

## James Low Interviewed by Ludovic Fontaine, 1<sup>st</sup> Dec 2022

[https://youtu.be/ld2Z\\_HUzhE](https://youtu.be/ld2Z_HUzhE)

### Ludovic

*You have been practising Dzogchen for fifty-five years and teaching it for forty-five years, and you have published many books on the subject and have translated and commented on many texts of this tradition. Can you tell us about your background and what led you to practise and teach Dzogchen and Buddhism?*

### James

My background is that I'm Scottish. I grew up in Glasgow and went to university in Edinburgh where I studied social anthropology and Indian philosophy. I heard of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and went to Johnstone House in the Scottish borders to visit him. He was unlike anyone I had met before, intense and impossible to pigeonhole. I had already hitchhiked to India before I went to university and had been touched by the Indian approach to life. Although people could be poor and life could be very hard there was a delicacy there which I didn't find in the West or in the Middle Eastern countries that I had travelled through. Moved by this I became more and more interested in Hinduism and in Buddhism. I decided to live in India and I stayed for many years studying Tibetan language and learning from different Tibetan masters.

I lived with many questions: What is the mind? What does it mean to be alive? Where are human beings situated in the world? The Tibetan view is very different from the Christian view that God has made everything and has placed human beings on the top of the pyramid, looking down on everything else. In the Tibetan view the human realm is embedded in a circle of 6 realms: the god realms, jealous gods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and the hell realms.

In life after life we move around these realms delivered to each by the consequences of our own previous actions. No matter which realm we are in it's difficult to find the exit from the circle. However from the Buddhist point of view a human birth gives you the optimal chance of finding an exit from this wheel of life. The wheel continues because of the impetus that we generate by the intentions we bring to new situations. We might know what it's like to have

a desire for more when we enjoy a good wine. We look at the label on the bottle and think, *“Oh, I need to buy this one again.”* So while enjoying something in this moment we are already projecting into the future and thinking, *“I want more of this wine and less of the other brands.”* This mobilization in a linear direction develops a momentum which is intensified by the force of both our aversion and our desire. Not only do these actions produce an effect on our current situation but they embed the seeds of consequences in our mind stream which will manifest later.

This patterning of experience is called ‘karma’ which means activity. It is the energetic charge arising from our dualistic participation in a specific situation. Moreover we tend to identify with our ego self. We tend to be governed by thoughts: I want to win, me first, I need, I'm entitled. These blinkered self-referential thoughts keep us running and running, trying to get more, as if somehow joy was something you could consume.

We know from eating ice cream that as you make contact with it, it vanishes. Pleasure is like that as well. As soon as you get your hands on it, it falls through your fingers. When we're young and very energetic we have all kind of experiences, but gradually we might see that chasing experiences is just very exhausting and does not lead anywhere. This was certainly my experience, and so I started to turn inwards and look at what was occurring in my mind.

I was fortunate to meet my root guru CR Lama who was a master of Dzogchen, a tradition in Tibetan Buddhism where the focus is on directly exploring our own mind. We start by focusing on the content of the mind until we see how fleeting and ungraspable it is. As we lessen our grasping at experience, which is always already vanishing, we become more calm and peaceful and more able to rest our attention on the space within which thoughts emerge. But of course at first I tried to observe the various tendencies which arose. I felt the pull to mesh with them and then was blown hither and thither. Gradually I learned to stay calm in the presence of these hooks which would otherwise be pulling me into my habitual patterns.

Slowly we find that when we are no longer led like a bull with a ring through its nose, we can stay calm in the face of powerful inner habits and patterns. Gradually we see that what I have taken to be I/me/myself only becomes personal if I take it to be so. If I let whatever is arising come and go then these occurrences are not me, not my identity. Rather they are part of the

vast array of potential responses which need only be evoked if they support kindly participation in the field of circumstances.

The more I was able to relax in the face of my own habit formations the more faith I had in my teacher and the lineage. As I was slowly able to find refuge in the unborn nature of my natural mind I had less and less need to catch my thoughts before they vanished. Thoughts, feelings and sensations arise and pass, arise and pass. They're actually ungraspable. From the grasper's point of view they can be very tricky and very deceptive. A thought seems to be something real and valid and yet it's always already dissolving like a wave coming out of the ocean and going back into it. Then we see more clearly that chasing thoughts is like chasing butterflies. So rather than looking out on to outer objects or within at inner objects, we start to look for the looker. We try to see who is the one who is looking. What is this awareness itself? There are subtle ways of becoming very open and, as it were, aware of awareness itself. Through this we see that we are awareness itself. This is the main focus of the path.

### **Ludovic**

*Is it possible for everyone to practise, to realize this pure awareness and to follow this path?*

### **James**

Yes. Awareness is the basis of our existence yet in daily life we are rarely aware of our awareness. Instead we rely on the formulations of experience provided by our dualistic consciousness. This is the aspect of our mind which starts to function when we take ourselves to be a singular subject who must make sense of the great variety of objects we encounter. This consciousness relies on concepts to interpret what is occurring for us. We perceive discrete objects which we name and then feel that this name gives us access to the existence of the object. I, the subject, observe objects and try to make them function for my benefit. Yet what is actually occurring for us moment by moment is co-emergent experience arising as the interplay of illusory self and illusory other.

Thus, for example, as I am talking with you I see your face in front of me but I also sense myself sitting here with my hands moving. I feel the weight of my bum on the seat. I am a flow of experience. And you, for me, are a flow of experience. And the room I'm sitting in is a flow of experience. All of these waves or movements or ripples of experience are arising together. Awareness illuminates the whole field of movement. Awareness is not observing

the movement from a position apart from the movement. Movement is nondual with unchanging awareness. Awareness is presence. It is not a 'thing' that might be experienced with dualistic consciousness.

For example, in a theatre there is a stage and on this stage there could be dancers or singers or actors. They move around and enact something. They couldn't show themselves if the stage were not open and welcoming to them. The emptiness of the stage is the optimal situation for free creativity. However when there is a theatre production, they bring the props onto the stage: the painted background, a table, a chair, a chaise longue, and so on. Then the way the actors relate to each other is mediated by these objects. The nature of the articles on the stage limits the potential of the display. If you've got tables and chairs, then a ballet is more difficult to stage. Now for a theatre to function, these props should not be nailed to the floor, because the most important thing is to be able to relate to the intrinsic openness and potential of the empty stage so that the props can be changed for different performances.

With that as a metaphor we might reflect how we, in our ego self, often nail ourselves to the floor. We say, *"I'm me, this is how I am, you know me. Come on, you have to accept me as I am."* The very fixity of our identity gives us a sense of security. But it's very limiting. It's a costly kind of false security because we're installing a fixed sense of who we are. We have our likes and dislikes and they condition our freedom to move, much as props do on a stage.

Yet we are performative, participative, and as we relate to other people our posture, our gestures, our tone of voice all change. We manifest with the other. The more we see this the clearer it is that however I am arising in any moment, is not the whole truth of me. I change with the ever-changing circumstances of life and so how I am at any moment cannot provide a final definition of who I am. Each moment is a display of the energy of our potential, of our basic openness beyond reification.

This potential is grounded in the unborn openness of the mind free of artifice. It is not fixed or impeded. It has no set form. It is nondual with the field of occurrence and can manifest in contact with whatever occurs. It is not a permanent display but rather a response to circumstances. It is this that facilitates our engaging with different people in different ways. Thus, if you visit friends who have small children you get down on the carpet and play all kinds

of games with them. Then when you talk to their grandmother your tone of voice is different as is your posture and your vocabulary.

We are situationally responsive as long as we can give ourselves freshly to the interaction. It's when we hold ourselves back in our sense of a separate I/me/myself position that our functional capacity is diminished. Moreover this restricted access to our open potential leads us to control other people because we are saying, *"If you want to be near me, you have to fit in with how I am."*

### **Ludovic**

*But is practice necessary to realize this emptiness, to realize this interaction between the ego and the stage?*

### **James**

We could call it practice, though in fact we are simply seeing clearly what is happening. We see without assuming. Most of the ideas we have about ourselves or the people we know are assumptions or ideas or templates that we have built up through mental activity over time. Thus, when we meet a friend we already have an image of that friend mediating how we experience them. We communicate with them through the lens of an image based on past experience. The possibility of direct fresh experience of our friend is muffled by what we know about them. Hence the main point of practice is to become aware that thinking 'about' someone or something is, in fact a cover-up of the actual.

Simply seeing what is occurring here and now is much more direct and connective. However this can be a rare occurrence as we are usually busy constructing our sense of the situation by bringing our knowledge, our personality, our ideas, our preferences into the picture. Thus you might be talking with someone in a cafe but actually you're talking through and to your idea of that person. You are confirming to yourself that you know who they are because you have the confidence arising from having limited the space for them to show you, *"Hey I'm different today! Something has happened in my life."* In this way the desire of the ego for stasis, for sameness, for predictability, operates as a kind of muffler or veil through which we have only indirect contact.

The heart of the initial practice is simply to come into our senses and stay with the freshness of what is received without editing, or adding or subtracting elements from the past. We stay with the freshness and in this way we release ourselves from the unnecessary work of maintaining our reifying knowledge of what we imagine to be the case.

### **Ludovic**

*It seems like a very difficult practice for a beginner, for example. And do you use other practices than the one that you described as maybe visualizations or mantras or breath work?*

### **James**

If we are clear about the view then any event in life can be incorporated as part of the path. For example, Cézanne spent much time painting Mont Sainte-Victoire in the South of France. He looked at it again and again. Each time he looked he saw something different. The hill is only the same and knowable in terms of its name and concepts 'about' it. When the hill is allowed to show itself each viewing is a fresh revelation of its unlimited potential. With this series of Cézanne's paintings there is the freshness of each revelation and yet to this we can apply the sameness of our recognition of 'the hill'. It is not an either/or: either the freshness of the moment or the interpretation via concepts. Openness can welcome concepts but concepts cannot welcome openness. Therefore direct seeing is central. When this is clear then the secondary skills and information are helpful. Before Cézanne was able to paint with fresh eyes he had to learn basic skills with brushes, oil paints, mixing and so on. He brought an expertise to his work, yes, but this was an ally secondary to the freshness of his eye.

This is also what is required for meditation. The basic expertise we need is to be able to maintain a calm focus. To do this we might focus on the sensation of the breath at our nostrils, bringing our attention to that subtle sensation and staying with it. Then, whenever we get distracted, we gather our attention and bring it gently back to the fleeting sensation until we have a stable attention. That is a basic tool, because if you're always running after whatever exciting stimulus arises you don't stay focused long enough to see that the whole field is changing.

If the mind is moving after an identified object, that object appears to be enduring. But when the mind becomes calmer by avoiding reactive engagement we see, *"Oh, everything is moving."* Our experience arises as the interplay of both subject and object. They are dynamic

and without individual defining essence. If we awaken to this then relaxing into the primordial openness of our awareness becomes much easier. You can also use visualisation and mantras, but only in service to the main task.

**Ludovic**

*I'm wondering if in your approach there's a final goal, like awakening or enlightenment or liberation. Is there a starting point and an end goal where one can say, "Oh, now I'm liberated" or "Oh, now I'm a Buddha." Is this a feature that one can find in your approach?*

**James**

The ground source of everything has no beginning or end. The term 'awakening' indicates awakening to this unchanging basis of all that we take ourselves to be and all that we experience. To awaken is to find that our life flows as the manifestation of the energy or potential of our presence, our awareness, our simple being-here-ness. Being-here-ness is not other than the ceaseless movement of experience. The stillness of awareness is like the theatre stage, and the movement of life is like all the different performances that arise on the stage.

These two are inseparable and awakening to their inseparability is the basis for wisdom and kindness. With wisdom we see the empty mind free of all inherent content. With kindness we see that sentient beings are trapped in the dreams of the six realms and so we spontaneously respond to them without confirming their reified sense of self. Dzogchen is part of Mahayana Buddhism, where our concern is always to bring together the wisdom of emptiness, the ungraspable openness of the mind, and the flow of kindness, connectivity and participation which allows us to be with people and do our best for them without getting caught up in the various neurotic patterns which arise.

**Ludovic**

*Is there a stage in the practice where the attachment of the ego, the fixation on the ego, is less strong ?*

**James**

Well, the idea that the ego is an enduring entity is a lie. The ego is a process, not a fixed state. It's a verb, it's not a noun. We are selfing. Moment by moment we are emerging from our

potential as a showing through our posture, gesture, tone of voice and so on. Our self is a site of participation. It cannot be found as a thing. Yet existence in the six realms of samsara arises from the delusion that the ego exists, that I exist, that I am me, that I am a stable person. This deception creates the ego-self which in turn generates a lot of problems for us because of course we, as this imagined entity, are impacted by events in the imagined world. We have hopes and fears, we feel expansive, we feel a bit frightened or ashamed. We are labile, we are moving with events, and yet the story we tell about ourselves is 'I know who I am' as if we could be accurately defined as something.

When we have a strong formulation of identity we need to look and see what this is constituted from, what are the building blocks of our identity. Then we see that the whole edifice is imaginary, resting on ungraspable moments of movement — this pattern, that pattern, this pattern, that pattern. There is nothing stable and fixed inside us. When we directly see this, our personal identity is let go of as a defining truth and we rest in unborn presence. We cease putting ourselves in the box of 'this is who I am'.

Abiding at ease in open awareness we directly see the dissolving of the signs and signifiers of the semiotic web that would nail down some pattern or formulation of who we are. With this we see that we manifest through nondual participation. These forms that arise have no underlying 'true self' — they are the kind energy of the unchanging ground. My actions are not an X-ray showing my enduring identity. Our presence or awareness has no individual features whereby it can be identified as this or that, good or bad.

Open empty awareness manifests unborn nondual participation as my connectivity, my being a part of the world, not separate from the world, but enworlded. When you come out of your mother's body, you come into the world yet your mother's body was already in the world. It is a new beginning for the baby, but it's actually a continuation of the energy of the world displaying itself. When seen clearly this 'world' is not other than a patterning of the dharmadhatu, the space of all phenomena.

The more we have a sense that 'I am' is referring to a process and not to an entity, and that therefore I am not a thing but am an open empty site of participation, the more the ego becomes thinned and can no longer function as our home base or starting point.



**Ludovic**

*Is it a way out of suffering?*

**James**

Yes. There is a famous formulation from the Buddha that there are two kinds of suffering: getting what you don't want, and not getting what you do want. I think we can easily recognize this in our lives. 'I do want' is desire for something. 'I don't want' is aversion to something. These two reactions arise from my belief that I exist as a definable entity. Here I am, this is me, this is what I like, this is what I don't like. I want more of what I like, and I want less of what I don't like.

Who is the one who is merged with these beliefs? The illusory ego-self. By resting in unborn open awareness all identification with ego formations is released from the grasp of the illusory ego. All that seemed to confirm my real existence has dissolved in the flow of potential. Experiences arise yet without a referent: whether seemingly pleasurable or unpleasurable, awareness remains uninvolved and unaffected. These illusory empty transient formations bring neither benefit nor harm. This is the way out of suffering. Moreover freedom from limiting identification as self, releases our potential to participate in life as required for the benefit of dream-like others.

**Ludovic**

*You talk about participation in life. I wonder if the place of ethics is essential in your teachings. Is it a practice that one has to do to participate in life? Or is the fact that one is ethical a consequence of the practice?*

**James**

The basis of ethics is to do no harm and, if possible, to do some good. The two main kinds of harm arise from being invaded and being abandoned. For example, children can be invaded sexually, or with violence, or with rules and regulations which are unhelpful. They can be abandoned if somebody never gives them a hug, or doesn't listen to them when they want to tell their stories about school, and so on.

The middle way, which is the heart of the Buddhadharma, lies between invasion and abandonment. So, to be ethical with others is to be free of the least intention to invade or

dominate others, and to be free of the tendency to abandon others. Moreover, I don't want you to invade me or abandon me. With this we meet at the contact boundary where we are both intact and yet enlivened by intimate contact.

This takes us away from a vertical hierarchy of dominating to dominated, controlling to controlled. We are co-emergent with our environment, fresh in each moment of perception. This is a participative inter-exchange, which is respectful of the other, whilst being available to the other.

**Ludovic**

*In your approach are there contra-indications which show that some people should not practise this meditation? In other words, can it be dangerous for some people?*

**James**

I think that if someone is prone to experiencing a lot of unbalanced moments, if they're very volatile and ungrounded, then this approach to practice should be avoided until they gain a basic stability. This is a practice about opening to space, to finding more space and not fixing a position. So if there is a pattern of instability arising from childhood experience or from experiences in previous lives, Dzogchen would not be the first direction to go in.

It would be important to first come into the body through the senses and to settle: here I am. An unstable person will need to separate from their pattern of energetic disturbance and by disidentifying from it, find their own integrity. At this point relaxing into unborn spaciousness will become liberating. If someone is chaotic, all over the place, they need to come into a simple duality: self and other, here I am. You begin there; I begin here. So with neither invasion nor abandonment, we maintain an ordinary connectivity which is grounding and fresh.

Once this is in place we can move from duality to a dialogic interaction and then onto something more dynamic until gradually we see that all pulsations of manifestation arise in the manner of a dream. But if you're very ungrounded, it's not going to work.

## **Ludovic**

*For the beginner who wants to start with Dzogchen, to have a practice and go far with this practice, what is the first step?*

## **James**

If you have a connection with a local Buddhist group where people are doing this kind of practice, then going along and seeing if it fits with you would be good. However, if you don't have a situation like that, the first thing is to be curious about yourself. One thing you could do is take a piece of paper and write down all your assumptions about yourself, which probably means things your parents told you, your schoolteachers told you, your lovers told you, and so on. Write all these down and then look at them and think, are they true? Each definition is like a little prison. What is the cost of fitting inside?

Perhaps this morning you were very happy and then you got upset because someone at work said something that seemed to sum you up, and you shrank. As you see the movement of these waves, these pulsations of experience, you might notice that you are more like water than solid earth. The definitions that people gave you have shaped how you seem to be. But are these defining shapes intrinsic or superimposed?

Waves are shapes of water which briefly manifest and then dissolve. If you can see that your mind is like this and that all your experiences are actually self-arising and self-dissolving then you can taste authentic freedom. Even if experiences arise with powerful emotions they will have no actual power to define you.

Allowing whatever occurs to come and go is central to this approach to practice. It is vital not to identify with the egoic claim to be an autonomous entity. I am not a thing. The sense of 'I' is like the crest of a wave — here, then dissolving, then a fresh appearance. Simple 'I' is presence not identity or entity. I am not a thing. I-ness is presence in co-emergence. This is not a belief. This is how we are revealed in our freshness when we let go of the cover-up of identity.

Being present in, with, and as, the ungraspable moment we start to see the intrinsic freedom of our situation. Although people try to put us in a box we don't fit in any box. This is true wisdom. Our fresh presence cannot be limited by the fetters of duality.

Moreover with the clarity arising from our inseparability with emptiness, we become more aware of all these horrors which are present in the world: hatred and violence on the basis of race or sexual orientation or religion or national history, or on an overdetermined notion that *"I know the truth about you and so I can define you."* Great loving kindness arises spontaneously when we see how people deal with each other as if they were fixed things. This is the basic violence of the human condition in which concepts about a person are taken to be the truth of their vital, living existence. This devious lie, this falsity, is also intensely applied to all the sentient beings we share this world with. So it is important that when we see how *"I have many aspects, many flavours but no one definition can catch me"*, that this is also true of all sentient beings.

### **Ludovic**

*And this beginner, how can he or she know if they're in front of the right teacher. If they want to have a special bond with a teacher, how can they be sure if the teacher is the one?*

### **James**

Well, we can try to experience what kind of education he or she is offering. The root of the word education is educere which means to lead out the potential of the student. Now, most education is not like that. It's more like being in a sausage factory with the students coming in like little skin bags. The teacher stuffs all kinds of stuff into them so that they can become good plump Buddhist sausages. There are a lot of Buddhist teachings and you can keep filling yourself up with them.

However, such an accumulation of information about dharma is not required for Dzogchen. We are looking to our teacher to help us empty out all our dualistic knowledge so that we can look at it and see its emptiness. When we see that all the objects of our world which we take to be existing out there are in fact the deluding experience of our own habit of objectifying experience, then we can gradually let go of reliance all these products of our own artifice. This is how we prepare to practise Dzogchen.

So you want to have a teacher who can see you and relate to you and help you to shed all this burden that you've been carrying. From our childhood and past lives we have tendencies which restrict us and diminish our freedom. This is like carrying a bag on your back, a rucksack full of stones. The function of the teacher is to help you take the stones out of the bag and

not put new ones in. I would think that if that is happening for you then you are receiving the benefit of your teacher's authenticity.

**Ludovic**

*Can you lead us on a little guided meditation?*

**James**

Well, I can introduce what we do and why we do it. Sit in a relaxed way and do not adopt an intentional posture. Feel into your body and adjust how you sit so that your skeleton is carrying your weight. The weight of your head is going down your spine and so your muscles can relax. You can shake your arms and move your shoulders. You're not holding yourself together. Your weight is hanging on your skeleton. Your belly is open and relaxed and your diaphragm is at ease, moving with the pulse of your natural breath.

The central approach in Dzogchen is relaxation and ease. It is not about striving. It is not about the hero's journey. It is not about breaking through. It's about relaxing, releasing and opening.

We sit with our eyes open resting in the space in front of us. We don't want to go inside into a private world, so we sit with our gaze open and relax in our intrinsic freedom from the endless task of constructing a self. We just sit. Nothing has changed. We're not trying to make anything artificial. Sensation of the body continues. What you see continues to be there. We simply stay with whatever occurs.

As we stay relaxed and open, we start to see how own thoughts and assumptions are constructing our habitual world. What we take to be the given-ness of our body and what is present in the room is actually the product of our interpretation. Our mind is moving because we are involved in what is going on. Perhaps we are making judgements about how we are breathing, or we look at the wall and think, "Oh I'd better repaint it. It's looking very old and tired." Or we remember that we have something to do.

Seeing this, it becomes obvious that our mind is moving. Our mind is always moving yet our mind can only move because of the spacious hospitality of the unborn true nature of our mind. All our memories, thoughts and plans are moving in this infinite space of the mind. So

relax into this space; rest at ease in this space, and allow the movement to move. Very, very simple.

If you get tied up in thoughts or in emotions relax into the outbreath and as you breathe out, release the tension that maintains your sense of self. Release your identification with all aspects of the fleeting occurrences of what you take to be the subject or the object. We are present in space as space. The more we sit with this, the more we see the dynamic movement of everything which seems to be a fixture of existence. All that arises and passes is the potential of our mind. While sitting, we have no need to get involved with any occurrence.

And then, abiding in this openness, our potential can manifest in many different ways with many different people, effortlessly inviting them with our presence to become present with their own presence. You act according to circumstances, collaborating with the potential of the moment. This co-emergence frees you from the binary tension of either controlling or being controlled.

At the end of the practice, we stay with the sense of space and see that all that occurs is inseparable from space. There are no fixed entities and our movement, and all movement, is movement moving in space. Although the ego-self wants to cling to and fix our experience, actually our freedom arises from being part of the ceaseless movement which is inherently empty of anything which would separate it from the space of open emptiness. Without the need for intentional practice we find that we, our ever-fresh awareness, are integral with ungraspable presence. Then our life is more light, more connected, and more at ease.