
The Ego in Tibetan Buddhism and Psychotherapy

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Developmental psychology	3
Baby	3
Infant	6
Adolescent	7
Buddhist perspectives of suffering	10
Change and stability	12
Awakening to ignorance: first level of ignorance	21
Vibrations and sound manifest.....	22
Naming and controlling: second level of ignorance	23
Not recognising karma: third level of ignorance	24
Tenderness	26
Refuge: Buddha Dharma and Sangha	30
Refuge: Guru Deva and Dakini.....	31
Refuge: Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya	33
Refuge: One's own mind	35
Doing a meditation practice	40

We will look at how the development of the ego is conceptualised in Tibetan buddhism and in western psychotherapy and psychology. I will look at different forms of psychotherapy and we'll do some meditation so that we can understand for ourselves the complexities of how it is that we evolve as an individual human being.

One of the big questions which, as far as I know, every religion and culture explores is a variation on the question of 'What are we?' We have a 'who' question, a more personal subjective question, and a 'what' question when we look at ourselves from outside and as we look at other people. Because how I feel about who I am, looking out, is a little bit different from who I think you are, looking out. I can't know you the way I know myself.

Before we make the enquiry we will start by settling ourselves because when we are involved in the world we get caught up with all kinds of thoughts, feelings and sensations. We'll start with some brief calming meditation to focus our minds. As our mind becomes a little bit clearer this opens up the possibility of enquiry.

To do this a very simple way we focus our attention on our breath as it moves in and out, over the upper lip. In order to survive in life we have to master and perform many complicated things that involve a great deal of energy and emotional balancing. This activity is very different. It is very simple: all you have to do is remember that you are breathing and observe the breath going in and out. So, it's not at all complicated compared to all the wonderful things that we manage to do just to stay alive. We just sit very quiet, with our eyes open or closed depending on what's easy for us and just get a sense of the breath going in and out. We stay with the breath. If you find that your mind is wandering off, then recognise that and very gently bring your attention back to the breath. There's no need to worry or get anxious or blame yourself if you lose the breath. Just very gently return to the breath. We'll do that now for about fifteen minutes.



It is customary to begin buddhist practice by taking refuge and developing bodhicitta. We can do that in a very simple form here by reflecting for a few minutes on our wish to protect ourselves and others from suffering and how, in order to protect ourselves and others from suffering, we have to understand a little bit about why it is that we suffer. So take a few minutes to get in touch with your intention in being here, that we are engaged in an enquiry into why we and others suffer, and develop the intention to reduce the amount of suffering that we and other beings have.

Taking refuge in buddhism is about developing a relationship with the buddha, the dharma and the sangha and the gurus, dakinis, all kinds of beings. Basically, it is about making a relationship. Entry into buddhism comes about with this act of taking refuge, an act which is saying, *"I am lost. I am confused. I don't understand enough about what is going on and that the solution to this sense of lost-ness and confusion lies in being related to others who might be able to help me."* It is a movement out of the sealed ring of one's own sense of self-sufficiency, through a moment of humble recognition of one's incompleteness, into a gesture towards the other of being open to receive something. Try to hold on to this background idea of relationship throughout all our explorations this weekend.

Developmental psychology

Let's think about a general view of psychological development that might be agreed on in the various schools of psychology and psychotherapy. After the moment of conception when the ovum and the sperm meet, a very rapid process of dynamic interaction follows moving quickly from a fair degree of simplicity towards a higher degree of complexity. Two potentials meet together and when the potentials meet there is a rapid escalation of excitement and possibility. That process leads to the development of the foetus and particularly in the foetus the development of the brain and the nervous structure.

Baby

Through information embedded in the genetic imprinting coming through the ovum and the sperm, the way the brain develops and the way the senses develop, the way the whole foetus is developing, prepares a potential for entering into the environment. Already when the foetus is in the mother's womb it is responding to stimuli which are coming both through the proprioceptive sense inside the body and through sensations of sound, touch and emotion that are passing through. When the baby pops out it is already very lively, the brain is working, the senses are working and the baby is focused on the world. It is in the world and it is also focused on the world.

Now we can't know directly what it's like to be floating in the amniotic fluid inside the womb because we generally forget that as we grow up. However we might imagine that it is rather pleasant. People who have been in floatation tanks report a sense of drifting away and merging with the environment so that the subject-object division lessens. Perhaps that's what it's like for the foetus. When external stimuli are powerful there can be a foetal distress which modern photographic techniques can capture and display but most of the time the foetus seems to be

quite relaxed, as if it is at one with its environment. After the baby has left the womb and come out into the world it can't go back in. So where can it go to hide from all the excitations and distresses of the world? Sleep is the only place to retreat and of course small babies sleep a lot; it's their way of reducing the impact of the incredible stimulus around.

Nevertheless when the baby wakes it's also kind of curious. Babies look around a lot. They are very interested in what is going on in the world. The baby is caught in a particular kind of tension: in order to survive the baby has to wake up and enter the world, but in entering the world it can't control what it will meet. When it wakes up and feels hungry there may be a warm mother's breast ready to hand, but there may not. There may also be the sensation of cold wet nappies and a kind of rubbing sensation where the skin is raw. The baby has no power to change its own nappies. It has very little power to make the breast come as soon as it wants because the mother has also got a separate life of her own. Therefore it's very important for the baby that that mother is interested in the baby. Babies are seemingly programmed for seduction. If the baby is not able to seduce the mother, the father and other people who might be around, it's not likely to survive. Probably most of us have experienced being seduced by a small babies. We look at them and we smile. We want to pick them up and hold them. There's something very seductive about small fragile things. It seems that generally a baby has an ability to bypass our irritation and our cruelty so that we go beyond our ordinary limit and give a care and attention to this small fragile being.

So the baby must have relationship with the world. Without relationship the baby will die. If you leave a little baby for a day without any protection, it's not going to do very well. If you leave it for two or three days, then what can it do? It can't crawl around. It'll just lie there, cry a lot and then eventually die. The English analyst, Donald Winnicott, was one of many who liked to point out that babies don't exist by themselves. It's only ever a mother-baby or a father-baby or a somebody-baby. You don't get just baby. You don't see them lying around in different places on their own. They are always with someone.

The baby's need for survival drives it to become attached to a nurturing environment that will take care of it by attending to the specificity of the baby's need at any particular time. It's not enough for a mother to be simply attached to the baby, to like the baby. We might have something that we like very much, perhaps a favourite painting that we look at every so often. Or it may be a favourite book that we read once every two years. If we look for the book and can't find it we think, *"Gosh, did I lend that book to someone? What's happened to my favourite book."* But we are not looking at the picture or the book all the time. Now if a mother had that

kind of attachment to the baby, the baby wouldn't do very well. The baby needs a mother who has an attentive committed awareness of what the baby is doing.

So we have the meeting of two things: One, from the baby, a scanning of the environment, a looking for the possibility of somebody who will meet the needs plus a rapidly developing ability to identify the familiar faces of care givers. Two, the primary care-giver's interest and commitment to observing the body, the sounds, the face of the small baby in order to work out what it might be that that baby needs. Usually it is the mother and she to work out quickly what the baby's different cries mean. Attachment on both sides is very important. If the baby is not able to find a person to attach to, a person who will be committed to give the baby on-going attention, then the baby's chances of survival are very small.

This attachment is not a neutral thing; it's full of affect, it's full of feeling. When things go well the baby gives a big smile, their eyes shine and they are very happy. When you fail them as an object of attachment they cry, they scream, they go red in the face and they really let you know! As the baby gets older and becomes an infant they develop a very good repertoire of techniques for manipulating the primary care-givers to ensure that their need are met.

In order to deal with the difficulties of existing in a world that is not under their control babies and infants develop three main approaches. I am going to link each to the buddhist idea of the three root poisons. The first is stupidity. By stupidity I mean here the infant's ability to just fall asleep. If it all gets too much, if things get boring, then small children may glaze over and go off into a dream-world. They can cut out, drop off. The second approach is by using desire: in order to get what they want the small person learns how to seduce the other by being an object of fascination. They do it by making funny gestures or doing familiar things that they know will make people laugh. If a child of two or three is not able to make its parents laugh it's not going to do very well in terms of survival. The ability to become the object of desire of the primary care-givers is very important. The third way is by using anger or aversion, a kind of negative energy onto the world. They channel negative energy to disrupt the pattern around them and free some energy there that can come towards them. For example, a two-year-old is in a pram, going out shopping with the mother. The mother meets a friend and they start to talk. At the beginning the child may bang a rattle a bit or talk to themselves but at a certain point the child gets very bored. If they can't deal with the boredom by going into themselves, they start to make a noise "*Nya nya nya...!*" "*Sh, I'm coming. I want to talk to my friend a bit longer.*" "*Nya nya NYA...*" The baby is able to use aversion to make its noises more unpleasant than staying in the conversation. That is a very creative way to use of anger and aggression to disrupt a locked energy and to pull it back onto itself.

In these ways the baby is learning how to manipulate the world. When the ability to manipulate the world is not possible, it learns to retreat into the self and to cut off—either through attention to an inner world of memory and fantasy or through going unconscious through sleep—in order to balance the possibility of survival in situations where the infant is not the centre of attention of the whole world.

Infant

One of the challenges that a child faces in their development—in coming out of the closed bubble of the family and the guaranteed attention of someone committed to being interested in them—is that society requires them to move out into kindergartens and schools where they are no longer the centre of attention. One way to describe this is a narcissistic wounding, in that despite the desire to be the centre of attention and despite using all the techniques that they have learned so far to get full attention, they hit a point where the techniques that they've learned just don't work. The methods that a child could use in their own family to seduce, bully or coerce brothers or sisters or aunts or whoever was around, they can't do anymore in kindergarten. They are de-skilled and if they try to push their own technique they are likely to meet a lot of resistance. The child who was always able to blackmail the mother by being very angry gets shouted at in the kindergarten. *"UH!?"* That can be scary and maybe they say, *"I don't want to go to that place any more because it's very horrible."* Suddenly the child feels exposed as completely stupid because they had a contextually developed competence which, as the context changes, reveals itself as an incompetence.

Can the child revise the habitual responses that it has learnt are useful now that the environment is showing them that these are not useful any more in this new situation. Or will the child insist on continuing to act the same way whilst maintaining an internal commentary like, *"These are all very bad people. I don't like these people."* In order to make contact the child needs to learn to behave in a new way. I remember in my primary school some of the boys were very fond of little toy cars and would play with them in the break or at lunchtime. I was not very interested in toy cars but other boys were. They were fascinated by something that I was not fascinated by and my response was to think, *"That's boring! I don't want to do that anyway."* There was a potential in the environment that I could have moved towards, but in order to move towards it I would be moving into a territory that I didn't know about or couldn't quite work out what toys could do. So rather than place myself in a 'one down position' where I had to ask other children about cars and learn from them, it was easier to say, *"Yuck! I don't like playing with cars. Cars are silly!"* By rejecting playing with cars I was able to say of myself, *"I'm somebody"*

who doesn't play with cars. I know who I am." The child's own sense of self is being stabilised at the expense of being able to easily relate to others.

Adolescent

Gradually the child develops an attachment to an image of itself which both gives a sense of security and inhibits its development into new areas of potential interest. This ability to be attached to an image of ourselves means that we can present ourselves in a consistent way to an environment. It is part of the development of our survival as human beings and it hits its first real crisis at adolescence. We had learnt to present ourselves consistently over quite some years but then this incredible genetic whack hits us and our bodies start to change and our interests in the world starts to change. Our hormones are creating chaos, our moods are unpredictable and we can no longer cling to a reliable sense of who we are.

It's very difficult for our parents too because they have an image of who we are but we are changing. We feel misunderstood by them and they feel that they can't understand us anymore. Confusion all around. It's a time when children often go into intense pair-bonding since it's easier to hang out with friends who are going through the same confusion and don't make a demand on you about who you are. When you try to talk to your parents they don't seem to understand you and you can't articulate what it is because you are in a place which you don't have the language or the ability to present clearly. Often in order to get through this time of difficulty we form intense attachments to particular things. It could be getting into drugs, it could be shoplifting, it could be videogames, skateboarding, graffiti—you join up with a bunch of people and you intensify your sense of being together in that activity. Or it could be that you become very introverted and spend all your time in your bedroom

During adolescence we often make decisions which are not very rational or thought through but are the decisions of a creature which has no skin and which is running to find a little cave for protection. We rush into a relationship or a career choice. Some adolescents are so confused that they just do what their parents tell them to do—*"Oh you must become a lawyer..." "Yeah, okay, I'll be a lawyer."* And then twenty years later *"Why am I a lawyer? I never wanted to be a lawyer...."* However, at the time it was a good choice in the sense that it reduced the anxiety of not knowing who you are.

We can identify in this some of the qualities of the ego—that the ego, this sense of self that we have, needs to be able to make sense of itself in terms of a history (which it edits) and in terms of an environment (which it edits) in order to maintain its sense of consistency and predictability. It unites that with an increasing repertoire of skills to manipulate and direct the

world. It tries to manage the responses that it experiences inside itself to changes in its own behaviour as well as managing changes in the environment. If you have ever tried to feed small children you will have noticed that they spend a lot of time playing with the mouth boundary: letting you put food in their mouth or not, making choices about what they will eat or spit out. Teenagers do exactly the same thing in their relationships with people, particularly sexualised relationships. *"I want to be with that one. I don't want to be near that other one."* There's a movement whereby we define ourselves in terms of the choices we make with the environment. We see the world not as an open expanse, a vast horizon of potential, but as if constructed out of tiny little alleyways that we nip through, hiding and looking and grabbing things while we can.

The ego is developing in relationship to an environment which is changing and moving. This puts pressure on the ego to change and move but the ego, in order to maintain its sense of self-identity, has to resist that change—either by ignoring the outside world, or by changing itself and then lying to itself that no change has occurred. The primary commitment of the ego is to its sense of its own self-continuity.

A person who has developed what is sometimes referred to as *ego-strength* has developed a range of ways to interact with the environment that maintain the continuity of its sense of self. Even if a particular trauma occurs such as a bereavement, a car crash, a robbery, a house fire, even if something like that occurs the person will be able to cope with it and manage their response because they will be able to maintain a story about themselves that will remind them that they still continue to be the one they know themselves to be.

To paraphrase what I have been saying, the ability to form attachments is essential for our survival. Children who cannot form attachment with their parents make their parents feel inadequate. One of the functions of attachment behaviour in children is to lock into the parents' behaviour in a way that will make the parents feel that looking after this very demanding small creature is worthwhile. If the child is too much trouble it will have a bad time. Seductive attachment behaviour, such as smiling and being cute, is very important. We can even see this in how we respond to our pets. When a puppy or a little kitten is born it looks so sweet. You just want to pick it up and kiss it and cuddle it. That is a very important way for that creature to survive.

[A Two Year Old Goes to Hospital](#)¹ is a film made in the 1950's by two psychiatrists, Joyce Robertson and James Robertson. At that time parents didn't go into the hospital with the infant who was just handed over to the hospital staff. They filmed Laura, aged 2, arriving and being put in a cage bed with some toys around. They kept filming to observe what would happen. At first this small child was looking around, quite curious in the new environment. Then it becomes aware that the familiar face that has always reassured it isn't there any longer and so it starts to make noises and attract attention in various ways. The nurse would come and speak soothingly, but without picking up the child. Laura would be a little bit settled by somebody looking at it and talking but then get distressed again as soon as the nurse had gone. After some time she would become very angry and distressed and would cry a great deal and wouldn't really respond to comfort. This crying escalated over a period of about twelve hours and then tailed off. The next day there was less distress shown and by the fourth or fifth day there was almost no distress. The child sank back into itself, cutting off from the environment and went into a state almost like a coma.

As a result of this film which showed all the terrible distress on the child's face, there was a move to allow parents to come in to hospitals and be there with their child. They also found that a child would recover more quickly after surgery if the parents were there because there was a familiar attachment-figure who could relieve the distress. Simply looking at the mother's face seemed to help the child more than many kinds of medication.

Now in the west many people think of a sense of self as being something that you have to go and find for yourself. People attend workshops 'to find themselves', or go on pilgrimages... Basically they go somewhere else to find a sense of self, as if it were something out there in the

¹ If going to hospital means losing the care of the mother, the young child will fret for her no matter how kind the doctors, nurses, and play staff. This film classic, made in 1952, drew attention to the plight of young patients at a time when visiting by parents was severely restricted.

Laura, aged 2, is in hospital for 8 days to have a minor operation. She is too young to understand her mother's absence. Because her mother is not there and the nurses change frequently, she has to face the fears, frights and hurts with no familiar person to cling to. She becomes quiet and settles. But at the end of her stay she is withdrawn from her mother, shaken in her trust.

In recent years there have been great changes in children's wards, partly brought about by this film. But many young children still go to hospital without their mother and ... the depth of their distress and the risks to later mental health remain an insufficiently recognised problem.

<http://www.concordmedia.org.uk/products/a-two-year-old-goes-to-hospital-52/>

environment that they could find and take home. Developmental psychology, however, is saying that a sense of self is essentially a gift that we receive when our striving, our need for relationship, takes us out into an environment which gives us a welcome, meets us and pulls us into relationship. We may know the truth of that in our own lives. When we go into a situation where people welcome us we feel good. We relax. If we go into a situation and we are not quite sure what other people think we get anxious and we are not sure; *“Am I allowed to be here? How do I fit in?”* Uncertainty trembles right through us.



Buddhist perspectives of suffering

Now I want to take up another tack from buddhism and then run these paths across each other over these two days. When Shakyamuni Buddha gave his first teaching in the Deer Park at Sarnath he taught what are called the Four Noble Truths. These four truths are: the truth of suffering; the truth of the origin of suffering; the truth of the cessation of suffering; and the truth of the path to cessation of suffering.

He said that the truth of suffering is manifest; it's everywhere. We can hardly avoid seeing the truth of suffering because we encounter it every day, either directly in our own experience, or in what we see around us. He said that for us, living in this human dimension, suffering is primarily in terms of birth, old age, sickness and death. We may be far enough away from our own births to have forgotten how painful it was, but if we have seen babies being born, or spent some time in an obstetrics ward, we will have seen that there can be a lot of suffering in birth not just for mother but also for the baby.

During our middle years we are probably able to run around, carry loads, have a sense of physical enjoyment through sex and eating and drinking. Generally we are at ease in our bodies. As we enter old age we can imagine problems of digestion arising, the sense weakening, arthritis coming into the joints... All kinds of tensions and losses occur in which the familiar home that was our body gets squatted by diseases who take up the empty rooms and force us out of occupancy.

Death means the loss of all the things that we've already started to lose by getting older and more sick. Already there are many things that we can no longer do. Did you enjoy climbing trees when you were young? I did. Climbing trees was an important part of my world. As we move towards old age and death more of the good things are behind and fewer good things are

ahead. There is a daily sense of loss. So birth, old age, sickness and death are indications that suffering permeates our world.

Suffering is classified in two ways: the suffering of getting what you don't want and the suffering of not getting what you do want. That is the traditional buddhist categorisation of suffering. It implies desire and intentionality. Not getting what you want implies that you have got an intentional relationship on to the world. *"I want to get this" "I don't want to get that."* I experience the world as coming at me and bringing me something that I don't want. So suffering is relational in this example.

What do we get attached to? We get attached to the past, the present and the future. We can be attached to good things in our past with the mind going back into the past where the good times were. We can also be attached to negative things in the past: *"My mother never loved me. If my mother had loved me I would be a happy person. But my mother didn't love me and so my life is ruined."* We can have an attachment to some event in the past which seems to us to be directive and govern how things are now and will be in the future.

We can have attachment in the present. We can be attached to a sense of comfort. We can be attached or engrossed in a good book or a film and not want them to end. We can be attached to a person and not want our relationship to end. Last night I was in an aeroplane flying here to Berlin. I was sitting next to a man who wanted to talk a lot. I had brought a book with me that I was really looking forward to reading. However, because I was attached to the sense that I am a polite person I could not be rude and show him that I wanted him to stop talking to me. So I was torn between two attachments and it was quite a suffering!

We have attachment to the future where we have some fantasy in our mind that we hope will come true or won't come true. We focus on a particular kind of event and by being caught up in that focus we are not able to relax and allow the attention to move out in different directions. Because our attention and our desire is already located on a particular object or a particular memory, we are dislocated from being present now in the world and being available to be with other people. By intensifying the presence of a particular fantasy that highlight creates an absence of the potential for real presence in the moment. The attachment to a particular future event creates the absence of presence in the phenomenological field of the present moment.

For example, a patient of mine came into the hospital a few weeks ago with his arm in a sling. This man had grown up in the countryside where his father was a gamekeeper. He was always longing to be in the countryside, because that's where he felt most at home. However, his job required that he lived in the city to earn enough money for his partner and their child. His

attachment to being in the country stopped him being happy in the city. But he had to be in the city. We talked about how he could practise just being in touch with nature as it was in the town, in parks or by the river... He kept saying, *"I don't like parks. It has to be completely wild."* Anyway, on the previous day he had decided that he would spend time in the park and borrowed a friend's bicycle. It was late afternoon and the sun was starting to set and there were beautiful colours in the sky. He's cycling along gazing at this beautiful sky when he hits the curb, goes over the bicycle and breaks his collar bone! That was a case of an attachment that was not very helpful at all. That often happens in life: we focus on one particular thing, it dominates our attention, we are distracted and lose contact with the total environment. Then we bang into something!

Change and stability

Impermanence is one of the basic principles in buddhism—everything is changing. Objects that we see change and our relationship with these objects is changing moment by moment. When we become attached to an object we tend to fix it in a particular identification, forgetting that the essential natural inherent quality of impermanence will cause that object to change. Even if its manifest external form doesn't seem to change, our relationship with it will change. That is inevitable. Even our breath is always changing and the quality of the attention that we bring to the breath is always changing.

The quality of the ego that we were discussing earlier likes to be able to define itself and the world in terms of a stable identity that permits reliable prediction. Ego gets disturbed by impermanence. We have a tension between our desire for security and continuity and our need to be in contact with the presencing of the world as a shifting field of phenomena. This is a very powerful conflict which we each deal with in different ways. Very often our desire for the comfort and security of continuity and consequent comfort leads to a kind of blindness.

This is something that often comes up in couple therapy. Two people meet and are happy together. They have lots of assumptions about each other and because they feel good about each other, they never bother to examine them. They go on with their busy lives. Meanwhile the partner is getting increasingly frustrated and may try to make that known but the other person doesn't really hear. Their assumptive worlds are no longer meshing very well. Then on the horizon person number three appears. Suddenly there's a new happiness in the possibility of simple delicious fusion again... It's very easy to take people and situations for granted. To take somebody for granted means *"As I knew you yesterday, so you are today and so you will be tomorrow. You are my best friend. I know you."* It's a very nice feeling but of course if I know you and I know all about you, you have no place to hide. If you have no place to hide, you have no

place to grow In fact I am actually killing you by knowing you. That's often why people have affairs when they are in a relationship. It's designed to wake the other person up and tell them, *"Remember I am person who has choices. I once chose to be with you but now you take me for granted. You think I am always going to be here but at any moment I can choose the exit."*

Knowledge kills the world. This is a very important. Knowledge insists that the world will fit in with our predictions about it. Although this is necessary when we are children, if we take it on as adults, with the incredible power that we have as adults, we can use it both to blind ourselves to the changes in the world and to enforce either change or non-change in the world in order to support whatever predictive template we have created.

The image of mastery is a dominant image in all cultures in the world—the image of the magus, the one who knows everything and can do everything. Omniscience and omnipotence. This is the phallogocentric confusion of the father-sky god and this position is subverted by woman. For example, you may know the story of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. In his court is Merlin, a wise man who can do everything. He is the great magician, he can see the future, he can solve every problem, but of course his downfall is a pretty young woman who is able to say, *"Ah Merlin, if you and I were together ... ahah!"*

In buddhism there is the idea that we are contaminated by three poisons—stupidity, anger and desire. Being isolated in one's power or knowledge can be lonely. Our first desire is to be close to someone but when we get close to someone we get confused; so desire leads into stupidity. When I get confused I blame the other person and so I become angry. I retreat but when I retreat I feel very lonely again. Then I find someone else to get attached to, and then I get confused and then I get angry.... round and round. It can be difficult to keep a balance in this circling since in order to survive we have to be in a world, which means being in relationship. When we're in relationship we are called into attachment.

The question is *"Can we be in relationship without being attached?"* That is to say, *"Can we connect with people in a full present, energetic way, a contact-full way, where we are alive and they are alive, without trying to stitch this up into a package that we take away to make us feel safe?"* It's that stitching up, that extrapolation, that pulling the person out of the world, which results in the tension that will later tear our heart out.

Be aware of attachment. As you walk down the street be aware of the things that you are drawn towards. See if you can identify things which are reassuring. Maybe you see an old car that reminds you of your parents' car, or a car you had when you were younger. What are the things that reach out and say, *"I'm safe, trust me."* What are the other things that you shy away

from? In parallel with this be aware of distraction, of how your attachment to one particular thing distracts you from other things. If you're walking along the street talking to friends on your mobile, then clearly you are not very aware of the street. Notice how focusing on one thing distracts you from other things. What is the basis for these movements in your attention? In buddhism our focus is always on the question, "*What am I up to?*" So be aware of what you are up to, observe yourself as you display yourself caught up in this matrix of attachment, desire, anger, aversion, stupidity and so forth. Focus on the point where you get distracted.

It can be useful to examine the nature and function of attachment in your own life. Do you experience it as being something that helps you by giving you a sense of yourself and giving meaning to your life? Or do you see it primarily as a cause of suffering?

Question: Is the intention to gain enlightenment an attachment?

When we develop the intention to gain enlightenment, whether for oneself or for others or both, we have a goal in mind, something which is not present now, but will become present in the future. By focusing attention on that goal we hope to realise it. Therefore there is clearly an attachment and a sense of intentionality. By focusing energy on this intention we inhibit distraction but so that our attachment does not become too solid and intense we need an understanding of the nature of the goal, the nature of our starting point, and the nature of the journey between them.

The starting point is: *Who am I, in my endeavour to gain enlightenment?* If my nature is not an enlightened nature from the very beginning, can I make it an enlightened nature? How? If enlightenment is something that I can construct by the power of my meditation practice then it is something that has a beginning and a middle. However everything that has a beginning and a middle is guaranteed to have an end. We cannot identify anything which has a beginning and does not have an end. So if my buddha nature—as the possibility of enlightenment—is something constructed out of my efforts to develop it, then it is itself a finite arising—arising due to causes and ceasing to exist when the causes get exhausted. So I would be gaining a very impermanent buddhahood.

For example, somebody might decide that they want to be a surgeon. They study very hard and they become a very good surgeon, however as they get older their hands start to shake. If you met your surgeon before the operation and noticed that their hand was shaking you might decide that you did not want them to do your operation. Gradually that surgeon gets side-lined and feels very lonely. "*But I am a surgeon. I have spent my whole life being a surgeon. I just want to keep on being me, a surgeon. Please let me cut someone open!*" When they go home, eyes full of

tears and tries to cut their steak their partner says, *"Here, let me do it for you."* It's very sad. That's what it's like when we construct something; it will always contain the seeds of its own destruction.

That is why the starting point of the desire to gain enlightenment is predicated on the sense that enlightenment already exists, in a form which is there but is covered over. The work (the journey) is not to create the enlightenment, but to reveal it. Enlightenment is a pre-existing, unchanging, groundless phenomenon which is always there, however we are obscured from it because of our ignorance. Given that the nature of enlightenment is presented as unborn and unceasing—a state of awareness whose essential nature is emptiness—then when we look for this original buddha nature and try to find what it is as a substantial entity, we find that we can't find it.

Paradoxically, the starting point that we have when we start to look into the point that you start from, is not something that we can find existing as such. Therefore the path to realise that the starting point from which you start is not something that exists as such, is a search for something that doesn't exist as such. Moreover, the realisation of the path which is buddhahood is to arrive at a point where you find that there was nothing to look for in the very beginning!

So we have this double move: you need to have a commitment to gain enlightenment—that is to say you have to have a strong focused attention, carrying a powerful affective emotional intention to gain enlightenment—whilst at the same time having some experiential or intellectual understanding that the basis, the path and the result of this whole endeavour is to realise that there was never anything there to get anyway!

In that way the path (or journey) becomes the middle way between the two extreme points of an eternalism and a nihilistic foundation. If you believe that you will gain enlightenment, will become a buddha thereby realise your true nature, then you might have the sense that what exists now is not real whereas enlightenment itself will be real, and in that way you will gain something real. That conviction is on the side of believing that there is an eternal substance that you can get.

If, on the other hand, you were to say, *"Since everything has been empty from the very beginning, I am already enlightened now so there's no need to bother."* you would be on the side of a nihilism that upholds the view that nothing can proceed from one moment to the next.

The buddhist middle way is to combine a profound compassionate intention to gain enlightenment for the sake of all beings with the realisation that there are actually no beings to save nor is there is somebody who can become a saviour. These two brought together, charged

with equal intensity, deconstruct each other so that form goes into emptiness and emptiness arises as form.

So, 'Yes' is a brief response to the question about whether attachment to enlightenment is a kind of attachment. But if you understand what enlightenment is then you are attached to something that deconstructs attachment in the moment that it arises. It is that process which is itself the nature of enlightenment, according to the dzogchen tradition.

Question: Is there a positive attachment and a negative attachment?

We need attachment to develop a position where we feel enough security in the world to examine what is at issue. As we were looking earlier, the infant's experience of the world is that it is full of things which are outside its control and so the desire is to have some degree of control. At a certain point the infant has to realise that it can't get control by trying to dominate the world, the way it might be able to control all its toys or punch all its teddy bears and hide them under the bed. None of us can deal with the world that way so we have to learn to form attachment on the world on the basis of prediction, as we were discussing earlier, paying attention to the things that will support our sense of having some degree of control. Now the danger arises when this becomes our only way of relating to the world and we develop a predictive fantasy such as: *Once I get more of the things that make me feel safe then I will be really safe.* If a person thinks they can become happy when they get a new car, like all their friends, then they need to work hard to get a new car. They work very hard, they get their new car but after some time their new car becomes an old car, so they are back where they started—with an old car. That's a problem. *"But in order to get the new car I had to work so hard and because I was working so hard I hadn't time to pay attention to my partner and now they are fed up and have left me. Yes, I've got a new car but I'm all alone driving around in my new car. Life's hard."* Because the world is so complicated we can only pay attention to one or two particular things at a time and we try to control these. While we're busy controlling these, something else gets out of control. So the big danger in attachment is when we become attached to the idea of being in control.

You could say that Buddha Shakyamuni took up a similar position to modern science in that he taught using working hypotheses. He pointed out that certain principles operate in the world and if we take these up and examine them, they may illuminate our lives. Or we may disprove them. Buddhism is practised differently from Christianity. Christian practice begins with dogma, with a creed, with a certain set of statements which you accept and follow. In doing that you join a body of people who believe in the same things.

Buddhism takes up principles and uses them as tools of enquiry. If the tools don't work, then you can try them again. If they still don't work then you might decide that it's not true for you. Especially in mahayana buddhism, which was influential in Tibet, a distinction is made between two levels of truth: relative truth and absolute truth. Relative truth is the domain of truth or the sense that I am here experiencing the world and the world is manifesting according to certain principles. Absolute truth is when there is a direct, unmediated experience of the revelation of the world as it is and that it is a world that includes what we call 'myself'. This absolute truth is inexpressible; it cannot be represented in language.

If you have the sense of being enworlded you don't have a relationship of separation from the world. If you don't have separation from the world, then you don't have the basis of a gap across which you could exert some control because the shadow side of attachment (where it makes trouble for us) is where, in my attachment to a particular form in the world, I see other forms in the world as negative because they are going to attack the form that I want to hang on to. I am therefore going to exert control onto the environment in order to keep my little form safe. However my ability to control the forms of the world is very limited. As we know from sitting in meditation, merely trying to observe the breath going in and out of our nose, is pretty difficult. Our mind is all over the bloody place! It is manifest that we are out of control but because that is too devastating to acknowledge we repress or forget it. Instead, we divert our attention in an attempt to try to control the world another way.

I can't see me but I can see you. You can't see you but you can see me. I can see what shape you are, and you can see what shape I am, but I can't see what shape I am. So I'm never quite sure what shape I am. Other people look much more kind of contained than I do. It seems much easier to control other people, because I've already got some sense of what shape they are, than to control myself. International capitalism is concerned with the isolation of particular commodities that can be moved around the world and given to people who will think, *"Isn't it wonderful to have this commodity. Now I know who I am."* The fulfilment of my sense of individual being is the ability to go to the supermarket and buy mangoes in winter!

One manifestation of attachment is how we try to organise phenomena in a way that suits us. This feeds into creating a myth of mastery, as if I am a person totally in control of the situation. We are always balancing our need to maintain sufficient attachment to a historical memory of ourselves—so that we don't feel completely mad and lost when we get up in the morning and look in the mirror. If we couldn't remember who we were looking at in the mirror we would get rather alarmed. So there has to be a degree of object constancy—both internal object constancy (memory, sensation) and external object constancy so that if you see children

in your kitchen in the morning you know that these are your children and you don't wonder what they are doing wandering around in your house.

When we meet up with a friend we all imagine that we are meeting somebody we know. Now in knowing that person, is the knowledge that we have of that person freeing us up to have a very lively open conversation with them? Or is there that possibility but it's overshadowed by a desire to control and direct the conversation because we need that person to be in a particular way to make us feel secure? The question really is whether we can be aware of the other person and respond to them without trying to direct the nature of the interaction so as to affirm a set of premises which we have pre-established and which are serving primarily to help us feel good about ourselves?

The Buddha said that attachment is the cause of suffering. Is my relationship with an object one of appropriation—taking over of the natural raw presence of the object—and pulling this object into the world of meaning which I already have established? Or is my relationship with an object one of openness to the possibility of what it is that I am encountering? If one were to practise non-attachment it wouldn't mean that some object would occur and you wouldn't know what it was. You would be able to recognise the object, but to recognise the object as existing in its own space and without the need to pull it towards you and to turn it into an extension of yourself.

That is why one of the first things that we turn our attention to in the practice of buddhism is impermanence. Impermanence is not a dogmatic statement to be believed in; it is a tool to use to open up, to leaven your experience of being in the world with others. When we are aware of the impermanence of ourselves, of our body, of the world we encounter, we get a sense that what we are engaged in is a process of existence. A lot of the time we exist in a world that seems to be composed of entities which appear to have an inherent existence of their own. However if we take up something and examine it, the buddhist idea would be that it would reveal itself to be a phenomenon held in place by the temporary juxtaposition of various forces. These forces are themselves held in place by other forces which are juxtaposed and others and others so that you have an infinite cosmic web of points of interconnectedness—an image which is often referred to as *Indra's Net*. Things are moments of appearance held in place by the juxtaposition of a complex pattern of causes and if any element in that pattern of causes changes, there will be a shift in the mode of manifestation.

We can test this out now here in this room. Look around the room and see if you identify anything which is existing in itself. For example, just now we are all being supported by the floor. If the floor didn't exist we would not be floating on air. The fact that we don't fall into the

room below may appear to indicate that the floor has a true existence. We can hit the floor and it might hurt our knuckles. If I fell over and the floor hit my nose some blood would probably come out. That's a reasonable prediction. This is a hard floor that exists. I can see it. I can touch it. I could lick it. I could bang it and hear it. All of that would convince me that there is a real floor here, made up of . Do these chipboards exist or not? They exist. But what is the status of the existence of the floor? Does it truly exist? Relative to what? To your nose! It is dependent on the wood, how it was made, dependent on us sitting on the floor making certain pressure on it. Depending on everything around it. So you would then have the sense that the floor is existing in relationship to yourself and the surroundings. Would you say that in some sense the reality of the floor is your expectation that the floor would be there? If we give ourselves time to analyse the floor we can agree that the chipboard has come from a factory where planks of wood are planed and the little offshoots have been put together with steam and glue to form boards which were then displayed in a shop and somebody came and brought them and cut them to fit the floor. We can track that whole historical movement but nonetheless, in an ordinary way when we put our foot down we expect it to be a floor and we expect it to be solid.

We have this double relationship with the world. We can run a complex, sophisticated analysis which shows us that the phenomena we experience are existing in relationship and are composites of many elements, each of which is a composite of other patterns of elements. At the same time, on an ordinary practical, pragmatic level we deal with these things as if they exist in a real, solid separate way.

Buddhist training requires us to spend time analysing the phenomena that present themselves to us so that we develop our ability to rely on what is revealed to us when we analyse it, rather than relying on a pragmatic assumption held in place by all the cultural assumptions around us and by our own karmic and developmental need to see objects as separate and inherently real. For as long as we are caught up in the cognitive assumption that things are real—*This is a real floor*— we are providing ourselves with the basis for movement into further dualistic conceptualisation.

Child development theories point out that in growing up a child needs to develop a confidence that its intention onto the world will be carried through. For example, if a child learned to ride a bicycle on Monday but then kept falling off on Tuesday, it feel very upset. So there is this tension between the need to have a predictive sense of the environment—i.e. the sense of objects as being reliable in their form of manifestation—and over-layering this with an attachment that makes that object one that I can own and possess, and thereby feeling safe, secure and in control.

The process of being able to perceive the world, to see the floor, and to walk on the floor is not in itself false. The problem is with the second layer of assumption, where I create the notion that there is a definite point that I can return to on the basis of my knowledge, and that my knowledge then takes away the burden of having to examine what is there. I am removing the need for awareness by substituting knowledge predicted on the past. Obviously what we see when we look at the chipboard floor, is something that is there. There is not nothing; there is this yellowish material under us. Something is there. So, what is the status of this thing that is there? There is an appearance—something is appearing to us—but does appearance necessarily indicate the presence of a substance?

We normally impute substance to an appearance, and that the substance is existing in truth, as if it were existing by itself. We extrapolate, we take out, we abstract, from this continuum of experience a particular phenomenon and see it as something existing entire and discrete unto itself. We see a particular phenomenon and we extrapolate it by the application of a name—*This is a chipboard plank*—and then impute all kinds of associations and realities to it out of my knowledge from the past—*It's probably 22 mm thick and is made from reliably sources wood ...* One of the ways we extrapolate is by the use of language. It is the name of the thing, *chipboard*, which holds the sense of the essence of the thing in the moment of the perception of it.

On the level of the absolute truth it cannot be put into words and is free of language. Because it does not construct itself out of words, it is a direct, immediate relationship with the environment. The meaning of the experience is the quality that arises in the revelation of it in the moment of its arising. The meaning is not prefiguring the experience by the meaning being embedded in a word which is then applied to the experience and the juxtaposition of the word and the manifestation gives rise to a meaning—*Aha, this is chipboard*. No. The relationship that we have to the chipboard is similar in many ways to the relationship that we have to ourselves. Just as I make sense of what's in front of me by naming it, I make sense of myself by naming myself.

The ability to apply lots and lots of words to lots and lots of phenomena is the basis for having a mature and healthy adult life. Perhaps we can remember how frustrating it was as a child not to know the words for everything. I have an elder brother and of course he would always know more words than I did and he would be able to identify things before me so it always felt that he had more of a grasp on the world than I did. Something would happen and he would say, *"That's a..."* and I wouldn't know what it was but he knew what it was. We can see how people who know the words for things have an enormous sense of ease of movement through the world. Maybe you are walking in the countryside with a friend and they tell you the

words for all the trees and all the plants that you see and which bird is singing. If I can apply the word 'oak' to a tree and point out different oak trees, this name unifies these different manifestations. Some may be tall and spindly in a wood, some might be wide and alone in a field, but I unify them by naming them. I can also unify myself by applying the titles of ownership to different kinds of phenomena that I have, even though these phenomena themselves are changing.

We may all have had the experience longing to hear someone say "*I love you.*" We may feel that the person likes us a lot, but we still have this terrible yearning for it to be put into words. That could happen at the beginning of a relationship, or it could happen in the middle, or at the end. Even if it's a lie it doesn't matter too much, we still want it to be put into words because the words provide a kind of shaping of experience. Language helps to bring together and order the masses of sensation, feelings and thoughts that we have, both in relation to internal experience and in relation to the world.

When we take up this enquiry into impermanence we can use language to unpack or subvert the reifying function of the naming aspect of language which turns fleeting phenomena into entities.

Question. Why do we do what we do?

Why do we do what we repeatedly do? How did it come about that we were born in the first place with certain karmic predispositions to do particular kinds of action. According to the Buddha's teaching this explained by the third Noble Truth, which is the truth about the origin of suffering. What is it that gives rise to the attachment that brings us into the world? Because the third truth deals with the cessation of suffering. If we can understand the initial point where ignorance arises, which generates the whole matrix of attachment and dualistic involvement in the world, then suffering truly comes to an end.

Many of the texts say that ignorance is primordial; it has always been there. However it only appears to be like that because it seems to have been there for such a long time that we can't get to the root of it—particularly if we look outside for the root of it thinking, *Who was it who introduced it? Was it the devil or somebody?* In the nyingma and kagyu traditions of Tibetan buddhism there is a particular way of describing the historical development of ignorance.

Awakening to ignorance: first level of ignorance

Once upon a time, which was not upon a time because it was outside time, something happened which didn't happen, because there was no basis for anything to happen. And

although nothing happened, something appeared to happen and because of the attachment to the appearance that something had happened. There was the development of the notion that something has happened *to me*. This level of ignorance is often given the example of a drunk man falling down the stairs. He was walking home feeling fine when, Ugh! Just then, at the moment of UGH, something has happened. “UGH I fell down.” Out of that perception there is a kind of disjunction, a dislocation from the mood that was previously there, and a whole new chain of thought arises in the mind. What is very interesting in this description is that that “UGH” is a moment of awakening—awakening into the self-consciousness that is ignorance.

Beforehand the drunk is just walking, and then “UGH”! Then there is a process—*Ah something's happened*. The mind is wakened to the need to make sense of a situation which before he fell down the stairs, he didn't need to make sense of. He was just walking along pissed, perfectly happy. No need to organise any thoughts, no need to organise anything because he's going home. Then he falls over. “*Oh fuck!*” He awakens to the need to make sense of his situation. That is to say, before there was no problem and now there is a problem.

Luckily our ignorance is very intelligent so ignorance can start to solve the problem even though it's a problem created by ignorance itself. This first stage of ignorance is called *lhan cig skyes pai ma rig pa* in Tibetan. It means the ignorance that arises together with the possibility of no ignorance. *Lhan cig skyes pa* means ‘arises together in one moment’. Having this sudden sense of “UH”, there's a sense of dislocation: *I'm back here—the world is out there*. So there is a gap and across that gap a vibration of sense-making starts. Looking a bit more, information coming in, moving in and out, subject and object starting to weave themselves into existence, vibrating together, constellating a whole development of positions out of which the world arises.

Vibrations and sound manifest

There is the development of a subject-place thinking about, and starting to have, thoughts. This is described as just before language. It is the movement which is creating the basis for the evolution of language. That is to say, there is an intelligence, embedded in a position which is separated off from its environment, that is attending to the details of the environment. Gradually this vibration leads into the manifestation of sound. Sound solidifies into core syllables and the core syllables lead into the fabrication of the languages that are spoken in the world.

The sense is of something very light, like two little gentle things hovering in space, hovering and vibrating together. The more complex the hovering goes on, the more they are vibrating through ranges of manifestation that vibration brings into affect. *Aa* sound comes out. Little

vibration here, *Aa* sound comes out. Like when we ring a metal bell or a crystal glass and sound comes out. Vibration creates manifestation as sound.

The more you have manifestations, the more you have arisings. These start to cohere together into a very subtle substance. The more substance vibrates, the more sound is generated. So sound is the first form of energy. Out of that sound manifestation is the beginning of the seed syllables of the world—the essential core mantras—and they form the basis for words. As these vibrations are settling down into forms, the forms start to become continuous and since the forms are continuous we start to have a memory of a form. We say, “*I know this one. It’s the same now as it was before.*” We recognise continuity in outer form, which gives rise to continuity in inner form, that is to say memory. The juxtaposition of an outer form and an inner memory, both of which have a history, allows us to recognise something.

The process continues and because there is more information which is starting to be responded to, the subject side gets more and more complex whilst also being aware of the gradual evolution of form, of things ‘out there’. Gradually on the subject side there is the evolution of language. Language is actually being generated through the vibration between subject and object. Then through the use of language to name both external and internal phenomena, there is a further development of the ability to predict and determine what is occurring.

Naming and controlling: second level of ignorance

With this development, subject now has language to make use of, to really own. It extrapolates things from the world and owns things by naming them. This seems to give these things an existence separated from the great wave of manifestation within which they are embedded. This is the second level of ignorance. In Tibetan it is called *kun tu btags pai ma rig pa* which means ‘the ignorance of naming everything’. We can also translate it as ‘the ignorance of continuously or always naming things’.

You may have experienced this yourself or you may know other people who are caught up in obsessional or compulsive behaviour, when they just can’t leave anything alone. Some years ago I was walking in the Himalayas with a friend who is an amateur ornithologist. Every time we saw a bird he would tell me its name. I got very bored with this. I would see this amazing big thing going through the sky and I didn’t know what it was but my attention was caught. Then he would tell me a name, and as soon as the name went on to the thing, it sort of collapsed, it was different.

So this second level of ignorance can give us a great deal of power and control, but it also knocks something out of the pure æsthetic experience of the world as it displays itself. Once this stage is in operation things are getting tight: I know who I am; I know what the world is. I am acting on the world to get what I want by moving things around. I can move them around because I know what they are. If I see something that I want, I know what it is and I can then develop some strategies for getting it. Having got it, I feel glad.

Not recognising karma: third level of ignorance

The third stage of ignorance is called ‘the ignorance of the stupidity of not recognising karma’. I am acting in the world and getting my needs met, feeling quite efficient. However I don’t realise that every time I have a success it’s not the self-contained subject-object interaction that I thought it was, but that it carries an extra load which I am blind to because I am only focused on the frame that I am creating for myself. It seems that I am living in a world which is there as we understand it in the ordinary, literal, empirical sense, but I don’t realise what I am doing to myself by perceiving the world in this way. This explains in terms of the karmic formation the answer to the question ‘*Why do we do what we do?*’ It explains how we have a karmic perception.

Rather than being caught up in an ordinary perception of the world we step back and start to analyse it. The analysis in terms of impermanence is the first step in opening up a gap in which we can be suspicious about what the whole story is about. For as long as we believe *I am real. I am me. You are real. You are you. This building is real. I want to get this... I don’t want to get that...* every action that we take proves to ourselves that ‘I am real’. I am real in the sense of being a thing to myself. If someone tells you that you have some quality—*You are angry with me*—and you don’t feel that you are, you get the sense that what the other person is describing doesn’t fit with your sense of who you are. Then when we try to defend ourselves and explain that we are not angry with them, we are actually creating a further impulse to a solidified sense of self, separated off from the world.

In the Christian funeral service they say, ‘*Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*’ There is a sense that when the person dies the soul separates from the body and body itself just goes back into the material world. We might be able to accept the sense that part of us goes back into the world and is no longer us, but that we have this essence, the eternal soul, which continues and may go up or may go down. This is important because the idea that we might completely go back into the world is a sort of annihilation. We live in a time when many people believe they are born out of matter –the semen and the ovum come together and that is the beginning of consciousness. Consciousness is created out of the complex interaction between these molecules, and at the

moment of death there is a dissolution when the brain stops functioning; and when the brain doesn't function it just goes back to nothing.

Buddhism refers to that view as nihilism, *chad-pa*. There is no continuity at all; something exists and then it's gone. A materialistic view like that says that consciousness is an epiphenomenon generated by the movement of neurons in the brain. Whereas the buddhist view—as I've described above in the production of karma—the world itself as a material phenomenon is an epiphenomenon of the mind.

Buddhist practice strives to unpack, deconstruct and subvert the enormous amount of energy that we have embedded in the idea of ourselves as existing as a substance separate from the world, a world which is itself composed of a series of separate substances. In that sense buddhism is anti-essentialist and is existentialist. That is to say, our experience of the world is not being generated out of a true essence, a true self. I am not 'James' because I have little ball of James-ness inside me that kind of pulses like the heart, going 'blub blub'. It's that I find myself in the world, responding to the world, and that experience of existing in a world with others is what can be referred to as 'James'. However because it is an existence, it is changing and transforming all the time in response to the environment.

With this perception we move towards seeing the world as surface. The great illusion is that everything has depth . Depth carries the sense of essence: that somewhere back there is something that gives rise to what is here. If only I could get in touch with back there (i.e. my true self, my deep self, the deep unconscious) I would get in touch with the source that gives rise to what appears here. This sense of depth moving up towards surface and out into the world, carries with it the notion of location and extension through space. Extension through space is linking with nodal points in space inside the self. Self and other unite across space. So we now have three points that are 'real'! Source self is real. Goal point other is real. Journey between them is real. It is the movement between these three, when it is taken as being truly real and self-existing, that is the dynamic for the ongoing experience of a dualistic world of self and other.

It is because of this structure that all the buddhist meditation practices are the way they are. You can link every single buddhist meditation practice to this structure. This is the key, core structure of what the dharma is about whether it is theravada, mahayana, sutra, tantra, or dzogchen—they all relate to this structure. When we learn buddhist meditation what we are trying to do is to create a scaffolding of method, of technique. A scaffolding which will be secure so that we can, inside the scaffolding, deconstruct the false creation of a separated sense of self living in a reified solid world. But if you don't create the scaffolding of method—which means

taking refuge, taking the bodhisattva vow, and the other disciplines then you just start to pull yourself apart and go bananas. That's not helpful.

This may feel like a lot of words and the ideas very complicated. Your head may be spinning around a bit but getting it into place is very helpful because once you have this in place you can see why the different kinds of meditation are described the way they are. It is because they are all different ways of addressing the structure of the problem. We have structure, process and product. So the structure is the basic experience of a sense of a separation between self and other. The process is the vibrating structure that we experience as our division from the world we encounter—all the thoughts, feelings, desires, emotions. These are the energetic wires between me and the world. The product or content are the particular thoughts which manifest because of these tension-wires strung between these two points, self and other.

If, for example I look at a neutral object, such as a flag. There is me and there is an object and interest or recognition becomes the basis, the structure. Then there's thought. I can have more specific thoughts. They solidify so that the content which is moving inside the process is very close. *It is my country's flag, a foreign flag, a prayer flag...* When we reflect on impermanence we are unpacking the givenness, or the seeming givenness, of this structure of perception. Remember, this is a structure of perception that we have been encouraged to pursue all our lives. When we went to school we were specially trained in it. We are rewarded for it in lots of way: by getting a driving licence, by holding down a job, by having relationships. Everyone wants us to be this way. Everyone except the Buddha!

Tenderness

Tenderness is one of the most important things in meditation however many of us are not very tender towards ourselves. We may even hate ourselves. We may feel that the only way we can make progress is to drive ourselves very hard to get rid of our many bad qualities and work hard to develop the good qualities others have but which we lack. Whilst this attitude can sometimes be useful in motivating us, and in generating some energy, it also is a very materialistic way of conceptualising ourselves, as if we were some sort of broken-down car engine. But we are not a machine. We are something very subtle, very fascinating and very interesting.

In order to be in touch with the very wonderful and interesting qualities that we all have we need to have a very tender eye, a loving eye, an eye that is full of interest. The development of this tenderness is a unification of wisdom and compassion. If you have a small baby and the baby is waking up crying in the middle of the night you have to go to the baby, pick it up, soothe

it and pay attention to it to try to find out what is disturbing it. Paying attention to a baby and at three o'clock in the morning might be difficult. You might be tired, you might be irritated, you might be worried that other people will get disturbed. Your attention to the baby may be quite crude. You may see it as a problem—*I just need to get it quiet so we can all get back to sleep*—but of course if you have an angry attitude like that then the baby sensitive to it and is likely to get even more upset. So in order to actually help the baby, as well as helping ourselves in that we want to go back to sleep, we have to avoid getting caught up in wanting the baby to grow out of this stage. We also have to avoid getting caught up in any angry emotional response of our own. What we need is to have a very tender attention to what is actually there.

Like the baby, we too are often disturbed and troubled without really knowing why. We may try to work out what is wrong by going to workshops, or therapy, or reading books, or talking to friends, trying to work out what to do differently. We learn all sorts of methods that we can apply to ourselves to deal with some of the distress that we are feeling. However these techniques may not be very helpful because before we know what tools or methods to apply to ourselves, we first have to identify what is really wrong. A good way to do that is just to spend some time with yourself. That doesn't mean spending time looking at TV, or reading, or cooking, or doing housework, or getting ready for work, or going to work. It doesn't mean just being alone; it means sitting with yourself, undistracted, in touch with what's going on. Even people sitting in meditation are often busy with something—reciting a mantra, trying to visualise a deity, trying to keep their attention on their breath, trying to look at a blank wall—busy in some way or other trying to focus the mind's attention on a particular phenomenon.

These are all very useful methods, but we have to ask, *'Methods for what?'* Focusing on the breath is a method for developing focused attention and for recognising the confusion of the pattern of the arising of thoughts and feelings. Visualising a deity or a figure like Guru Rinpoche², reciting their mantra, praying with devotion and then dissolving the meditation into yourself is a method of focusing the attention and entering into a state of openness. We use methods in order to achieve something. Clearly it's a good thing if we can focus our attention and get some understanding of emptiness. But is it what we need to be doing at this particular time? Often when we sit down to meditate we quickly apply a method without taking time to be in touch with our own state at that particular time. But if you don't know what your own state is then maybe you should wonder, *'Why am I applying this method now? And to whom?'*

² Guru Rinpoche has several names and one of them is Padmasambhava

We know that it is important for babies to drink milk. So if you are with a baby and the thought comes in your mind *'It's time to give the baby milk'* and you give the baby milk then you expect the baby to be happy because babies like milk. Now the baby may not actually be happy with that intervention. It may not particularly want milk at that moment. In 1950's Britain mothers were advised to feed babies every four hours and many mothers would have a little alarm clock that would ring to tell them that it was time to feed the baby. The mother was told that if she was strong-minded enough to keep to this schedule the baby will learn to adapt to the system. The baby would learn to adapt its desire to the environment and that in order to survive it had to fit in with the system. Other people's wishes and demands were more important than its own.

This may well be an important stage in the process of socialisation, but it involves a necessary lack of connectedness with one's own desire. We can do just the same in our practice of buddhist meditation. We can say *'I am a very stupid person. The Buddha is a very wise person. The guru, who is the agent of the Buddha, has said I should do this practice six times a day so if I do this practice six times a day it will help me.'* and that's fine. It works very well if you live in a monastery where everybody has to do things at the same time. It cannot function efficiently if there are lots of people all wanting to do different things at different times. Christian monasteries and buddhist monasteries both rules of the day when certain practices have to be done, when food has to be eaten, and all the rest of it. But most of us don't live in a monastery and part of the path to gaining enlightenment is to be able to turn the light inside and have a look at what's inside. Part of looking is to see what our own state is, to get a sense of how we are and then to link how we are with the various dharma methods that are available.

Back to the crying baby. You put the nipple in the baby's mouth and it starts to suck. The baby's quite happy now and it's forgotten about crying because it's been distracted into drinking the milk. We can use meditation to quieten the mind. But maybe we also need to enquire into why the baby is crying? That means to enquire into ourselves, into our own state, *'Why do I suffer?'* That's a very difficult thing to do because it's not simply doing a repetitive activity which you know is meaningful because some important person has told you it's meaningful. It's getting into the forest of your own feelings and thoughts and trying to get some understanding of what is going on moment by moment.

That's why tenderness is very important. We should be kind to ourselves. We should be patient with ourselves. We shouldn't get angry. We shouldn't be in too much of a hurry. Just gently spend time with yourself and get to know how it is that your mind operates. If you can observe yourself in that way with tenderness you will gradually start to know yourself a little

bit. When you know yourself a little bit more you can have a more interesting conversation with meditation teachers and people like that. Often we come to meditation like a patient going to a western doctor: *'I have a pain in my leg. I know I have a leg and I know I have a pain, but I don't know anything about legs and I don't know much about pain except that I don't like it. You're the big expert doctor. Do something now to my leg to take the pain away.'* However, when you give your leg over to the doctor in that way, with the freedom to do all kinds of thing to your leg, who can you blame if you come back from the hospital two months later with your leg cut off? You may have gone to Google or to the library to read lots about legs but you now you've only got one leg left! That's why it makes sense when you have a pain to understand a little bit about your own body. Then when you go to see the doctor you can have a slightly more educated conversation about it. Sadly doctors often don't like educated patients. As a psychotherapist the worst kind of patient is another psychotherapist! Hopefully in the dharma it is a little bit different: a good student, or a student that the teacher can help, will be a student who has gone to the trouble of educating themselves, has gone to the trouble of learning something.

There are two ways of learning. One way is by reading books, studying, discussing with others, going to different teachers. The other way is to sit quietly with yourself and observe who and how and what you are. When we read buddhist texts through the eyes of these authors, through the shining wisdom that's presented there, we may start to recognise ourselves but inherent in every gift is a demand. So what is the demand when you read the dharma? The demand often is that I should be like that. I should do that. It's a demand that we experience as taken up by ourselves rather than imposed by the other. There is a mimetic movement through which, by an identification with the other, we seek to find an agreeable and acceptable way of being. The Seven-line prayer, for example, says to Guru Rinpoche *Khye Kyi Je Su Dag Drub Kyi, Following and relying on you, I do your practice: I want to be the same as you.* However in being like somebody else, you may not be yourself.

This is the developmental crisis of adolescence. Can I find a way of having confidence in myself enough to be as I am or do I need to be like everyone else? If I try to be like myself I may find that other people don't like me and I'm afraid of being left all on my own. That would be terrible so it feels much safer to be like other people. If other people want long hair, I'll have long hair. If other people want tattoos and piercings then I'll have tattoos and piercings. Everyone else can see now that I am just like them, one of the gang, and I don't need to worry any more about who I am because I am you.

—So what kind of a Buddha do you want to be?

—*Don't know.*

—Would you like to be a Guru Rinpoche Buddha?

—*Oh, yes please. That sounds good.*

—Or would you prefer to be a Tara Buddha?

—*Well, that would be nice too. Oh, don't give me choice. You just tell me which Buddha I should be. You know best.*

—Guru Rinpoche is good for you.

—*Okay then. Thank you very much. That's what I'll be.*

In this way we seek reassurance whilst avoiding the serious task of looking into ourselves. And it's not wrong to do this. A lot of the time we are anxious, we are insecure, and clearly it makes sense to practise through identification with others. It's not wrong for adolescents to want to be like everyone else. That's one way of dealing with the anxiety of an identity crisis. It's fine to wear the same clothes as other people. There's nothing wrong with it. It's a method for dealing with anxiety.



Refuge: Buddha Dharma and Sangha

Buddhism starts with the idea of refuge. It's like how on a rainy day you want to have an umbrella or some cover because there is a sensitive surface—your skin—and there is a negative other—the rain—and you want to put a barrier between the sensitive part and the negative part. A refuge consists of having a buffer zone between you and what is difficult. It's also a bit like how a child might say, *'If you don't leave me alone I'll tell my mummy.'* So as buddhists we say, *'I have a big mummy and she will take care of me. I take refuge in the Buddha and the Buddha is bigger and stronger than anyone else. He even understands emptiness which nobody else can understand so he's definitely the best one. Nobody can ever get to me. Buddha's got my back. When Buddha got enlightened he sat on the big throne and the devils fired arrows and spears at him and they all turned into flowers. I'm with the Buddha and he's the best!'*

This is very sensible. If you are going to take refuge in someone why not choose the best? If you have a mummy and a daddy you want to have a daddy who is big enough to beat up anyone who causes you trouble. The infantile longing for protection is something that remains with us all our lives. This is why we fall in love. We look for some kind of comfort and belonging and merging. To call it infantile is not to insult it at all. It is to say that it is a very valid part of the tender yearning quality of our soul.

That is one aspect of taking refuge in buddha, dharma and sangha. You powerful things please protect me! *'By the blessing of the buddha, dharma and sangha, may all beings be happy.'*

May I be safe. This kind of practice is very important because through this we develop a confidence, feeling someone is on our side, and in a time of distress we have a reliable place to turn to. Through our meditation or our practice or our prayers we will be connected with a benign force which will support us and calm us and make us safe.

This links in with the development of ego-strength since the ego develops in relationship. The ego is a mode of relating to the world. Part of the health in the ego is the ability to relate to changes in the environment. When a child is disturbed and anxious they need to have a reliable person who will help them make sense of the world.

- Mummy, mummy in school today this boy punched me. Why did he do that?
- Well, it's because he's not a very nice boy.*
- Am I a nice boy?
- Yes, you're a nice boy.*
- Oh, right. Thank you. Can I go out and play now?

Refuge: Guru Deva and Dakini

We have the same relationship in taking refuge but we are also taking refuge in Guru, Deva and Dakini. The guru is the teacher, in particular the teacher who introduces you to the nature of your mind and gives you a connection with the possibility of transformation and realisation. The deva or deities are the meditational deities that we rely on through visualisation to provide a point of symbolic transformation of the way in which we perceive our ordinary situation. Through visualising myself in the form of Guru Rinpoche, or Tara, or Chenrezi or whoever, I am identifying with a form which is not my own. So I am me being Chenrezi. The 'me' that is 'me' is now the 'me' that is somebody else. Therefore the possibility of self-identification is removed out of a narrow, habitual, karmically defined mode into a more creative, symbolic and expansive mode.

This an important preparation for the time of death because for as long as I am fully identified with the body and feel that I am this body, then when this body starts to become weakened or sick, I have the sense that I am going to die. I am going to end as I know myself. Now if the only way that I know myself is in this body then I will have the fear that I am totally truly ended. But if I have been practising a sadhana meditation then there is a flow through different modes of identification. The stages in the meditation include visualising, identifying with the deity, merging in the deity (Guru Rinpoche, for example) at which point this is the only form that is existing, then it dissolves into a point of light and that point of light is dissolving into open spaciousness. Out of that spaciousness I am arising again. I am experiencing the fact that I can go from an identification with form into the experience of formlessness, and then return to

form with a continuity of an awareness which is devoid of a particular content. It's a process of awareness because awareness is the open, spacious, lucid quality or dimension.

It's very difficult to put experience into language without making it too concrete. The experience of having a form, of not having a form, is a process of arising and passing inside the open state of awareness which has no beginning or end, no colour, no shape, no top or bottom. We use the deity to transform the location of ourselves from an ego that is identified with this flesh and blood body: *"I am this body. This body will die. I will die. I feel sad. I feel worried. I have to do a lot of things before I die. How many cream cakes do I have to eat before I die? How many bottles of good malt whisky do I have to drink before I die?"*

For the ego there is always the issue that time is running out. We don't know how much time we have before we die. All we know is that it's not infinite. Even the time we have before we die, we don't know if these years will be times of health or times of sickness. Goodness knows what will come to us. Our anxious response to this is often to ignore it and distract ourselves by watching TV, reading the paper, and falling asleep. Or we may become a bit obsessional about housework and keeping the house and the garden very proper. In that way we try to build the security of our identity around repetitive activities which seem meaningful. However if we were to imagine that today was the last day of our life we would probably not want to be doing these things!

Time

The practice of tantra, making use of the generous, compassionate forms of the deities, opens up is a new relationship with time. You may have experienced a timeless quality sometimes to the meditation. The focused attention becomes absorbed in the object and is not distracted so that there is no basis for thinking of beginning, middle or end. In fact it is the sense of beginning, middle and end which defines time as we know it. The focused attention on the deity, the creating, merging and dissolution, as is described in the various practices, relaxes into openness, with no attempt to consolidate a focused, concrete location of self, but simply allowing awareness to relax and whatever is arising, to pass through it.

In that state one is free even of the time of beginning, of resting for a while and then of ending. There is an openness within which the flow is without ceasing. This state is often described as being without beginning and without end. It is unborn and unceasing. It is unborn because when you try to find out what is there you cannot get hold of anything. There is nothing substantial. It is unceasing because thoughts, feelings, sensations and appearance are constantly streaming through this open dimension of awareness.

This third aspect is the dakini. There are different kinds of dakini. Some are worldly goddesses who live in cemeteries and who are concerned with controlling the world's resources, particularly with the four elements. The Tibetan word for dakini is *khandro* and indicates something moving in the sky. In this understanding the dakinis are a symbolic way of understanding the essential purity of all that arises because the sky that they move through is the open sky of awareness, the sky of emptiness itself. Whatever arises and moves, this is the dance of the dakini and this dance never ceases.

One of the things we find when we are located in an ego-focused identification in the world is that things are constantly ending; we are dealing with a self separated off from a world that is composed of finite entities, all with a beginning, a middle and an end. However we are all trying to ensure that the good things in our lives don't end, and the bad things in our lives end as soon as possible! The solidification in our perception is paralleled with a solidification in our sense of selves, leads to a solidification of our immediate sense of our desires and wishes. This in turn leads to a solidification of the judgements that we make about the field that is appearing to us, manifesting as a solidification of the interventions that we make to either secure or distance ourselves from the objects that we like or don't like.

However when we take refuge in the dakini, we are unifying ourselves with the experience of a ceaseless play of arisings. In doing that we are unpacking the sense of solidification which has us trapped. It's a transformation from our aesthetic being trying match our likes and dislikes out onto the world, towards experiencing the revelation of the world as a ceaseless play of beauty in itself, whatever its manifest content may be and however we might have described it in terms of our prejudices.

To recap, in the first three forms of refuge—buddha, dharma and sangha—we are seeking a kind of containment and protective encircling of ourselves to keep difficulties out on the other side. In the second of the three forms of refuge—guru, deva and dakini—we are trying to engage in a subversive movement which will unpack and relax the tight embeddedness that we have in the fixed position of an ego identity. The first level of refuge is giving a reassurance and the second level of refuge is giving a disturbance. Both are very useful because sometimes we need reassurance and sometimes we need to get shaken up a little bit.

Refuge: Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya

The third level is taking refuge in dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya. These are Sanskrit words and the Tibetan equivalents are *Chos-sKu*, *Longs-sKu* and *sPrul-sKu*. There are

different ways to translate these terms and one way is natural mode, expressive or radiant mode, and manifest mode.

The mind of the buddha, which is our own mind when we understand it, is without beginning or end, without determination, and because of this it has no core cause. It has no particular intention either; it is just there open and relaxed, untouched by anything. There is no activity that it needs to do. It doesn't need to achieve anything. This state is called *kuntuzangpo* because it is full and complete. It doesn't require anything to be added to it or anything to be taken away from it. In terms of feelings, it would be a profound feeling of being at peace with oneself, but not oneself as an entity. *Kuntuzangpo* is not a state of mind that is inside the body or outside the body; you can't locate it as being in any particular place. It has no colour, or shape. It is not an object out over there. You can never see your mind, just as you can never really see your own face. What you *can* do is realise it, when it becomes your way of being. That's why it is the natural mode dharmakaya. When you stop doing other things you relax into this natural mode.

This state of open awareness is responsive. It is responsive in an ethical way, just as we would feel troubled if we heard a baby crying. Although this state of dharmakaya is perfectly relaxed, and everything that arises in it passes in it, everything is self-arising and self-liberating, nonetheless there is a quality of responding. A movement can arise within it which has an intentionality of ethical concern. This response arises as a radiance, or an expressiveness, which is seen symbolically as five-coloured rainbow light, is sambhogakaya.

From where are all the thoughts, feelings and sensations that occur to us in this state of relaxed openness, coming? If this mind is without beginning and end, without top and bottom, where is the thought factory located? Where? How could a production factory locate itself in this place without top and bottom, colour or size? We are used to living in linear terms (here and there) and in a spatial location (past, present and future). Yet here we have a very different sense in which the movement of thoughts, feelings, sensations—all that occurs—together arising in and as the openness of this mind. It is the display of this mind which is revealing itself to itself yet without that revelation becoming separate from the ground which gives rise to it. The awareness that whatever is arising is the display of the awareness itself, which doesn't become concretised. When one attends to this display which is arising inside the openness of awareness, it clearly takes on a manifest form, *nirmanakaya*.

Look around the place where you are sitting now. You can see colours and shapes however as humans we are drawn towards the perception of particular gestalts, towards people, towards

people that we can recognise, people that we can relate to. This is the manifestation of compassion.

Compassion can be seen in two ways. From the view of tantra in general we can see ourselves as beings who have the potential for enlightenment and the task of the buddha nirmanakaya, this *tulku* (Tib. *sPrul-sKu*) coming into the world, is to help those who have a buddha nature to awaken to that nature. In that way the nirmanakaya becomes the link between nirvana and samsara. There are beings suffering in samsara because they have a potential that they have not yet realised, and there is an extension from nirvana where the Buddha has realised his potential and links realised potential and awakening potential in a moment of recognition. That is a function of the nirmanakaya.

The dzogchen view is slightly different. In the view of dzogchen, this level of manifestation of compassion is: everything is compassion. We are all compassion. We ourselves as we are now are the compassion of the buddha. We are the manifestation of the buddha. There is no change that needs to occur to anything. If we understand that the source of generation of whatever is arising is this movement across these three modes, from openness to expression to manifestation, and that manifestation moves back into this dissolving expression through the five-coloured light and into the openness of being. This pulsing of form into space, space into form, is ceaseless and ongoing. Nothing that arises is more significant than anything else. There is nothing that is bad and that has to be excluded. There is nothing that is good and that has to be held on to. All things are the manifestation of the ground. This is the realisation of *Kuntuzangpo* in the world. This third level of refuge is about recognition, relaxation and continuation as set out by Garab Dorje in his Three Statements.

Refuge: One's own mind

The final refuge is to take refuge in our own mind. To learn and practise many different dharma methods is important but each of these dharma methods is designed to return us to the point that we always start from, which is ourselves. While it is important to have respect for buddha, dharma, sangha, and guru, deva, dakini, if the focus of our attention is on the good qualities of those who have realised enlightenment and the bad qualities of ourselves who have not realised enlightenment, that attitude will engender the continuation of dualistic perception. That is not the same as taking refuge in one's own mind.

Tibetan texts say that "*Method is compassion and wisdom is emptiness.*" Recognising your own mind is wisdom. Wisdom is the understanding that your mind and everything that arises is emptiness. The mind that recognises that is also empty. Method is the compassion whereby we

get this realisation, and we then help others to get this realisation. So, we can say that dharmakaya is wisdom, and sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya are method. Everything that arises is a method for gaining enlightenment.

If we recognise this then we quickly find ourselves close to buddhahood. But if we start with a position of judgement—*some people are very good, some people are very bad, this person can help me get enlightened, this person is an obstacle to enlightenment*—then although we may seem to be taking care of ourselves, we are actually manufacturing more dualistic division.

That is why it is very important to recognise that meditation practices are method; the guru is method; temples are method, and butterlamps are method. These are all only method.

We have to think very clearly how we are going to make use of these methods and, as I described above, there are three levels or three ways of refuge. The first way is seeking comfort and protection. The second way is seeking subversion and disruption. The third way is seeking recognition and identification.

It is very nice to make a little shrine at home, put up a picture of your lovely guru, burn some butter lamps and then when you feel sad and upset, you can go and sit there and that will give you some comfort. This is an example of refuge level one. For that to work you have to make use of it. You make your altar nice with fresh flowers and precious things because the more you put your emotion and your energy into it, the more it will be invested with your heart-longing. It's like putting money in a bank and when you are sad and lonely you can go to the bank and take out some of your money and treat yourself to new clothes or a nice champagne. In the same way you look after your altar, day by day you build up this resource and then "Oh, Rinpoche, listen to me, look at me..." The important things to recognise is that this is a method. The guru is method. All of these manifestations are methods and methods don't mean anything unless you use them. Gurus, tea-cups, phones, torches... everything comes into the world to be used. If you don't make use of them you won't get any benefit.

In refuge level two, we make use of the guru in the meditation. If you are lucky enough to meet a crazy guru their own behaviour will be so disturbing to you that you keep thinking, "*What on earth is this person doing?*" The guru's manifest presence in the world becomes a continuing source of distress and confusion for you, like having a stone in your shoe. Because if you have a stone in your shoe you have to think about why you are walking. When you can't understand your guru's behaviour it can help you to question your own life so that you become more awake and more aware of your own intentions and how you are spending this precious time between birth and death.

In refuge level three we need to use the guru to give us the instruction that will help us to recognise the nature of our own mind, as dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya. If you don't understand what the guru says you have to ask again and again until you get clear. It all depends on your own desire; if you want a lot and you're very greedy you can get a lot. If you only want a little bit, you can have a little. For that reason the basic practice in the Tibetan tradition usually starts with reflecting on what are called the 'Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind from Samsara' (*Tib. bLo lDog rNam bZhi*) and in particular the reflection on having a precious human birth. It is a very rare opportunity and most of the time we are caught up in our ordinary busy lives so that we don't see teachers very often. Then when we do see a teacher we may be half-asleep or too shy or too afraid to ask the question that we really want to ask. In that way the time goes by, we remain in our doubt and our confusion, we feel sad and yet longing for something.

That's why it is very important to pay attention to your own heart-longing and to remember that it is like the little baby. Then when your heart cries out for something, don't go, "*Shhh, don't make a noise. Go back to sleep. Don't disturb anything.*" Let your baby cry and if your baby cries, maybe someone will come in your world and answer your cry. But if you always stifle your baby because you don't want to disturb the world, because you don't want to be greedy and ask for anything, you won't get very much. You'll just have a very disciplined, well-adapted disturbed little child inside you. Not very nice.

Question: What if the guru we take refuge in turns out to be not so holy?

This is a very familiar problem in life. We fall in love with someone, we idealise them and then they betray us. Without this there would be no opera. Carmen, Tosca... every opera is about this! So why should we be surprised that betrayal exists? In the dzogchen tradition we take up this idea of *kuntuzangpo*, of the always good, that everything is good. It is good not in terms of the dualistic notions of good as opposed to bad, but that everything that arises is good because its source is good, because everything is the manifestation of emptiness.

If you go to the guru primarily seeking comfort and reassurance then you will be upset if the guru betrays you because you no longer feel comfort. You feel discomfort. But if you are a meditator and you go to the guru in order to be disturbed, then a guru who betrays you is a very wonderful guru, because really does disturb you. What has been betrayed? Your attachment to an object that you imagined would always be good and reliable. How did you decide to begin with that the guru was a good person? Because he or she did very nice things and made you feel happy. So, I love my guru when he makes me happy and I hate my guru when he makes me sad.

This is the normal human reaction. It can be very useful for us to recognise this because we then have the basis for doing meditation practice to transform our point of perception, so that we are not locked into an idealising fantasy, a transference of the good mother or the good father, which actually distracts us from the possibility of examining ourselves.

Basically it's about method, that you make use of the guru to help you. If you expect that you are going to receive an adult adoption service from a Tibetan lama who passes through your country for two days a year then that is cloud cuckoo land.

To give responsibility for your life to someone else makes you a fool. Here is where we have to struggle with our infantile regressed desire to find this parent figure and say to them, *"Here is my life. Here are all my problems. Over to you guru. What should I do?"* If you do that then you shouldn't be surprised if the guru responds in a way that, as in the question, "is not so holy".

Question: Why do we build a scaffold to support the ego when it will all crumble down? How can we apply this knowledge in our therapy practice?

The scaffolding (of tantric visualisation practice) is itself explicitly empty—*"out of a clear blue sky arises the deity, Tara, Chenrezi, Padmasambhava..."*—and the deities themselves are the manifestation of emptiness. The scaffolding is empty. With this scaffolding and with my identification with Tara I move from an identification with my flesh and blood body towards something else. I'm using the scaffolding as a way of softening the intensity of the attachment that I feel to this body. This body then dissolves through the identification with Tara and the scaffolding also dissolves; both dissolve.

The scaffolding is empty and what we are holding in place is also empty. Because if somebody simply told you or explained to you that you do not exist you would get more tight and insist that you did really exist. So what we do is we say, *"Tara, I pray to you to show to me that I don't really exist."* "Okay" she says with a big smile and then she comes and dissolves into you and you respond, *"Oh I don't exist. It's really nice."* You take a moment that would otherwise be terrifying and make it pleasurable through the use of positive emotion, through the identification of the scaffolding.

Regarding the second part of the question, there are different kinds of psychotherapy, but most psychotherapy is concerned with strengthening the ego and strengthening an ongoing continuous sense of self which is reliable as a location for managing our complex interactions with the world. This strengthening of the ego helps a person to manage their life better, keep a job, keep relationships, bring up their kids and so forth. Now, that is important also as a basis

for the practice of meditation because if you don't have clarity in yourself, doing meditation could be difficult, frightening even.

For many people psychotherapy gives them the stability they need in order to do meditation practice. We live in an environment that has a lot of stresses and strains. We may well have grown up in families which were under pressure from the war, from unemployment, from alcoholism, from all kinds of things, and so it may be important to address some of these confusions before starting to do meditation. For people who have a lot of self-hatred psychotherapy may create a mood of tenderness and love so that the person can start to love themselves.

Question: What are the needs that I need to get and how do I get them?

This is an interesting question because if we have the idea of method then how we experience our needs depends on the methods we have available for dealing with them. Methods arise out of a particular view.

If we regard this world as a dangerous place full of temptations then one method for managing danger and temptation is to avoid a great deal of disturbance. So it would be useful to recognise that a need is dangerous, though tempting. If we see this world as a manifestation of a deity, such as Tara, then everything in the world is Tara. Therefore, whatever we do is a manifestation of Tara and it doesn't matter so much. You can say "Yes, Tara" or "No, Tara" and it's both Tara.

So it all depends on the view. If we start with the assumption that we shouldn't have needs because they are tempting us from the straight and narrow, then needs are the trouble. But if we regard a need as something that arises in the mind, and have the view that everything that arises in the mind is the play of Tara or the direct manifestation of our own buddha nature, then whether we indulge the need or don't indulge the need, makes no difference.

What do we need? How will we know what we need? In a tantra and dzogchen view it's more about the relationship of being in the world and intentionality. If intentionality is arising out of a limited ego-place that wants to be in control or own the world then that's a very different kind of experience than if we are able to relax and respond to the world as it reveals itself. In the revealing of the world we reveal ourselves to ourselves. With this view you are not so worried about what you need or don't need. You can be interested in whatever is going on and need doesn't really come into it. The miraculous thing seems to be that if you take up that view in life, whatever you need arrives.

One of the first things one of my teachers said to me in India was *"If you practise the dharma you will never starve."* Even when I had very little money, somehow food would arrive. Even when I was far away from people I might wake up in the morning and outside my tent someone had left a little tsampa, and one time an old man walked two miles to give me some eggs. People do that. I don't know why, but you are doing your practice and somehow it comes.



Doing a meditation practice

Meditation shifts the focus of our attention away from the ordinary experience we have of being a consciousness inside our bodies looking out through our eyes onto a world which is separate and real, inherently real. For as long as we have the sense of being separate from the world, the world will act on us; we will act on the world and we inevitably we get pulled into a manipulation or control fantasy. When that structure is in place we get pulled into rising feeling when things seem to be going well and we are getting what we want but when things don't seem to be going the way we want, we go into a sinking feeling of depression and hopelessness. These mood swings, this kind of manic-depressive movement of hope and despair, is very disturbing. Both movements are reinforcing our sense of a substantial reality.

The practice of meditation is trying to simplify our existence in the world on the outer, most general level. We try to avoid putting ourselves into chaotic circumstances that will cook up our internal response so that we don't intensify this elation and depression. We have developed certain patterns of response throughout our childhood and these patterns lead us to make choices in our lives whereby we repeat our patterns, and through the repetition of our patterns, we solidify the sense of having a continuing self.

For example, a very common pattern is to believe that I am a worthless person. Because of this no one will like me. So, if I want people to like me I will have to please them. Then I have to do a lot of things to please other people just so that they will be willing to tolerate me. I do lots of the things to please other people, but I get tired because my own needs aren't being met. Eventually I get exhausted and when I get exhausted I behave 'badly'—maybe I binge eat or get drunk or start shouting at people, something quite chaotic. Afterwards I feel quite guilty and bad because I have acted 'out of character'. I am also worried that I showed a needy part of myself and so other people will see me as unacceptable. I shrink. I avoid people. This confirms to me that I am a bad person.

This is a way of interacting with the world: trying to get away from a position but returning to that same position because of the nature of the interaction we make. We choose our friends, work situations and so on which we have found useful in the past. They allow us to maintain our sense of continuity and permit us to continue repeating our patterns— so that we end up always being hurt and lonely but trying our best.

That is why dharma texts often advise practitioners to leave home, to go away from a place where people know us; go to a barren land and do our practice there. For as long as we stay around people we know, and particularly with people we have chosen to be in our lives, we are surrounded by triggers that will hook us back into our repeated patterns. But if we go to a place where there are new people or particularly a place without people, we are spinning, trying to get into this pattern but since there is no hook there to get us we become more aware of what we're up to.

Anybody who has done a solitary retreat will be aware of that. After a time you find yourself talking to yourself because you need to carry on the conversation with yourself that you usually have with other people and which reaffirms you in your ordinary sense of self. When we go to do meditation it is useful to do it in an environment which does not support our continual habits because otherwise we'll have to sit in meditation for quite a long time before we calm down to a point where we can start to see the underlying structure of our patterns. If you can't make a big external change like that then make some small changes; light some incense, perhaps take a shower first, switch off your phone, lower the light... Have the sense of washing off the world so that you allow your mood to shift as much as possible before you sit to do meditation.

If you are very agitated it's going to be very difficult however since we are part of the world we can make use of the aspects of the world around us to help us get into the state to do meditation. If you feel very tired, for example, it might be helpful to put on some music and dance for a few minutes, and then sit and do your practice. You can use the energy of the world to transform your own energy and bring yourself to a state whereby you can get into the meditation as quickly as possible. If you are very tired, there's no point to sit and struggle with wanting to fall asleep; you have to wake yourself up. The main thing is to relate to your own state, whatever that is. We have to be in touch with ourselves before we can know what is good for us. Then when we sit to do the meditation our goal is to make use of the method provided to shift our state into one of an open awareness not resting on any particular point of identification.

Visualisation is one of the methods used in the tantric tradition. That is to say we make use of the creative capacity of our imagination to create an image which provides a focus for our attention. Before doing a deity visualisation practice it is traditional to have an initiation first

and in the course of the initiation you are introduced to the presence of the deity. The usual way of imagining this is that the deity has a home somewhere. In the meditation you invite the deity to come from their home to be near you, and you offer them some things so that they are happy, you then have some intimacy with them, and then they go back again. The structure for this is the Indian ritual of welcoming an honoured guest to your house. Why would we invite people to our house? Usually because we want something from them. We want them to like us. We want them to give us something. We want them to praise our furniture or food or whatever it is. In English we have a saying, *"There's no such thing as a free lunch."* It's the same when we invite the deity into our house; they get the bill and the bill is, *"You have to make this person enlightened."* That's why we have to offer them many nice things.

What is important is that we want this person to come. We are yearning for relationship. For many people who go into the dharma the image or the archetype of the lonely hero is hovering around. There is the idea that just by going on your own into nature, some mystical moment will arise. In this practice we are concerned with relationship and to remember that whatever comes to us comes in relationship. The path to wisdom is through relationship. The fruit of wisdom is compassion, which is relationship. The fruit of this transformatory relationship is to dissolve the frightened hard core of a sense of self that has to protect itself, so that we become more open and available for a free intercourse with other people.

So we invite the deity to come and then we praise the deity and we pray to the deity so that our perspective on the whole world dissolves into just one point. Here is this deity who is looking at us, smiling at us, and we are completely open to their presence. Now is the time to allow all your idealising fantasies to arise. Now is the time to think, *"You are the one. You can save me."* Whatever positive projections you have inside you, put them into your meditation. It's much safer that putting them into people in the outside world. So you should pray with deep longing in your heart. All the loneliness that you feel, all the sadness, all the confusion, you should bring this into your heart so that you have this intense longing, *"If only you are with me then I am safe. Oh, I need you."* This intensification is very important because you are using your emotion as a support for cognitive focusing onto one-pointed attention.

Remember that this is method. It is not about becoming a devotee of some mind-controlling cult. You are in charge here. You are in charge of using a method to help concentrate your mind on a point which will open your own mind. It's not about enslaving you to any god or deity or cult at all.

Having practised this for some time, usually with the recitation of a mantra which is a method for purifying and focusing the mind through sound, we then invite the deity to come to

the crown of our head and this deity, which has come from its pure land, is of course composed of light because the deity represents the manifestation of form and emptiness. This light is the presence of form and emptiness. Remember we spoke earlier of the world as surface, a glittering, shiny surface. The appearance of the deity is just this shining surface in a clear form.

So when the deity comes to the top of our head, from the top down and from the bottom up, it dissolves down into light, into a little ball of light about the size of a pea. Then this ball of light sinks down through the crown of your head, down into your heart. At this stage your body has already been purified because rays of rainbow light have been streaming into you as you were praying to the deity. Different visualisation practices have different ways of doing this rainbow light but the essential thing is that we are imagining rays of light streaming into our body, purifying all the tensions, all the grasping, all the heaviness that we experience, so that we start to feel our own body filling with light. All our body is light and anything heavy or substantial in terms of physical, muscles, blood, bone, but also heavy emotions, thoughts, feelings, repeated patterns of identity—all of this is dissolved in the light.

Every stage of the relationship that we are having with this deity is transforming our own relationship with ourselves so when this small ball of light comes down into our heart, our own body is clearly at this time also a body of light. Our body of light then dissolves down and merges into the ball of light. So this ball of light is now the essence of our body and the god's body. But what is it the essence of? Form and emptiness. Light and emptiness. As you condense light into light into light it doesn't become heavy; it just becomes a more intense light. Then this small ball of light dissolves down and down and we have our attention fully on this ball. We are completely absorbed into this ball; It is as if we are shrinking down and down and down, smaller and smaller until there's just a tiny point of light and we just keep going into that point of light, without being distracted by anything else, into this point of light. And then it's gone, then just open.

We relax into this state of openness for as long as possible, and whatever thoughts, feelings, sensations arise—without waiting expectantly for them, without trying to grasp onto them, without chasing after them after they've gone—we just allow them to arise and pass, without entering particularly into any sense of spatial location. If we stay with this then gradually, eventually we will find ourselves caught up in an idea and getting drawn back into being here in the world.

Now what is very important at that point is to recognise as you become aware of the world that you have two choices: you can think, "*Now I am back here again*" or you can experience the revelation of the world from the state of meditation. If you take the second option you have the

experience that you and everything and everyone around you are arising in this moment, effortlessly, fully formed, as the presence of the radiance of your own mind. If that recognition is a little difficult it is often easier to think of all that is arising as the form of the deity. We are living in this domain of the deity; all that appears is a form of the deity; all sound is the sound of mantra, and any thoughts, feelings and sensations are the mental experience of the deity. This second method has more intentionality, more sense of *“I have to recognise that this is this...”* I am transforming the world by taking up a method of naming and labelling, whereas in the first method, if we can just experience it as the revelation, it’s more relaxed and more open. If it is possible for you, do it in the relaxed way, otherwise take up this identification with the deity.

Afterwards we just continue in the world but with a sense of the freshness and lack of substantiality in the forms that arise. They are there as before, nothing has vanished, except the heaviness of imagining that there are real entities for us to hang onto and construct something out of. Through this experience of openness—the radiance of the world that we are encountering—we can be freed from some of the hopes and fears that keep us expanding and contracting. We welcome the world and we welcome ourselves into the world, a world of relatedness. It is not a relationship that I have to try to make; the relationship is a given because here we are in the world. We are related. Just here.

In this way we use the practice to move our point of perception from an internal ego to a state of open awareness which is responding to the world as it presents itself, as the play of self and other, a self and other which are not truly separate.

Here is a very simple way of doing practice. If you already have had initiations and are doing practice then you can modify it into a form that you are more familiar with. I will describe something very simple and for this practice it is not important to have had an initiation or not.

Visualise or imagine a clear blue sky in front of you. You can do this with your eyes open or closed, whichever you are more comfortable with. In the centre of this clear blue sky is a ball of light. This ball of light has rainbow colours running through it. This ball of light is the presence of the five wisdoms of all the buddhas. You can see it in the form of Tara, Chenrezi, Guru Rinpoche or whoever, or more simply just as a ball of light. Whilst looking at this ball of light recite *“Om Aa Hung”*. *Om* represents the Buddha’s body, *Aa* the Buddha’s speech and *Hung* the Buddha’s mind. These three letters represent the dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya. In that sense they are the presence of all the forms that we take refuge in.

Now as we recite *Om Aa Hung , Om Aa Hung , Om Aa Hung ...* rays of rainbow-coloured, five-coloured light are coming into our body. We can experience it coming in through our forehead,

our throat and our heart, or just as a great wave of light. Our bodies are being filled with this light. As we are reciting, this light is coming and it is removing all the heaviness, all the burden from us. If you feel happy this is a wonderful thing. When we stop reciting *Om Aa Hung* the ball of light comes to the top of our head, gets a bit smaller, comes through the top of our head, down into our hearts. Our body is already full of rainbow-coloured light and the light of our body merges down into this ball of light. The ball of light gets smaller and smaller and vanishes. We just rest in that open point where the mind is no longer focused on any single arising—it has no central focus—it is an open spaciousness through which thoughts, feelings and sensations arise and pass without our involvement. Whatever comes without us being involved in it. We stay in that state for some time and then gently allow the presencing of the world whilst trying to stay with the sense of the expansion out into light.

There are stages of the process: we start with space: then space becomes form; associated with form is sound; the sound generates light from the form; then form merges into form, revealing light; the light goes down into space; out of space light arises; then we are in the world of light.

We do this practice very gently with a lot of tenderness. We don't have to be heavy on ourselves. Just allow the longing of the heart to open to light. Very soft.

The more we engage with this kind of practice the more we can soften our tight sense of having to be in control. However it may be difficult because, as we looked earlier, to experience the world as an ongoing revelation, as a presencing out of a state of openness, is not a notion that is supported in our culture. That is why it is helpful to find sympathetic people to practise with together. If you only ever practise alone and get no feedback from other people then since you are doing an activity which is not aligned with the main cultural interest, you might end up feeling rather isolated or peculiar. However, on the other hand if you form a dharma group there is always the danger of politics and confusion. But in general holding this idea of the world as relationship, it's important to try out for yourself different ways of being with others, trying to be open, attentive and compassionate yet without falling into attachment and without trying to direct the flow of interactions.

We are moving now towards our conclusion. It is customary to end buddhist dharma by appreciating how this activity creates some positive energy which can help us. We then develop the sense of sharing whatever we gained in this situation out towards all sentient beings. We can do this in various ways and one way would be to imagine whatever is of value being in front of you as a little ball of light whose rays of light spread out to all sentient beings. We are not going

to hang on to good things and keep them special and precious for ourselves, but whatever is precious for us, we will offer to others. Just sit with this idea for a moment.

Now we are at the end of our two days I would like to thank our organisers very much. Thank you all for inviting me here to this project and thank you all for putting you energy into reflecting on yourselves. This is a useful way to live.

