

The glue of duality

Exploring the terms apprehension and comprehension

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Questions and Answers

Please explain the meaning of the terms 'apprehension' and 'comprehension'.	2
Will apprehension and comprehension both fit in the mental factor of perception?	4
Why use the term rNam-Par Shes-Pa for consciousness (Skt. vijñāna) if it means to comprehend?	5
When I am grasping at something is that dependent on my prior reifying of a transient event?	6
Does being compassionate and including everyone not involve grasping?	7
How would I 'grasp at something' without 'finding a place for it within my existing ways of making sense of things'?	10
Do apprehension and comprehension begin to arise from the first level of ignorance?	12
You said, 'this is', 'this is a cup', 'this is a cup in my hand'. How does this relate to apprehension and comprehension?	12
Is it possible to have grasping without comprehending when acting within our dualistic frame of reference	14
In dzogchen, are we trying to break free of the first level of ignorance, where an emergent phenomenon is made into something?	16
How can this 'allowing' happen without grasping?	16
Where does apprehension and comprehension fit into eight consciousnesses?	18
Do apprehension and comprehension both arise from the eighth level of consciousness? Can we pinpoint one level of consciousness for both?	19
Where do apprehension and comprehension fit in the four levels of ignorance?	21
Do 'making it something' and 'grasping it as something' happen simultaneously?	22
When does direct perception, the first moment of seeing something, occur? Before or after the moment of 'making it something'?	23
Can we have direct perception of a concept since that is also a phenomenon?	24
Please suggest the kind of practice that should be done?	26

Question:

Please explain the meaning of the terms 'apprehension' and 'comprehension'.

You referred to both terms in the commentary on one of the texts: "Consciousness is essentially a mixture of apprehension, of taking hold of something, and comprehension which is to be able to hold it clearly within our existing frame of reference."

In Tibetan, 'apprehend' would be *'Dzin-Pa* and 'comprehend' would be *rNam-Par Shes-Pa*. To apprehend is to grasp 'something': the 'object' of grasping is the reified appearance.

- We make an appearance into the appearance of **something** without knowing that we do it. This is so usual for us that we are blind to the intrinsic inseparability of appearance and emptiness.
- We then grasp it as **something** as if it were an existent something before we grasped it, then
- We comprehend it by finding a place for it within our existing ways of making sense of 'things'.

This is how the energy or glue of duality manifests the pseudo-clarity of my understanding of how things are. My experience is mediated by concepts yet I feel that I have direct contact with substantial entities each with their own inherent existence.

Awareness or rigpa is our mind fully relaxed and open as the natural illumination of whatever is occurring. It is without bias and without prejudice being panoramic and all-encompassing. The essence of the mind is emptiness, its quality is clarity or luminosity, within which its kindness is all-pervading. The kindness or benign contact is freely given and is not dependent on the qualities of the recipient.

With unawareness or ignorance of basic openness there is a loss of being at ease with all phenomena as they come and go. The first moment of unawareness is a grasping at something, separating appearance from its ground of emptiness. It is not that 'something' is taken out of emptiness but rather that the fact of its intrinsic emptiness is ignored. An entity, something existing in itself, seems to have come into existence. Now the work of maintaining this delusion begins.

Subject and object are like twins. They are born together. Then, although subject and object are actually brother and sister or conjoined twins, it's as if they vibrate in opposition. *"I'm not you. Get away."* Then, like fighting siblings, they create more and more separation: clinging to what is mine and clinging to the idea that the other is not like me.

The definition of self is based on exclusion of the other, *"I don't know who I am but I'm not you."* There is a kind of stupid clarity in that. We can see this politics everywhere. Although each self needs to keep relating to others, the integrity of the self, the continuity of its specific identity, depends on the rejection of the other. The otherness of the other, if allowed, will seem to diminish and relativise. The purity of my ego-self is always vulnerable in any interaction with the other. It can be influenced, collapsed in on itself, pulled out of itself—all of which highlights the self-deception of its belief in autonomy and personal agency. Self arises in dependent origination with all that is other: on the basis of not being the other I am self; on the basis of being self, I am not other.

This is very different from the *Ka-Dag*, the primordial purity of awareness. Awareness is unborn, uncompounded, uncreated. It is intrinsic and unchanging. Its purity, simplicity and virginity has never been touched or soiled. This is because it is not an entity standing in relation to other entities. It is not a thing amongst things, and so its purity is unchanging.

The ego cannot contact awareness. Awareness is non-dual with all occurrences, whereas ego is dualistic and operates through dualistic consciousness. Awareness offers the immediate revelation of how it is, how the whole is in this instant. Consciousness tells the ego self about something, something which it is not. We are conscious of the other—even when we are self-conscious we are conscious of a transient image of self, an image we take to be self.

Consciousness is always dualistic: I am conscious of something. Consciousness always takes an object. You're not just conscious; there is always a subtle object.

For example, if you were sitting in a clean room and you're reading you're not aware of smell. But maybe somebody is cooking downstairs and there's a smell of chili coming up in the air and you go, *Oh!* Your smell consciousness arises with the smell; the object and the subject arise together. The consciousness of smell grasps at this fragrance coming in

on the air and then your mental consciousness (Skt. *manovijnana*) processes this smell in terms of its concerns. “Have I smelled this before?” or “This means mom is preparing lunch” or whatever it would be. You elaborate something. So the smell is taken to be the smell of something. “Ah, now I know what it is.” This comprehension follows apprehension. I understand it. “All right”. I can encompass it. I can locate this smell in the body of knowledge that I have in my data bank. Or perhaps a smell comes up and suddenly you feel a bit anxious: “What is that?” And then you look outside and somebody's doing something with their car engine. “Oh, it's that smell.”

In this way, the anxiety of survival present in each individual maintains the dualistic consciousness that pervades our experience, scanning events with the hope of gain and the fear of loss. Is this a friend or an enemy? Should I open to this or close down? This uncertainty evokes the third *skandha* heap, which builds up a composite image of what is going on. In Tibetan this is called ‘*Dus-Shes* (Skt. *samjna*), a gathering information with which to build up a picture of what is there, of the something-ness. This is the basic apprehension or perception upon which consciousness (Tib. *rNam-Shes*) develops its comprehension.

Question:

Will apprehension and comprehension both fit in the mental factor of perception?

Although many technical terms are used in the analysis of experience, our actual experience arises all at once. It is important to learn to use the technical terms but without taking them to have an existent referent. First of all there has to be something, something which you take to be the object of your attention. The smell came into your nostrils: *Oh, what's that?* Our perception is both proactive, going out to the object, and reactive, having the impact of the object come to us and elicit a response.

This pulsation in perception reflects how our body is in the world— we breathe in and we breathe out. We spread our breath out into the world and the air comes into us. We are in a constant exchange. This is what we call life.

Question:

Why use the term rNam-Par Shes-Pa for consciousness (Skt. vijñāna) if it means 'to comprehend'?

In English, generally the word consciousness means my mental aliveness – fact that I have mental experience in which I am conscious of something. When you go to hospital for an operation the anesthetist makes you unconscious. You're very happy to be unconscious because you don't want to see what they're doing. For the ego it is a wonderful thing to be conscious if what I am conscious of is pleasing to me. If it is not pleasing, then I prefer to be unconscious.

Consciousness is a limited form of experience because it is so reactive. And that reactivity or ego sensitivity brings our attention up and out. Generally, we're not settled in ourselves because we're always concerned about how others will behave towards us. The Tibetan term *rNam-Par Shes-Pa* indicates knowing something, some shaped form, some entity. This unites apprehending something—the sense that there is a 'not me' that I can grasp and get a handle on—and comprehension, my sense that I know what I have got hold of.

Awareness is different. Awareness is like the ocean and consciousness is like a wave. The wave is always moving, going up and down, subject-object, subject-object. That's the world of the consciousness. Yet the ocean itself is very calm. The wave is not separate from the ocean but due to our habitual grasping and need for identity, the unstable wave is taken to be me, "*Hey, get out of my way, I'm a special wave.*" Everybody's trying to push away the other waves or pull them in. But waves are ungraspable, as is the consciousness of all sentient beings.

Our aim in meditation practice is to see that the water in the wave is the water of the ocean. The wave has no water of its own. Individual identity is a delusion maintained by the capacity consciousness has to make the impermanent seem permanent.

Question:

When I am grasping at something is that dependent on my prior reifying of a transient event?

Our consciousness manifests a long history of reification. Our self is reified, our consciousness is reified, and all that we encounter is reified. This is the structure we are born into life after life. We do not carry the details of our experience of one life into the next. What is carried forward—or what appears as the substratum of our new series of experiences—is these three aspects of reification. Consciousness is a mental event which appears subjectively to be an ongoing quality of our self. This is a false interpretation, an identification which hides the openness of our mind itself.

It can be useful to make a distinction between mind and the content of mind. Mind is like the pot and the content of mind is like the food inside. So if you look in the pot and there's nothing there, you might think, *"Hey, this is not very interesting, there's nothing to get here."* If somebody has cooked something nice in the pot then, *"Oh! wow!"* and then, you say, *"It's a little bit sweet, but also nice."* The content of the mind maintains duality because it gives your ego self something to work with as you add your patterns and interpretations. The mind itself is intrinsically empty and offers nothing for the ego self to hang on to. Unfortunately for us as meditators interested in liberation we rarely experience the open emptiness of our mind. Even if our life is like a desert, we're like a camel that has had a drink in the oasis. We can walk for many days on the fuel of the past. We are a karmic camel and we can go for a long time living on these old ideas and old tendencies. That's why meditation can be quite frustrating. We don't get a clear view of the intrinsically empty pot because some new trace of the past arises

Will I never be free of this?

The truth is that you, as you take yourself to be, will never be free of this, because subject and object are born together. If the person doing the meditation is the ego-self then it can't get free. We have to relax out of the ego-self because it's a false identification.

After India's partition, there was a lot of a lot of pain and horror in the Punjab and people have many memories of what had happened. For as long as they're thinking, *"All these bloody people, look what they did!"* it just keeps heating and heating and heating. Yet the

day when someone says, *"Oh, my brother!"* then it can be very different because when you can say 'brother', then it's inclusive; there is less basis then for the memories of the past to keep coming in. You're saying, *"I see you two-eyes, two-legs brother, breathing in breathing out. I am also breathing in and breathing out, my brother, my sister."* But as long as you say, *"Oh your people did that to my group. I can never forgive!"* then everyone is in a prison of anxious identity. So, it is very important to observe how duality functions in our lives.

You see little children playing in the street and waving bits of wood. Mom says, *"Leave it behind, we're going home now."* The child say, *"No. This is my sword. I need to keep it."* With this you see how the mind has given an identity to this piece of wood through the magic of interpretation. The wood was just lying in the road. The child found it yet within one second, it's theirs.

Grasping at something, claiming an ownership of it, is activity generated by the three root poisons. The first poison is the dulling toxicity of being sure that I exist and everything I encounter exists. With this basic dualism, I am then either attracted to or repelled by the existents that I encounter.

The toxicity of desire is the conviction that this entity is special and important and is something that I must have. This one person or item is given a status above all others. This is delusion.

The toxicity of aversion is the conviction that this entity is unpleasant or dangerous and should be avoided and pushed away. This prevents me from having a rounded view of what is in front of me. I then act according to my beliefs about the other and ignore the fact that we both manifest as transient patternings of illusion.

Question:

Does being compassionate and including everyone not involve grasping?

If compassion is 360 degrees in all directions, then I take care of you and I take care of me simultaneously. Compassion is not top down, an offering to the needy as if they were inferior. We are all equal in having buddha nature. If I am helping someone whom I take to exist as a separate person then I am still grasping at the duality of self and other and

attributing inherent existence to both. If I see that you are hungry and I focus on your hunger, which is an arising sensation, and I give you food then your hunger goes down. Have I helped you? Tomorrow you will be hungry again, but in this moment I have made a gesture.

If this gesture is made in the full acceptance of impermanence then it helps us on the road to emptiness. There is no helper, no help, and no one who was helped—the whole sequence is an illusion happening in the manner of a dream. If we see this, then we awaken to our actual situation. Each person has to awaken for themselves, nobody can do it for us.

On a more relative level, when we help other people, it is a dynamic activity. As long as we are in samsara all gains and losses are temporary. We cannot build an enduringly safe place for others with our activity. Compassion is connectivity, the great method for lessening the sense of separateness that all sentient beings experience. In the classroom a good teacher will try to help each student but they will also know that some students understand very quickly, some understand less quickly, and some understand only after a lot of difficulty. Sentient beings are differentiated by their own karmically generated current capacities. There are no truly existing children who are fundamentally 'stupid' and 'bad' and 'will never get anywhere'. Such limiting definitions do not truly define the child—but they do show that the judging, defining adult is trapped in duality and in reifying concepts. Compassion is connective and is about working with the energy of the potential in the moment.

If you are farming a field with a lot of stones in it, then you need to use a special kind of head on the plough so that it won't break too often. You have to take care ploughing. Also you have to grow crops such as oats or rye that can survive in such a soil. Some crops don't mind stones too much, but for wheat it can be difficult. So the farmer has to know all about his land: is it well drained, is it alkaline, is it acidic? In Britain farmers previously got very excited about taking down all the trees and hedges so that they had bigger fields. But then when heavy rains came they washed away all the soil. If you don't see the big picture and you think, "*Oh, now I'm winning*", then you forget dependent origination—on the basis of this, that comes.

Being in a hurry to help people is often not so helpful. I remember when I was living in Shantiniketan with my teacher and his wife there was a lady who taught in the university. Sometimes she had some mental health problems. On one such occasion she was getting a bit disturbed and Amala, Rinpoche's wife, said to him, *"I think we should bring her into the house and take care of her."* And he said, *"Fine, you invite her, you cook for her, you talk with her into the night because she loves to talk. Then it's you who tells her that she has to go when you have enough. I'm not going to do that."* It's one thing to be sweet and say, *"Oh my dear, come we will take care of you"*, but after some time, you find that it's very tiring.

It is vital to be aware that our capacity to help others will vary. Our mind is unreliable and other people's minds changed too. So help as you can, when you can, but without making grand promises. If we see that there are no truly existing people and that everyone is a pattern of energy, then we have to work with this energy without reification.

Once when C R Lama was in Ladakh he was invited to give some initiations at a monastery that was quite high on a hill. He was carried up the hill and when he got to the top he took off his shoes and went into the temple. He performed the initiation and when he came out his shoes were gone. Everyone was running around looking for the shoes, very upset. But he told them, *"These shoes were very nice shoes. I was in Europe and people bought these wonderful shoes for me. However as for the theft of the shoes, 90% of the of the sin of the bad deed is mine. This is a poor area. There are sharp stones everywhere. So who would not want good shoes here? By leaving my shoes outside I created temptation for the thief. So the thief has 10% of the badness and I have 90%."* In this way we have to be aware of how complex life is. We can't just consider something as a good thing to do without considering the possible side effects.

This is made clear with the Buddhist concept of the Three Wheels: subject, object and the activity that links them. This structure is present in many languages as subject-verb-object or as subject-object-verb. The value of the object is not free standing, since it is linked to the status, mood and requirements of the subject. It can seem obvious that chocolate is good, intrinsically good yet it is not good for someone with diabetes. It might seem good to their tongue, but it will not help them maintain stability in their blood sugar.

The teachings advise us that our awareness should be as vast as the sky, and our compassion should be as fine as milled flour, as precise as the point of a needle.

Question:

How would I 'grasp at something' without 'finding a place for it within my existing ways of making sense of things'?

We already, automatically and habitually, see the world as full of things. It's not that we are consciously transforming light and sound into things. We're living in a world which is already solidified due to it being mediated by our own karmic constructs. When I see a bird flying in the sky, I can't imagine how it does this. I watch the little bird... it flies right into a bush, right into a tree and I think, "*Oh, how does he do that? His wings come in at just the right moment.*" The bird is not having to think, and it didn't go to a flying school; it just flies. In the same way we see according to our karmic vision, the assumptive interpretive vision that brought us into the human realm. In each of the six realms the formative assumptions are unquestioned; in each case what happens seems completely true for the experiencer. Our karmic vision reveals to us that we are individual entities living in a world of separate real things. On the basis of this we add liking and not liking. We say, "*I've had enough*" or "*Give me more.*" Our wish is that everything which arises for us should fit into our personal frame of reference.

For example, when I was young in the 1960s, there were certain kinds of music which felt like 'my music'. Then later there was punk and rap which I would sometimes hear on the radio and wondered, "*What is this? This is not music!*" I didn't feel an easy resonance with that kind of music. Similarly in a family, in a social grouping, we find that particular kinds of patterning seem normal for us yet when we look at other people we see that what is normal for me is not normal for them. Usually this difference is not disturbing for us because we can simply think, "*Oh they're different*" and leave it at that. Buddhist teachings encourage us to examine this more closely.

If each person has their own normal, and there is no normal shared by everyone, then the assumptions that our identity and choices depend on are merely conventional. They are true and valid for me because I believe they are true. They have no actual basis apart from my belief in them and so they're relative to all the karmic and cultural influences that

have contributed to these beliefs. These cultural formations are not inherently true. They are just constructs and the value of a construct lies in whether you believe it or not.

The ego wants to feel secure in its knowledge. Many years ago when I was walking along the River Ganges heading towards Prayagraj at Allahabad to the big kumbh mela, I passed through little villages. I had only two lungies, so I would wash one by beating it on a rock in a certain way. The women in the village would come and say, *“No, no, you have to hit your lungi with a stone to wash it.”* So the next day I'm in another village and I'm hitting my lungi with a stone to wash it and the women there came and tell me, *“No, no, you have to beat it with your clenched fists to wash it.”* In each village the women had a different way of washing cloth. Then we see that this is a relative truth, but in each village the people there believe that they know the correct way to wash clothes.

However we can't just throw away our grasping, because it is the glue that keeps our social formation together. Our beliefs and identities are not absolutely true but they are relatively true, and we need to employ them in our interactions given that we are living in a world of fabricated identities. In meditation, we can dissolve the glue a bit and gradually become free of relying on such identifications. Our meditation helps us develop wisdom on the basis of insight into the lack of inherent existence in people and in phenomena. We come to see directly that everything that occurs is inseparable from emptiness, from the open empty ground. However, if we wish to develop kindness and compassion we need to be able to relate to all sentient beings, each of whom believes in the truth of their identifications. It is not about destroying all identifications but rather about seeing that all identifications refer to illusory formations. Real entities are the product of delusion.

Thus in meditation we do not grasp at the thoughts and feelings which are arising, yet when we get up from the meditation and go out, we have to be able to relate to the fact that people's constructs are real for them. We have to work with their beliefs without believing what they believe. Other people may be convinced that we are basically like them. Disrupting this assumption is unlikely to liberate them. We have to offer authentic contact and communication—yet in the manner of a dream. Thus, compassion is to enter into interaction without getting caught in reification or reactivity.

Question:

Do apprehension and comprehension begin to arise from the first level of ignorance?

It is indeed from the first level of ignorance that all of these aspects begin to arise. As soon as there is a 'some-thing' there is the beginning of some-one who knows that some-thing. The arising, which is actually transient and devoid of inherent existence, is apprehended as something. This starts the process of defining: what type of something is this? And thus comprehension, the work of consciousness, begins. Comprehension is part of the process of constructing the object as an identifiable and knowable and usable entity.

I don't know if it is still practised but in the old days, after the monsoon, people would put potassium permanganate down a well since it was known to kill off many of the bacteria that had come from things being washed down into the well. If you take even the tiniest crystal of potassium permanganate and drop it in water, all the water immediately becomes purple. It's like that—one tiny drop of 'this is', 'this exists', 'I am', and the whole world is suddenly pervaded with its colour! Everything is some-thing! It's like when the sun is going down in the evening a red colour pervades the sky. It's just suddenly there, the sky is red!

Ignorance is suddenly there and then we are living in this world suffused or flavoured with this. We are, in our limited identities, the fruition of the first moment of ignoring the actual ground.

Question:

You said, 'this is', 'this is a cup', 'this is a cup in my hand'. How does this relate to apprehension and comprehension?

As soon as there is this very simple first sense of existence, there is an anxiety. Existence and non-existence are born together as mutually contradictory binaries. This anxiety of the insecurity of existence seeks reassurance. Its lonely vulnerability seeks a friendly other. If I say, "Hello" to you, you might wait to see if I say anything more. Maybe I only know "Hello"? Maybe I can only announce my existence? The lonely self has to reach out more clearly, so that the idea of self is calling for a friend to the idea of the other. I say,

“How are you?” Now we have the Three Wheels. I want to know how you are. Now we're having a conversation.

One thing leads to another to another and we build up pictures in language, in association, in memory. We are all, from the position of the ego self, creatively constructing these patterns. This construction occurs in the face of intrinsic emptiness. The construction of meaningful entities pleases the ego yet it covers up the inherent emptiness of all the ingredients used in the construction.

It is vital to be clear about this first moment of arising. This moment occurred long long ago and it also occurs in each and every moment we experience. ‘This’ arises. Is it the sky or is it the some-thing in the sky? In the traditional buddhist view a rainbow manifests from the sky. It is a quality of the sky. The sky shows a rainbow. The ocean shows a wave. If you truly see sky and rainbow together, without conceptualising them, it is obvious that the rainbow is a sky-showing, a sky revelation. The sky has the capacity to display many forms which are non-dual with it. But if you take out your dualistic scissors and cut around the rainbow, “*This rainbow is the best rainbow, this is the most beautiful rainbow*”, then where is the sky? The sky vanishes as the now ignored background while the rainbow is foregrounded and becomes very real. You take your camera, you're photographing it, you make an exhibition and you call it ‘The Rainbows of the Himalayas’. This rainbow you have found is in fact your own creation because you have separated it from its non-dual source.

All entities are created by reification—this is unawareness creating delusion out of illusion. This separation is followed by grasping. The baby comes out of the mother's body and then the umbilical cord is cut, establishing the baby as other than the mother. Now it is an individual somebody and we give the baby a name and with this it takes on its individual identity. It was part of mum and now it comes out of her and into its own ‘existence’.

The prajnaparamita literature states that emptiness is the great mother, the mother of all the buddhas, yet the Buddha is not born **out of** the great mother. The Buddha is living **inside** the great mother. She has a very very big belly; she has hundreds of thousands of buddhas inside because she is like the sky, never fragmenting, always non-dual. There is

buddha, yes, but buddha inseparable from the great mother. They are not two, they are not one, they are non-dual.

When you have two, you have grasping. I grasp this. But with the clarity of non-dual there is nothing to grasp. How can you take the wave from the ocean? Can you take a cloud out of the sky? Can you take a thought out of your mind? I think, "*Oh, it's very important thought.*" I think this about that thought. Both the initial thought and the thought that comments on it are unborn illusions. The thought is always non-dual with the mind.

So first cutting and separating, and then comes grasping. The basis of cutting is the 'not seeing non-duality', and with this consciousness arises as the manager of subject/object interactions.

Question:

Is it possible to have grasping without comprehending when acting within our dualistic frame of reference

Yes. People from many countries live in London. I might be sitting in the bus and two people are in front of me talking in their language. I don't know what they're saying but I do know that these are people talking. The activity is grasped by me as something yet I have no comprehension of the content they experience in the activity. I gain a little bit of a holiday from my busy mental activity due to my not understanding the content of their words but I still have a subtle grasping at the sense that something is occurring. I know that they are speaking a language. I can see that they understand each other. I don't understand what they are saying but I can tell that they understand—and I grasp at my understanding that this is the case.

In dzogchen we attend to two basic aspects of experience: 1) *kadag*, primordial purity, like the open sky, and 2) *lhundrup*, effortlessly arising non-dual experience, the instant or spontaneous manifestation of primordial purity.

When we are having a conversation, we're just talking. Neither of us knows what we're going to say. We listen and respond. The content flows out freshly even if we use words we have used before. This particular pattern will never be repeated with this same emotion and quality of connection. If we see that our experience is always fresh, then we

see that it is self-arising and self-liberating. It occurs by itself. No one is doing it. I am not doing it. By observing this we see that the concept of self is an unnecessary complication. I am speaking—yes, that is undeniable. Yet to whom does 'I' refer? When we look for the speaker, the seer, the doer, we cannot find any enduring entity. Pattern after pattern arises—yet they establish no thing. They are patterns of illusion like rainbows in the sky or like waves in the ocean. The wave arises and comes up and then it goes down and vanishes. Did it ever truly exist?

The wave arises and vanishes but if I grasp at it as if it were something then my grasping makes it, for me, something solid. The grasper grasps its own idea of what it is grasping. From the very beginning there has never been even one real existent entity. The only thing we ever actually grasp at is our concept of the object and there is no real existent grasper. So the grasper is a transient concept, the grasped at object is a transient concept, and the activity of grasping is a phrasing of the narrative of self.

Our essence is empty; it is spacious and open and has never become a thing. It is not a dead space for its nature is ceaselessly generous, offering diverse patternings of light and sound. Within these dynamic patternings, the patterning of selfing arises. These are the patternings of aware participation, self-arising and self-liberating in non-duality with the field of occurrence.

All of this richness is freely available and yet because the egoic sense of self is so limited and limiting it attends to the few aspects of the whole which seem relevant to it and ignores the rest. The ego fragment of the unfragmented whole makes collages of pseudo-entities from the items it selects.

This is the process of composition which is the fourth of the five skandhas. We build up pictures which we take to stand for real entities. This is an activity; this is a verb. All that is composed and seems to exist as something is in fact activity. Nouns are redundant—they are the delusions that hide the actual ungraspable dynamism of the display. Moment by moment there is appearance, appearance arising with other equally empty and unborn appearances. There are no independent entities. The naming of appearances as if they were real enduring entities is a delusional activity. It is the second level or aspect of ignorance in action. All appearance is self-arising and self-vanishing whatever our egoic

narratives might say. We name and attribute fixed qualities and value to 'what' we name. Yet we are only naming concepts without referents.

Everything is connectivity and this connectivity is creative. When you grasp, you make it solid and fixed; that's the problem. If we are relaxed and playful we are freed to experience everything as the interplay of unborn appearances.

Question:

In dzogchen, are we trying to break free of the first level of ignorance, where an emergent phenomenon is made into something?

Well, we are not trying to break free. We simply relax. What binds us is not solid or real. We do the Guru Yoga of the White A. The A symbolises emptiness, the great mother, the sky, the ocean. The rainbow light around the A indicates the potential of emptiness arising as the energetic display of the five elements and so on. We make the sound of A. Everything arises from A. In the Sanskrit alphabet, all the consonants have A as their inherent vowel. When we make this sound of A we gather all the differentiation in the world that arises with language and we bring it back to its basis which is A. All words are arising from it. It is like the mother and now all the children go back into the mother, which they have never actually left.

We make the sound of A three times and then relax. Then whatever is arising is accepted as it is. Instead of seeing thoughts and feelings as naughty children that have to be controlled, we allow them to play because they are in the safe garden of the mother. They are in space as the movement of space. This is the non-dual openness free of the judgement of good or bad, right or wrong. Polarities are always very dangerous: friend or enemy, beautiful or ugly, rich or poor... They are the slippery slope leading us back to the ego.

Question:

How can this 'allowing' happen without grasping?

It is only through the practice of seeing that grasping is reassuring for the ego, but it is in fact disconnected from the openness of the world. For example, if I hide my face with my hands and say, "Ha ha. I'm safe in here, you can't see me." Then you might think that I have

gone a little crazy because you can see me even though I can't see you. You are in the more powerful position but I do not see that. The ego is a liar, a deceiver, a cheat. I want to win and I'm willing to tell myself that I have won even when I have not. With such a positioning I am incapable of allowing whatever comes to come. I want control. Therefore, the first task is to unmask the ego and see that this phoney pretender is offering an unreliable identity. 'I', as the marker for open empty awareness, has no need of the mask of identity.

If you can stop grasping at the factors with which your identity is constituted then you will see that they are self-liberating. If you don't catch them they will not be able to catch you. To 'allow' them, to let them come and go without interference, is to aid your own insight into both your own intrinsic freedom from lack and excess, and their inability to actually add or detract.

When you grasp at something, you are hiding inside your concept of self and this is comforting, like pulling the blanket over your head. Life is still there, it's just that you've cut yourself off. However in Guru Yoga, although it's a little bit scary, we relax. We take the blanket off and we open to how life is occurring. Thoughts come, thoughts go. There is actually nothing to cling to.

In Britain when people come to a pain clinic with a chronic back pain the surgeon sometimes says, *"We can't operate because it's too dangerous; you could be paralysed."* The person then asks, *"So do I have to live with the pain?"* Nowadays they are told, *"Yes, you have to live with the pain, so you should get to know your pain."* The pain clinics have started to teach basic meditation, so that the person learns to sit with the pain and what they see is that sometimes it's hot, sometimes it's sharp, sometimes it's sawing... They see that they have many different kinds of pain. It's never just one thing.

So when the mind says, *"I hate this pain"*, what is being referred to? The referent is a mental construct. The phenomenon of pain is always changing and many patients find that insight very helpful because now they can be with each moment because it's just this. With this, even if you contract away from the pain, you will relax after the surge. But if you have already tensed up on the basis of predictive concepts—*"I can't bear it, it's terrible"*— then you're making it much worse for yourself. You have become very solid,

so the pain is hitting you hard. Whereas if you just say, “Ooooh! aaahhhh!” then it's like a wave; it's like a pulse. If you open to whatever comes out and let it come and go, then you start to realise that all good things are impermanent and all bad things are impermanent. With this we relax from grasping onto something we deem to be good or bad.

The mind is like the sky. The sky is clear, and so it shows in each moment, this pattern... this pattern... this pattern. Our awareness is inseparable from this ceaseless patterning, the patternings of the energy moving in the field of revelation.

If we see this then we can give ourselves to life as it comes, whether it's doing exams if you're studying, or doing your income tax return if you're employed. There are many things we don't necessarily want to do. However, if you sit in the ego you will become reactive whereas if you stay connected with the world you simply do what you have to do. Then the free flow of non-dual energy allows your life to proceed without grasping and you start to trust relaxation rather than tensing.

Question:

Where does apprehension and comprehension fit into eight consciousnesses?

The sixth consciousness, mental consciousness, processes what is coming through the consciousnesses of the five senses. The seventh consciousness then flavours this with the five root afflictions – mental dullness, aversion and so on. This brings an emotional quality into what we're seeing.

The eighth consciousness is like a store of associations that can arise. We're never quite sure what is going to be evoked from the potential of what is latent in this ground consciousness. Sometimes we have dreams or daydreams, or some funny thought arises in our mind and we wonder, “*Why am I thinking this? Where did this come from?*” Because the mind itself, in being open like the sky, is ceaselessly welcoming everything moment by moment—happy/ sad, good/ bad—all kind of associations can suddenly be mobilised. As long as there is duality, our activity leaves a subtle trace just as a snail crawling across a rock leaves a little track. We carry these traces within us. Someone might grow up and become a generous person yet when they were a child, they had a big brother or big sister who was always teasing them or stealing their sweets. From these events the person

carries a certain vulnerability which manifests if they feel that people are being unfair and so they react strongly even if the provocation was mild. For someone else that intense reaction would not be there. Thus in this one life an echo of how it was twenty years ago can be very impactful.

Moreover, from previous lives we have our karmic echoes. The eighth consciousness is the site of many different kinds of echoes. And these echoes, empty as they are, can cause much suffering if they are mistaken for real entities. This is the basis for racism, sexism, ultra-nationalism and all the extreme positions which take prejudice to be a path to truth. Inequality, conflict war and exploitation are all grounded in the delusion that real entities with real fixed qualities exist.

Question:

*Do apprehension and comprehension both arise from the eighth level of consciousness?
Can we pinpoint one level of consciousness for both?*

Each of the eight consciousnesses functions through some degree of apprehension and comprehension. For example, a sound is apprehended as an impact on the organ of hearing—something has occurred. The auditory consciousness is activated by that apprehension and generates a basic comprehension such as ‘a dog is barking’. This is fed into the mental consciousness which seeks to refine its apprehension of what has occurred— *“Ah, it is the neighbour’s dog.”* With this comes to comprehension that the dog has a habit of barking at the next-door neighbour’s cat. This is apprehended by the seventh consciousness which feeds in one or more of the five poisons which might give rise to the apprehension that *“It is that horrible cat again disturbing that sweet dog.”* With this comes the comprehension that, *“It’s time I spoke with the neighbours about their cat.”* This intention, which is clearly in the form of the three wheels, gives a further emphasis to the belief in duality which is the organising principle of apprehension and comprehension in all eight consciousnesses.

With regard to all these progressions it is vital to remember that the concept of the eight consciousness is a Mahayana development of the six consciousnesses highlighted in the Theravada tradition, i.e. five sense consciousnesses and mental consciousness as their organiser. In the Theravada and basic Mahayana views, consciousness is the fifth of the

five *skandha* heaps and the third of the twelve *nidana* links. The first link is ignorance, the second is associations. In this schema ignorance means ignorance of the three marks of conditional existence: impermanence, suffering and the absence of inherent existence.

The basic cause of suffering is essentially ignorance of dependent origination and the consequent arising of clinging and craving. This is a different approach from that of the levels of ignorance set out in the tantric and dzogchen texts.

In general, how an event is apprehended will involve the interaction of karmic and cultural factors. For example, in some cultures noisy eating is taken to be a sign of enjoyment and therefore a compliment to the cook, while in other cultures it is taken to be a sign of rudeness and an insult to the cook and the other diners. When people are acting on the basis of cultural assumptions their reactions seem to them to be correct, for they have no insight into the conventional nature of their beliefs. So instead of having an open field of diversity where there are many different ways of behaving, each family is establishing an oppositional structure indicating what, for them, is right and what is wrong. Due to this our minds become very cloudy because now we think we've got the truth, that we've apprehended the truth. So, if someone hears you slurping your soup, they may now comprehend that you are a very badly educated person. They are fitting what you are doing into their frame of reference which tells them 'the truth'. This is very different from thinking that this is a big world in which people do different things in different ways.

Ego identity and intolerance go together. That's why in our practice of tantra we visualise ourselves as Arya Tara or as Chenrezi, and this divine form is revealed to be our true identity. We step free of our particular cultural formation with all its rights and wrongs and judgments; we abide in our illusory identity which allows us to be open hearted. May all beings be happy! May the silent soup-eaters be happy! May the noisy soup-eaters be happy!

Namkhai Norbu often advised us not to enter into judgment. Coming to a conclusion about things is very dangerous because things keep moving and changing. The farmer might look at his fields and think that he can expect a wonderful harvest. But then comes an early hailstorm and the whole field is flattened. At any moment something can happen.

Question:

Where do apprehension and comprehension fit in the four levels of ignorance?

Apprehension occurs in the first level, with the idea that there is something autonomous there. At this point there's not even subject and object, simply a condensing of energy around this 'something'. An idea of grasping is an idea. Both are unborn illusion yet the delusion that the grasper and the graspable have real existence is starting to be present as our basic assumption. With this there is thickening and opacity, a density which prepares the way into the second level of ignorance, of separating subject and object. With this there is comprehension because now I have a reference point which is me. I am becoming conscious of myself and of others. This I is clear and without its own content but with ignorance of the open basis it identifies with what it takes to be 'myself'. As 'I' faces the other items in the field, feelings of liking and not liking arise. With this as our guide we comprehend that this is good and that is bad. There is increasing comprehension of how it is to be a self and how this self relates to every other appearance.

This duality manifests as the third level of ignorance which identifies different types of appearance and experience and names them. This in turn reinforces the sense that the names refer to enduring entities. This enables another spiral of apprehension and comprehension.

The subject's encounter with myriad diverse others provides the basis for karmic accumulation. Fully committed to a dualistic view, the subject develops intentions towards an object and these direct its actions. This movement unites apprehension and comprehension. One is doing something to or for someone and reviewing the outcome. This consolidates the karmic impact of the action even when, as in most cases, there is no understanding of the process and consequences of karma. Very often we don't know why we take the world to be the way we think it is, or why we like some things and don't like some other things. Some people are very interested in wild flowers, others not. Some people interested in birds, others not. For some reason, this pattern on the object side finds or doesn't find a corresponding pattern on the subject side.

The reason proposed in dharma is that of karma, the ripening of the consequences of actions performed in earlier lives we no longer remember. Our karma is not something stored inside our body; our karma is our luck — it's our parents; whether we have a big family or a small family; whether we're wealthy or poor; what kind of school we went to; whether there was war or peace as we were growing up... All of this is our karma. This influences whether we are trustful or mistrustful and that affects the kind of choices we make. The expectations in a culture about what a girl is allowed to do and what a boy is allowed to do, is also an aspect of karma. Karma arises from our belief in duality and it manifests as the kind of world that we encounter. Our thoughts feelings and sensations arise in relation to the kind of events that occur for us. We impact the world and the world impacts us.

Question:

Do 'making it something' and 'grasping it as something' happen simultaneously?

Yes, these happen simultaneously. As soon as we see that there is something there, then we apprehend it, we take hold of it. If you say, "*James, I want you to catch me some air*", I will do my best but it's quite difficult. But if you had said, "*James, give me the pen*", then easy, "*Here's the pen.*" So you can apprehend something, to apprehend means to take hold of, so I can take hold of the pen but I can't take hold of the air and I can't take hold of space and I can't take hold of the ocean.

What you do with the ocean it is to open to it. You open to the sunset, you open to the snow on the Himalaya, you open to the sky. And the openness of the object and the openness of the subject arise together and this is the basis of meditation. But as soon as you come into grasping at things, then the world becomes small. For example, I have a pen. How lucky I am to have a pen. But the pen has my hand, so who is winning? My hand is the prisoner of the pen. "*Would you like to drink your tea, James?*" Yes, but I can't take hold of the cup because I have a pen in my hand. It is important to see that when I hold the pen there is situational advantage in that I can write, but there is also situational limitation. Precision in the formation of intention is empowering because it allows me to do something but it's also cutting me off from doing other things. The exit from this constraint is to maintain the Three Wheels of subject, object and their connection within non-duality. Merge your mind with the great mother and enjoy all your unborn children.

If you are going to find your nonduality with the all-inclusive dharmakaya it is vital to release yourself from reification and open to this ongoing ungraspable revelation. Every appearance is movement, and shapes are always changing, therefore don't make permanent conclusions about anyone, and don't put them in a box. Situational definition and existential definition are very different. In order to be with others we have to make situational definitions. *"Is your tea hot?"* That's a reasonable question. I'm not putting you in a prison with that one. But if I say, *"Oh Jane doesn't like hot tea..."* that's different. Maybe today she doesn't like it so hot and tomorrow she wants it very very hot. It depends.

So the guiding principle is: let's see. Don't imagine. Don't assume. Don't predict. Let's see and respond.

Question:

When does direct perception, the first moment of seeing something, occur? Before or after the moment of 'making it something'?

The first moment is simply seeing, seeing patterns of light. It is not seeing 'something'. The sense of the something-ness of the appearance is an important arising, as is our judgement about it. The arising is not the problem. The difficulty lies in our grasping at it as a vehicle of truth. We reify the arising, ignoring how it actually is, and then construct its reality on the basis of what we take it to be. The effortless vanishing of each experience is the completeness of each moment beyond comparing and contrasting. This will show us that there are no real existents 'out there' or 'in here'. All that arises is inseparable from emptiness. What we grasp at is in fact the non-duality of appearance and emptiness. Yet through this act of grasping, of apprehension and comprehension, we ignore the emptiness of what is grasped. We grasp at our idea of what is there and not what is actually there—which is emptiness. Moreover our own idea of what is there is also empty, as is our idea of who we are.

Because ideas seem to be graspable whereas the actual is not, the ego focuses on ideas, concepts, memories, plans. The ego grasps the abstract and takes it to be real. Awareness does not grasp but stays relaxed and open whatever occurs. Truly the past is gone. Our ideas about it are mere echoes.

We need to be careful not to set up two categories: the actual and the conceptual as if they were oppositional alternatives. Both are empty although the actual is manifestly empty whereas the conceptual seems to refer to real substances. The conceptual is how the actual seems when it is not opened to as it is.

The concept is only functioning in the moment of its occurrence. Every time the concept arises it constellates a particular pattern for a moment. Why is it a delusion? Because it seems to indicate something that is really there. The occurrence is an illusion, just as on a hot day you see water on the road in front of you although there is actually no water. In the same way, if I say "Old Delhi" I seem to be talking about something that exists out there. Yet if I actually go to Old Delhi, I find it is changing moment by moment. Old Delhi is not other than my ungraspable experience of 'it'. Thus as I walk about there, Old Delhi does not agree with my memories of it. Phenomena are always changing. Concepts are like a very bad musician; they're never on the beat; they're either ahead of the beat or behind the beat but they're not on the beat. The beat is self-vanishing

The only way to truly understand this is to look at your own life, to observe yourself. When you think about friends or family or what's going on in the area where you live, see whether your concepts are illuminating how it actually is or are they illuminating your idea of what it is? Are your concepts telling the story of seemingly substantial entities which are not present in the world, but only in your mental world.

Question:

Can we have direct perception of a concept since that is also a phenomenon?

Yes, the concept arises in the mind. It shows and goes. If we stay with that, there is no elaboration and our perception is direct and unmediated. However we often do not observe its passing and so we are taken in by the idea and believe that it is a medium of truth. Concepts are phenomena, very subtle phenomena. The only way we can grasp them is by making them substantial for us through reification, apprehension and comprehension. We ourselves hide the nature of concepts from ourselves. The concept comes and goes. It is just this specific vanishingly moment of lived experience yet it appears to have an enduring existence for the ego.

The concept is like false teeth for an old person; they are needed for chewing up the world. But actually the world shows itself all at once. If you're going walking and you come around a corner and see the sunlight on a big tree, what a tree! Your companion asks, *"What kind of tree is that?"* Now, is this naming going to add value or not? Does calling it a tree add value? What you see is light shimmering which you take to be leaves, but that's already concepts. You have this amazing aesthetic experience in front of you but it's not enough for the ego. It is not what the ego is looking for. The ego loves the power of naming and knowing—and indeed prefers this to simply being with the appearance as it is. All kinds of stories can be added onto the reified tree and this hides the actual unreified tree of simple perception. When we are living in the world of conceptualisation it is as if our concepts are taking us closer to the tree whereas they are actually taking us away from the tree-ness of the tree.

We do need to speak in order to connect and offer kindness yet we can hold our speaking very lightly. Then when we speak our words are like little gestures, like the movements of a massage that can soften the hard conceptual surface so that we are more available and responsive. This is very different from using language to gain power and learning in order to control things.

If you just see the tree and receive the tree like a blessing and your heart opens and your eyes open. *"Oh!"* You get everything and you get nothing. When you come home somebody may ask, *"What did you see?"* *"Oh, it's amazing."* *"Yes, but what was it like?"* *"I don't know. Just that it's beautiful."* There's nothing much to say. Your heart is full. Someone else might have two hours of story to tell but their heart might be empty.

Each basic simple self-vanishing concept is not the enemy; the problem is when you start to build a wall with concepts and you lose the freshness of the situation. In dzogchen, the mind itself is said to be naked, fresh, raw. It's naked for it's not covered in concepts. Concepts can be part of it, but not on top of it, not defining it. It's fresh because it's just this. So don't compare and contrast with other concepts or link it to the past and the future. It's raw; it's not cooked. Nothing has been added, no spices, no garam masala, nothing... just this... taste this... If we practise just staying with the freshness of the moment, then we become very relaxed and soft inside.

We have to remember that awareness, *rigpa*, doesn't always have the same meaning. It depends on the context. *Vijnana* consciousness doesn't always have the same meaning. Avoid solidifying, coming to conclusions and the ego-inflation of being right. We should be collaborating with language and trying to find out how we receive this music: how do we move with this music rather than solidifying ourselves?

Question:

Please suggest the kind of practice that should be done?

In brief, focus on impermanence; you see it in everything, both outer and inner.

Stay with your senses, because the senses are the doorway that makes inside and outside less separated. If you go too much into concepts you're in a private mental world. It makes a kind of thickening of the skin around you and you are sealed into yourself.

Pray to Padmasambhava and do his practice. Do the Guru Yoga of the White A.

No need for striving. Trust the intrinsic. Relax, release all identifications and fixations. Relax and enjoy the play of your mind.