

Q&As

Extracted from 'The Happy Twins: Dzogchen and Mahamudra'¹

Autumn Retreat in the Eifel, 2019

James Low

Transcribed by Jo Feat

Edited by Barbara Terris

Questions and Responses extracted from the teachings. They can stand alone. If you want to refer back to the full teaching then click on the link above and you can listen. If you want to refer to the texts then the verse number and line numbers will let you do that.

Question	2
Question about revising translations	2
Question after verse 3	3
About termas	3
Questions after verse 6	4
Question about death and distraction.....	4
Question about dementia.....	5
Question after verse 10	7
Question about gender of gurus.....	7
Questions after verse 19	7
Question about activating awareness.....	7
Questions after verse 24	9
Question after the start of the Mahamudra text	11
Question about transmission.....	11

1. Two texts were studied on this retreat. The Mirror of Luminous Revelation (from Nuden Dorje Drophan Lingpa) and The Mahamudra Middle Way of the Ganges (from Tilopa).

Question after lines 15 & 16.....	13
Question about sound	13
Questions after lines 17, 18, 19 & 20	14
Question about getting confused when we die	14
Question about optimism.....	15
Questions after lines 23 & 24	16
Question about using analogy of movie screen.....	16
Question after line 30.....	16
Question about a Tibetan word	16
Questions after line 44	17
Question about who is the one who focusses on the mind.....	17
Questions after lines 76, 77 & 78	17
Question about whether great yogis fall in love	17
Questions after line 75	18
Question about attaining non-attainment.....	18
Questions after lines 85 & 86	19
Question from a student called Ruth: Cutting the root of the ruth-ness of ruth.....	19
Question after line 89.....	23
Question about understanding the unborn.....	23
Your identity is a maintained construct.....	24

Question²

We will start to look at the first of the texts, which is the text from Nuden Dorje. An earlier translation of this Tibetan text was published with my commentary as the book *Being Right Here* and later as the book, *The Mirror of Clear Meaning*. This is a re-translation.

Question about revising translations

Question: Why do you translate texts again that you have translated already?

² This and the following questions were during the teaching on *The Mirror of Luminous Revelation*.

James: Each translation is like walking around a mountain. The mountain is the truth of sunyata and we take up this or that vantage point. I put up a text on the website entitled [108 Views of Mount Sunyata](#), and it is exactly that. You look at yourself one way and it is empty, and you look at yourself another way and it is empty; you never get to the truth.

In *Being Right Here* the title of the text is translated as *The Mirror of Clear Meaning*, and now I am translating it as *The Mirror of Luminous Revelation*. Revelation means something which is revealed, and what is revealed is something which is already there. A revelation is the opposite of a construct. How do we bring ourselves into a state in which we can experience the revelation of how it is? What do we have to do? These are normal questions for us. However this is where the path of dzogchen is particular. It says the way to get to where you want to be is to realise that you are already where you want to be, and so to stop moving. Because if you are where you want to be and you keep moving you will get somewhere else, and it is not somewhere else where you want to be; it is here.

Question after verse 3

About termas

Question How do you distinguish between false termas and genuine termas?

James: With some difficulty. Western art has art experts who discuss whether a painting is authentic, i.e. by the master, or painted by his apprentices. Tibet has experts on terma.

Generally speaking, a genuine terma has three aspects. Firstly, it has a Chenrezi practice. Secondly, it has a Padmasambhava practice which is linked with dzogchen, and thirdly it has a guru yoga. CR Lama said if it has these three aspects it is more likely to be genuine, but of course the fakers also know about this. This is why fake is very important. The main way to find out whether a terma is a fabrication is whether it rings true in practice.

People are led astray by the five poisons. There are some people who pretend to be tertons, and this includes some western people who create titles for themselves and invent traditions — for whatever deluded reasons. Primarily, because they don't believe in karma and they don't believe that there will be a consequence. Or they are so immersed in their fantasy about themselves that they get carried away.

Nuden Dorje [1802-1864] was a very reliable person. More and more of his books will be translated. He was living in Kham Trehor in East Tibet in Khordong monastery, a small monastery up a valley. He found most of these treasures in some rock surfaces. He would go to the rock and he would see something and in the language of the description of this event he takes it out of the rock.

Whether he takes it out as a physical thing, or whether something embedded in him at the time of Padmasambhava is awakened, but it is not clear that the time is right to reveal it.

Questions after verse 6

Question about death and distraction

Comment: Have I understood you correctly? Did your teacher say to you that because the mind is easily distracted, especially at the time of death, it flows away immediately?

James: Yes, very quickly, because we are distracted so quickly. We vanish. Something comes, some wind of karma blows across us and we follow after that. That is why in this life we have a chance to find space. The wind moves through space. Space itself doesn't move.

If the most subtle experience that we have is wind, then wind moves with wind. When you open the window and the wind comes in all the air in the room swirls around. When the subtle feelings of being yourself encounter a wind-like emotion, suddenly you are happy or sad or full of hope. We all know what that's like. We are vulnerable to these waves of love, desire, lust, hatred, fear and anxiety. The wind is the most unstable of the elements, but it is the one which is closest to space, so in the meditation we want to dissolve and relax into the space.

When experiences arise, if you stay open, they are arising in the open space of the mind like a soft, summer cloud or a rainbow arising in the sky. But if the power of your attachment and your identification is strong, when the thought arises you go into the thought. And when you are in the thought you have now got formation; form is rejecting space. The space is pushed out and now thought comes after thought. But what we want to do is stay with the space, and see this is arising as space. This is the energy of the dharmakaya manifesting. The energy arises from space, it doesn't have a material source. We keep materialising the world, giving substance and essence as a way of interpreting the nature of manifestation.

At the point of death, if we have done the dissolving practice a lot, then as we are dying we are used to letting go, so now this body is dissolving into light. We realise that, because we have the experience and the confidence from that experience, that the mind is like space. Although everything vanishes, awareness is still there, because awareness never changes, but consciousness vanishes. When you die you go unconscious, and then consciousness reemerges, and then we go unconscious again.

For most people who don't have a sense of space, when they are in the bardo they awake and are terrified and collapse. It is like a kind of nightmare where you are going through a door and

running through a corridor, and then something happens and you find yourself coming into a new formation.

The most important thing in our practice is to see that the mind is empty but not non-existent. Emptiness is not nothing at all, since emptiness is the ground of everything. This is the great mystery of non-duality. When we take refuge, we are taking refuge in what will protect us at the time of death because we hold the refuge inside us. We hold the sense that we are okay.

When a small child is frightened and can't find their mother they become agitated. Mum comes back and says, 'Oh sweetie, I am so sorry I just had to do something. I'm back again now. It's all okay.' She picks up the child and the child feels the mother's arms, and smells the mother's skin, and relaxes. That is the function of the refuge; to know that even when your ego-self gets scared it is going to be okay. That brings you close to space because space is what is there when you relax. What keeps us apart from space is our agitation, our worries, our concerns and our mobilisation.

So the function of the refuge is to help you to relax. The idea that someone is going to come down and save you is a dualistic vision. How is somebody going to save you? It is whether you feel safe or not; it is about you. If you are looking out there for some external rescuer that is not going to be helpful, because when you die you are going to leave all that behind. You could pay a lot of money to get a very special statue that has a lot of blessing, and put it on a special shrine, but when you die you leave that statue behind. You have gone. You haven't got any pockets with you when you die – you can't take anything with you.

You have to understand what refuge is. It is not about hanging on to the buddha but feeling that the buddha is with you. The 23rd Psalm says, *"The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want. He makes me down to lie in pastures green: he leadeth me the quiet waters by. Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale, yet will I fear none ill: For thou art with me; and thy rod and staff me comfort still."* The psalms of David are full of this – something is with you. That is a statement of trust; it is not actually that somebody is going to be there taking care of you.

The name of the primordial buddha, Kuntuzangpo, means 'always good'. It's fine, don't worry, no hassle, no problem. *Kuntu* means always and *zangpo* means good. We are sorted. It is very nice and that is the function of the refuge. It says we should recite it six times a day, but really we want to keep it with us all the time.

Question about dementia

Question: What if I get dementia and cannot remember the refuge?

James: With dementia the interpretive structures that we have start to crumble. Memory goes, and in the early stages there can be a lot of anxiety that often settles. There is also a

lack of connectivity. Consciousness, as a dualistic interpretive system, is not operating as before. Awareness will be there but the content of awareness has become much less varied.

You can think of awareness as being like a theatre stage. The drama finishes, the curtains close and the lights are put out. The stage is still there. The stage (i.e. awareness) is there in the dark before the person's body dies but the movement on the stage, which had been the focus of attention during the person's life, is not happening anymore. The organisation of subject/object fixation which confirms that I am myself – I am looking at you, talking with you, recognising your face therefore since this is me here talking with you, I know that I am me – all this is vanishing. How do I know that I am talking with you? It is because I am in this room which is illuminated in my awareness with everything arising together. I am looking at your face and talking with you at this moment and there is a particular vibration of connectivity within this room and within this field of awareness. But if I am always fixating just on the other person or what I have to do because I am very busy, I don't see the stage, and when the actors leave the stage there is nothing to hold it in place. That is the issue.

The stage – that is to say, the base, the ground, the source – is what we stand on when we manifest into the world. It is not like the physical earth but it is the ground of our being, which is nothing and yet is also the presence of everything.

Conditions like Alzheimers and other kinds of dementia are diminished capacity conditions which means that consciousness has very little to work on, so consciousness is already fading long before the body dies. It has gone into a very thin state. However when we do our practice, we are using our consciousness to open ourselves to awareness. Consciousness is like the child of awareness. It is like the energetic extension because the energy of awareness manifests as me seeing you with my eyes and hearing your voice with my ears. Consciousness is an aspect of the field of clarity, so if that starts to close down then I don't have the basis for reminding myself to go into the practice. Consciousness is the door to awareness. That door can become disturbed - anorexia, bulimia, addictions, busy distractions, self-destructive habits, dementia, brain injuries, anaesthesia – there are many conditions that diminish the functioning of consciousness.

Consciousness is like our shoes and our umbrella. We put on our shoes to walk and they keep your feet from harm; we hold an umbrella and it keeps the rain off. We mediate our relation with the world with our consciousness. However when we come into the meditation we fold the umbrella, we take off our shoes, and we just relax. We let go of consciousness.

Consciousness is the energy of the mind formulated in particular patterning. The energy of the mind is a potential. The potential is still there in dementia but all of the things we have learned, all the skills we have mastered, cannot be activated. We can become more conscious or less conscious but if we get a condition like dementia we lose that capacity to move into consciousness. Even intelligent people can get dementia; they can no longer organise how they are going to be in the

world, when they need to go to the toilet, how to get in and out of a car. With dementia our competence, the link between our energetic formulation and our potential has declined, and that is a tragedy.

When Nuden Dorje refers to the eighteen factors of a precious human life, he is talking about the external factors of a buddha having come, having taught, there being the conditions for learning but this also includes having a healthy body with all the organs functioning. That includes mental consciousness which means you can think and reflect on what is going on. You lose your precious human birth when you can no longer operate through your senses. That is why it is very precious and important to practise now since we never know when and in what way our death will come to us. When we have this opportunity we want to open ourselves to awareness, again and again.

Question after verse 10

Question about gender of gurus

Question: Why do you sometimes refer to the guru as female. Is the portrayal of the guru as female because women give everything?

James: Whether the guru is male or female doesn't matter too much but in a patriarchal structure it tends to be male. For 'political correctness' I changed the gender here. Hopefully more and more female gurus and women teachers will arise and each bring their particular flavouring. Of course women will probably do things in a different way, but actually there is no such thing as 'a woman', or 'a woman's way of doing things'. If there were a hundred different women teachers, they would have a hundred different styles of teaching. I would say that we can't make generalisations about how a woman would teach differently for a man, but it may be fair to say that a woman teaches differently to a man.

Questions after verse 19

Question about activating awareness

Comment: In those two examples, the bird and the music changing, they are both things coming from the outside into awareness.

James: No... no...

Question: I am a firm believer that I should do everything myself. Are you saying there is no way I can actually activate this with these examples? Or is it just a matter of allowing something to become present?

James: Absolutely. You cannot do it by yourself, it is not possible. No matter how hard you try you will fall over your own feet because that which is not you, is you; the bird is your mind.

If we feel we are inside this flesh body and it is an autonomous zone then doing the practice is very difficult. We have to let the environment be us. We are enworlded. We are the manifestation of the ground in the world. We share the space with all the other manifestations of the ground. There is no isolation; we are moving, mutually influencing, in a field with others.

The issue was that as I was walking down the path, I, as me, abandoned the world. I forgot the trees. The bird, as me, reminded me to be me, to be the big me rather than small me.

Comment: The most important thing we can do is to allow and to listen.

James: Yes – the senses are the path. The senses allow a non-judgmental intervention by allowing the movement of the world to come in.

This keeps us in connectivity. When you slip into yourself, or when you project yourself into another person with longing and fantasies, you lose the co-presencing of self and other. Too much focus on the other and you get a split, too much focus on self and you get a split; it is the co-emergence of these two.

When there is a wave there is also a trough or a dip; there is the crest and the trough. The same as in breathing out and breathing in, or the heart beating – self and other. Sometimes it is more self and sometimes it is more other, and these two pulsing together is fine. It is not flat, because a flat line is bad news for the heart. Pulsation is good, but linked pulsation in a wave.

When I feel I have to do something I am isolating myself. For this practice, isolation is never a good idea. We need the other and that is the meaning of the guru yoga. 'I can't do it without you' is not a subservient position; it is the fact that we can't be alive without air. It doesn't mean that the air is my master but I need the air to be alive. I need space to be alive, to move around in, so space, air, warmth, liquid and ground to stand on – the five elements – are my body and the world and they are working together.

The question is how to sort out these little demons: self, my mind, awareness? They can get mixed together. When children play with plasticine it starts off in different bright colours and after five minutes it is just a dirty greyish brown. This is our mind. We have the practice, which is what you are doing – and then after a few minutes we wonder what you are doing!

Question about recollection

Question: I am struggling with this word 'recollection'. Does it mean 'effortful recollection' versus the freshness of recollection?

James: It is trying to remember something. Effortful doesn't necessarily mean that I am breaking out in sweat; it means the subject/object movement of the recollection.

Comment: Would the freshness of recollection be more of a technical term that you translated from *dren-pa* or *sati*? I am really stuck with the word.

James: You are in this room just now and you are looking over at me. In the moment that you are looking at me you are probably not very aware of the space of the room, nevertheless here you are, in the room. Intrinsic recollection would be if we stopped looking at each other and talking together, and so you are here. You have always been here. You don't have to try to remember that you are here, because you *are* here.

Comment: So this moment when I realise I am here is *dren-pa*?

James: *Dren-pa* is where you simply come back to where you already are; you are not recollecting something from somewhere else. I am not thinking about what I did yesterday, or wondering where I left my keys? If you like, it is coming back to the self, so it is in the same family as resting or dwelling or being at home. When we get caught up in the subject/object movement of thinking and planning, it takes us away from the here-ness of here and the givenness of things.

Effortful recollection would be having lost the simple fact of being here because I am thinking about something and I now have to think about something else. For example, I am doing the basic *samatha* practice of looking at my breath and then realise I am distracted. I might think I have to try harder or that I need to get more sleep at night so that I can be fresh to practise in the early morning. Your whole game plan is one of recollecting – but you are losing because you haven't gone back to the simple. An awful lot of our mental life is that busy construction.

Recollection in its ordinary sense is like the fourth skandha of construction, compounding, and building.

Questions after verse 24

Question about feeling sleepy in meditation

Question: What do I do if I feel sleepy during meditation? Do I fight against it?

James: No. Maybe lie down and rest a bit, or have a cold shower to shift the mood. The key point for us is never to struggle because as soon as you are struggling and applying willpower and effort you have duality, so be with the mind however it is.

I studied with many different teachers in India but it was only when I met Namkhai Norbu that he made this very clear for me. He told me to meditate when it is a good time to meditate. Nobody had ever said that to me before. They always said you should do your practice regularly six times a

day. If you don't feel like meditating, why would you meditate? I asked him, what if we never feel like meditating? He said he doubted this. He was saying to be a friend to yourself and collaborate with yourself. Stay close to your own situation.

If you are tired after a long hard day but you feel you should meditate, then sit comfortably and enjoy the flavour of 'should'. Or listen to the echo of 'should'. Who in your life has told you 'should'? Mama, papa, schoolteachers, a lot of people have said 'should'. Has that been helpful? No. Do you have resistance to 'should'? Yes. I should but I won't. You are saying yes and you are saying no. You are increasing your internal division as a path to non-duality. Struggling with yourself, trying to defeat yourself to overcome yourself when there *is* no self. Who are you fighting with? This is shadow boxing.

If you are not in the mood you might need to consider whether you are getting enough sleep. Have I got a job I hate? Why is my life so painful and unpleasant? Altering outer phenomena can sometimes help your meditation. Struggling with outer phenomena as if they were inner phenomena when you are not clear about non-duality is ridiculous.

Don't fight or force yourself. Be an ally to yourself and work with yourself. We meditate together then we are here because this is our timetable but when you are on your own you have to work out when is the best time for you to do practice. Some people prefer the morning, some prefer the evening depending on their energy structure. Find out what is suitable for you.

Question about the Five Wisdoms

Question: Do the Five Wisdoms come into play?

James: The Five Wisdoms belong mainly to the tantric system of transmutation which is a method that uses correspondences. The Five Poisons correspond with the Five Wisdoms, and by recognising them as the Five Wisdoms, which are also the presence of Buddhas of the Five Families, then you are not so afraid of them. Looks bad, but it is really good.

You go to the doctor who tells you that he or she is going to give you an injection. *"But I don't like needles."* The doctor says, *"But the injection will be very good for you. Don't worry."* You have to believe it is very good for you. *"Oh no, I am not going to look. Tell me when it's finished."* Later I need to go to the dentist. I am looking forward to going to the dentist because the dentist is my friend. This is the Five Wisdoms. The drilling buddha! It is like that. We know how to do this in ordinary life; we manage our fears and resistances by thinking it will be okay. We are used to doing that but it is a kind of deceit or artificiality.

In a dzogchen text like this, which says not to do anything artificial, it means that we shouldn't try to transform the Five Poisons into the Five Wisdoms because that would be effortful and intentional.

If there is something good we are going to have it anyway, since it is ours as well. The view is that we don't (or can't) make the Five Wisdoms since they are intrinsic. Because they are there from the very beginning we already have the Five Wisdoms. That is different. There is nothing to transform because you have already got it.

Question after the start of the Mahamudra text³

Question about transmission

Question: Can you explain maybe once more the actual meaning of the transmission. What does it mean to get the transmission?

James: I don't really know what transmission is in Tibetan but it's a term that everybody uses. A transmission in a car makes the wheels go around and so that is useful. Transmission means something is transmitted from one place to another. Actually, in dzogchen we have non-transmission. *"The Guru is going to do the transmission today. We are going to get this pointing out instruction."* Everybody is sitting quietly. *"Phat!"* Did you get it? What are you going to get? What is being transmitted? An opportunity. A chance. A chance for what? A chance to see yourself.

You are driving your car in very heavy rain. Every time the windscreen wipers cross the windscreen you see for a bit and then the rain comes on the windscreen again. You have momentary

³ This and the following questions were during the teachings on the text ***The Mahamudra Middle Way of the Ganges***.

transmission, momentary clarity. Remember, you can't buy your buddha nature, you can't sell your buddha nature, and you can't lose your buddha nature. It says this in this prayer from Rigdzin Godem that we recite every day: no one can give it to you. So transmission is a strange idea.

Of course, the function is actually to awaken to non-duality. The idea of transmission, and in some ways of initiation as well, is of being empowered. In some ways is like an add on — but you don't need anything added on since it's there from the very beginning. So the removal gets presented in the form of an add on. What we need is the falling away of construct.

When we recite the refuge prayer the end of the first line refers to the 'best assembly' [Tib. Tshogs Kyi mChog rNams]. This is the best assembly, the best sangha, the assembly. *Tsok* is the same word that we use when we make the offerings and it means to gather things together. However this gathering is also the five skandhas; it is also us gathered together as a composite. We are actually decomposing even though we are trying to leave things as they are, not interfering or creating patterns. However, whether I'm building up or letting it go, the problem is if I don't have a good relation with 'I', I get confused. This is what we were looking at yesterday afternoon, *"I love you, I need you."* Who is the I? Who is the you? What is constellated when we use this? 'I' do the practice. Now, if I am in my ego-self — and that's quite a strong bubble — I won't break out.

When we have this sense of the white Aa with the five colours as the presence of all the buddhas, in particular Kuntuzangpo and all our own teachers. You can include other people who have helped you such as your mother, your father, your school teachers; you can even include people who have harmed you and through that harm have helped you to become more resilient, or more aware. All of that is there. It is empty and you relate to it. Why? Because of non-duality. Non-duality means not one, not two. If all the power was in the guru, then it would be in one, and that one would have the full cup and pour it into you. So they would have a lot, you would have none, and then they give you some of what they have. Alternatively if all the power was in you, they would simply give you a few tips and a few hints, which would be an 'add on'.

The teacher says something, and now you feel more empowered. Unfortunately, you feel empowered as you. The non-duality is when you realise that I am me because of you. We arrived together. You don't have students unless you have a teacher; you don't have a teacher unless you have a student. There is no self-existing teacher or self-existing student. There is no self-existing mother. You become a mother if you have had a child. Subject and object arise together.

When we do the Three Aa practice, we begin: I am here, and that is there. Both are arising. The 'I' is coming out of me, the 'I' is in front of me, arising and dissolving and then there is space. The space itself is undivided and then within that you get the movement of subject and object.

That is really the meaning of the transmission; to let us see that non-duality is the ground within which the delusional duality arises. It is always there, but it helps if somebody shows us a little bit, and when we do the practice together maybe it helps us to get more feeling of it. But nothing is being transmitted.

In fact, if nothing could be transmitted that would be very good! Usually what is transmitted is 'something' and you already have enough somethings. Something more? Another initiation? Some people here may have had many many initiations, and what has it done? Have you kept your vows? This initiation seemed so special at the time but have you done the practice? Probably not. We live in a little box. We see another box and we think, "*Oh, I want that new box.*"

Question after lines 15 & 16

Question about sound

Question: Returning to the example of the bell, when a bell sounds, especially these Japanese kinds of bells, there are three qualities of the sound. But you have to be educated to get this because otherwise it can just sound like a single bell sound. However if you have been taught, and if you listen attentively then you can hear that there is the initial impact, which has a certain sound, and there's a second sound which is a little bit different, and then there's a last one which is very long.

If you take this example, some experts will tell you, '*Oh, look at this bell, here you have this sound*', which you wouldn't hear with basic awareness. We are still not in conceptual analysis. What is this 'in between' which is a very discriminative awareness, but is not concepts? We are really hearing this sound which has a different quality and which you wouldn't be able to hear normally unless you were trained to hear it.

James: That is the interplay between listening and hearing. Now you have been told what to listen for so that learned adaptation is inflecting or informing your capacity to hear. Because, as you say, without having had that you would just hear the sound. So it's an informed hearing. On one level it is more artificial, but it also opens up more tonal quality. If you listen to classical music and you have learned something about classical music then you can identify themes in the music, how they're brought back and developed and so on. Otherwise, you just hear nice noises.

It is not that that information is wrong, but we have to see we are cooking something here — and the cooking should be enriching flavour, not taking flavour away. The problem with the conceptual process is you could just boil it and boil it till it is all mush. You overcook it with your thoughts. The example you have raised is helpful. Thank you

Questions after lines 17, 18, 19 & 20

Question about getting confused when we die

Response: It is all becoming very unclear for me, because you say that appearances are inseparable from mind and that appearances are always changing. But the mind isn't changeable. There seem to be all kinds of logical problems with this.

James: There are. This is one of the reasons why CR Lama told me not to study logic!

Response: Maybe, but let's take a very concrete bardo teaching where all the sense information disappears. You are too weak to think, yet still there is mind.

James: There is consciousness as the body is dissolving in terms of the five elements. When the power of the different senses vanishes that goes back into mental consciousness and mental consciousness comes to its most fine form, like a thin mist over the openness of awareness.

Most people don't dissolve into openness. They stay with that fine mist of consciousness which is why they don't have the bardo experience very much. CR Lama told me this very clearly. He said not to believe what I might read in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* because for most people it is not what happens. This book is written for lamas by lamas because *they* have the clarity wherein they release everything, and so they can be in this clear light and openness with nothing going on. Have you ever been clear? No. So why do you think you are going to get clear when you die? This is what happens because it doesn't get released, because you spend your whole life in intoxication and attachment. That residual attachment means that you go into another life very very quickly.

For meditators, who have spent a lot of time dissolving through the tantric practice, through resting in openness, this gradual and very quick pattern of weaving and construction gets thinned out and thinned out and then there is the chance that when they die the mental consciousness vanishes into the wind and the wind dissolves in space. But that's not going to happen for most people. They just go wind! — and then they are moving into another life. They don't get forty-nine days, they don't even get forty-nine minutes.

Response: Bad news!

James: Yes, that is bad news. Well, you have to observe yourself. If you get distracted very easily, if you are always preoccupied, if you can't stop thinking, if you are in a situation where there's no danger and you could just be relaxed, open and present... but you are in a maelstrom of thoughts, why would it be any different? Or you go to another situation, maybe some holy place where you feel very relaxed and easy because the level of stimulus is very low, but retreat becomes toxic for you because every time you come back into the world you get stimulated and this maelstrom of thoughts arises again. *"I want to retreat from the world and then I feel better."*, you think but when

you die it's not really going to help because dying is not retreat; dying is losing. It is the vanishing of the stable frame in which 'I know where I am. I have my little room, I've got my mat on the floor. I cook my rice and dhal.' But now all that is dissolving.

Response: In German, there is a saying that hope is dying at last.

James: Yes, it would be good for the hope to die. We were looking at that earlier in the week with this term, *monpa mepa*, [Tib. sMon Pa Med Pa] which is one of the three doors of liberation. That as long as you have hope and you project some fantasy creation in your mind it blinds you to the truth of things. It is not that you are going to be punished by any demon; it is just 'this is your mind'! So every time you follow after the thoughts and you get carried away, you are not here with the simplicity of the senses. The senses are always simple.

You go into the forest and you touch stones, and then you touch the bark of a tree. You can lick the stone and lick the grass and lick the bark of different trees. There is texture and smell and taste. If you are really in that you don't need many thoughts; you are in the world of the senses. And that is a very good place to move towards the immediacy of what's arising — because that dissolves cleanly. But once you have the interpretation, that makes this fine patina, this fine layering, this veneer, this covering. It gets in the way, which is why the death experience is more difficult.

Question about optimism

Question: Does that mean that optimism is just another concept?

James: Optimism is a wind, a warm wind, and it can support all kinds of concepts: *"I'm sure scientists are going to find a solution to climate change. These are very brilliant people, you know, with BAs, MAs, MSCs, PhDs – postdoctoral stuff. They are incredibly intelligent with laboratories and resources. Of course, they are going to find a way."* You can live in that bubble. Whether it's true or not, you have to ask what is the actual problem they are dealing with? Is it, 'What is here?' Is it 'this'? *"No, they're doing it on that."* Whenever you have optimism it tends to be a bit global.

However, you have raised a very good point because it says in the texts that for those who practice dzogchen, they should maintain a relaxed, happy attitude. 'Happy' here is because happy is probably our most open state. If you go for a walk and you are happy, you look around and you see more, don't you? If you go for a walk and you feel a bit dull and depressed there is a kind of veiling through your senses. Does that seem true? That is what 'happy' means here: it doesn't mean manic happiness and having lots of plans and excitement. It is just like supporting yourself on the in breath, making sure you have enough oxygen coming in. And then, here I am. *"Wow! Look at what's here."* That warmth of connectivity allows optimal sensory contact.

Questions after lines 23 & 24

Question about using analogy of movie screen

Question: In the analogy of the cinema, light is initially projected through a film to give the image on the screen, and we are then sitting interpreting that image on the screen. Is what is being projected analogous to thoughts coming through our memories? When we have thoughts we think they are ours because they often refer to our own history, or even to what we project on to other people.

James: I don't think it is so much that they are ours but it is that we live in a world with other people, and other people are as full of their stuff as we are of our stuff. Other people, as they appear in my world, are full of themselves because they have their thoughts and their feelings. They make their choices about how they wear their hair, whether they use lipstick, what kind of clothes they wear. They are a formative, performative, pro-formative showing of something so there is already a narrative in the formation that I see. That would be what is in the movie. But it comes out as colour, so it is a patterning of colour. There is no essence.

If somebody puts on lipstick, and you see the colour of lipstick, you might think it looks good. Lipstick has an impact, doesn't it? Something is there, otherwise the shops wouldn't sell it. There is a vibration in the nature of the red or the pink. There may be an intention in the person that they want to look good, or that they want to be invisible, so they are highlighting or making obscure what they show. But nonetheless, what you see is colour. It is colour as light but then you interpret it because you have your response. Some people really don't like pale lipstick and they want to get their girlfriend to wear bright red lipstick. But perhaps their girlfriend thinks her skin colour doesn't suit bright red lipstick. Our bodies and our aesthetics are harmonising and responding to situations with interpretation.

Again, there are these two streams: the immediate aesthetic line, and this other stream of your personal and cultural resonance. It is always these two fields, but because we fuse the two together the aesthetic vanishes into the conceptual. When William Blake wrote about cleansing the doors of perception he meant stop imagining before you see; allow yourself to see. He was a visionary and he saw a lot.

Question after line 30

Question about a Tibetan word

Question: Is there a Tibetan word for the undivided whole? It is a word we haven't got in English.

James: It would be two words: *dag nang* [Tib.Dag sNang]. *Dag* means pure and *Nang* means appearance, but it also means the vision of the whole. It is what appears including the subject formation, so subject and object arising is a *dag nang* vision.

Dzogpa-chenpo is called the great inclusion and mahamudra is the same. It means everything is within this because it is the infinity of the mind; there is nothing outside. If everything is already in, adopting and rejecting doesn't make a difference because it's always all already here. You are selecting inside what you have got so why would you bother since it's already here? Just open to and be with what you have got.

Again, with these texts, nobody else can do it for you. You are given all kinds of examples, but you yourself have to sit, go for a walk and look. There is a field and I see the wind blowing in the leaves of the tree. Is that inside my mind or outside my mind? Then do this Guru Yoga of the Three Aas. Relax and open. Do it with your eyes open. The tree within the moving leaves is there. You are sitting on the earth, so it's a little bit cold. You may feel a bit cold and damp and maybe not very comfortable. You have got sensation in your body and you have got the wind on your face, and all of this is coming together. Is this in the mind? Where is the mind? If you hold your mind inside your body, you will hold the world outside it. Theory and knowledge about this is useless; you have to find it for yourself. I can't do it for you.

Questions after line 44

Question about who is the one who focusses on the mind

Question: You said you have to focus on the mind, but who is the one who focusses on the mind?

James: That is the mind. Mind is focusing. Only the mind can see the mind, and the mind sees the mind by being the mind which is the ending of duality and subject/object interplay. It doesn't make sense in grammar.

Questions after lines 76, 77 & 78

Question about whether great yogis fall in love

Question: Does that mean that great yogis do not fall in love? Some yogis are married. What does falling in love mean?

James: From my observation, even great yogis seem to have unhappy marriages.

Response: But were they in love?

James: Of course, they were in love. Why wouldn't they be in love? Love is a dream. They practise dream yoga. They have an illusory body. They eat food and they know that the food is illusion. They have sex and that is also illusion. Why not? People who do yoga may imagine their partner in the form of a heruka or a yogini or whatever, and then work with the energy in there. That too is illusion. We fall in love with projected fantasy; we fall in hate with projected fantasy. So who is loved? This person — for a while. The wives of even some great yogis had sex with other people. Why do that? Why would you go out looking for lead when you have got gold at home? Some prefer lead. Some see gold in lead. Some see lead in gold. This is called falling in love; imaginary creations of the mind.

Falling in love doesn't have the highest status in buddhism; it is a temporary insanity. What is much more important is to be loving and kind and not hurt people and not upset them, which means to see the person. We have the saying 'love is blind' because we don't even actually see the person. We project our image of the person on to them. When you really relate to someone and you sit and open to them, then maybe you open through their eyes. Who do you see? Sky to sky. There is nobody there. You feel all sorts of things. You feel more present and relaxed; everything is dissolving and your body goes into light. How could you say 'I love you'? Who is there to love?

Of course, there is loving. There is a mood of connectivity and of intimacy which has value as dissolving. It is the dissolving that has the value. Whereas if you turn it around you make the creation the value — *"I will always love you."*

"I will always love you as you are today." When somebody says that, they are being very honest. They are saying that your phenomenal appearance has been absorbed into my databank, and I will project on to it a creation which will be my true love object. Your personal function is finished now — please move on. That is who you fall in love with, because what could you love forever except your own illusion?

Questions after line 75

Question about attaining non-attainment

Question: Line 75 says that when you attain non-attainment you attain mahamudra. When you attain non-attainment nothing is attained. But is it clear for the person who attains non-attainment that non-attainment is attained? Is there a sign or is there a fundamental change?

James: What would there be? When you see that you are already here, and that wherever you go, you are here. And when you see that you are now, and that at all times under all conditions you will be now and that you cannot be other than now and here, then you have the attainment of non-attainment because there is nothing to get. You cannot add anything into 'now'

because 'now' is infinitely open and completely closed. Each moment is self-sealing — complete in itself.

You cannot work this out from the position of the ego; the ego doesn't get it. We should always be absolutely clear — the ego doesn't get enlightened! That would be using the language of general mahayana and theravada. Enlightenment is not something you 'get', although the Tibetan texts are always saying, *tob par shog* [Tib. Thob Par Shog], “*May we get this!*” But what are we going to get? Something you can't get.

It is a reassurance, it is a fairy tale, it is a lullaby to give you the comforting notion that you are going to get something. Why? Because that is all we understand. We understand apples and chocolate. We know how to eat chocolate. We may even have some in our pocket. I've got buddha nature inside me, so I have got something. It is talking inside the delusion of thinking that there are individual people who have such a thing as a buddha nature. In fact there is no such thing as a buddha nature as something that you would have. We cannot become a buddha, because we are finite, and the buddha is infinite. The finite doesn't become infinite, although the finite is already infinite because it is within the infinite.

There is quite a difference. If you think you can go from the finite to the infinite, as finite, how would you do that? “*May I be without limits and still be me!*” Not possible. The one who is without limits will be me. It will be 'I' as awareness. 'I' as awareness and 'I' as James are not the same thing. 'I' is the first person singular used to indicate the one who is speaking, the one who is walking, the one who is knowing. So who is the one who knows?

That is what we are looking at all the time in the meditation. This is unborn awareness. When you don't see that it is unborn awareness you create the pseudo identity of I/me/myself, born in this place and doing that.

The attainment of non-attainment is to see there is nothing to attain. Kuntuzangpo, our founding buddha, has no pockets or clothing. He has nowhere to put anything at all because he is completely naked. He doesn't wear a jewel; he doesn't even have a nose ring. He has got no piercings, no tattoos, he has got nothing. He is just naked.

Questions after lines 85 & 86

Question from a student called Ruth: Cutting the root of the ruth-ness of ruth

Comment: I don't see how that is like the root of the mind. Sorry, I don't get that.

James: Well, it depends what the mind is rooted in. If you are rooted in being Ruth then Ruth has a set of concepts that conjure up for you memories of your childhood, where you live, and all the rest of it. These associations form around the point of Ruth-ness, that the word Ruth applies to someone, and that someone is you. Ruth has Ruth-ness, which means that each time you meet 'Ruth' there is a continuity.

That is the mind which seems to have a root, because the word Ruth, which is a linguistic signifier, puts its root down into the seeming individual essence. There is a person, a particular person who is Ruth, who is full of Ruth-ness, so that the name Ruth as the root is embedded in the Ruth-ness of Ruth.

If you cut the root of the mind you see Ruth as a performativity. Ruth is a dynamic unfolding. By saying, *'Hi Ruth'* you are called forth, and you respond from whatever formulation of your potential is available in the moment. When we say, *"Oh, yes, I was talking with Ruth."* it is as if then there is a Ruth-ness to Ruth. As you talk with different people and you have your moods, and they have their moods so how your energy links with their energy – the Ruth-ness of Ruth, the root, the ground — is shifting.

There is no essential Ruth in Ruth. You have a patterning of availability constellating itself moment-by-moment, according to circumstances. and that shifting field, like the sea anchor, seems to be stable 'because you are Ruth'. We all know 'you are Ruth', so the name makes us stupid.

Response: If one disassociates from that, would you become less attached to that?

James: Yes.

Response: I do have other names actually. Maybe I'd be better off using another of my names.

James: Unfortunately, just changing your name wouldn't be enough. However, it is a good point. Because as you know, in the Tibetan tradition when you take refuge, you get a refuge name. When you get an initiation, you are given an initiation name because initiations are about new beginnings. The new name is a kind of reminder for this particular practice: this is your name for this particular practice. Ruth is the name that you have for the practice of being Ruth, so when you are practising ruth-ness, Ruth fits.

This is the performativity of the five skandhas and all our associated karmic habits. There is no essence in it however, we assume that there is an essence to it because otherwise language would collapse. If the term that we are using to refer to something had no reference — if there wasn't actually something there that the term referred to — the signifier and the signified would be in a deluded relationship. We believe that they have always been married, and that it is a happy marriage.

For example, the problem is that when you use the signifier 'Ruth' the signified is ever-shifting. It is as if we can know who Ruth is by repeating the term Ruth, or tree, or motorcar, or India, but the actual patterning of the phenomena manifesting in that moment which is captured by or subsumed under this wrapper or rubric of India is shifting. There is no fixed India, and yet we continue to use the term India.

What we are referring to with the term India is a set of ideas, memories, perception, plans, opinions, and so on. Then you see it is easy to cut the root of the mind because the root is very weak. The root is a fantasy. It is like the basis of the essence of the flowering of the plant. If you didn't have the root, the flow of nutrients coming up through the capillary action wouldn't work. It is the pathway of the vitality of the efflorescence: the flowering out, the showing.

But what is it grounded in? Nothing, because there is no ruth-ness of Ruth to find. 'Ruth' is an empty signifier. When we say 'Ruth' we don't know who we are talking about because each person here who knows you is talking about their Ruth; the Ruth that exists for them. But you are not their Ruth, you are a very unreliable Ruth. You abandon your ruth-ness all the time because you keep becoming a new Ruth in different situations. So you are 'Ruth the multiplicity', but you have only got one name: 'slippery customer'!

Ruth: It can be quite an imposition. When I came back from spending some time in India that 'Ruth' was like some sort of cloak of other people's expectations and their associations with India. They assumed a certain 'Ruth' and then I got drawn into somebody else's drama.

James: And, of course, if the other people decide that their notion of Ruth is more important than your notion of Ruth, they may say you are incompetent and unable to function. That can happen very easily with elderly people. Other people are deciding the truth of that person and so they lose their identity. It is a very tricky area, who decides if and when you are incompetent.

In Britain in the 18th century, it was not uncommon for families to get a doctor to declare a family member 'not of sound mind' and that person would then be taken away to a mental hospital, which was more like a mental prison. It was a quick and easy way for example, to get your wife's wealth without having to kill her.

Ruth: I was thinking more about when people become spiritual and they take on some kind of religious garb and new practices. Their family may find that very difficult to accept.

James: Yes, and they may disown them. *"Don't utter that name in this house. She is no longer my daughter."* People can be ghosted and blanked off and made to be nothing.

The key thing is that you get a sense of what he means here by the root of the mind. You start to see how the mind fabricates what it takes for granted. The process of mental production is so automatic that it doesn't seem to be occurring at all.

If you are healthy and you go out for a walk, you are just walking. You don't really think you are exerting a huge amount of exercise. When you come to a hill you think, *"Aha, now I am really walking."* but before, when the ground was flat, you were on automatic pilot; walking was hardly registering and it didn't insist in the same way.

"I really exist. I am me because I am me. There is a 'me', a defining essence of me inside, and I know when I am being true to myself. I know my authentic identity. I know if I am being false. I wake up in the morning and say, 'I don't feel like myself today.'" I may even go and tell my doctor that I feel depersonalised. These assumptions are all constructs.

Cutting the root of the mind is to see that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not true. The signified is only ever a mental object. Signifiers cannot catch phenomena.

In Tibetan the term *nangtong* [Tib. sNang sTong] combines appearance and emptiness, and appearance and emptiness cannot be apprehended through a concept. In order to capture the concept you have to take the emptiness away from the appearance so now you have the appearance of something. When we say appearance and emptiness, we mean this is the appearance of emptiness.

Ruth is the appearance of emptiness in the form that we call 'Ruth'. But we say, *"No, Ruth is the appearance of Ruth."* When we look at Ruth we say, *"Oh, that's Ruth."* So Ruth is starring in the show called Ruth, but Ruth is the appearance of emptiness. These two things are simultaneously present. Why is this possible? Because all the thoughts which seem to generate the ruth-ness of Ruth are themselves empty. Thought and emptiness, feeling and emptiness, memory and emptiness, any old thing under the sun and emptiness. Nothing is other than emptiness, so everything you could say about Ruth is already inseparable from emptiness. All the ingredients of the ruth-ness of Ruth are empty. That doesn't mean that they don't differentiate, but their ground is empty, so you cut the root by seeing there never was a root.

We are back with the example of the snake and the rope. You beat the snake and you realise you have been beating a rope. When you cut the root of the mind you realise the mind never had a root to cut, and that the mind has been floating. The mind in this sense is not the big mind — mahamudra as mind — this is the mind as the formulation of who you are. This me-ness of me-mind is floating in air.

That is why we ask people, *"How are you?"* Because although we know this is Ruth, we don't know how Ruth is, so Ruth is Ruth continuous. *"But how are you **today**, Ruth?"* We ask because we don't know. All we know is this is Ruth. Ruth is a name. The only reliable knowledge we can have about the lady in the corner is her name. And what is the name fixed to? We don't know.

Ruth: This is like going outside and talking to a tree or a plant. You stop talking and it talks back to you. And similarly that is like the exercise of whether you have ever been seen?

James: Yes, absolutely. But delusion is the seeming absolutely true sense that you or I exist as a person: I am just me.

When you observe how you are, the me-ness of me — not as an imputed or a fantasised essence, but as the performativity or the disclosure or the becoming — it is always changing interactively. It is unborn, and unstopped or unceasing. There is no birth to Ruth. Ruth is unborn, and yet Ruth is unceasing. It is because Ruth is unborn that there is no definitive Ruth, and because she is unborn there is a ceaseless ruth-ing. There is a dynamic unfolding of the potential of that person and it is not a potential contained inside her, because Ruth's potential is in the world and in her.

They say, don't hold your mind inside and don't keep the world outside. Because if somebody is nice to Ruth, Ruth will smile, and if somebody is horrible to Ruth, she won't smile. Her smile and non-smile is a potential coupled together with the triggering stimulus. In that sense, Ruth is outside Ruth, as well as Ruth is inside Ruth. We are talking in fairly dualistic terms because we are participative creatures. We want approval. We want belonging. We want people to like us. We want to find pathways of connection, and therefore whether the pathway of connection is open or closed affects us a lot.

Question after line 89

Question about understanding the unborn

Ruth: We can probably all understand ruth-ing, but being unborn is a little more tricky. Do you mean it in the sense that it is moment-by-moment?

James: Unborn means there is no fixed ruth that we can find; there is not an essence inside that has been born as a something. The ruth-ness of Ruth is not guaranteed by some deep essence that was born at one time and continues to pump you out.

You are not arising from a finite source; a distillation of the essence of Ruth. You are arising in interaction with many factors; your memories, sensation in your body, who you see around you, whether you feel safe that we are talking about you or not. All these things would affect whether we could have this conversation.

Ruth: Illusion is profound.

James: Indeed, illusion is profound. An illusion is not scary as long as you don't hang on to delusion, because delusion says it is real and then illusion seems very scary. Illusion is pointing

to the fact that my delusion is a lie. And then the feeling is, if it is all just an illusion then there is nothing; then it would be unborn, but it is unborn and unceasing.

That is the middle way between the two extremes of eternalism and nihilism.

Your identity is a maintained construct

Let's go back to our main point here which is that your identity is a construct. The construct is maintained not just by your effort, but within the field of relative or conventional truth. We have this agreement that I will believe that you are real if you believe that I am real; we are constantly confirming to each other that our illusory existence is true. Therefore, the price of social belonging is delusion.

Consider this story.

A long time ago in India, there was a king who had a very happy kingdom and he lived in a palace. All the people loved him and he loved his people, and he did his best for them. But one day the court astrologer came and said, *"Your Majesty, something terrible is happening. We see in the stars that a great storm is coming, and when the rain falls from these clouds anyone who drinks that water will go mad."*

The king said, *"My goodness, my people, everybody must collect healthy water now. Hide as many pots as you have, collect the good water and protect it. And when the rain falls don't drink the rainwater."*

But of course, these were poor people with only one clay pot. So after a couple of days they were very thirsty and they started to drink the water. Gradually, they went mad.

The very poor people went mad, then middle classes went mad, and finally the people around the king went mad, but he had a big tank of water and he continued to happily drink it.

He stood on the veranda of his palace, and he looked out and said, *"I am the king of a land of mad people. How can this be? Mad people need to have a mad king."* So he said, *"Bring me the rain water."* Delusion is participative and to stand apart was too painful, so we get pulled in.

Some of us may have been a little bit wild when we were younger and worn funny clothes and known all kinds of funny things. But after a while, it's a bit of a sweat, it is much easier to be a bit invisible and just fit in. Conventionality is a site of invisibility. You become 'normal' by agreeing that delusion is real.

This is not philosophy. This is something to investigate again and again for yourself: I believe in things that are not real. I don't actually need an awful lot of belief to exist in the world. You don't need to believe in the true existence of a potato to peel it and chop it up for cooking. You don't need

to believe that water is real in order to boil a kettle and make a cup of tea. You need to be there, so you don't burn your hand. You don't need any intellectual belief. You need to know that boiling water on hand is painful. You can stay in your senses with minimal elaboration and perform your life very well.

It is the layering of interpretation, it is the addition of these ingredients of the things that make me, me; my memories, my liking, my not liking, that hides me from me. In the freshness of our connectivity we have thoughts and feelings arising; it's fresh, it is here, it is connected, but it's not me because I am just fresh and connected.