
Saying the Unsayable

James Low interviewed by Guido Ferrari

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Excerpts

- *The point of view of dzogchen is to recognize that the ground of all of our thought, feeling, sensation, activity, is a state of open relaxation, a state of presence – that is to say, to be fully here, fully alive, as an awareness which is not this or that.*
- *Awareness is liberation itself. Awareness means not to be caught up in thinking about things, not trying to make sense of them, but just to offer a relaxed open hospitality, a hospitality towards whatever arises.*
- *'I'm okay as I am. Without doing anything more than breathing in and out, I am okay.' This is the meaning of dzogchen: 'It's fine. Nothing more to do.'*
- *What continues is this open potential. What manifests is always changing. Manifestation arises with others as the eternal dance of becoming.*
- *Free of all fantasy, here we are at this moment, alive. Nothing is happening, everything is happening. It's very simple.*
- *It is about learning to trust an immediacy of being, to stop being an internal politician.*
- *In seeing you, your face will touch me, so that I can become the one who can meet you where you are. And that is the basis of ethics.*

Contents

WHAT IS DZOGCHEN?	2
RECOGNIZING A STATE OF OPEN RELAXATION AND PRESENCE	2
LEARNING TO TRUST THIS IMMEDIACY OF BEING	4
THE BASIS OF ETHICS: IN SEEING YOU, YOUR FACE WILL TOUCH ME	6

What is dzogchen?

Question by Guido Ferrari: Mr. Low, what is dzogchen?

James: Dzogchen is a traditional meditation system which contains a view of life, a profound way of understanding one's own true nature and also a way of being in the world with others.

It came into our dimension, into our human domain, a long long time ago – you could say many hundreds of thousands of years ago – but for our particular period it came into the world through the transmission of Garab Dorje over 2000, years ago.

Q: And what is the content, the meaning, of dzogchen?

James: Dzogchen means perfectly complete, without fault, without error. It points to the fact that our own nature, the nature of each being – not just human beings but all living forms – is without fault or limitation. Ordinarily, as human beings we grow up with a very narrow sense of our own identity. We feel constrained when we look at other people: we see they have better qualities than us, maybe more money, more intelligence, healthier bodies, we feel competitive, we want to do our best... but somehow there is always something wrong. So somehow disappointment gets woven into the texture of our life. From the point of view of dzogchen, this is caused by not recognizing who we really are. Our attention is tilted out too much into an identification with how we manifest –with our physical appearance, with the nature of our voice, with our ideas and so on – rather than relaxing and attending to ourselves in the ways in which we manifest.

Recognizing a state of open relaxation and presence

Q: So we can say that we are not our emotions, we are not our thoughts?

James: Well, we can say, I think, not that we are not them but that we are not defined by them: we are *not only* them. Thoughts and feelings are energetic formations. They are very unstable, you can't hold on to them, you can't catch them. A thought comes into our mind and then it's gone. We have a feeling due to causes and circumstances... then it vanishes.

So, if we try to build on these, to build a stable identity it is like building a house on sand; the foundation will always be weak. And so we have to be working and working and working.

The view of dzogchen is to recognize the ground of all of our thoughts, feelings, sensations, activities, as a state of open relaxation, a state of presence – that is to say, to be fully here, fully alive, as an awareness which is not this or that. Moment by moment we *become* this or that. When I talk with my mother, I am a different person from when if I am talk with my lover. If I am at work, I'm different from when I am talking with friends. In each situation we manifest with different ways

of moving our body, different tones to our voice and so on. But each of these ways of being arises from the same open ground. None of these aspects of ourselves defines who we really are.

For example, the people I work with in the hospital see me in one way, I am Doctor Low, I am a professional person who performs this and that function. They think, 'Oh yes, we know who he is!' – but with my friends I am somebody different, with my children I am somebody different. Each of these people sees some aspect of myself but what is this self? The self is not the sum total of all these aspects. You couldn't go around and interview all the people who know me and take all their accounts of me and put them together to give a true and final account of who I am. The true quality of our existence slips away, it is ungraspable and yet it's always present. In the language of buddhism that is called *emptiness*. It doesn't mean that there is nothing there at all but rather that the vital quality of existence is not a substance, it is not a thing. It's not an object that you can grasp, and yet it is somehow the basis of all the experiences that we have.

Q: So, one of the most important things is to be aware of this reality.

James: Indeed. *Awareness is liberation itself. Awareness means not to be caught up in thinking about things, not trying to make sense of them, but just to offer a relaxed open hospitality, a hospitality towards whatever arises.*

Most of the time we have the feeling that our lives belong to us. So we have a sense that the arena of our experience is something private, that it belongs to us like a garden. We are very concerned that in our garden we should have nice flowers and not have any weeds. And if the neighbour's child keeps kicking their football into our garden we get annoyed, we say, 'This is my private space!' In the same way we think that our mind is our private concern and so we feel that we should be able to have the kind of thoughts we want, the kind of feelings we want. And so we try to control our domain.

When we come to an understanding of awareness, we relax and open and we realize that our existence is more like a public park. We are entitled to walk in the public park, we can sit on the bench and observe all the things that are going on, but we can't blow a whistle if people are doing things we don't like. To be aware is to be tolerant and to recognize that we don't control the world – but at the same time we are not the slave of the world. It's about participating, taking a place, which means finding the rhythm, finding ways in which you can connect in a dynamic and meaningful way with other people.

Q: So this ground-reality is more like a space and not a thing?

James: Yes indeed. And because it is a space you can't grasp it and yet it never vanishes. It is always there when you allow yourself to become aware of it, but most of the time we are preoccupied by the things which fill the space. Just as when you live in an apartment you get used to the furniture that's there and then maybe after some years you say, 'Oh, I am tired of this! We need to redecorate' and you decide to paint the walls. You take the furniture out and suddenly you think, 'Oh, this is an interesting space!' But when all the furniture was in the room you didn't see the room, you just saw the furniture. So the *purpose of meditation* is to do a big spring-cleaning: Take the furniture out, strip the walls down: 'Ahhh.' So in this space many many things are possible, many many things can occur.

Q: Sometimes we think that this ground basis, this space, is full of love and compassion and of beautiful emotions. Is it true or is it just a desire?

James: I think when people gain an awakening, a direct experience, of that open nature, it has a subtle purifying and refining influence on their being. So, to see that your own nature is spacious, is infinite, allows you... [deep outbreath]... just to relax. You feel: 'Oh, I'm okay. *I'm okay as I am.*

Without doing anything more than breathing in and out, I am okay.’ This is the meaning of dzogchen: ‘It’s fine. Nothing more to do.’ On the basis of that, what shall I come into the world for? If I am already filled, if I am already complete, I’m not hungry for things. So why would I be jealous, why would I be greedy, why would I be full of hate? It’s fine.

However, through meditation we also recognize that this spaciousness of the mind gives rise to everything: good things and bad things have the same ground nature. They are all empty. They are like a dream. If you recognize this nature, it is like a happy dream. If you don’t recognize your own nature, it is like a nightmare. Both, dreams and nightmares, have the same nature, they are illusion, they are just manifestation. Like when you look in the mirror, you see the reflection of your face, you look at it and think, ‘Ah, that’s me!’ You look at your teeth and you think, ‘Oh, I have to go to the dentist.’ But what you see in the mirror is not you – it is a reflection.

Thus we can see that moment by moment all the events of our life manifest, yet without substantial reality. It is like a theatre, like a drama. The stage is an open space and on the stage of a big theatre many many dramas are enacted in the course of a year. In the same way, the dramas of our mind are without limit. Sometimes we are happy, sometimes we are sad, these changes are always occurring, on and on and on.

Q: When we are able to live in this ground reality, is it correct to think that death is finished, death don’t exist? Because this ground basis is eternal.

James: That is correct. It is infinite. Finite moments arise as the finite moments of being awake in the day, of going to sleep at night. Gradually some clarity can come into your state of sleeping so that you have more sense of an on-going unbroken awareness of whatever is occurring: when you are happy, when you are sad... *what continues is our open potential.* So when you come to the moment of death, death is another kind of experience, an experience which is being enacted on the same stage, the stage of emptiness, of openness. However you might think, ‘My life belongs to me. I live in my flesh and blood body. This is my true basis. I am this physical person born from my mother and father, I am me, myself’. If you think that this is the basis of your existence, death will hit you very hard. You will feel very sad, very disturbed and upset. But if you recognize that while we manifest in this world because of many different factors, *the one stable continuity is the empty awareness* which pervades all things, then death is just another chapter opening up.

Q: So we are not our body?

James: We are not our body, we are not our thoughts – and yet of course we *are* our body and our thoughts. There is a double edge to this: If you say, ‘We are not our manifestation’, we go to an extreme of being purely numinous. And if we say, ‘I am only my body’, we go to an extreme of being solely phenomenal. And the teaching of the Buddha is the *middle way* between the extremes.

Learning to trust this immediacy of being

Q: But then how to live according with this ground reality?

James: The key point is to not to interrupt the line between the openness of the heart – which is the site of awareness – and the senses. Our senses connect us with all things. If – instead of processing the information through our thoughts, feelings, habits and assumptions – we open and respond directly, spontaneously, we will find that the fitting activity arises in the world. *So it is about learning to trust an immediacy of being, to stop being an internal politician,* to stop being concerned with winning and losing, with fame and notoriety, and just to be at home in ourselves however we manifest.

Q: So, it is a kind of dance.

James: The whole world is nothing but dance, the dance of illusion in which subject and object ceaselessly interweave. Some people imagine that a state of enlightenment would be a state that would be completely protected, it would be a stasis, a stability... and that once you achieve that safety, nothing would ever disturb you again. This is, I think, a false understanding. The one thing which is stable and unchanging is our awareness, but because it is empty, you cannot grasp it. *What manifests is always changing:* our body changes, we get older, our voice changes, our thoughts, our feelings change, and these manifestations are happening in a world with others. We are always in communication with others. So, contact, mutual aliveness, co-emergence – this is happening inseparable from the ground nature. At this very moment as I am talking with you, we are together in one world manifesting at the same time. I am only speaking because you ask me these questions. If I was walking down the road, I wouldn't be talking to myself. So, in my words I am showing you something of myself but that happens for you. If I now go and have a cup of tea with someone, I'll talk in a different way. So, in that way, *manifestation arises with others and this is the eternal dance of becoming* – that who-I-am is determined by the other as much as by myself.

Q: This is non-action.

James: Yes, it is a kind of non-action in which the centre of gravity of my existence is not deep inside me but it is in the interactive point between us.

Q: What is very important is not to stop this dance.

James: Absolutely. And you cannot stop it; it is not yours to stop. That's the false narcissistic position of mastery: 'I am in charge of the world. I can make things happen on my terms.' But the world is a revelation, it is happening all the time, and we are part of the revelation. We are not just sitting in the audience looking at something on the stage. We are not just actors. We are the complex interaction of many factors. *We are the empty stage, and the actor on the stage, and the director of the drama, and we are in the audience.* All these aspects of our existence are happening at the same time. The path of dzogchen is to find an integration or balance – so that you are not just empty and open, you are not just participative, you are not just trying to control things, and you are not just amazed at the wonder of everything, but these four aspects move and dance together.

Q: Is it correct then to say that we are not the chief of our life?

James: That's correct. The Buddha said that the mind is the chief, that the mind is the creator of all things. But that mind is not our ego-consciousness, it's not the bit of ourselves which is holding all our memories, and our hopes and fears and desires. The buddha mind is a mind which cannot be grasped as an entity, but rather, like a cornucopia, like a rich ground, it gives rise to everything. It is like the ocean or the sky.

Q: So the most important thing is to be with the life, with the other people.

James: Absolutely. It is about participation, taking a place that evolves and moves. *It is about openness, responsiveness, not fearfulness, but to have a spontaneity, a lightness of being, not to take things too seriously.* One of the central teachings of buddhism which is also in dzogchen is that everything is an illusion. It's like a dream. So, if you take it too seriously, it will become very heavy and you will feel ground-down and oppressed. But if you make it too light, you'll say, 'Oh, it doesn't matter.' Again, it is the middle way between these two.

Q: But we are responsible in our life.

James: We are responsible. But sometimes we can take responsibility to be a burden, as if there is some judge who is going to call us to account and say, 'Oh, what are you doing? Why did you do that?' That's a very harsh and dualistic notion of responsibility. Or *we could take the word responsibility to mean 'the ability to respond'*; that means to be flexible, to be present, to be willing to see, to be willing to hear. No blockage on the senses and the heart.

Q: This is life from the point of view of dzogchen.

James: Indeed.

Q: What is the meaning of dzogchen about *Shambala*?

James: Well, Shambala is a notion of a magical kingdom, an ideal realm where everything is perfect. And this is an idea which belongs really in the family of *tantra* which is concerned with transformation. Tantra seeks to take our ordinary day-to-day life and to transform it by finding points of identification with pure realms, with the realms of the gods, the gods of meditation. Shambala belongs in that domain. Although in some understandings it is also a realm hidden on this earth and is concerned with an apocalyptic vision of future time. That one day the armies of Shambala will arise and bring about a new regime. Many many cultures have these kind of notions.

Generally, dzogchen is not concerned with that. It is concerned with the immediacy of being present in this moment without any interruption, the actuality of what is here is always much better than fantasy. Because a positive fantasy, well that is a dream. A negative fantasy, that's a nightmare. *Free of all fantasy, here we are at this moment, alive. Nothing is happening, everything is happening. It's very simple.*

Q: So to be human is to be aware with this kind of reality.

James: Yes. That's the way we awaken to our infinite potential. Rather than defining ourselves by cultural ideas and the ideas from our family and schooling inside which we have become cramped living in the house of all that we have inherited, we open the walls of the house. Then we see that we actually inhabit an infinite mansion of many many possibilities and through that we can engage with more kinds of people. We can find everything interesting, because we are willing to look. *We look before we come to a conclusion. The main way to limit your life is to come to a conclusion before you look.*

The basis of ethics: In seeing you, your face will touch me

Q: I have one last question. What is the meaning in dzogchen of ethics, of morality?

James: I think dzogchen ethics are grounded in the face of the other. That when you attend to another person, when you see their face, the light shining in their eyes, you are called from your own heart to manifest the very best of your possibility for them. We don't turn our face away from the other. So, in order to do that, you have to inhabit your own body and your own face. I think it would be reasonable to say that many of the worst things that happen in the world occur because people don't see the face of the other, and neither do they live in their own face. They are living in a mental sphere where they think, 'This is a terrorist', or 'This is a Jew', or 'This is...' – whatever the category would be – and then they say, 'I know what these people are!' Without looking at them, without seeing them, 'I know who they are. And on the basis of my knowledge I will act.'

But *in dzogchen we stay in the body, in the senses. First I want to see you, and in seeing you, your face will touch me, so that I can become the one who can meet you where you are. And that is the basis of ethics.*

Q: Thank you very much.