
Being Buddha, Becoming Better

Buddhism and Psychotherapy

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Talk given at the Cambridge Buddhist Society, UK

11 March 2010

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Excerpts:

At the end of the therapy the patient, having been freed from the transference, can now see that the therapist is an ordinary person. That dream is over. However, that doesn't stop the dreaming, does it? Dreams go on. You end the dream of analysis and you might pick up the dream of 'buddhism'. Dream follows dream, each one appearing to be real and true.

In the practice of tantra, the view is that from the very beginning nothing has truly existed. Images are arising moment by moment. These images are translucent, playful, and essentially delightful, but if you grasp them in the wrong way they turn into sharp, hot objects that will burn and cut you. It's about how you take the world; it's about having a lightness of touch.

In buddhist language this is described as dependent co-arising co-origination, a co-emergence. Thus 'how I am' is called forth into being by how you are. Who I am is not defined by something inside me, but is the shimmering surface, the interface between subject and object; it is emerging in interaction, and the ground of both subject and object is ungraspable – beyond thought, word and expression. Thus we attend to the immediacy of how we and our world appear rather than enquiring into 'who we are' in search of an imagined essence.

All the various tantric practice serve to free the knotting which exists in this physical body and which constrains the energy which moves through the channels of the body. This frees us up to have more plasticity and capacity to move with the endless eddying sways of the world. In this understanding, wisdom is to be relaxed in open presence, in effortless non-duality with the ungraspable ground of being, while compassion is to become whatever is required in the situation. If we know who we are, in knowing that we are nothing, we have the potential to be everything.

We can be like seaweed, sliding over other people, close enough to touch yet not scratching, forcing or demanding. By being moved myself, I am part of the co-emergent movement with you. By not centring the core of my being in the movement, I don't mind being affected by you. By awakening to the fundamental ungroundedness of existence – the groundless ground – free movement can occur.

When we start to see that everything is passing, the evanescent moment can only be enjoyed; it cannot be grasped. There is no doggy bag for experience; we don't take anything away. Your karma might go with you – being the pattern of your condition – but if you release the point of appropriation, everything goes free. The main function of meditation in dzogchen is simply to release, release, and release. Its central point is relaxation and not striving.

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The meaning of the Tibetan word for Buddha, Sangs-rGye

This evening I am going to talk about some of the structural aspects of Tibetan buddhism and link them to the practice of psychotherapy.

I will start with the Tibetan word for *Buddha*, which is '*Sang-rGye*'. '*Sangs*' means to clean or to purify, and '*rGye*' or '*rGye-pa*' means to expand, to move out, to be in touch with what is there. Generally speaking, this word unites key aspects of wisdom and compassion. Wisdom is the recognition of the possibility of a purity, a freedom, a relaxation. The expansion refers to the movement of compassion, how to be in the world with others in a way which is connective and without over-determined self-referential agendas.

The Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism describes nine different levels of practice. They can be grouped into three approaches to the practice and experience of awakening. The first way we will look at expresses an attitude of renunciation and is referred to as the hinayana. Some people see this as a pejorative term since this term means 'a lesser vehicle'. We will then briefly look at the mahayana, or greater vehicle, with its adjunct paths of tantra, and finally approach the third way, dzogchen, the great completion or natural perfection.

Our time together permits only a quick movement across these approaches but I hope to indicate how, for each approach, the **view** – the way of understanding existence – is linked with specific kinds of **meditation** practice. This in turn generates a way of manifesting one's being in the world with others, referred to as the **activity**, and this leads into the fruition of a particular kind of **result**. Each level of practice has these four elements in it.

The view is very important, because how we view the world leads to a particular revelation. As we all know, we engage in an editing of experience, and have our own biases, conditionings, and dispositions. These are the usually invisible sets of assumptions we operate from and through which we affirm our attachment to the particular patterns that

have been with us for a long time. We each grow up in a family with its particular set of dynamics, and we develop the structures and beliefs of that family. That is to say, our neurosis is both determined by and a determinant of our experience. Beliefs, patterns and neuroses are the lenses through which we view the world. Buddhism, like psychotherapy, offers more conscious and intentional views or approaches which can be adopted and utilised, not as an ultimate truth, but as a way to help us see the patterns of knottedness that we get into.

When people come for psychotherapy for the first time, they often think that the past is long gone. They think *'I'm an adult now. This is just who I am. I don't know why I am like this and I don't even like being like this, but anyway, this is me.'* They hand the problem over to the therapist to solve. However, through interaction with the therapist there is a gradual unfolding of the historical origins of the problem. They might come to see that due to causes and conditions, due to experiences in their childhood, certain patterns and ways of being in the world have been over-privileged causing many aspects of the phenomenological field to be ignored. This diminished potential is what has come to be true for them; this is what they inhabit.

Grounded in artifice, these patterns are constructions; if they were truly innate or truly determined we wouldn't be able to move from them. Psychotherapy and buddhism are both ways of explaining the relation between freewill and determinism. The different schools of psychotherapy take different positions on how much freedom is possible. In particular there is the question of whether the conscious ego can ever make decisions based on all that is going on since the notion of the unconscious means that we see but through a glass darkly, a glass which will never be clear. The buddhist views we will now look at have certain resonances with that understanding.

The hinayana view

The hinayana, or restricted method, expresses the view that this world is a very dangerous place. There are many temptations and snares that can trap us, through our attachment and longing for meaning and value, into identification with temporary situations. We tend to take these identifications to be truly enduring and endlessly meaningful. Probably most of us have had that experience in our lives. When we were at school everything seemed very important; we worried about exams or whether we were going to get into the football team. We leave school and maybe go to university or into work and then we get different kinds of concerns. Perhaps we then apply to go on a psychotherapy training and we get other kinds of concerns! Finally we are trained as a therapist and there are yet more concerns.

From this point of view, this world that we live in – samsara – is a revolving world where one experience leads to another, and one lifetime leads to another. Moreover we can't get away with anything, for there are both the immediate effects of our activity, the impact on ourselves, others and the environment, and also the longer term consequences called karma where we often have no idea why something is happening.

In the currently prevalent materialistic view that we have just one life, if the police or the tax inspectors do not catch you out, you have somehow got away with it. However, from the point of view of karma you can never escape because you are part of the unfolding matrix of

experience; you can't leap out of it into anywhere else. This is all there is and we are woven into it, so every time you move, the invisible threads coming out of you are pulling on the patterns of the wider field. At a set point these threads will spring back as if they are made from elastic. You may think you have got away with something but later you suddenly find bad things are unexpectedly arriving for you.

Taking this to be the case, we might think, *'Well, what's going on here? This is not very nice. I want to have some freedom.'* The path to freedom prescribed by this approach is renunciation. If we can let go of our attachment and extract our attention from the tumult of ordinary identification we can become calm and clear. This involves being mindful, being carefully attentive to what is going on with the minimum of conceptual elaboration. This requires us to be in the situation without distraction, yet subtly apart from it at the same time.

However if we surrender into the movements of desire, anger, jealousy or pride, the fusional quality, the seductive mixing together of subject and object will catch us. Like a wave it will wash us up on a beach, an intense little world, and then another wave will land us on another beach. Each situation seems so real – and then it is gone, leaving us disorganized and seeking some new point of reference.

Renunciation is based on seeing the sticky nature of the world around us. If we can then step back from it, if we can avoid an intoxicating immersion with these phenomena, we will gain perspective and clarity. The price of renunciation is to have an artificial life. You renounce many of the things which make for ordinary, social conviviality. If you become a monk or a nun you renounce the sexual aspects of your existence; you renounce intoxicants; you renounce particular choices around food; you renounce money; you renounce power...

The idea is that if we can step back and make a kind of hermetically sealed environment, then, by this finely attuned and finely conscious activity, we won't bump into each other too much. We will then feel that we are moving calmly and serenely, in the way that monks are often described as moving.

Of course, the monks are being fed by other people who are out in the world hustling and dealing in order to survive. You can't fully separate yourself from the world unless you are going to live on wild berries in the forest, and even then you are still dependent on other people leaving you alone. Renunciation is often described as a turning about inside the centre of one's being, whereby that which formerly was seen as beautiful is now seen as ugly, and that which formerly was seen as intriguing and of positive value is now seen as dangerous.

The meditation practice that goes with that is primarily a simple calming of the mind – shamatha practice – in which by adopting a simple focus you learn to not attend to the ever-changing mélange of the contents of the mind. Typically, the object that is chosen in the meditation practice is one of optimal boredom potential: you choose the breath going in and out – not enormously interesting – or you choose looking at a stone, or a painted disc. You achieve success when you finally convince yourself that observing your breath is more interesting than engaging with your thoughts.

Renunciation can bring a simplification to life. It requires a definitive reading of situations resting on principles which are known before the situation arises. One is applying the techniques. In that way it is rather like cognitive behavioural therapy. CBT sets up models of

adjustment to, or alignment with, particular programmes of activity which, if they are followed, provide a kind of protection against the complexity of existence. The model explains how anxiety, depression, psychosis and so on work, and shows what must be done in order to manage, and potentially avoid, the arising of these conditions. This can be very helpful and can support the development of an increased capacity for careful attention or mindfulness. Yet as a formal, conscious practice it involves a distancing from, and technical management of, complex life situations. The increase in mindfulness generates a new kind of alienation which may be hidden by the enthusiasm for a new method that seems to work.

Living in the world with other requires finding a balance between fusion in habitual patterns and the application of a management strategy. However since we usually begin our search for awakening with a sense of the constraints and pain of our habits, applying formal techniques of separation and renunciation can help to illuminate what we are caught up in.

One of the discoveries that we find when we calm our mind in this hinayana way is that many of the things that seemed to be innately and inherently important are actually not so important. We start to see that the shining quality of the object is a projection. When we take back the affective projections, and then the cognitive projections, what is there reveals itself as something of a potential; something that is devoid of finite defining inherent self-nature. We see that the values that we attribute to the object exist there by imputation, and that imputation has become so habitual that the projection seems to be actually residing in the object.

Let's take the example of a watch, because we all know what a watch is. As soon as we look at this object I am holding up we see a 'watch'. The watch-ness of the watch seems to be inherent. But, of course, we see the watch as a watch because that is something that we have learned to do. We have become so accustomed to the identification of this object as a watch that we don't question the seeming truth of this cultural construct. This watch could also be worn as a hair ornament, and if you lived in a culture where you didn't know how to tell the time and clock-time wasn't very important, that might be a very nice thing to do. Why not?

What we might gain from that approach is a sense that the frames of reference that we have are both learnt from the culture, taken in from the outside, and then projected back out in a validation of what appears to be a given fact of life. We take our experience of being intelligent people who know what is what, to be linked to the fact that things in the world have inherent meaning, which we have ascertained.

Once you start to see that the meaning is not inherent in the object, you also have to question whether *you* are really such a smart cookie after all. We have a lot of learning and experience inside us, but to what point? It's empty – empty of inherent self-nature. Here am I, James, communicating in English, and you understand that because you understand English. If you didn't understand English what I say wouldn't be meaningful to you. That is to say, inside these little worlds that we inhabit everything seems meaningful but when we step outside that, it is as if it has no meaning at all. The little bubbles of meaning we inhabit are revealed to be relative and contingent when we travel to other cultures.

The interdependence of the 'subjective' and the 'objective' factors of experience are illuminated by the concept of dependent co-origination whereby each seeming entity is revealed as the result of prior causes and the cause of future results. This reveals the

absence of any intrinsic essence in any phenomena of any kind, for they each are momentary manifestations devoid of inherent self-nature.

The mahayana view

The mahayana view of emptiness develops that view of interdependence by pointing to the inseparability of and non-contradiction between manifestation and emptiness. All the experiences of the senses, all thoughts, feelings and sensations, everything that can possibly occur is without any self-validating essence. Identity has no more substance than a dream, and therefore has to be reaffirmed moment by moment. Like the reflection of the moon on water there seems to be something there, and experientially it *is* there, yet this is a mere appearance for when you examine it you don't find anything solid.

This opens up the understanding that actually our world is an act of creativity; that all of us are present together in a field of dream-like creations. The capacity to dream, to create, to invent, to imagine, can be captured by different kinds of forces. It can be captured by desire, by anger, by reification, and by objectification. Or it can be captured by a sense of lightness, of movement, of impermanence, transience, interplay – something which aesthetically carries a lightness of touch, and the potential for moving and being moved.

If we experience our core as a person as not something solid and substantial, then when somebody interacts with us and moves us, we won't mind being moved. If there is no solid territory to hold on to being here or being there doesn't really make much difference for it is only the form that changes, there being no true essence to be attached to or undermined. However if I believe that I am really defined by the various aspects of my existence then the impact of others on me is likely to be evaluated in terms of gain and loss, winning and losing.

In the world of psychoanalytic psychotherapy, people talk about transference and counter-transference in which one person's way of being, on all its levels, impacts another, causing them to shift their thinking, feeling and behaviour, often without consciously recognising that this is happening. Taking others to be something *they* are not and having others take us to be something *we* are not, is a major cause of confusion and unhappiness. Psychoanalytic psychotherapy can help with this and at the end of the work the patient, having been freed from the transference, can now see that the therapist is an ordinary person. That dream is over. However, that doesn't stop the dreaming, does it? Dreams go on. You end the dream of analysis and you might pick up the dream of 'buddhism'. Dream follows dream, each one appearing to be real and true.

The tantra view

In the practice of tantra, the view is that from the very beginning nothing has truly existed. Images are arising moment by moment. These images are translucent, playful, and essentially delightful, but if you grasp them in the wrong way they turn into sharp, hot objects that will burn and cut you. It's about how you take the world; it's about having a lightness of touch.

A great deal of tantric practice involves visualising oneself as a variety of deities and, through entering these alternative identities, recognising that the ground emptiness, or

open potential of our being can arise in many different forms. As you imagine yourself fully becoming a goddess like Tara, or a fierce deity like Heruka, or a peaceful deity like Chenresig, you start to recognise *'Oh, I can become many different forms, and each of the forms that I become is what I truly am in that moment, but not a moment longer'*. Full inhabitation of each moment is vital and connective, and yet it doesn't create anything at all. This is the central point.

In the course of our lives we have all been many different people. Somehow we string these moments and memories of our lives together like beads on a rosary or a necklace. What is that thread joining them all together? In Sanskrit it is called *santana*, and in Tibetan *rang gyud* [Tib. Rang rGyud]. It refers to the continuity of life that runs through the sense of self. This sense of continuity is maintained primarily by our self-referential function, our habit of self-reflexivity, linking whatever is arising to our own situation in terms of me/not me, like/not like. This is reinforced by our self-narrative, our memories and the people and objects that affirm our sense of going on being our specific, individual selves.

Rang gyud – my continuity – is linked with the word for tantra, *gyud pa* [Tib. rGyud-pa], which also means continuity. However it is a different kind of continuity. In this view the continuity of my being is my inseparability from its ground nature, which is a radiant openness that manifests in many different ways. All the ways that I have ever been, and all the ways that I can be in my dreams, in my waking day, in my various different moods, are all expressions of an ungraspable openness. The infinity of my becoming is inseparable from the indeterminacy of my being.

So what should I be? Well, what do you want to be? If I am for my self, my being will become condensed and concretised around a point: the point of 'I am'. 'I am' this, 'I am' that, for I move from one moment to another always being something. 'I am hungry.' 'I am thirsty.' 'I am tired.' 'I am a man.' 'I am a student.' 'I am a teacher.' We are always identifying with one thing or another.

If we really look at the basis of 'how is it that I am' – the phenomenological actuality of our coming into being in the world moment by moment – I think we can all see this is contingent, circumstantial.

In buddhist language this is described as dependent co-arising co-origination, a co-emergence. Thus 'how I am' is called forth into being by how *you* are. Who I am is not defined by something inside me, but is the shimmering surface, the interface between subject and object; it is emerging in interaction, and the ground of both subject and object is ungraspable – beyond thought, word and expression. Thus we attend to the immediacy of how we and our world appear rather than enquiring into 'who we are' in search of an imagined essence. The search for a stable personal essence is the force that ties us in knots.

All the various tantric practice serve to free the knotting which exists in this physical body and which constrains the energy which moves through the channels of the body. This frees us up to have more plasticity and capacity to move with the endless eddying sways of the world. In this understanding, wisdom is to be relaxed in open presence, in effortless non-duality with the ungraspable ground of being, while compassion is to become whatever is required in the situation. If we know who we are, in knowing that we are nothing, we have the potential to be everything.

In buddhism, the Greek notion of 'know thyself,' would be 'know thyself to be nothing and through that to be everything' because the self is simply a kind of narrative point; it's the place of the ongoing commentary on the immediacy of interaction which arises through the interplay of subject and object.

For example, in Tibetan thangkas and paintings you often see a god and goddess in sexual union indicating the inseparability of subject and object. That is to say, you cannot separate yourself from the world: you are always enworlded. Our being is always already connected to the matrix. We are not apart; there is no threshold between me and the world.

That's an amazing fact for it puts into question all the worries and anxieties that we have about how other people will see us. Because we are all in it together, no one is outside the mix; no one is the judge who speaks the truth. Rather all we can offer is our contingent opinion, mere gestures in the flow of becoming. You are part of my world and I am part of your world, and what we take to be our own worlds are mere bubbles floating in the interactive matrix. The bubble is a mere habitual convention; it cannot establish separate realms, since what is within and without the bubble has the same nature.

Sometimes our lives go well and sometimes they don't go so well. Because there is no inherent self nature in any of these phenomena, does it truly matter? If you add up a mountain of dreams, what do you get? It is just illusion. However, when you believe in the illusion, you say *'When people like me, I feel good, and my self esteem increases, and when people don't like me I feel bad and my self-esteem goes down.'* This can feel very real and important especially when our seemingly fixed sense of self feels to be all that we are or could be. The value of the portfolio of my self can rise and fall for it is always at the mercy of market forces.

Meditation is practice which opens a realm free of the instability of fixing one's identity to the fluctuations of interactive becoming.

The dzogchen view

The third level is dzogchen. Dzogchen is a particular Tibetan view that is grounded in non-duality. The term 'non-duality' indicates what I have been describing: the impossibility of creating any boundaries between self and other, good and bad, right and wrong, male and female.

The ground of being, in being empty, in being an infinite hospitality, is always opening itself to the emergence of itself, which is both self-similar in the non-separation from the ground, and a radiant display, as the moment by moment precise unique manifestation which is always occurring.

The traditional example used to illustrate this is the mirror. When you look in a mirror, you don't see the mirror, you see yourself. The mirror-ness of the mirror is revealed through the reflection because the mirror itself is always elusive; the mirror shows itself through showing the non-mirror. The reflection is not the mirror, but the capacity of the mirror which is its real quality, is shown through the nature of the reflection of the other which it displays

It is the very emptiness of the mirror that allows it to show a whole series of images. If I had a big mirror and I slowly turned it around in this hall, at a certain point each of you could see

your face coming into it and then passing out of it. Now, if I held it up to face the left side of the room, all these good people on that side would fill the mirror, but by the time I turned it round to face the right side, they would have gone!

Thoughts arise and pass; the less attachment you have to them, the less identification with them, the more you see that mental events leave no trace. Conditioning, which is the basis of suffering, arises due to attachment; that is to say, there is investment, involvement, and the gradual accretion of a fixed sense of self and of the world. Attachment obscures both the experiencer and what is experienced.

For example, attachment to a favourite place obscures the immediacy of the moment of encountering the place because we have covered it with our 'looking forward to it' before we arrive. We cover it with our memories and associations when we are there and this moment provides fuel for further covering in the future. Moreover our own sense of ourselves is obscured in the process, for we become immersed in our attitudes, beliefs and feelings and take them to be definitive of our identity and this obscures the simple, open clarity of the experiencer. The subtle content of our mental experience becomes misidentified with the actual experiencer, and engaged subjectivity thus becomes the grasped-at, yet ungraspable site of identity.

It's a bit like a moussaka or a lasagna with the ingredients piled up layer on layer. These are somewhat heavy things to eat, and imagine if you had to eat yet another big bowl of greasy, heavy moussaka for breakfast, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner, and a midnight snack! That is what the construction of the self is like. No wonder we can feel overwhelmed by the gradual accumulation of aspects of ourselves: memories, hopes, doubts, regrets... on and on.

When we start to see that everything is passing, the evanescent moment can only be enjoyed; it cannot be grasped. There is no doggy bag for experience; we don't take anything away. Your karma might go with you – being the pattern of your condition – but if you release the point of appropriation, everything goes free.

The main function of meditation in dzogchen is simply to release, release, and release. Its central point is relaxation and not striving.

[More on Sangs-rGye, Buddha](#)

So, going back to the meaning of the word *Sangs-rGye*, pure and infinite.

In the hinayana system, *Sangs* indicates purifying, avoiding what is dirty, and giving up all kinds of bad or erroneous behaviour so that the mind becomes simple and pure. *rGye* refers to developing all good qualities by becoming thoughtful, careful, attentive, and concerned for people. The hinayana system is quite a lot about striving, about things to avoid and things to develop.

In the tantric system, *Sangs*, purification, indicates the natural openness of the mind and *rGye* refers to the spontaneity of all the images which are arising.

In the dzogchen tradition, *Sangs* indicates the absolute natural purity of the mind and everything it experiences and *rGye* refers to the effortless immediacy of the non-dual field of experience.

Dzogchen means great perfection: from the very beginning everything has been completely perfect just as it is. There is just this, our inexplicable presence. All the constructions of reification are a dream within a dream. Of course, if you start thinking about the problems in the world, how can they be taken as perfect? Looking at it from the perspective of subject and object, you can see that the view of non-duality opens a different realm of experience, but it could be just another fantasy.

Only when you see the non-duality of your own suffering, only when you see how to integrate whatever is arising – good, bad, right, wrong – are you released from having to be the judge, the controller, the one who has to sort it out – the great burden of self-consciousness. Imagining that release you might fear that without control there would be only cacophony, a kind of mad chaos. But it isn't like that, because when we don't have an agenda, we are free to attend to whatever is arising. The paradox is that not knowing in advance reveals self-organising immediacy.

A magic mountain, sulphate crystals and candyfloss

When we don't have an agenda, we drop pre-occupation and foreclosure. If there is no self-reference, no turn towards one's own position, then the tenderness of gaze that one has can be brought to each specific situation. You find yourself fitting in situation after situation with a very exquisite precision. You experience the freshness of engaging with the context, yet without having to know how this happens. This brings a trust in our freedom to become which further opens us to our ease of being. The continuity of presence is not resting on any particular pattern of content.

In the Tibetan language this experience is called *lhun-drup*. It is a lovely word. *Lhun* means a mound and *drup* means to make, indicating that the field of experience presents itself fully formed in all its aspects moment by moment by moment like a magic mountain. The ground that it arises from is a ground without any edge centre or circumstance, so there is nothing for things to form around.

However, our usual experience is not like that, for it develops on the basis of something being really there. Perhaps when studying science at school you grew copper sulphate crystals? First you make a strong solution of copper sulphate, and then you hang a little thread in it and gradually you see the crystals forming around the string. Or if you go to the fairground, you can buy candy floss. There is a big revolving drum of spun sugar. The stallholder takes a stick, puts it in the drum, and the spun sugar winds around it, and then you get your delicious treat.

Both examples illustrate how something forms on the basis of something else. Each thing, whether 'object' or 'subject', each entity develops on the basis of other pre-existing things. This is the structure of samsara. Attachment or egoism is a constituting point, a finite point, which then draws in particular patterns of responding. If you release that finite point the centre of your being is wherever you are. Many people are centred in memories of their childhood. These are often memories of events that have generated negative self-beliefs. Other people live years ahead of themselves, identifying most strongly with hopes or fears for the future.

It is very difficult to live in the moment if we have a sense of self which is constructed out of our construal of past events. The openness of the emergent moment is easily veiled by our pre-occupation with struggling to maintain our sense of ourselves, based on memories, plans and intentions, while we seek to engage with the ever changing field of the social environment we operate in. That's an incredibly complicated juggling act and is one reason we all get so tired. Nowadays, with electronic media, we are bombarded with things to think about, to manage and to do. You set up a little operation control room in yourself, trying to stay one step ahead of all this stuff.

Taking people seriously is the worst insult

It is not uncommon to think that everything that occurs is very important and that we as individual subjects have to stay in control and sort it all out. Then we are ceaselessly stimulated by the environment and react to whatever is occurring. That on-going activity is often based on the belief that being respectful to other people involves taking them seriously. Whereas from the point of view of dzogchen, the worst insult you can pay anyone is to take them seriously for then you will be taken in by them and wander together in the labyrinth of their beliefs, assumptions, prejudices and so on.

This presents a very interesting question in relation to therapy. A patient comes in preoccupied, caught up in their experience and what is happening to them. It's all very serious for them. They start to tell you their story and they want you to remember the details: when things happened; which auntie did this; which uncle did that; and so on. It is respectful to remember all these details but when we do that, it's a double move. We are validating the person as a person and we are also colluding in their deceit of themselves, helping to maintain the mis-recognition that they have always been living in. We are confirming that they are their story.

Narrative is always a narrative *about* something. But what is the thing itself? This is a central question in European philosophy. What is the ungraspable thus-ness, the is-ness of things? This is the presence that no amount of ratiocination, no amount of endless, spiralling, critical, reflective thought will ever grasp. It is grasped by not grasping, through silence, through stillness. That which *is*, is just there. Always there yet somehow hidden by the stories we tell about it.

Moreover all stories are stories about this presence, whatever their manifest content. For everything that occurs, all events, comments, interpretations, whatever, is only the radiance of ungraspable openness. Each gesture towards the manifestation is also a gesture towards the ground of the manifestation – for these are not two different things. Yet in being mesmerised by the details we lose the context and the ground. No refinement of technique can reveal this since there is nothing to be acted on and no problem to be solved. Deep listening reveals the inseparability of silence and sound, openness and narrative. And deep listening is there when technique and intention are dropped.

Observe yourself and see how you cheat yourself

You might think that to have an idea about how another person should be, or could be, is somewhat patronising. We live in a time of individualism and people are said to have their own truth and to be their own person. People want to 'find themselves' and they do in so many different ways. However according to dzogchen, and most of the schools of buddhism, all of these ways of 'finding yourself' are very good ways of losing yourself. The Buddha

taught various paths to be followed; he didn't say '*Just be yourself and have a good time*'. He did not say '*The world is an oyster so enjoy it*'. He said '*Observe yourself and see how you cheat yourself*'.

When you trust yourself, you cheat yourself. Better not to trust yourself. What is this self that shouldn't be trusted? It is a construct, an accumulation, a product of interaction with the vagaries of the environment. We can play with all these constituents of ourselves because they are the energy of communication. It is their illusory nature that gives us our freedom.

Since conception, our existence has been a dialogue, an interaction of forms, ideas, words. This 'conversation' never ceases for existence is dynamic, unfolding in the co-emergence of what we take to be self and what we take to be environment. The division between these two is conventional and illusory, for they are both movements in the field of experience as revealed in the mirror of awareness. None of the ideas we have about what is going on establishes anything in truth for our ideas are just another aspect of what is going on. That is, we are in the flow, not outside of it – and so cannot provide an 'objective' account. Yet we tend to believe the stories told by ourselves and others. These stories embroider us into the fabric of our culture as the inter-play of stories seems to validate them as both truthful and meaningful.

Believing in these stories we cheat ourselves as we come to rely on false constructs as the building blocks of our existence. There is no substance to any of these creations, no reliable essence. To take them in that way is to be deceived and to cheat oneself. In seeing their empty, dynamic, illusory flow we, being of the same nature, can engage in the free play of communication, the exchange of energy which is existence. This open exchange is itself compassion as there is no basis for selfish or harmful behaviour. The world and oneself are an undivided field, an expanse of experience which cannot be secured yet which is open and hospitable to our participation.

When we observe the flow of our thoughts we see that they are truly a movement; they are gestures reaching out into the world that they are already within. Seeing how this is, how something and nothing are inseparable, there is the freedom of unburdening experience from the need to provide the truth of existence. What then, we may ask, is the basis from which I as an individual, living in my skin bag, move out towards the other? What am I looking for in you, or from you? What do you have to give me? Can you give me my self? Can you give me the meaning of my life?

We might have a cup of tea and a chat together. We might go for a nice walk, and laugh together, have a good time. But who I am – the centre of my being – is not something that can be gained from another nor can it be found or lost. Rather, it is the ever-present openness, which reveals itself moment by moment in new ways of *becoming* with others and which is the basis of finding out how to *be* with others.

As therapists, we often see patients who are socially anxious. What can we say about that? Should we see it as a problem to be overcome or as an aspect of a broader existential anxiety? The latter is the feeling tone that arises when we encounter the groundlessness of our existence. Anxiety arises from wanting reassurance from a world that cannot reassure us. Embracing our own groundlessness and tasting its open potential can free us from that pervasive anxiety

For example, I don't know what I am going to say. I am here now with you, saying something and hopefully, it is reasonably interesting but I am not speaking from lecture notes. To speak in a way that tries to connect with others will always involve hitting and missing because as we speak we are moved, and as the other listens they are moved too. It is a joint movement in the co-emerging field. As with waves lapping in a small pond, if you throw in a stone the waves spread out; they hit the side, and then they start coming back, generating an incredible complexity of waveforms. I think our being together is a bit like that.

We cannot follow a guide to show us the 'right' way to proceed. Right and wrong, knowing how to please other people, being socially appropriate, all these conventions are extremely difficult to integrate into spiritual practice, because what is at the heart of them is fear: 'the meaning of my existence is determined by your approval.' I, in order to survive, am willing to become a puppet and I have quite a few strings that you can pull to make me behave in the 'right' way. But what then does 'right' mean?

Where we are determines what we see

The founding buddha of the dzogchen lineages is called *Kuntu Zangpo*. *Kuntu Zangpo* means 'always good', or 'always already perfect', and refers to the natural perfection which is not created. Anything which is situationally perfect will, because of the movement of time, become situationally imperfect. The study of history shows the rising and falling of people's reputations. For example at one time, British colonial writers thought that Lord Curzon was a marvellous chap. Later on, Indian authors writing about Lord Curzon, said he was not such a glorious chap after all, because they were looking from a different point of view.

Everything which comes into manifestation is determined by circumstances; where one is sited determines how one views things. I hope that by my brief overview of these different buddhist paths, you can get a sense of how different views reveal the world in different ways.

The views that we developed in our culture and in our childhood are useful in terms of our social adaption - in fitting in or in getting on with things - but they don't necessarily illuminate the ground nature of our being. In order to do that we have to put ourselves fundamentally into question. We have to observe ourselves in the very process of our manifestation, moment by moment in different circumstances. I may be feeling warm towards someone, or feeling cold. I can act from that basis or not, but then something else happens and I move again. My viewpoint alters and another set of decisions presents itself.

We can be like seaweed, sliding over other people, close enough to touch yet not scratching, forcing or demanding. By being moved myself, I am part of the co-emergent movement with you. By not centring the core of my being in the movement, I don't mind being affected by you. By awakening to the fundamental ungroundedness of existence - the groundless ground - free movement can occur.

In terms of psychotherapy, when patients present in the hospital setting where I work they come with a whole range of problems. The person is causing trouble for themselves and causing trouble for other people. They need to be 'sorted out', as it were; they need to get a 'treatment'. What is it that can be treated? Behaviour can be treated. There are lots of things you can do which will influence the patterns of behaviour or movement of the person.

However we need to consider whether we can we put into question the basis of identity held by the patient? That is to say, do you have to have a healthy ego before you enquire into its actual validity? Do **you** have to be 'sorted' before you start to de-construct the basis of the assumptions that you have about who you are? Very often people think that that is the case.

In India there was a tradition of people known as mahasiddhas: the great adepts, or the perfect ones. They often lived in cemeteries. They sometimes drank a lot and some were robbers and thieves. These were people who were not sorted. Eighty-four such mahasiddhas are important in many tantric practice lineages. Their importance speaks of a view that says if you start by trying to regulate behaviour, and then settle the personality, by the time you are deemed ready to start deep meditative enquiry you will have lost the energy of youth and may well be dead.

The question is, can we work directly with energy as it manifests? This is particularly important if you work with adolescents. Rather than trying to put the energy back into a box, can we experience energy as just energy? Not to take it as an attack or an insult, but to provide a spaciousness wherein the person manifesting the energy can come to see that due to certain circumstances they are like this. *'When you do that, I get really pissed off and then I break the window.'* We can't stop ourselves being pissed off. Can any one of us do that? Generally speaking, there's quite a lot that's irritating in the world. So instead of trying to stand guard as a bouncer on the door of our existence keeping out all the bad things, the possibility is to have an open, front door and an open back door. Then to whatever comes in, you can say, *'Hello!'* knowing that it goes out the back door. Trusting impermanence, the fact that, without any effort from us, everything is already passing away even as it arises, we can open to the raw, naked force of unmediated events.

We spend a lot of time saying, *'Don't come in!'* or, *'Welcome!'* Why? It's all going to vanish anyway. The things we really like are suddenly gone and the things we really hate are suddenly gone! The more we interfere, trying to get our own way, the more we get caught up in the turbulence of control.

Tolerance and openness is not the same as collusion. Whether it is with regard to our own complex experience or the behaviour and attitude of a troubled youngster, being with the situation as it is, is neutral. Not indulging and not pushing away, but just being present with the disturbance, brings, paradoxically, a spaciousness in which there is room to manoeuvre.

The energetic quality of the emotions

What is this energetic quality of the emotions, which could be directed in so many different ways, and in some cases, makes us want to punch someone? In the dzogchen view it is the very vitality of our existence. The world has got to us because we are part of the world; there is no wall between us and the world. We will always be affected by what's going on unless we are dead. Being affected, being reactive, is being alive.

The basis of my free movement is space. If there is enough space I can move in whatever way is required by the situation I participate in. What happens in neurosis is that the space becomes very small, like a kind of echo chamber. Thoughts bang into one another, as do physical sensations and feelings, and then these reverberations amplify each other until you get an overload and the person becomes overwhelmed. In order to release that tension the person may manifest disruptive behaviour that impacts the world around them. Other

people then feel overwhelmed, and thus you get external action and reaction, which simply mirrors the internal action and reaction.

The question then is how to help people become more spacious. We need to learn how to not block what is arising but to be curious about it, and through that curiosity to develop a new perspective free of habitual self-reference. If you are confluent with your experience you will have little power to influence it, and no capacity to understand it until after the fact. However if you have perspective, you can still be in touch with what is happening but it is as if it's arising within the translucent space of your open being. You are aware, and you are present with the arising and passing of the phenomena, with the freedom to engage or not engage.

Sometimes it is very important to be angry, to tell people to back off. If you are being attacked in the street it's quite useful to have that capacity, and then hopefully the attacker will run away. If you are thinking '*I can't make a fuss; I shouldn't make a noise*', then that is of no help to anyone. You see that in abusive families. The child is told '*Don't make a noise or I'll hurt you.*' or, '*If you tell anyone, Daddy will be sent to prison, and then what will happen to the family?*' This silencing of the immediacy of the reaction is part of the pressure causing the neurotic spin of turning in on ourselves. This leads us to rely on our subjective feelings as the litmus test of what is actually happening.

An ontological enquiry

The central point that buddhism can bring to psychotherapy is an ontological enquiry: what is the immediate moment of my being? What is this double move of being in the world with others and being, as it were, for myself. In other words '*What is this ungraspable being which immediately reveals itself as I, me, myself in my various ways of being with others?*'

Very rarely do we experience this in a naked way. Usually, it is clothed in interpretations – in thoughts about ourselves. Sometimes we are just relaxed. Maybe there is a sunset or you are sitting listening to music; you are just there. The music is playing, you are present, but in that moment you don't have any ears, you don't have a nose, and you don't have any feet. Then you come back to having thoughts about the music, and in that moment your ears and your nose come back to you; you are somebody having thoughts about something, and you are now standing in a dualistic relation to it.

Through the presence of the therapist becoming ever more relaxed and spacious, there is the possibility of creating in the room a mood of non-reactivity that allows the free expression of whatever is occurring. We start to be able to see that there is nothing intrinsically bad in ourselves. For some reason, self-hatred is quite pervasive in our culture at the moment. Very few people, certainly the ones who come for therapy, seem to be happy in their own skin.

How could we be happy as ourselves if we imagine we should be other than we are? '*But how I am is not very nice. I make so many mistakes. How could anybody be happy being like me?*' But does such a description really point to who we are? Are we truly determined by our thoughts, feelings, sensations, and proprioceptions? Are we determined by our behaviour? Are we determined by what other people think of us? These are all factors in the emerging field: they illuminate the patterning of the moment, but do they actually deeply and truly define who we are? Whatever truth they have is only momentary. The continuity

of our being is not maintained through a chain of thoughts but through undivided non-dual awareness, our natural presence

If, for example, a patient is being very aggressive and abusive, shouting at the clinic receptionist, I might say:

“Please leave the building. This is unacceptable.”

“But why shouldn't I get the attention I need?”

“There is a price to belonging. You cannot cross this threshold and insult the people on the inside. In this world there is always a deal. Go away, and come back when you are ready to play your part in the deal.”

You could say that this is a very narrow welcome, but it poses an implicit question: ‘*Who is the one who is being turned away?*’ The manifest behaviour is being rejected but the potential is not. As skilfully as we can we try to say to the person that what they are doing is not acceptable, while at the same time holding the tender vibration of their heart in our hand. They are not being rejected, but their behaviour is being rejected. Of course the person who is strongly identified with their behaviour is not going to find that easy but we have to hold the difference, even if they can't.

The spirit underlying this is that we maintain the wisdom of accepting everything as it is, yet maintain the compassion of responding to the complexity of the actual situation which involves several people.

Each person is not an island unto themselves; what we do impinges on others. We have the possibility of awakening to the potential of aliveness, spontaneity, and connectivity in all beings.

Given that there is no fixed self to be true to, authenticity lies in the attunement of our response, rather than in aligning with a putative essence. Neither controlling nor submitting to others, in dropping the sense of our own fixed essence we can awaken to the absence of such an essence in the other. ‘Knowledge of’ is replaced by ‘being with’, as ever more skilful ways of becoming are free to flourish.

In buddhist meditation practice we can directly experience this ungraspable basis of ourselves moment by moment. How we emerge establishes no more than the rustling of the leaves in the tree. Just this, just this. I think the work of the therapist could be like that. We try to be exquisitely present in a way that requires the gentlest, lightest, but most meaningful touch. What James Bugental used to call ‘*the press*’: a very gentle palpation that evokes the energy of the other, so that self and other – subject and object – start moving together. Like clouds in the sky, like waves in the sea, as self-reflexivity diminishes we are free to play our part in the infinite drama of illusion.