

Start where you'll finish

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Extracts:

“...Dzogchen begins exactly where we are and doesn't suggest that we should go somewhere else or do anything different. Rather we are invited to rest in a relaxed presence open to each moment just as it is. The source or ground or basis of this moment is the same as the basis of the next moment, and the next moment, and the next moment. Although the manifest content of what is happening changes moment-by-moment, when we rest in the ground, the immediate openness, which is our natural condition, we find that it never changes. Being at home in the openness of our being we start to see that all that occurs, whatever is happening, is the play of the energy of the ungraspable ground.”

“...in dzogchen recognising the nature of your mind is very important. If we don't recognise this nature, we're just forever busy, trying to correct, trying to improve and always feeling very vulnerable and at the mercy of events...”

Whose energy is this? It is our energy. But not ours in the way I can say, “This is my watch.” A watch is a possession. Our energy is not a possession, nor is the natural state, our own true nature. Although it's been there from the very beginning we have never possessed it. It is our ground, the ground of our existence. That is to say, we are manifestations of this ground, this open awareness, and our relation to it is like a child to its mother...”

Starting with ourselves

What is it about buddhism that draws our interest? What do people from the East have to offer to us? We have a place to sleep, food for the belly – so what else is it we need? Often, we feel that something is lacking or missing, and that something has to change in order for us to find fulfilment, to be complete. This sets up the idea of a path; that from where we are now there is somewhere else to go to.

In the buddhist tradition there are many different paths: paths of renunciation, paths of transformation, and paths of more direct realisation. And the notion of a path, of going from here to there, feeds or encourages a sense that there is something wrong with us. What is wrong with us? It is important to know, to have some kind of diagnosis. If you felt ill you wouldn't just go into the pharmacy and take handfuls of any kinds of medicine; when you know what is wrong with you, you take the right medicine.

In practising buddhism or dzogchen it is always very important to start with ourselves, to investigate what it means to be alive, to explore what the nature of our existence is. All of the buddhist teachings are medicines. They are all methods for doing something, but you don't need to adopt a method to do something if it's not what you need to do. Therefore it's very important to examine your own condition and examine the nature of the teaching in order to find the best possible link between them.

But how should we look at ourselves? We could look at ourselves in a very critical way. For example, we might make a mistake and then say, "Oh, I'm so stupid!" In that way we recreate a situation in which we don't trust ourselves: "I'm always getting into trouble, I always make the wrong decisions!" Although there is some insight in that, the clarity of recognising that 'something has gone wrong', is taken to the unhelpful conclusion that "Something is wrong with *me*, I am wrong." Through this, clarity can become a method of maintaining stupidity. That is to say we construct a solid sense of 'I' 'me' 'myself' with inherent qualities: "I am stupid." "I am lazy." The buddhist tradition would describe this habit as an aspect of the function of ignorance.

The function of ignorance

There are various aspects to ignorance. The first is the ongoing process of ignoring our own natural state, and whilst that is occurring, because ignorance is active and not just a passive 'not knowing anything', we become active in knowing and believing in things which are false. From the buddhist point of view, there is no inherent self-nature, no true self-substance in ourselves or any phenomena that we encounter. Every time we have a reifying view about who and what we are, this is a function of ignorance.

In the Buddha's early teachings he described this lack of inherent self-existence in terms of the five skandhas. These are described as the five basic components of our existence as human beings, and when these five aspects function together, it creates the illusory sense that we truly exist as something with an internal identity. For example, on the table in front of me we have a 'bunch of plastic'. We see it as a 'bunch of flowers'. However, there are no flowers here, only plastic parts. But because we have seen real flowers and we have this image in our mind, when we look at this plastic we think, "Oh, these are flowers." In this

way we attribute meaning out of a template, out of a map in our mind. All the time and in every situation, the many templates we have acquired create the sense that we know what is going on.

This is the ignorance of naming, which we could say is a kind of epistemological disease. That is to say, when we use words, we feel that we are talking about something real. For example, "This is a glass of water". We feel confident that our knowledge of language, and the meaning it carries, gives us a true account of what is there. This is a glass of water, we can all agree on that, and there is nothing to discuss about it. We sit in a room - that is a fact. I am a person - that is also a fact. We don't need to doubt that this is a glass of water. We don't need to doubt I am a person. In this way knowledge makes us stupid because knowledge, in this sense, becomes the limit which stops inquiry. We take it for granted that what we see, what we can describe, is truly existing in itself. And within this acceptance of the reality of true, substantial objects, we act in order to increase our benefit, our welfare, and to diminish danger and loss. We want to be happy, and it seems obvious that getting lots of bad things doesn't make us happy, while getting lots of good things does make us happy. Thus, we tend to spend each day trying to get more good things and fewer bad things.

However, 'good things' only appear to be so due to the causes and conditions which maintain them. Once those causes and conditions change, something that seemed to be a good thing can easily become a bad thing. For example, in Romania a few years ago it was very common for people to obtain a mortgage using Swiss francs. When the economy in Romania was developing and people were making money, it was a felicitous move, because at that time the Swiss franc was quite low. However, with the recent economic crisis, the Swiss franc has risen in value, and the people in Romania who bought their houses using this method are now crying, not laughing. What looked like a very good decision, what looked like something that would guarantee happiness for the future, became, due to factors outwith the decision, a cause for unhappiness and sorrow.

This leads onto what is described as the third level of ignorance, the ignorance of not understanding karma. Karma is the way in which activity generates not just an immediate consequence but an energetic resonance which manifests later on in time. In his very first teachings, Buddha Shakyamuni explained the nature of cause and effect. He said that if you want to know about your past lives and past actions look at your body now, and if you want to know about your situation in future lives look at your present activity. We don't usually consider ourselves in this way. If someone is very beautiful they may feel, "Oh, I'm very beautiful." And if they go to school and do very well in their exams they may think, "Oh, I'm very intelligent. This is who I am. This is how I am." However, from a buddhist point of view, whatever arises is due to causes and conditions. Whatever seems fixed, sure and reliable, simply manifests a particular shape for a while. When its causes and conditions change, the form we took to be self-existing in and of itself dissolves, changes - it does not last. A beautiful person might travel in a car which then crashes. Their face goes through the windscreen and after the accident they don't look so beautiful. These are simple if unpalatable facts for nothing constructed lasts forever.

Waking up from illusion

Although the buddha explained that we are living in a dream, we think we are awake. We think we are responsible adults making important decisions about our life. We think we know how things function. But actually, we don't understand much at all. Moreover, all our

activity is creating causes for future experiences. So we need to be careful about what we do, as we cannot escape the consequence of our actions. As long as we believe that this outer level of manifestation, all that we see, that we feel, that we hear and so on, is all there is, we will ceaselessly try to push away the bad things and pull in the good things. This leads us to a lot of activity every day. Without ourselves finding any space, time, or opportunity to reflect on what is actually occurring, everyone we meet reaffirms 'us', reinforces our beliefs about what we believe is true. When we walk down the street there are adverts saying, "Come to this bar", "Buy this car", and so on. There is no big poster that says, "Life is an illusion so who are you?" The advertiser says: "I know who you are, and I know what you want to buy - come to my shop!"

All the different aspects of buddhism are concerned with awakening from illusion. For example, the outer paths have the view which says that due to this world being so unstable, so sticky, like a swamp, you must renounce it, get as far away as possible. This means being very careful and cautious about what you do, and also being a bit suspicious about yourself, not trusting your impulses so much, not rushing but rather looking precisely at what is there. The intention to be careful is supported by many rules and regulations. For, from one point of view, although we are grown up we can actually behave quite like children. That is to say, when you are around small children, you often have to say, "Oh, stop, be careful, don't do that, it's dangerous!" But now that we are grown up we can say, "Leave me alone, I will do as I want!" Since we then tend to make many mistakes it is perhaps safer to abide by the dharma rules. For the concept of karma indicates that causes occurring now, causes which don't seem like causes, will have effects long after we are dead.

Rebirth is an important part of the buddhist view, because having many lives means that we are not just this body, this existence. Rather our nature is infinite. It manifests in this finite form with our body which will die, but the nature of our mind, the root of our existence does not die. It is because mind's nature does not die that karma operates. If, when we died, the whole thing switched off, we wouldn't need to worry about karma. The mind's nature is without any limitation, and because of that it is not determined, not conditioned by any of the factors of our daily existence. But the mind's energy, what we experience as our manifest existence, is ceaselessly being conditioned by events which are also the mind's energy.

This is why we have many different kinds of meditation practice. Meditation is not just a method for reducing stress and becoming calm and relaxed. It is also a way of recognising aspects of ourselves which are not limited by the attachments and identifications that we have to the phenomena of the world, including our sense of ourselves.

For example, I can say, "I am from Scotland. I have a British passport, and this passport guarantees my identity." When I come into the airport I show my passport and people look at the picture, check it on the computer, and they say, "Oh yes, this is the same person who is described in this passport." In this way, our life is based on identifications with our parents, our family name, our occupation, our gender, our age, and so on. Each of these identifications seem to describe exactly who we are, and if we remain inside this illusion, this dream, this theatre created out of these points of reference, then we have the on-going anxiety of that identity being questioned and even undermined by the ceaseless flow of events. Each event that arises impacts us and determines our experience in that moment. For example, we may meet a friend, and they tell us some good news about what is happening in their lives, and so we feel happy and smile, feeling warm towards them. We then meet someone else who tells us something upsetting. Perhaps their parents have just died, and they look very sad. Then we also feel and look sad. That is to say, our life is

always in movement, acting and reacting, being changed by events. But who is the one who is experiencing this flow of experience?

Developing concentration as a basis for clarity

Something is always going on, we know that. We are here but who are we? Usually we are the one who is telling the story of what is going on. We are the storyteller and we are also the audience. We are good storytellers. We are the children of Scheherazade, we fascinate each other, and we fascinate ourselves by telling stories. "This is me, I did this, I did that." However, it is impossible to talk or think your way out of samsara. No matter how intelligent you are, no matter how fine and sharp your thoughts are, these qualities cannot cut you free from this endless sequence of signifiers.

In response to the incredible variety of our experiences the Buddha taught a wide range of meditation practices. A key method he taught is the calming meditation called shine in Tibetan. This practice enables us to gradually build up a capacity for focused attention so that we are not so disturbed by the ceaseless flow of thoughts, feelings and sensations. In this practice we focus our attention either on the breath or on some external object. Many different thoughts and sensations will arise but we don't chase after them, we simply stay focused on our intended object.

There was a very interesting piece of psychological research involving small children aged about four. Individually, they were shown a sweet, the kind that children like, and were told, "You can eat it now, but if you wait you will get two of them." Around five hundred children were involved in the research, and they continued to tracked their development throughout the years. They found that at the age of fifteen, the children who did not take the initial sweet did very well at school, were well behaved and had a lot of friends, and the children who ate the sweet immediately had a lot of trouble and did not do so well. These findings illustrate the importance for the capacity of delayed gratification.

Generally speaking, meditation also requires a capacity for delayed gratification since it is not in itself immediately gratifying. Unless we can wait and see what is there, not getting pulled into taking what we'd like now, and pushing away what we fear, we are just like a puppet whose strings are held by every event in our world. When we practice meditation we start to move away from the reactivity of immediate gratification for we now have an intention to develop, to move from our current stuckness to something better. However, as soon as we set off on the journey to fulfil our intention, obstacles arise. It is very easy to think that we are rational, reflective people until we practice meditation. For as soon as we start to meditate we realise that there are many thoughts and feelings moving in our mind which we don't determine or control. We start to see that we are not autonomous agents creating our own life. We don't make our own thoughts, we don't make our feelings - they simply arise as something that we experience and may identify with. Recognising this fact as we start to practice can make us feel worse. For the first time we can really see the chaotic nature of our experience. Developing concentration as a basis for clarity gives us the stability to see the chaos without being carried away by it. Then we see that what occurs is not what we thought it was, and that we also are not who we think we are.

We don't need to go anywhere else

Dzogchen begins exactly where we are and doesn't suggest that we should go somewhere else or do anything different. Rather we are invited to rest in a relaxed presence open to each moment just as it is. The source or ground or basis of this moment is the same as the basis of the next moment, and the next moment, and the next moment. Although the manifest content of what is happening changes moment-by-moment, when we rest in the ground, the immediate openness, which is our natural condition, we find that it never changes. Being at home in the openness of our being we start to see that all that occurs, whatever is happening, is the play of the energy of the ungraspable ground.

Whose energy is this? It is our energy. But not ours in the way I can say, "This is my watch." A watch is a possession. Our energy is not a possession, nor is the natural state, our own true nature. Although it's been there from the very beginning we have never possessed it. It is our ground, the ground of our existence. That is to say, we are manifestations of this ground, this open awareness, and our relation to it is like a child to its mother. The child has a mother and the mother has a child, but there is a very different kind of relation between them. The mother was there before the child appeared; the child wasn't there before mother. The child came out of the mother's body, and the mother remembers everything about the baby. She might remember the moment of conception, the early stages of pregnancy, the growing of the foetus, then the whole birth experience, being awake at night, feeding and so on. All these things the child knows only as stories that it's heard. Similarly, our manifest form is the child of the open state, the mother. Yet, we have forgotten that mother, our own natural ground.

Dzogchen means 'the great completion' which indicates that everything is already perfect just as it is – for it is what it is and no other. This simple fact is hidden by the ceaseless movement of our hopes and fears. Dzogchen can be symbolised by a round ball. The ball has no corners, it has no edges, and however you turn it it's always the same. Similarly, when we look at the nature of our own mind, we don't find any particular thing. There is just a spacious availability. Yet paradoxically because we get nothing, we get everything. As long as we want something, and in particular something special, something that fits our sense of who we are, we won't get 'nothing', we will get 'something'. And this 'something' is a big obstacle, because in gaining it we limit ourselves and attach our identity to finite and ephemeral events. The ground nature is not something you get; it will never be caught. Everything in this world can be caught: countries are caught by other countries, diseases are caught, and so on. But our own nature is not a possession, it is not an entity. It is not like anything else.

Texts on dzogchen often say: *if you go to heaven, go to heaven. If you go to hell, go to hell.* "Why would I want to go to hell? I want to go to heaven, it's much nicer. I know me, I know what I want. Heaven and hell, they're not the same, they're very different." Different for who? "For me, I'm not stupid! Good things are good, and bad things are bad! I've been to school and I know the difference between shit and chocolate!" This is the view that we are familiar with, it makes sense to us. Yet our capacity to keep the 'bad' away and to always acquire the 'good' is very limited. In grounding our identity in the ever-changing flow of experience we make ourselves hostages to fortune. Dzogchen points to the true ground of our being, the vajra or indestructible, ungraspable open presence.

Our mind itself is vajra –
Indestructible.
The basis of our existence,
The radiant open clarity,
Unborn and unceasing,
Is not created out of good deeds,
Nor is it destroyed by bad deeds.

From the very beginning it has been there,
It is always here, closer to us than our breath.
This open state, the centre of our heart, offers hospitality to everything.

What we take to be our experience is actually a conceptual event occurring after the fact of the actual moment of experience. We react to our sense of what has occurred, and that sense is an interpretation, a representation of a moment that has already passed. If we like it we hang on to it, and if we don't like it we try to get rid of it. This gives us the sense of being in control, of managing our lives. But actually it traps us in a mental world, a realm of reflections. We are running after events trying to tidy them up. But the event itself is gone, so we are merely tidying echoes and shadows. So if we don't see our own nature directly, we will be forever busy trying to correct and improve what is occurring. This keeps us feeling vulnerable and at the mercy of events.

Questions from participants

Participant: When I was small, I never wanted to wait for the second candy. I always ate the one I had. I didn't want to miss out on what was there.

James Low: Well, the advantage of dzogchen is that it shows us how to have everything without waiting - but safely. We don't have to grab for everything that occurs in our experience. Everything that arises is given to us in this moment of experience. It is useful to distinguish between impulse and spontaneity. Habits are established in all of us. When something triggers that habit so that it manifests again, this is called an impulse. The impulse expresses a habit created in the past - it is intense yet stale and repetitive. However, with spontaneity, our way of manifesting is co-emergent with the whole environment. It is similar to dancing: the music is playing, and your body is moving with the rhythms of the music. You are not acting on the world but are part of what is occurring, feeling fresh in the moment and completely with whatever is here.

In dzogchen there is a lot of emphasis on spontaneity. What makes this open connectivity safe is that the ground of spontaneity is the natural open dimension of being, the nature of the mind, the ground nature. Whereas, an impulse is coming from the habit formations which cluster around the ego's sense of being separate and wanting to get something from the world.

Participant: Can we, in a deep state of meditation, see with our mind's eyes the basic nature, the root state, can we see it?

James: No, you don't see it as an object because it's never an object, you become it.

Participant: But what can see it? Mind, eyes?

James: The nature sees itself. Only by becoming the nature do you see what it is.

Participant: But does it happen in mind or in the eyes? **James:** It is necessary to do the practice to see how we actually are. For as long as you look from the limited place of the ego you won't see it. You have to relax into unlimited space and then it's obvious.

Participant: Can it happen just like that, without any preparation?

James: Yes.

Participant: Why?

James: The natural state is always there. In the tradition, Milarepa and many others have taught that in the moment of orgasm, in the moment of sneezing, in the moment of shock, in the moment of death, in the moment of falling asleep, and with other such interruptions of conceptual elaboration, the nature of the mind is more accessible.

Participant: Can it happen in a moment of relaxation?

James: Yes, if you can truly relax you will find yourself in the open state. However, mostly, we can't relax. When the busy stuff stops and there is nothing happening, our nature is clearly present, but because we tend to be looking for something, we jump out of the open nothing in order to find something in particular. And so samsara runs on. This is because the point from which we engage in experience is habitually "I, me and myself", with its constant preoccupations - "What is happening to me?" "What can I get, what can I avoid?" Then when our own nature, the state which is beyond grasping, beyond appropriation, is nakedly present, although we have always been part of it, it is as if we stand outside it, merged in concepts and so do not awaken to it.

We have all been used to grasping at things for a very long time. This is our familiar way of engaging with the world. This is how the world seems to us. When we are engaged in the world in this way, it is not possible for the natural state to be experienced, although it has never been hidden. We don't get enlightened in samsara; it is samsara in samsara. We awaken in the state which is always already awake. This will become clearer as you start to practice.