
Open empty and endless...

Dzogchen Retreat

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What is most important about the teaching, the transmission, and the teacher is their relation to emptiness, because that is what makes the relationship with the teacher something which fundamentally alters the basis of our 'being in the world'.

...

The problem of the subject cannot be solved by the object. The emptiness and confusion, the difficulties we feel, the uncertainties about who we are, about what the meaning of our life is, what we should be doing with our existence... will not be resolved by falling in love. You may have a holiday from the difficulty, but afterwards the difficulty will still be there.

...

Meditation practice itself will not change the content of our mind but it will change the relationship we have with the content of our mind. This is one reason why meditation can be very boring, because you spend a lot of time just being with yourself—and actually, we are all a bit boring!

...

The clarity which is produced by thoughts, is developed by linking one thought to another thought. But the clarity which arises from relaxation openness and emptiness, is there prior to thought. Thoughts arise as the shiny edge, like if you are looking at the sea in the moonlight and the waves arise and little drops are shimmering. That's what our thoughts are: little drops of beautiful energy arising from the open dharmakaya. It is the depth of the ocean, with its own luminous potential.

...

Advice on observing the mind: *Go like an ornithologist into the forest. Go in and find a nice place and sit very quietly. The bird is in the forest—and if you don't move around too much, the bird will appear. So just relax; your mind is there, and the one who is looking, shows you.*

...

The same potential tools, the resources arising from emptiness, are now being transformed towards another task, and this is the essence of tantra. The clutch if you like, to change gear, is emptiness. We are locked in the gear of our karmic identity, driving along at this particular speed, perceiving what we perceive at that speed. Then, we change gear—we lock in—and now we're doing Padmasambhava!

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Day 1 teachings

Introduction

We will be looking at the view and the meditation of the higher tantras, as found in the **Big Rigdzin** practice taught by Chhimed Rigdzin Rinpoche. We will also be looking at the view and meditation of dzogchen. Part of this involves being clear about the nature of emptiness and in particular the view of the two truths. Rinpoche always used to explain that generally speaking, the tantra view is completely the same as paramitayana mahayana; it is just that the method is different. If you are not familiar with these technical terms they will become a bit clearer as we proceed...

Emptiness and Devotion

The understanding of emptiness is the central phenomenon of buddhism. It is presented both as a critique and as an analysis of our ordinary perception, as well as a way of understanding the ground from which everything manifests. Thus in the first move we have to see that everything is actually nothing, and then in the second move to see that nothing is actually everything. The danger for us is that we go from 'something' to 'another something' without going through nothing!

For example, faith is very important in the practice; without faith it is really impossible to have the energy, involvement and connection to make the practice come alive. But we do have a lot of faith anyway. We have 'faith' that we know when the shops open and close; we have 'faith' that our house will be there when we go home. We act on the basis of faith all the time. So faith is a way of relating to the world which simplifies phenomena. It is based on relying on assumptions. The more you rely on them the more real they feel, the more true and more useful.

The difference between having faith in the practice of tantra and faith in knowing where you parked your car is that the object of faith in tantra is empty, and the object of faith in ordinary life is full. Things appear substantial and to have an enduring sense of self. So clearly, there is a potential danger that if you transpose the assumptive faith of ordinary experience on to spiritual practice you will end up with a dogmatic religious view, whereby you start to believe that things truly exist.

What we actually have in the world of phenomena is manifestation. People can helpfully believe that their guru is enlightened. Other people may come and meet that guru and think he's nothing special. Is that because they don't understand the **real** truth, or is it just because the pathway of connectedness is not there and so they live in a different dimension? The danger for disciples is to believe that people who don't see things the way they see them, are somehow lacking in something, are stupid, or less than in some way.

What is most important about the teaching, the transmission, and the teacher is their relation to emptiness, because it is *that* which makes the relationship with the teacher something which fundamentally alters the basis of our being in the world. In the history of Tibet there were many conflicts between religious groups and such conflicts still occur between western Buddhists. These conflicts arise because of a lack of attention to emptiness. Believing that something is strongly real is the taste of ignorance.

If you see a teacher and feel your heart opening, feel very warm inside, what is important is that, on the basis of meeting the teacher, something shifted inside you. Before you went into the room to meet the teacher you didn't feel like that; then when you met the teacher you felt in a different way. If you observe this then you can directly see that: 'My state, who I am, is contingent and

impermanent.’ If after a while you no longer feel like that, you can then observe: ‘Oh yes, that is impermanent.’

At this point we can draw two conclusions. We can say either, ‘*Oh, the teacher is the source of this wonderful feeling; I need to make sure I spend my life with that teacher.*’ or we can think, ‘*Oh, the state of existence which I have is very unreliable. If I don’t recognise my own nature I’m going to be in trouble.*’ The first pathway takes you towards religion, and the second path takes you into meditation. We do need to have **both**, because it is through meditation that we understand the empty nature of ourselves and all phenomena. Through that you can then start to see that the energy of connection you can feel towards teachers, lineages, and so on, is a dynamic flowing energy which arises from emptiness. Otherwise, you will end up simply with a brand loyalty, and you will feel more committed to protecting that brand which would be to operate within the understanding of attachment, of taking things as strongly real.

When I met C. R. Lama¹ in the late 1960’s, at that time I asked him many questions about Tibet and his monastery and so on. He would say, ‘*Well, it’s gone, there is nothing to think about.*’ And that is really important. When it’s gone, it’s gone. What was essential about the monastery was the fact that some realisation was gained; Rinpoche had the realisation with him, and so the building was not so important.

It is the same with dharma centres like this one here in Berlin. It is a wonderful thing that people take a lot of time and energy to create them and in general we have to say that dharma centres are a good idea because they provide a place where people can come and study, practice together and gain something of value. But if the people involved in building it are thinking, ‘*Well this is how it used to be, and now our next project is... Today I have to do this and this to make the project happen...*’ They are worrying about whether they’ve got the right kind of electric cable, or the right permission from the local council etc. All these are simply worldly concerns and no dharma is being done. Building is being done, but you could build a hotel, you could build a brothel, it would not be any different.

What is really important is that we don’t cheat ourselves. The outer form is very wonderful, if it is illuminated by a clarity of understanding arising from the view. So, although buddhist ideas are often very difficult, I think that they are very important to understand. However the difficulties we have in understanding them are often not because they are intellectually challenging, but because they challenge the assumptions through which we live our ordinary lives.

Emptiness and Impermanence

In order to understand the nature of Padmasambhava and do the practice we need to have an understanding of the three kayas; but the basis for understanding the three kayas is the understanding of emptiness.

So, on a general level, the first aspect of this is impermanence. Phenomena—the inner phenomena of thoughts, feelings, and sensations, and the outer phenomena we encounter in the world—do not endure through time. For example, you may go to a museum and find ethnographic exhibits, perhaps a shaman’s rattle, and on the glass case there may be writing telling you what it is. The rattle is being preserved for the future but it is decontextualised. You can’t touch it, and even if you could touch it you wouldn’t know what to do with it. So there it is, enduring through time, but **what** is enduring through time? It was made in a culture by people who had a specific intention, it was

¹ Chhimed Rigdzin Rinpoche

the manifestation of that intention, and then it was stolen or traded and now finds itself in a glass box. So it seems to be continuing through time, but actually it has become something else.

Entities, or things, which seem to exist by themselves in the world, would have no meaning for us if we didn't experience them. We cannot experience an object without projecting onto the object. Just as the object comes into our world, so our world goes onto the object, which means it is already wrapped in our thoughts and assumptions at the moment it arrives. We live within our own particular tendencies, history, and karma, and we can't step out of that very easily. When you walk down the street you can see people wearing clothes which you would never wear. They have two legs, two arms, one head. You also have two legs, two arms and one head. So why can't you wear the same clothes? Somehow you know, *'That's just not me.'* So that clothing, which in terms of its function is quite useful, is inaccessible to you; it would feel like violence to yourself to wear that piece of clothing.

This is an aspect of impermanence. It means that the neutral quality of phenomena is extremely impermanent. It is always being stolen, being influenced, by the valency of our own projections and choices. In that way we can see that the openness of the world we inhabit is already always closed to us as soon as we move towards it. We make prejudgements and these are the manifestation of our own particular kind of conditioning, the shaping that we carry inside ourselves. It's important just to examine this kind of experience for ourselves, to see how particular, how specific our way of being in the world is.

This specificity, when we look at it, is very intense in the moment it arises, but is also unreliable because it doesn't endure. When the arising of the impulse, or the movement, comes on us, it's like blinkers coming around us and we become focused into a very narrow point. That moment becomes cut off from other moments. It appears to be totally true—and yet of course, it won't last. So impermanence is linked to **attention, intention, identification, and the investment of energy**. That is to say, moments seem so very rich and powerful; they seem almost inevitable because they are the vehicles for our own energy. The Buddha taught and explained impermanence again and again because this identification into a situation is very paralysing for us and leads to the bad actions that we perform.

We can see this very easily with small children. If they want to eat a particular thing, or play with a particular toy that someone else has, they can become very disturbed. The toy has caught their **attention**; it becomes the object of their **intention**, which is to have it; and they then become **identified** with it; and this carries a huge **investment** of energy. It is as if the whole world, the whole of their existence depends on having that. And the more intense that lock-on becomes, the more powerful the small person is, and yet, the more pathetic they are. They are convinced they must have this thing; all their existence is embedded in this. This is a state of absolute vulnerability.

Throughout our lives the same pattern repeats itself. For example, in love relationships, we may feel that this object, this person, is the solution to our problem. We can feel destroyed if we can't be with that particular person. But the problem of the subject cannot be solved by an object. The emptiness and confusion, the difficulties we feel, the uncertainties we have about who we are, about the meaning of our life, what we should be doing with our existence, will not be resolved by falling in love. You may have a holiday from the difficulty, but afterwards the difficulty will still be there.

When we get into these states we are saying, *'I know who I am; I know that I need you.'* And both statements are untrue. I don't know who I am, and if I don't know who I am, I certainly don't

know who you are, so why do I want you? Even if I know who you are, **you** don't know who you are in a way that I know who you are. That's why we fight! [Laughter]

This is the opposite of impermanence. This is thinking: *'I have a stable identity. I know some of my good points and my bad points, and looking around the world I see you are the ideal one for me and therefore we can work together and make something good.'*

Who is running this show anyway?

From a traditional buddhist point of view if couple-relationships work out that's because people have a good karmic connection. But since we don't really recognise our own karma, what is running the show is **not** our conscious intention. The tilt that we have is out towards the object. All our senses are looking out. We are facing outward into the world.

We have many shifting thoughts, feelings and sensations. When we start to meditate and observe our mind in process, we are usually amazed at how complicated it is. We have thoughts that we didn't expect to have. But where do these thoughts come from? They are not our conscious intention; we could say they come from the unconscious, they come from our karma. They come from somewhere, but they are in our experience. So in order to maintain our stable sense of self we have to edit what is arising, as our experience. We have to take the image, or the representation of our self, of our idea about who we are, and use that as the stable form against which we decided whether to allow this thought to be identified with or not.

Does that make sense to you? Can you see that that's what happens? It is very important to just recognise, 'Oh yes, there is a lot of myself which I don't want to be me.' And really in that we have a big choice to make: either we say, on the side of samsara, *'The image I have of myself is correct; this other stuff is wrong,'* or we say, on the side of dharma, *'All of this stuff is me and my idea of who I am is false.'*

The most important quality we can develop for meditation practice is honesty; to honestly tolerate the mess which arises as our experience. We get distracted. We fall asleep. We find that we are obsessing about something. If we can think, *'Yes, this is truly me, I am not something other than this; this is not a mistake,'* then the stability and security of our fixed sense of identity starts to crumble. This is very important. Unless we put the story we have about ourselves into question, it will remain the site of control. This is essentially the quality of attachment—attachment to the idea of being a stable enduring self-identity. And Buddha said attachment is the cause of suffering.

Modern science and technology provides us with many useful appliances. You have a refrigerator, a cooker, a dishwasher, maybe to get more complicated a motorcar, a computer... We have lots of things and most of us have absolutely no idea how they work. But they make us feel very powerful. We just press the button and 'ping' something is cooked, but the process by which it occurred we don't know. Actually, we live in a world of great outer ignorance and great inner ignorance with this very thin line of pseudo-competency and expertise. However, when we do meditation we realise that we don't even have that thin line of competence.

So the first real target of investigation for impermanence is the stable narrative about ourselves, which leads us to the understanding: *'I don't know who I am.'* Now, this could lead us to feel rather mad, if we think, *'Well everyone else seems to know who they are. What's wrong with me?'* From the buddhist point of view, the conclusion we should draw is, *'I don't know who I am because I'm not an object of knowledge'.* The real nature of the self, my own real nature is not something that I can grasp, that I can define, that I can articulate. It is something which presents itself but is beyond becoming an object of knowledge.

So here we are sitting here today and each of probably thinks we have some connection with buddhism. So, we might know that we are interested in buddhism, we also know our own name, where we were born, our age, and we can give some stories about the things that we have done. But do any of these things tell us who we really are? These are thoughts. The fact that I was born in a particular time, a particular place, what does that say about who I am? Are you defined by your history? Are you created by your history? When we meet someone for the first time and we start to chat we usually introduce ourselves in terms of our history. Somebody might say, *'Oh, I was in India,'* and the other replies, *'Oh! I was in India too. What did you do there?'* And so people start to weave their stories together until they think, *'Ah, this is a nice person, I understand them.'* These stories carry a kind of meaning, but it's as if everything we say about our self is giving the sense that there is a self about which things can be said!

So, here in my hand I have something. What could we say about this? What is this?

Response: It is white.

Response: It's a cup.

Response: It's porcelain.

Response: It has a lid.

James: OK, so what about this one? [*James pretends to hold up something.*] [*Laughter*]

Response: It is invisible.

James: Mmm, it's there but it's invisible. We need to have a noun to carry adjectives and adverbs. We need something *there* that we can add our opinions, our comments, our interpretations, and stories to. And we are used to doing that. So actually if we do this [*Again James pretends to hold up something.*] we can also have something here can't we? We can have a gun, an ice-cream... it could be anything. Because we are used to putting values and associations onto something, we can imagine something is there and then put the projection onto it.

In terms of tantra and dzogchen because this is important because it is the natural creativity of the mind, cut off from its ground of emptiness and spiralling around phenomena—or even non-phenomena—and creating the illusion of truly existing entities, including ourselves. That is to say we are tied in knots. Samsara itself is a quality of creativity which has somehow just turned the wrong way.

So, impermanence is also the process of energy. Again and again we create ourselves, we make associations about who we are, we re-tell our story, elaborate our identity. Each of these is a gesture of creativity. It's like creating a rainbow in the sky; due to causes and conditions something seems to be there but you can't grasp it. It's like the reflection of the moon on water, it's like a mirage. Something appears to be there, but it's not there. The buddha taught this illusory nature of phenomena many many times.

Tantra brings to this general buddhist understanding, that these illusions are generated by the energy of the mind itself. We are kind of dazzled by our own clarity so that we can't see—like shining a torch in your eyes.

[We use nouns when really we should be using verbs](#)

Another way of seeing this would be to think that actually it's partially a linguistic problem; that we use nouns where really we should be using verbs. If we say, 'I have a watch in my hand,' it appears to be a fixed thing. However the reason I carry this watch with me is exactly because it's not fixed inside; it goes round and round. If it was fixed it wouldn't be much use! So we can easily accept that there are moving parts inside the watch, but there is also a fixed frame which keeps safe the moving parts which are more vulnerable.

But from the point of view of buddhism, what we have here is a 'watching'. The watch is in the process of continuing to manifest—it is dynamic. If we think back to when we were at school, we learnt a bit about atoms and protons and so on, and we understand that this nuclear and sub-nuclear dynamic energetic structure is actually revealed to us in the form of a metal which seems to be a stable thing existing in itself. And also, in the buddhist analysis based in the early **Abhidharma**, there is the notion that all manifestation is based on tiny moments, each one lasting a sixtieth of a second. Form comes out and then vanishes; comes out and then vanishes. And by the rapid presenting of these moments we, on the outer level, seem to see something which is stable. So what we have is an illusion, and it's an illusion which appears to us because of the nature of our perception. We can see this if we take some old fashioned movie film which is composed of frames. We can put it on the projector, adjust the speed and then the frames seem to flow together and give us a continuous image. That is to say, our eyes don't have the capacity to see the individual frames at a certain speed.

Some insects have brains and link sequences that they can act very quickly. Some frogs, for example, have tongues that shoot out and catch a fly—just in an instant—much quicker than we could manage. That is to say, the world that we experience is the world that is possible for *our* particular constitution. And if that constitution changes, we suddenly start to live in a different world.

On a very simple level, for most people as they get older their eye sight gets weaker and the simple confidence they developed when they were young, that they could see anything, starts to vanish. They are blinking and looking again and again and the letters just won't become clear. So we can understand very directly how, due to causes and conditions, this capacity which was available to us, as the causes and conditions change, that capacity fades away. Our hearing also, diminishes as we get older...

OK, so maybe we can take a break just now. And as we do that, if you can, just observe yourself in the process of going to have a cup of tea, going to the toilet, chatting with people. Just try to observe the very dynamic nature of everything you encounter. When we come back we can have time for questions and so on.

Break

Question about habitual actions and how they are addressed in the three yantras

Question: When you say there is no 'real me', don't you think that our actions tell us a lot about who we are, especially our habitual actions? Doesn't that say anything about a 'real me', or a certain solid something?

James: In the general buddhist teachings there is the idea of the *five skandhas*, or the five heaps, which are the components of a person. These are: form; feelings; cognition; associations or conditioning and consciousness. The fourth one, conditioning or association, is the one which speaks to the question of pattern. This is looked at in various ways.

The most general way would be to think of it in terms of the description given in the *wheel of life*. This starts with ignorance, which is illustrated by a blind old woman hobbling along. The second stage is this association, or conditioning, which is shown by a potter's wheel. The potter takes some of clay and starts to mould it into a shape. As he's building this shape out of the pile of clay something is coming into form. That form shows itself, or insists in the world, in a particular way and yet, it is still connected with the original lump of clay. If the potter is not happy with the shape he can just bash it back in again, but once it is cut off and allowed to dry and fired it takes on a fixed shape. It is the particular quality of attachment which 'fires' the clay.

Actually all our tendencies are possibilities of the potential of our existence and if we loosen up, we can behave in very different ways. We usually don't quite see how socialised we are; how restricted by various internal prohibitions we are from certain kinds of behaviour. These behaviours *are* possible for us but we don't do them because we have an internal policeman or an anxiety in relation to it. You might say that having these rules and regulations is very useful in terms of our social existence because we don't cause too much trouble for each other. But none the less, in terms of our potential—we become restricted.

We could look at this, in terms of the three main bands of understanding in buddhism. Firstly hinayana, which addresses the sense that the world is a very dangerous place and so one should try to renounce all the hooks for further enmeshment in its complexity. Secondly mahayana, which addresses the sense of linkage and connection with others and one's obligation to help them. Thirdly the tantric path, including dzogchen, which is concerned with recognising the original purity of the situation we find ourselves in. We have to remember that these are all *methods* for understanding something. They are not truths in themselves. It is not that one of these paths is more truthful or more real than another. They are ways to examine and behave which will bring about illumination for people with particular kinds of tendencies.

From the hinayana point of view, I start to observe myself, my patterns and tendencies, and I judge some of these to be good and some to be bad. I want to renounce the negative tendencies that lead me into bad actions, and I want to increase the time and energy I spend with things which I think are good. I might even renounce the world and become a monk or a nun, living in a very simple way and avoid provocations and temptations. The goal of that particular orientation is non-disturbance, and therefore what is important is whether our tendencies, our habits, have a capacity to bring disturbance. The meditation practice for that is called *shamatha*, calming the mind. Then there is a move into *vipassana*, where we examine the points at which different phenomena, as they arise and pass, bring about a reaction from us. One starts to see that the constituents of 'my personality', which I take to be 'me', which I feel as '*me*' in the moment that I enact them, are a pattern of thoughts, feelings, memories which arise in the mind.

If I just rock back a little bit from them and observe them with mindfulness, I will see that they are also impermanent. Now what we encounter when we start to do this kind of meditation is what is called *rang gyu* [Tib. rang rgyud], one's own flow, or continuity. For example, if your personality is quite a tight anxious one you will find that in meditation lots of tight anxious thoughts arise. If you are a more relaxed joking person you will find that while you are meditating lots of jokes will come to your mind. Generally, the meditation practice itself will not change the content of one's mind but it will change the relationship that you have with the content of your mind. And this is one of the reasons meditation can be very boring, because you spend a lot of time just being with yourself—and actually, we are all a bit tedious!

The key thing is through mindfulness to start to see that I have a choice how much of myself I bring into a fusion with what is arising and if possible, even in the moment where I start to fuse into my behaviour pattern, to remain mindful of that too, so I am both in it and out of it at the same time.

For example, if you are an anxious kind of person and you worry a lot you can start to see that, 'I am worrying,' which is when you are really fused in it—but also that, 'I do worrying.' That is to say, worries are a process that arise and which I sit in, like sitting in a boat as it moves down the river, *plus* I'm also mindful of this worrying. So these three possibilities are happening at the same time, and one starts to move between these three positions. This is very important in terms of recognising that when these traits or habits or patterns arise, they are our shape. We are that person **but** we can **also** be unconditioned by the condition at the moment we are in the condition. This is very important and very practical.

So, say for example you're sitting in a cafe talking with your friends, telling them a story, and you might suddenly think, '*Oh God, I'm talking too much!*' So you might feel a bit of guilt or a bit of shame and ask yourself, '*Why do I do that?*' That's where we act on ourselves as if **we** were the causal agent: '*I have been talking too much.*' Through doing the practice we can see this is a karmic tendency, this is a particular shaping or conditioning, and in this life it is my luck to talk a lot [*Laughter in room*]. We **have** to do something; it's in the nature of manifesting in the world. Some people are very quiet, some people are very noisy, some people are angry, some people are envious; we all have particular traits. The key question is, do these traits define who we are infinitely? Or do they define who we are **situationally**? By practicing mindfulness we can see that these tendencies are always flowing and changing, but they do have a certain continuity of pattern and these patterns are developed by the impulses of our karma. Character traits will manifest but we don't need to be conditioned by them

So the practice of that meditation is to maintain a clear intentional focus using a neutral object, like the breath or an object like a pebble in front of you, and through that, to maintain an undistracted focus so that the stream of thoughts which would normally hook your attention just goes by. You can start to experience that the contents of your mind don't have to catch you; that the contents of your mind and your awareness, are two separate things. By taking that mindfulness practice into the world, maybe starting with walking meditation and then developing mindfulness at all times, the character traits or personality habits manifest, but one is mindful of that manifestation. It is as if the aspects of oneself that one took to be truly personal, to be defining of oneself, now become just some stuff. It is like being in your own home and you have your clothes, and when you put them on you feel, '*Oh yes, this is me; these are my clothes; this is how I am.*'

Acting the role of Hamlet cf. visualising yourself as Padmasambhava (tantra)

But if you work in a theatre you put on the clothes that are provided for the role. They are not yours but you can occupy them. Because you're on the stage you have to **show** something, and afterwards you take them off. In the same way, we start to see that our anger, our desire, our envy, our depression, or our anxiety—are patterns which we can move into and move out of. When we are in them they **appear** to be us, but because we can move out of them, they are clearly not **really** us. Rather than resisting the momentary situational fusion, one should observe the fact of the freedom which lies in the fusion.

Just as the actor is always themselves—let's call the actor John—if John is playing Hamlet, in the role of Hamlet he **is** Hamlet, but he is always John playing Hamlet. He is not psychotic; he is an actor; he doesn't **believe** he is Hamlet. He believes and knows that he's an actor, lucky enough to get some work, now playing Hamlet. That is a really important thing. So the continuity of John is present even in the moment of being Hamlet.

This view is taken up very much in the practice of tantra where by visualising oneself as the deity, Tara, Chenrezig, Guru Rinpoche..., one leaves one's ordinary identity behind, the identity that one takes to be truly who one is, and one is then immersed in the experience of being Guru Rinpoche. At first when we do that we think, '*I am James, wearing the clothes of Guru Rinpoche.*' When you

really get into the practice and understand it, you understand, *'Ah, I thought I was James but I am really Guru Rinpoche, and now I am Guru Rinpoche walking about wearing James' clothes, talking like James.'* When you experience that, then you have the stability of the meditation, so that under all conditions you never forget the infinite freedom of being, no matter what constraints come up. For example, other people know us in terms of our ordinary identity. Parents, children, colleagues, friends and so on will speak to us not as Guru Rinpoche but as James, or John, or Mary, or whatever.

Of course, if I am *'really'* James and I am just *pretending* to be Tara or Padmasambhava it's like a holiday. Sooner or later I come back to being James—it's just time out. But if we can see that: *'I fell into an attachment to the illusory identity of being James, I was attached to this, it became a limited identity in which I thought I knew who I was, but actually I had lost contact with my potential'* through the practice of meditation you link with your potential, and you realise, *'James is one of my forms. I can also be Tara, Padmasambhava... I can be many different things.'*

This is why in the Nyingmapa tradition we have eight forms of Padmasambhava. This is really important. There is not just one form but eight forms, which show that form is form. Form is display, it is not essence. We are not defined by our performativity. Our performativity is a display, a showing, but it doesn't define what is shown. This is because the source that is doing the showing is infinite; the forms are momentary being, arising according to circumstances, according to situations. If our gaze is only in the situation we feel defined by what we have done, just as most of us can remember, particularly when we were children we did some shameful things. And when we remember doing them, maybe hurting an animal or something, we cringe inside and wonder, *'Oh God! How could I have done that?'* because it is held inside us: *'I shouldn't do that'*. All of our education is saying we are defined by our activity: *'By their deeds you shall know them.'* Buddhism is saying something very different. It is saying that activity is interactive, communicative, in a field which is always changing and moving. You cannot define people by their activity. To confuse being and doing is a big mistake.

Meditation: Three 'A's

Let's now do some meditation to bring this hopefully more clearly into our experience. We use the sound of 'A' three times to relax a little into an open state. We are particularly paying attention to the difference between stillness and movement. When we say 'A' we release the tensions in our body and our fixations with our thoughts and feelings and so on. We just relax into the space in front of us. We can sit with our chin slightly raised and our gaze open; not staring, but just letting the gaze rest in the space in front of us. Just relax into that space and allow whatever is there just to be there.

That is to say, we relax from being a focused consciousness which is reacting to what is coming, working with what is coming, to an open awareness which just merges with space and allows the registering of forms and experiences as they arise and pass.

[Practice of Three 'A's meditation]

OK, so we can go back into that meditation in a few minutes. At first, it's not good to do it for too long. The key thing is just to allow the mind to flow. You can't stop the mind flowing, but you don't have to judge the flow. Whatever arises, arises.

If your mind is very dull and you feel sleepy, then without trying to push that away or change your state, just stay very close to it, stay present with the dullness. And it's the same if you feel bored or distracted or angry... Whatever the state of the mind, just allow it to be there and just be present,

not falling into it and not retreating from it. Have your awareness relaxed and open because judgement is what can make meditation like this difficult. We can judge on the object saying, *'I don't want this stuff happening in my mind,'* and we can judge on the subject, saying *'Oh, I'm very stupid and useless, I can't do anything other than this.'* This judgement separates out the immediate naked awareness in relation to what is arising. It creates a triangulation where you have an experience, with a presence very close together with that experience, in a state of non-duality, which is our goal. But when the judgment comes in like a wedge—so that I'm now thinking about what I'm doing with what is happening—then of course this sets off all sorts of tumbling. In that state the ego becomes a cuckoo in the nest of being.

So, simply relax. And if you find your mind becoming turbulent, relax into the out-breath. You don't need to make any sound; just release into the out-breath and again everything is going on.

OK, so we can do the practice again.

[Practice of Three 'A's meditation]

Questions arising from the meditation

Question: When I meditate I often have this phenomenon of pressure on my skull and I have the tendency to see there is something pathological, like a negative thing, that shouldn't be happening. Maybe on the other hand, it is quite a normal phenomena that happens to almost everybody.

James: OK, we could have a hands-up voting? *[Laughter in room]*. How many people get this? *[A few people put up their hands]* OK a few, so you are almost normal! *[Laughter in room]*.

Sometimes that kind of experience can come if we are trying a bit too hard. We are forcing something and it brings pressure on the breath system, the 'lung'. What you could try to do is enter into the meditation without hopes and fears: *'This is just something I will do for a while and we will see what happens.'* There is also the fact that we spend a lot of time identified with our head. The head is clearly very important. Our key organs are located there, our sense organs, and we also have a kind of protectiveness towards our head, our eyes and so on. We do tend to have a heightened sensitivity around this area. Also very often in meditation, if we are doing a kind of releasing away from the body—either in a tantric style practice through dissolving or through the Three Aa's, or other methods where we are releasing out of our ordinary sense of the body—we often have a residual sensation which arises, maybe in the shoulders or in the head, which pulls us back to the sense that *'The basis of who I am is my body.'* It's not that there is something wrong with having a body, or being embodied, or experiencing bodily sensation; it's about the relationship between the body and the mind.

In many religious structures there is a sense that the essence of ourselves, sometimes called the soul, is trapped in the body. There is the sense that the body has a kind of negative downward force and the soul wants to rise up and be very pure. This is not really a buddhist view though there is some residual tendency of it in some of the hinayana aspects, particularly this notion of renunciation: that when the world impacts our senses it creates turbulence, therefore, we should avoid stimulus so that the mind can be tranquil. So what we are trying to do in the meditation practice is to separate the mind and the body, so that the real relationship between the mind and the body can be revealed.

If we do the Three 'A' practice or the PHAT practice we can have the experience of no-content: not thought, not sensation, not feeling. There is just open—nothing there—just open. Then, from this state, sensation, feeling and so on arise. If we can really get the taste of the open experience, if we really see at this moment there is an unrestricted, unrestrained, openness which has no content, then because it has no limit, it is infinite. And because it is infinite, when something arises we can know it has no other source for arising than this state.

So, when we have a sensation, for example in our head, if we are very clear that the basis of the arising of this sensation is an open awareness, we will be able to hold the experience of: *'This is in my head'* as a manifestation of the open and empty ground. But, if we grasp the sensation: *'It's in my head'*, and we say, *'Ah yes, that's where it is; it's my head,'* then we construct ourselves back in the domain of the ego and of course the openness will vanish. Then all sorts of thoughts about heads and pains will develop and you will be using thought to provide clarity, rather than awareness.

The clarity which is produced by thoughts, is developed by linking one thought to another thought. But, the clarity which arises from relaxation openness and emptiness, is there prior to thought. Thoughts arise as the shiny edge, like if you are looking at the sea in the moonlight and the waves arise and little drops are shimmering. That's what our thoughts are: little drops of beautiful energy arising from the open dharmakaya. It is the depth of the ocean, with its own luminous potential.

Observing ourselves without judgement

Question: You were teaching that when we do prostrations, we do prostrations towards our own buddha nature but that this is actually a sort of image, a sort of ideal in our heads. So how do we find out if we have the right ideal or the wrong ideal?

James: Well, you have to always observe yourself and keep looking. Observing oneself means, in the first instance, sitting like we are here now. We are not quite asleep; we are aware that we are not dead; something is going on. We can become caught up in what is going on *or* we can step back and try to observe, over a gap, what is going on. From that position we can get closer to what's going on until we are not quite in it, but we are not away from it either.

For example, if you have a camera and want to take a photograph, you try to focus it but sometimes it is too close and sometimes too far away. You have to get the right adjustment. In the same way moment-by-moment as we are sitting here, we can observe how we just get caught up in something. We find ourselves drifting off, maybe you are thinking about what I'm saying, or thinking about the shopping, or that there is a pain in your leg... What most **of** us tend to do when we recognise that, is to jump back in a guilty way, as if we have been caught shoplifting or something. We drop the goods: *'Oh, not my thought!'* So in order to observe ourselves, we have to stop judging ourselves.

This is the very first stage. As long as you judge yourself, your relation to yourself will be very bumpy; it will be too extreme. We want to take a kind of neutral mood, of simply observing and being interested in what's going on. In order to take out the judgement we also have to take out the ego, or the invested ego, as the site of observation. In the meditation, when we feel that there are things in our mind—states of our emotion, uncontrollable fantasies, dullness, not getting the point; feeling there is something wrong with us—it becomes very difficult to stay with that experience.

'Liar number one, cheater number one'

So, when we want to look at that kind of experience like doing prostrations, we have to work a little bit first to find a neutral space of observing the phenomena, and then just stay with the neutral observation and trust what is revealed to us. C.R. Lama often used to say, speaking of himself, that he was *'liar number one'* and *'cheater number one'*. And this is also the view we need to take

towards ourselves; we have to see how easily we cheat ourselves. On one level seeing is quite easy; we look around the room and we immediately see things but just behind that *perception* follows the *conception*. We add value into situations, and in that way we imagine we are seeing what we are projecting. This is how we cheat ourselves and cheat others.

From the point of view of dzogchen we are not trying to stop the projection but we are trying to recognise that projection is projection; that the source of this feeling is in my mind, that I am layering this onto the world. This is not something there by itself.

The second stage is when we observe our mind. We look to see what is the basis of this mind, what is the shape of this mind, what are the qualities of this mind, Can they be established in a clear definitive way. Can I know what my mind is? It's a practice that we need to do again and again and again. The key point in this practice is to see the difference between a direct perception and fusion with a concept.

Question: You said that everything that is arising is Padmasambhava but that seems to me also like a concept.

James: It is.

How we do we know which practice to do when?

Question: Why can't I approach reality directly without even that? Are there helpful concepts to approaching reality, and are there concepts that are much more of a hindrance?

James: Maybe most of us experience that we are quite unreliable: sometimes we are clear, sometimes we are not clear, sometimes we can be quite dull and stupid, sometimes we can be angry. We have many different moods. Therefore it is helpful to learn different methods for different times. When we feel relaxed and spacious we can just relax into the state and work with whatever arises. When we are in situations where things around us are perhaps a little bit intense—where there is a risk that the object may become more powerful than the subject, where we may feel conditioned and constrained by things around us—this is a very useful time to visualise oneself as Padmasambhava.

From the point of view of dzogchen, the mind is open, radiant and energetic, but that energy, as it manifests in the world shows itself, and is not a kind of intentional tool. However from the point of view of tantra, Padmasambhava's nature is emptiness and form, but it is also *energy*. When you're in the mode of Padmasambhava and you do the mantra, you can feel this energy flowing through you, and you can feel afterwards that you walk down the street with more confidence, with more light in your eyes. You can meet someone's gaze and not feel so collapsed in yourself. That intentional development of energy, having an impact on the world, is very useful sometimes. And again, sometimes it's more useful just to practice a basic mindfulness; being a little bit separated and wary about the things around us.

But, how will you know which one to use? Nothing can tell you from the outside. It is not like going to a fancy restaurant where you get four different wine glasses and five different sets of knives and forks; it's not so difficult to learn which one goes with what. We are talking about what position to take up. We see it's a bit cold and snowing outside so we should wear a coat. But maybe I don't really need a coat, who can decide? This is the thing, it's not possible to be enlightened as a child. You have to grow up first, although being an adult is very difficult. Many adults live as children, expecting someone else to take care of them, to solve their problems for them.

As an adult we have to live our life knowing that we don't know how to live. Should I stay in my job or leave? Should I have children or not? Should I stay in this relationship? Who can give you the answer to these things? Adult life is very lonely. You can get advice and ideas from other people but in the end **you** have to decide **your life**. The consequence of **your** action comes to **you**, not to the person who gave you the advice! So it is very important to really practice observing yourself. If you find yourself getting into states of doubt and confusion you have to investigate these states and really see. It's insane to ask someone else, *'What shall I do with my life?'* This is how to become a slave.

The question is: *'How can I develop the qualities I need to live my life?'* I myself will have to live it, so I will need to decide what kind of meditation: how long shall I do the meditation for; if I do a meditation for many years and I don't seem to get any result from it am I cheating myself or not? You can talk about it to someone, you can ask their opinion, but in the end **you** have to decide.

Thankfully we are not alone in doing this. All the buddhas of the three times are happy when people do practice. This is why when we take refuge what we are doing is plugging ourselves into a system of allies. Having this sense of a warm supportive presence around us is very important. Holding onto that felt sense of warmth and association and belonging, we then have to sit alone and experience the infinity of our mind.

All limited things arise in the mind, without limiting the mind

As long as I think of my mind is something finite I can try to catch it, push it up my nose to get it into my head, and then keep it in my bone box until I die. This is not the understanding of the buddha dharma. From the very beginning the mind has been pure. This means awareness has no limit. When we look around this room everyone we see is in our mind; our body also is also in our mind. Each of you is the centre of the universe. Each one of us, as we experience the world, experiences the interaction of colour and light, then words and concepts are applied shaping this: *'This is this person, that is that person...'* But even when you look around the room and you see someone you know a lot about—this person is an inhabitant of your mind, but where else are they living? The fact that they are **not** sitting on **your** cushion, doesn't mean they are not in your mind. The mind has no limits; all limited things arise in the mind, without limiting the mind. This is the central teaching of Garab Dorje, of all the great dzogchen masters.

In not recognising the mind as infinite, we take it to be finite, and then the mind lives in the world with other finite objects. When we experience ourselves as a finite person we are caught up in consciousness, that is to say the aspect of our mind which always has a content. We always thinking about something, feeling something, sensing something and from that position there is very little that we can do. When we look out into the world, we see other people—some whom we like, some whom we don't like, some whom might help us, some whom might harm us—and the best we can do is to try to manage our situation as best we can. The view of dzogchen, however, suggests we can be both in a state of relaxed open awareness **and** energetic participation **at the same time**.

For each of us here, at this very moment our being has these two aspects: ***the open awareness of the mind, which is still, and the movement of the mind which is unceasing***. This movement of the mind reveals itself as ourselves, all other beings, houses, cars and so on. Through recognising that movement as always changing—without scratching or marking the infinite open dimension of the mind—we don't have to be fearful of the free play of manifestation.

In the tantric language this is called *vajra* and the vajra or *dorje* [in Tibetan] is a symbol of an indestructible nature. This indestructible nature is not a physical body; it's not some kind of manifestation, because manifestation is always ceasing. But if you recognise that the nature of

emptiness is indestructible, the openness of the ground is indestructible, then all that arises from this indestructible nature is also indestructible.

Imagine if somebody decided that they wanted to murder Mickey Mouse, this would be a terrible crime; children would be very unhappy. But Mickey Mouse, sad to say, has never been born. Mickey Mouse doesn't really exist, so how will you kill him? If something is not born, it can't die. Everything arises out of emptiness, as the form of emptiness, and so is unborn. The unceasing manifestation is also unborn; it hasn't come into a real separate existence. This is not abstract theory.

If you hold this in your mind when you do meditation, then when meditation problems arise you will find this is the perfect solution. The problems of meditation are that we grasp at arisings as if they were real and then feel conditioned by them. Recognising that all experience is unborn means that there is nothing to do with it. Therefore, in meditation just stay relaxed and open. You don't have to develop better thoughts. You don't have to remove bad thoughts. If you simply stay relaxed the mind will move. If you don't stay relaxed, **you** will move. It's really very simple. However, it is very difficult to do. This is because for all our lives, for many *many* lives we have been moving. We know how to move; we know how to think, to have emotion; we know how to be very busy and weave thoughts into patterns... We don't really know how to relax.

So we can do some practice now, starting as we did before, with the Three Aa's. And after we do the Three 'A's just sit. As the mind moves and you find yourself identifying with the movement of the mind, then whenever that occurs don't try to push it away. Don't sink down into despair, just tilt very lightly back and it will move away by itself.

[\[Practice of Three 'A' meditation\]](#)

How can we know if our practice is going well?

Question: What are the indications that show us we are actually on a good way with our practice, or going the wrong way. I had a talk with someone and they said that it depends on the way your life is going. If you don't have too many extremes, either to the positive or the negative, that is an indication that your practice is going well. On the other hand, she said, that sometimes there are certain situations where anger seems absolutely appropriate. Therefore I am confused as to what can actually be a landmark or indicator, for whether my practice is really going well or not.

James: Well, if we take the bodhisattva vow and we connect our energy and our path to enlightenment with that of all beings, then it is likely that we will be disturbed. If you earn let's say, a 100 euros a week you can then think how much you need for your shopping, heating, rent and so forth. But if you have three teenage children and they are taking lots of friends home and all wanting to eat, then it is much more difficult to work out how to budget your money. When you take the bodhisattva vow and open yourself into the world, you actually write a blank cheque—therefore many things will affect you.

Similarly if you are looking at the content of your mind as a way of knowing how your meditation is going, and you have committed yourself to helping others, you will always be disturbed. From the point of view of dzogchen it's not the *content* of the mind that is important but our *awareness* with the content of the mind. Sometimes the mind is very rough, sometimes it's very smooth. The mind can be peaceful for a long time and then become disturbed. Does that mean we are getting worse? Maybe there is just the uprising of some pocket of habits and tendency provoked by some situation in the world.

However, according to the mainstream mahayana tradition there are the various stages of the bodhisattva path. There are ten stages and five ways, each of which has classical accounts of what you can experience at each level. Through that, we can try to see where we are going. But from my own understanding, what is important is that you firstly really try to understand the teaching on the meditation, to really understand, *‘This is the teaching of Garab Dorje, and this is the teaching of how the mind is.’* It doesn’t matter whose mind it is, the structure of the mind of all beings is the same. The **content** of the mind of all beings is different but the **structure** is the same. So if we really understand the structure, and we understand the meditation method, by bringing these two together, gradually a good result will arise.

Some people have a lot of current karmic difficulty from past lives. Some people also have had very difficult childhoods. Some people have difficulties physically in the body so that it’s more difficult for them to practice. Some people are more prone to depressions, anxieties, and so on. However, it’s not a race. It doesn’t really matter what other people do, our task is to stay close to our self. So in that sense, I think what can make it easier is to accept that it’s a marathon—it’s a long journey—and this journey sometimes will be easy and sometimes will be difficult. So, if we really commit ourselves to the journey it doesn’t matter too much what it’s like. If you decide, for example, *‘I am going to Mount Kailash,’* and you think, *‘I am really going to Mount Kailash,’* then it does not matter if the journey is easy or difficult because you know where you are going. But if we think, *‘Oh, I will only do this if I can make a success of it,’* then it is much more difficult.

I hope this is helpful.

Question: What about taking clarity in dreams as a criterion for success in practice? I read that in Namkai Norbu’s writings, but when I was not clear in my dreams I got kind of upset so I would like to have some clarification whether that is a good criterion or not.

James: Everything comes and goes. The basic idea in dzogchen is whatever comes, comes, and whatever goes, goes. In a sense my metaphor of a journey doesn’t apply in dzogchen. Dzogchen is about being here in this moment. We are not moving; awareness never moves. The world is moving, the body is moving, words are moving, but our real nature is not moving. So you don’t need to go on a journey to find your real nature. Your real nature is not hidden. It’s not behind you. It’s not on top of you. You don’t need to buy it. You don’t need to steal it. It’s just there.

If you start to get some recognition of this, problems will continue. The mind will continue to show many different kinds of experiences and so your capacity for awareness is going to be in touch with different kinds of obscurations. **That’s** the journey! The journey is not to get **to** somewhere else, but to hang on to what you’ve got. It’s like finding a wild horse and managing to climb onto it—now you’re on it you just have to hang on! So it is about not falling off. In many ways it’s about surrendering ourselves into a process, having a commitment to it. *‘However it is, I’ll be there,’* is perhaps more helpful than trying to go onto the outside and evaluate where we are. Anyway if it’s going well, what does that mean? What can we now do with that?

The key task is getting a definite experience

Last evening we looked briefly at these four key points from Padmasambhava beginning with primordial purity. Perhaps we should go more into the meditation to really try to get some experience with this? What we are trying to do is to get a definite experience and what we want a definite experience of, is ourselves. What is stopping us having a definite experience of ourselves is our ‘self’.

If you want to look at your left hand you have to get your right hand out of the way. In this example, the left hand is just your mind as it is and the right hand is the creativity, the effulgence, the richness of the mind itself which shows itself as thoughts and feelings and sensations. When I was a child we used to sing a little hymn in church which goes:

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible, hid from our eyes.*

It's very sweet.

This is like dzogchen: the mind's nature hides itself in its own brilliance because **we take** the brilliance to be something else—it's like a waterfall. So when we do the Three 'A' practice and we open a little bit there are many thoughts, feelings, sensations; lots of stuff going on. This 'stuff' is the radiance of the mind. This is exactly the sambhogakaya—but it looks like a junk shop—just some old rubbish floating around in your head. If we get fascinated by what's there, either because we like it or we don't like it, and get into a reaction to it, the focus of our attention will not be able to see the ground itself. When we are in touch with the ground itself then we can experience directly that everything is arising from it. So the key task is to have that experience. In order to do this we have to keep observing the mind to see, *'What is the shape of my mind?' 'The one who is looking and that which is looked for, what is their relationship?'*

It is the mind's own intelligence that is looking for itself, but usually our intelligence is turned **out** looking **at** 'objects'. If you turn that habit towards your mind you will be looking for it as a 'thing' and therefore you will be likely to hang onto stories such as: *'My mind is like this,' 'My mind is like that,' 'Oh, maybe this is it!'*

So our task is to start with the Three 'A' practice and then in the open state, even in the midst of thoughts and feelings, to ask: *'Where is my mind resting? Does my mind rest on anything?' 'My mind', we may have to remember is this capacity to know things: I can **know** Monday, I can **know** Tuesday, I can **know** Wednesday... If my mind is resting on Monday, what am I going to do on Wednesday? So, many wrong answers will come in the mind, many false explanations, but we have to just stay with the one explanation: *'If it is real it will endure; if it is a thought it will go away.'**

If the teaching of the Buddha is right, the mind has no limit. It's not just one thing; it's infinite, universal. When the answer is a thought it's probably not the right answer, but you don't have to judge it, you just stay with it and the candidates who fail will leave the room by themselves! [*Laughter in room*]. Don't look in the manner of seeking something you have lost. Don't look in the manner of a policeman trying to find somebody guilty. Go like an ornithologist into the forest. Go in and find a nice place and sit very quietly. The bird is in the forest—and if you don't move around too much, the bird will appear. So just relax, your mind is there—because the one who is looking shows you.

It will reveal itself, so long as you don't confuse yourself by being busy. Usually when something needs to be done we mobilise our energy, 'I have to do the dishes,' 'I need to go to the bank...' Our life is one of moving out towards things, but this is completely different: if we move we will lose. So this is going against the tendency we normally have.

OK, so let us do the Three 'A' practice and then just hold very gently in our mind this question: *'What is my mind resting on? Where is it located?'*

[Practice of Three 'A' meditation]

This is a very good practice to do. You can do it on your own as much as you like. I think if you continue with it you start to see that everything you could build your sense of identity on is just a

movement of the mind and that you are trying to build a house from pieces of ice floating on the river.

Now we will dedicate the merit. *“If there is any virtue from our study here together we dedicate it for the sake of all sentient beings.”*

End of Day 1 Teachings

Guru yoga using the Three ‘A’s

Good morning. Let’s start with the Three ‘A’ practice, visualising or imagining a letter ‘A’ in the space in front of us, with rainbow light all around it. This ‘A’ represents emptiness, which is the ground of everything, and in particular it represents the manifestation of the three qualities of the guru. So when we sound the Three Aa’s we integrate with the qualities of the guru who is in front of us.

This is a very condensed and simplified form of guru yoga. In the tantric and dzogchen tradition, guru yoga is seen as a most important practice. This is because—although from the very beginning the real nature of ourselves, the nature of our mind, has been alone, naked, and simple—in order to understand that, we have to have connection with another. So the road to our self is through another.

The Guru principle, or function of linking

This is the very opposite of the American dream, the self-made man, somebody who can pull themselves up by their own boot straps. The guru here is the ‘guru principle’, because a guru is essentially a function; it’s not a particular person. It can of course take the form of a particular person, but the guru principle is one of linking. That linking can occur in terms of relative truth and absolute truth. So for example, our mothers and our school teachers link us into the world of social behaviour, the world of language, giving us a way of moving in the world with some degree of skill and elegance—or not, as the case may be! [*Laughter in room*]. We have the teachers who have explained the dharma, who have given us an understanding of dharma views, history, and so on, and so they link us into a world of understanding and the beginnings of practice. And we also have the teachers with the more direct spiritual function, who through initiation or dzogchen transmission link us into our own nature.

This function of linking is enormously important, because the whole basis of ignorance and attachment is that it fragments, it isolates, it separates. So whatever helps take us out of ourselves, helps to connect us on various levels—the level of energetic interaction; the level of symbolic awareness (*when we start realise that our mind is populated not just by thoughts and feelings but by forms, by archetypal forms, by basic tendencies*); the level of the ground nature of our mind, the natural openness of being—any bridging of these is a part of the aspect of the guru.

So here, as we begin this practice, we feel the living presence of all those who have connected us and with whom we are in connection. And then we recite the three A’s, and recognise that our nature and their nature is inseparable; and then we rest into that.

When ignorance arises in the mind there is a forgetfulness of the natural integrated state and a separation into subject and object. As subject we then work to manage the field of objects: we tend to look towards the world of objects either as an interruption to our desires or the source of what we want. The principle of guru yoga is that our nature is pure from the very beginning, and the

nature of the guru is pure. These two, in coming into alignment, unify the ground which is the basis for the arising of states of separation and duality.

Feelings and thoughts arising in meditation

Now, sometimes of course, we do the practice on the basis that the guru is enlightened and we are not, that there is a place of integration and perfection and that we are separate from it. We then pray for the blessing of the guru to help us find our own nature. That is, of course, how it feels! It feels real to experience ourselves as limited, lost, stupid, and so on. To imagine that we are somehow relaxed and open in this natural state, may seem like a public relations statement but have nothing much to do with our lived experience. So then it would make sense to be very small and humble and pray with great faith. The problem with that is that it is grounded in belief in one's own feelings, rather than in belief in the guru. If you feel that you're small and limited yet you've already had teachings about your buddha nature, then you are believing your own feelings more than the teaching. So, if the teaching says that this natural state is available and close at hand and our feelings say, '*No, it's not*', you have a choice. Look at your life: what kind of states have your feelings taken you into? Eternal happiness?

However, that doesn't mean you can't pray with faith. If you recognise feelings for what they are—the energy of the mind—then you do not reply on them as a true definition of who you are. You can use them as a site for mobilising the flow of energy, in which you recognise: this feeling is impermanent and resting on it for a moment before it vanishes, I can move in a particular direction.

But it involves observing the nature of the feeling, 'I am a useless person, I can't meditate, I never understand any of the teachings.' It is through attachment to these beliefs, as being truly definitive of our nature that we wander in samsara. But without changing them, without altering their form, by recognising that these are energetic moments without inherent self-nature, what appear to be limiting forms can themselves be the basis of recognising the nature of the mind. So the key difference here is whether you rest inside something which is arising in your mind, or whether you observe it and work with it.

To try to deal with each of these thoughts as they arise will take a lot of effort and a long long time. So the key difference between a hinayana approach and a tantric and dzogchen approach is not to focus so much on the content of the thought but to observe the process, the dynamic nature of the thought, and to observe where it comes from, where it rests and where it goes to. So the key thing here is not to limit yourself by the limiting thoughts that arise which seem to describe yourself and your world. The one who is limited by the limiting thought is not your real nature. This is what we were looking at yesterday: the difference between consciousness and awareness.

OK so let us try this practice. In the space in front of you imagine this white 'A' and then recite the Three 'A's and rest in this integration with all the gurus. There is no where further to go. There is nothing else to be done. Just rest in this state.

[Practice of Three 'A' meditation]

The Kuntu Zangpo principle

In this kind of meditation there is no object of meditation except whatever occurs. You are not trying to keep the attention focused on anything in particular. This means that whatever occurs is equally worthy of attention, which means not entering into judgment about the content of your mind. So if you have too many ideas of how your mind should be and what you think meditation success would look like, this will make this kind of meditation more difficult. We have to always remember that the founding principle of the lineage of dzogchen is *kuntu zang po*. Kuntu zang po

means ‘always good’; everything is good. And we can realise this in the meditation, whereby we just allow whatever arises to take its place and then to go. It will be revealed not as anything solid, not as anything having an internal defining nature, but as a flow of energy which has many different forms.

We can see the same principle in tantra in terms of the peaceful and wrathful deities, and of course in the eight manifestations of Padmasambhava. Some of these manifestations look very nice, very sweet. You could imagine if you were to meet the *bhikshu* form, or the royal form, and invite them home to meet your mother she wouldn't be too alarmed. But if you brought home Dorje Drolo she would ask, *‘Why can you never get a good boyfriend?’* So clearly, these wrathful forms don't look very nice; they manifest qualities of destruction. But we have to understand: what is the meaning of wrathful deities, of forms of the buddha which look terrifying and frightening? Now, in the world of tantra we are concerned with a particular kind of intention. The wrathful forms arose due to historical circumstances when demonic forms came into the world and the peaceful forms of the buddha were not powerful enough to manage them. So in order to prevent very dangerous things occurring, the buddhas kindly manifested in these killing forms and killed the demons. So we can say that these wrathful forms of the buddha, although they may not look very nice, are actually good because they are very useful—a bit like a dentist's drill! It is important to see the logic of this: things are good because they are useful.

The view in dzogchen is even more radical than this. It's saying that everything is good even if it is useless. When you sit and your mind is very dull and you don't seem to be making any progress and it seems like a waste of time, you might think, *‘Well, how can this be good? I have better things to be doing with my time. If I was going to be sleepy I could be back in my bed, or sitting having a nice cup of coffee, or out helping sentient beings. These things are better—everyone would agree they are better.’* If you see some alcoholic sitting on the street with piss on his trousers you don't think, *‘Oh, this is a wonderful state to be.’* But if you see a nurse coming home from work in her uniform you might think, *‘Oh, that person has spent a good day.’* These are the judgements of our mind. We give meaning and value, and then we take it back again—because **‘we know** what's what’.

But Kunto Zangpo's vision of the world is very different. Everything is good however it is, whether it seems useful or useless, whether it's bright and shining, or dull. The implication of this is clearly, that there is no success and no failure; there is no winning and losing. To be very successful in life can be disastrous, condemning you to more ambition, more need for power, and anxiety about losing your position. So in the realm of meditation we try to give an even attention and open balanced welcome to everything which arises.

Integration in the post meditative state

When we come into the post meditative state, of course we experience different kinds of values in the world around us, but we want to practice discrimination in the manner of a dream. Obviously if you go into a cafe and they charge you 50 euros for a cup of coffee, you don't just pay up. Clearly this is too much, and it's too much because you know what the price of a cup of coffee is. It is exactly in these situations that it's very difficult because the rules of the world are very powerful. What one has to do is to integrate the experiences of discrimination in the world, so that the differentiation that's necessary in order to live, or drive a car, or get to work on time, is a discrimination which is *‘attending to’* the form of things, the surface of the world, without imputing any depth underlying that surface.

These forms of the world are not inherently true, but they are necessary to observe. In Germany you drive on one side of the road; in England they drive on the other side of the road. Neither is inherently true, but it makes a big difference to remember which side to drive on. That is to say, you

are working just with the surface phenomena, with things as they reveal themselves, without giving a kind of solidity to these phenomena.

All of us here know many different things. Sometimes the things that we know we hold very close to us and we develop a kind of pride, or a sense of being an expert, or having a kind of power and dignity in the world because of what we know. We have an accumulation. But imagine if all the things that you knew were to present themselves in your mind at the same time—you'd go mad. In fact what we want is things to present themselves to us, for us, as us, according to the circumstances. That is to say, in the moment of interaction with the environment something will come to mind, come to hand, and we will find ourselves enjoying the availability of this information which makes us more available and useful in the situation.

So clearly, what is important here is a kind of linking, a kind of availability, so that through my connection with the moment and through my connection with my resources, there is a flowing together of what is required, and that this is not something solid, or heavy, or limiting, or constraining. In that way if our energy is relaxed, it will flow into the moment and we will find how we are is OK.

In dzogchen this quality is referred to as *tse/* [Tib. rTsal] and it is illustrated by the example of refraction. When light goes into a crystal there are various fragmentations, and so on, so that the light is split up and comes out as various colourations. So the light of our clarity, our presence, our awareness in the situation, allows us to diversify, to show many different forms according to the particular marks inside this crystalline structure we inhabit. This means staying in the process as it unfolds. If you look ahead too much to plan a situation, if you worry too much about what you did wrong, you will have missed the next moment and the next moment... Each moment arises fresh. Each moment requires some new manifestation.

It is very important then to understand that qualities like anxiety and depression which can usually act as a kind of barrier between us in the world, making us more self-conscious, more retroflexive, so that instead of freely connecting into the world we turn back into our mental perturbation. There is no point to try to push through anxiety or depression with a kind of will power. The task is to take it back into the meditation, not on this level of manifestation but on the level of revelation, where the energy we use is called *rolpa* [Tib. Rol ba]. The traditional image for this is a mirror. And just as the mirror shows many different things without being affected or contaminated by them, so the basic clarity of the mind can welcome all states without being caught in them. Now of course, states like depression and anxiety are very diffuse. It's a bit like sinking-sands or a marsh; if you try to resist you get more caught up. So the key thing is, even when we feel terrible, to enter into the state of meditation, just relaxing and opening. Whenever we seem to get caught up, falling into, fused into states of lost-ness, just gently stay with that. Don't try to retreat but just stay as close as possible, very tolerant and very relaxed. Don't be impatient with yourself. Trust that this is indeed Kuntu Zangpo—this is OK.

It may not be what you want, but it's what you've got. If you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with! [*Laughter*].

HUNG: a semdzin practice for loosening up attachment

So, we can do another practice now. This belongs in the kind of practice called *Semdzin* (sems 'dzin) and it's a practice for loosening up attachment.

We usually experience the world that we encounter as composed of solid entities and we of course feel blocked by them. We don't attempt to walk through walls because we think, 'My body is real and solid and the wall is real and solid.' On the level of outer manifestation that is clearly the case, but we also feel that our idea of our self is blocked by many other things. Our mind can feel persecuted by thoughts or memories arising. We feel blocked by the furniture of our experience.

So what is very important is to develop a sense of unimpeded clarity—the capacity of the mind to be with whatever arises without being limited or blocked by it—so that the capacity for 'arising' to grasp us, to adhere to us, and limit us is diminished. In order to do this we want to work with a sense of power and unimpeded clarity and in order to do *this* we make use of the syllable HUNG.

Five wisdoms and five poisons

Hung represents the five wisdoms and the five wisdoms are the purification of the five poisons. These five poisons are important to know about and to see as a function in our own mind. The first of the poisons is stupidity, or mental dullness, which is essentially the resting on assumptions, taking things for granted. This then generates the two principle secondary poisons: desire/attachment and aversion/anger. As soon as we start to take things for granted we are going to be limited by them because they appear to be self-existing, just there by themselves. Then from that we feel drawn towards some things, which appear to be good and represent what we want, and we feel aversion and hatred towards things which are not what we want, or which seem to be attacking us in some way. Then, the two further outer afflictions, or poisons, are pride and jealousy. Pride of course is when we become fixated on our self as a representation. We develop an image of our self and maintain that image feeling, 'I have achieved something, I am an important person,' so it's a kind of inflation which resists deflation. Jealousy is a quality whereby we become focused on the qualities that someone else has; somebody is gaining something which should be ours and we feel hard done by and upset that we are losing what is properly ours. So these five poisons, or afflictions, function in our daily lives a great deal. They bring us into relationship with phenomena through creating the sense that they are real separate phenomena and these phenomena carry valences, positive or negative.

You can find the five wisdoms elaborated in many books, but for our purposes now, the qualities of the five wisdoms are condensed in the letter HUNG.

The purification of stupidity is the wisdom of the *dharmadhatu*. That is to say, it's the realisation that moment-by-moment the ground of our existence is open. It's never constrained, we are not resting on entities, therefore there is no obscuration coming to the gaze that we have. So for example: if we were looking at a dance performance, you have the stage which is open, and on that stage bodies are moving across it. If the gaze is captured by attention to the details of the dancer's movement, then often the space is lost. But you couldn't have dance without space; it's the space itself that permits the dance to move. As you see more and can hold your attention on the whole stage, the movement takes on a different feel. You start to see the whole system of the entire dance, the choreographer's intention, rather than being captured by some particularly interesting movement. And so this particular wisdom means that, in any situation, one holds the sense of the space. Everything is a movement in space, a placing in space. So rather than being pulled into what seems to be *blocking* space hence become forgetful of the space, it's re-contextualised as, 'just this or that' without interrupting, or cutting into, or dividing, unborn spaciousness.

The wisdom which arises from the purification of desire is the wisdom which is able to see everything very precisely; a clearly discriminating wisdom. Generally speaking, when we feel desire for something, or someone, we give it more attention; we get more fascinated by the details of it. As the song says, 'I only have eyes for you.' But the purification of desire is, 'I have eyes for everything.' Everything is interesting, everything is fascinating. Instead of having a highly invested

special object with the rest receding into the background, wherever the gaze goes, there is some interest, some light, some wonder.

The purification of anger is a mirror-like wisdom, which is to say, that when we're angry we tend to have a very precise sense of what we are angry about. We know it very well, we've got its number. The purification of anger is when that degree of intense focused clarity is taken into everything and so, like a mirror, it shows the precise details of everything without bias.

The purification of pride is the wisdom of equality. This is to recognise that whatever the content of phenomena, because their nature is empty, they are united in the equality of that 'real nature' rather than divided by the particularities of their content. That is to say, life is performative. It's like theatre, where we say, 'An actor is only as good as their last review.' Success is there and then it is gone, failure is there and then it is gone; these are just moments, they don't establish the true nature of anyone or anything. In the course of a week you will be in some situations where people like you and think you are a good person, and you will probably also be in situations where people don't like you so much and maybe don't think you are a good person. Then you can really experience taking up a place and then feeling cast down. That movement is very important. We are both the continuity of awareness and the waves of positive and negative experience. This continuity of awareness is unchanging, whereas how we are located in the world with others is always going to change. That is the problem with pride: it tries to hold onto a position of manifestation as if it was an essence, and so is doomed to unhappiness.

The purification of jealousy is the wisdom which can accomplish everything. If we have things to do in the world we have to make use of whatever resources we have. If one way becomes closed to us, we need to find another way. From the hospital, where I work, to the place where I have a private consulting room I have about ten different methods of travel because London transport is very bad. The tube often breaks down; buses are on strike and so on. So if one way is closed and I'm in a hurry to see a patient, I have to find another way. The problem with jealousy is that we fixate on one object, or one person, and we think that is the key to our happiness: *'If only I had got that job!'* *'Why is that terrible person having the thing that I wanted?'* *'Why am I not with this person? This is the person I love. Why is it they don't want me but they want someone else?'* Then the mind starts to turn around this, and turn around this, and no other solutions arise. It is a collapse of creativity. To recognise what it is—a kind of condensation, an over fixation—and loosen it up, releases the potential to approach the world in an open way.

The transformation of these five poisons, and by extension, all limiting thoughts and behaviours, is represented in the Tibetan letter HUNG.

Instructions of the practice

Some of you will know what the letter HUNG looks like from your practice, but if you don't know, you can visualise a Tibetan letter 'A'. If you don't know what the Tibetan letter 'A' looks like, you can use a capital 'A' because the 'A' represents emptiness and emptiness is the root of these five wisdoms.

The practice itself is quite simple. We just relax, loosening ourselves up and relaxing the identification with the body. To do that you might want to just relax into the out breath. Then, you imagine this letter 'A' or HUNG, and that is the focus of your attention. It is as if all your energy is condensed into this letter.

Then start to recite the letter HUNG, the sound of hung, and as we do that we imagine that this letter is starting to move around. It is very powerful and very sharp and cuts through everything it meets. So it goes right through your body, from the top to the bottom, from side to side; slicing you up until

there is nothing left. It then moves around the room chopping everyone else up; taking down the building; all of Berlin, out; the whole world, out; all the planets. It's going through everything. There is nothing which can block the movement of this energy.

As we are reciting this we feel the power of HUNG—this wisdom conquers all grasping, all stupidity. As always, the more energetic the practice the more you need to take responsibility for your own state. The whole purpose of these kinds of practice is to shake things up, put things into question and disturb the assumptions you are operating from. If you are feeling a little wobbly in yourself, a bit fragile, then be careful, try it a little, and see what happens. If it's not your cup of tea you can stop, just relax and be in the spaciousness.

OK, so let's try this now.

[Practice of HUNG]

Now, if you like, you could talk with a neighbour and try to describe your experience. So let us do that for a few minutes

....

Are there any questions from this practice or from anything else we have spoken about?

Questions

Question: This is a technical question. Would you recommend that we close the eyes?

James: I think with this kind of practice, because it's relating to your own condition, the best thing is to try different ways, when you have time, and to see what it feels like. With all kinds of practices there is always this tension between aligning yourself with a 'proper' way of doing it and exploring what is good for you. If you explore, too much, you can invent a practice that has no link to the tradition, but if you do it in too tight a way you can be doing something which never really touches or works for you.

Question: Referring to the patterns of our behaviour and our karmic patterns, we can either be completely absorbed in them or step back a little from them in order to have the chance to observe them. But there was a third thing and I have forgotten what it was. Would you say something about this?

James: Yes, the third thing is to be present with it as it's occurring, not trying to change it, not observing it from a distance, not 'witnessing' it. Just holding your awareness as a diffuse light. When we are fused in something, it's as if the light or the energy is inside the thing. Because we are caught up in it, it seems alive. And when we are observing something, it's as if we are looking at it with a spotlight or a torch.

The traditional example for this third way, of being present with something as it is occurring, is that it's like the very early stages of dawn, when the light has come into the sky but the sun has not yet arisen. So the light is diffuse everywhere; it just seems to somehow be coming out of everything, very gentle. One maintains that open illumination and allows the experiences to arise and move through it.

Question: Do you recommend that we do this hung practice very often?

James: Yes, if you have time. This is a practice you can do quite a lot and really go into it. One consequence of doing it is that you will feel very disconnected, because you are dissolving the ordinary things that you normally use as a feedback loop to reassure yourself about who you are. So if you are going to do this practice intensively, then you need to be in a situation where after the practice you can have some time to just be very peaceful and don't have to rush to work or drive a car or anything like that. This is the same for all the more energetic extreme practices: you shouldn't try to integrate them with going to work, for example, because they are designed to take you away from that modality.

Practices to do as you fall asleep

In some ways, it's very similar to falling asleep and then waking up in the morning. We are, actually, all very used to letting go of our familiar world. Generally speaking, we sit or lie down to sleep, and gradually we just let go of everything; we let go of our thoughts, our concerns of the day, we let go of our sense of the room, and then we let go of our sense of the body.

In order to help minimise the sense of difference between the structure of ordinary life and the kind of time-out from being asleep at night, we can practice falling asleep into the identification with the deity. And you can do this by visualising yourself as Padmasambhava, or Tara, or Chenrezig...

Or, you could do it like a kind of *phowa* ('pho ba), where you imagine, as you are falling asleep, that there is a rainbow bridge and you are going across this straight into the palace of Padmasambhava.

Another option is to visualise a small white *thigle* (thig le), a small white luminous ball, at a point on your forehead. Just focus your attention on that, so that you try to take the light with you as you fall asleep.

Or, you can relax into the out-breath, just as if you were going into the meditation of the Three A's; just relaxing, so that you integrate your mind in its open ground nature and sleep becomes an experience arising in that state. Then, when you wake up in the morning, you can wake up as Padmasambhava, or Tara, or whoever. Or, you can immediately just go into doing the three A's and relax into the state.

In this way you are trying to take meditation into sleep and meditation into daily life, so that the ordinary constructs that we make become less solid and less real. This also helps to make a kind of culture, or a kind of back ground feeling tone, that the world that I inhabit is one of openness and radiance and free movement. If you do an intense practice like the HUNG or PHAT and you don't have a general feeling of living in a dharma world—if you don't have dharma thoughts a lot in your mind—you are likely just to make yourself feel very strange. Understanding the view is a large part of the practice.

Three stages in dharma learning

In the traditional presentation of dharma learning it is said there are three stages: the first is to listen, the second is to think about, and the third is to bring it into meditation practice.

In regards to this first stage, we have to listen in a way that lets us really hear. This means listening not just with your ears but with your heart, your belly... If you listen with your belly, if you listen with your own lived experience, then if what is explained doesn't make sense to you, you will immediately have a question, because you wonder, 'What is this?' It has to register in our life, otherwise we don't have anything to work with. It's the job of the teacher to try and offer many

different examples and images to help understanding, but students also have to engage with this—and if it is not clear to shout out! Otherwise what is the point?

The second stage, when we are certain that we have heard things properly and they make sense to us, is to reflect on them. That is to say, we have to take these ideas into our memories, into our current experience, and see how they illuminate what is going on; see how they give us a different reading of how we have been making sense of our existence. Through this practice of contemplation we want to get to a stage where no experience of our life becomes outside the dharma for us. For example, maybe you have been waiting at the bus stop for a long time and it is cold. Through your study you embedded in your mind some sense of, *'Oh, I should be reflecting on this, I need to be examining my experience.'* You can then start to think, *'Oh yes, now I'm bored,'* or *'I'm angry,'* or *'I'm upset.'* *'What is this? Where is it in my body?' 'How do I become attached to it?' 'How do I link this current moment of frustration with earlier moments of frustration in my life?'* Contemplation is about developing a confidence that these teachings, have become tools for us to use.

The third stage is to take that into meditation. Remember that meditation is a kind of altered state of consciousness, so in that state, the tools that you use have to be ready-to-hand. You can't get up in the middle of your meditation and check out a bit from a book. Practices like this HUNG practice are grounded in certain kinds of understanding and we need to build up this basic understanding for them to be very effective.

Lunch break

Applying the three stages of dharma learning to emptiness

On the basis of what we have just looked at, let's take the basic buddhist idea of emptiness. In tantra and dzogchen, all the meditations require some understanding of emptiness. Although the actual word 'emptiness' is not often used in dzogchen texts, it is taken for granted that there is an absence of an inherent self-nature in phenomena. Ritual puja texts, like the ***Big Rigdzin***, are, if you like, the theatre of emptiness. Without emptiness the ***Big Rigdzin*** is meaningless. If you don't understand emptiness it's very difficult to get the benefit from that practice.

So, if we take a basic thing, to listen to, or hear emptiness—as in the first stage of dharma learning—means, from one point of view, the absence of inherent self-nature. That probably sounds as strange in German as it sounds in English. So what do we do with that? A central teaching of the Buddha and it sounds very odd? We have to try to find in an ordinary sense, so we can really hear it in our body, what it means.

We all have a body, so we could start with the body. This body that we have is in an after-lunch state. This is different from the before-lunch body. If our body was just our body, it would be just the same after lunch as it was before lunch. The fact that our body changes according to circumstances, that it gets tired at certain points, gets excited at certain points, gets energised at certain points, means that it is a process. Nevertheless each of us says, *'My body. My body is like this. This is my body,'* and seem to be referring to something definite. We have a sense that our body, as a kind of experiential or existential phenomena, is a process that changes according to circumstances, but at the same time we also have certain concepts and memories, images and representations, which give us a sense that our body is an enduring phenomenon.

It's in the form of sensation and energy, and our body as we think about it and make sense of it, appears to be an enduring entity. So from this we might infer that the stable essence of our body is not in our body but outside our body, in terms of how we think about our body. So the inherent self-nature of the body is actually *'exherent'*. Once we recognise that, emptiness is not such a big deal. Emptiness is the direct presence of the body as a lived experience, but one which is

ungraspable. Because, the body we had before lunch was ‘our’ body, was ‘our real body’—we were in it moving around doing that body’s thing—and now, we have this other body, the after-lunch body?! This is emptiness; the lack of stability in phenomena. There are no entities; there are only processes. These processes are always in interaction, or conversation, with the field of experience they inhabit. If we look again at the body of representations, the ideas that we have about our body, that seem to give us the sense that there is a stable enduring phenomena, these are also composed out of processes; processes of linked thoughts, processes of linked words as we formulate sentences. Hopefully this set of ideas is quite clear?

Now let’s take that into contemplation. When you get the opportunity, look out some old photos from your childhood. When you look at a photograph of yourself you see, *‘This is me, I recognise myself.’* But what do you recognise? *‘It may not look like me now, but yes, that is me!’* So what is that? What is the relation between this photographic image, the child who was actually alive then, and us as a living person now?

It shows us how much, how quickly and how easily, we invest in representations. We take the representation to be the living thing. We see how, on the sight of this photograph—maybe one we haven’t looked at for many, many years—memories are evoked. Some of them are cognitive memories, some of them are somatic memories accompanied by strange sensations, maybe a feeling of pathos; all kinds of things... Perhaps we can see that in that strong recollection: *‘That is me, that is how I was; I’m still like that.’* there is an intensity of solidity, a felt sense of true existence.

And yet, nobody has the power of going back to being seven years old again. The photograph might contain familiar images, say a garden that you can still go to, but even if you went to that garden and saw a familiar tree that you used to climb so often, if you weigh as much as I do, you wouldn’t be able to climb it! But also, when you are seven and you look at a tree, it stands in a particular relation to your body. We think it’s the same tree, but a tree has changed, and we have changed, and our relationship with it has changed.

In that moment, we can see how we make ourselves stupid by resisting the fact of impermanence. When we say, *‘Ah, it’s amazing, it hasn’t changed at all,’* this is just being stupid—of course it’s changed. We have changed, the object has changed, and the relation between the two has changed.

What we can see in that is our resistance to the idea of emptiness. We might think, *‘Well, a few things have changed, but essentially it’s the same,’* but this essence exists only in our head. In Tibetan this is called *dag dzin* (‘dag ‘dzin): attachment to a felt sense of an enduring self-identity. When that occurs, you have the sleep, or the illusion of a familiar world. When you go to the bread shop to buy fresh bread, the bread they have on the shelves is the same range of bread on Friday as it was on Wednesday. That’s quite good because you know what you could buy, but if was **exactly** the same bread, you wouldn’t be too happy! So, it is the *idea* which has the stability; the phenomena are changing.

The task in the second stage of learning, contemplation, is to take these ideas into every experience you have. Maybe some old film is coming on the television, a film you know quite well. When you watch it, is it the same film? What is coming in the moment is something fresh. It is coming into our world and we can open to it in a fresh way, or we can use it as a way of reassuring ourselves that we have a good memory because we can remember what they are going to say next. Perhaps we are watching the film at home on a DVD and maybe the last time we saw it was in the cinema, projected on a much bigger level. So here, the environment is different, our mood is probably different, but

we can say that the content of the film is the same. But then when we actually watch the film, usually we are surprised because there are bits we had forgotten about.

That helps us to see, that when we watch *anything*, we always have a contoured or a selective attention. We bring the particular shaping of ourselves into the interaction with the object, so it is revealed through the contouring of our self. All of this helps us see how the phenomena we experience are constructs. The seeming continuity, the seeming inherent existence, is something which is put together and created as a set of mental interpretations which we superimpose on the actual phenomena.

For example, if you go to an exhibition of Rembrandt's self portraits, and we now have available a very nice collection of these, you can see how he is really struggling to engage with his image. He creates these representations and you get a sense, as you look at the different paintings, *'Oh yeah, this is the same kind of person, there is something about him,'* and yet we imagine that they don't really tell us anything about Rembrandt. **We** can use that image to create **our** fantasy, **our** story of what he would have been like if we'd met him and had a coffee with him, but we don't really know. So when we go to art galleries, when we look at the ballet, we cannot help but pull the images into our world. It looks as if we're being taken into **their** world, but really it's coming into **our** world.

So through this practice of contemplation, we want to deepen and strengthen our understanding of process; a process which is ceaseless, and in being ceaseless, is ungraspable. You can only get a sense of it by participating in it, by being part of it, but not falling asleep in it. If you participate with presence in the process, life is a beautiful energetic movement, something ceaselessly unfolding but without any substance. The more we attend *into* the process without building the solidifying bridges of concept—on which we seem to create essences—we start to see that there are gaps, gaps in the moments when there is just nothing. And then the process arises again, and the process arises again...

Applying three stages of dharma learning to doing tantric practices

You can take this kind of contemplation out in all directions, to all the phenomena you meet, but I'd like to briefly develop this in a way that would be helpful if you were going to do a practice like the **Big Rigdzin**, or any tantric practice.

Continue looking at these photographs from the past and really examine, *'What is the secure continuity of my existence as whoever I am?'* So, in the case of myself, as James, since in living my life I don't know what's going to happen to me, and I also don't know what I'm going to do, my identity is revealed to me after the fact of its presentation. This means that the stories I develop about myself are a way of tidying up the immediacy and spontaneity of what I experience myself to be in the world. Does that seem to fit with your experience?

Who is the one who is doing me?

If you strongly feel that you know who you are and what you are going to do, my suggestion would be, that makes you blind to the fact that you actually don't know who you are and you don't know what you're going to do. So, I know I am going to do something just now, because I'm here to do something, but I don't know exactly what I'm going to do. And I don't know what my body is going to do. I mean, my body does 'leaning things', 'bending things', my legs move around, I'm stretching forward and backward. But who is doing that? In the terms of the police, I am clearly the one who is doing it. I have to be responsible for what I do, but who is the one who is doing me? This is a really important thing to keep investigating.

When you walk down the street and you find your body moving around people, or avoiding ice if it looks slippery, where did that decision come from? It comes before consciousness usually; so consciousness is catching up with, and making sense of an experience which has already presented itself. So, if there is this process of manifestation which is happening in relation to the environment, and also occurring with some kind of attention (albeit at a slight time delay), and sometimes some story development about these events, then a great deal of how I am is never attended to by myself. This is clearly obvious in terms of our phenomena of being on automatic pilot; people can drive for hundreds of kilometres with no awareness of what they were doing. In the modern sense you would say that the brain was driving the car; the person's consciousness was not. They had no conscious attention to the task.

So, when we come into doing a tantric practice, at the stage of the development of the mandala it will almost always say, Out of the clear blue sky comes a seed syllable. This first line that describes the clear blue sky is called: de zhin nyi gi ting ne dzin (de bzhin nyid gi ting nge 'dzin) and means the contemplation of how things are. That is to say, there is an open potential which is the ground of what we take to be things, but which really it is just open. We might think that because it's a clear blue sky, it's very high and therefore very holy, something very far away from us. But when you observe yourself in your ordinary activity, this clear blue sky is in front of you every second of your day.

Our behaviour reveals itself into an open space of potentiality. It's not something tightly constructed by ourselves. We are not like an architect planning a building, we are just participating in existence, and that participation requires space. If we have no particular fixed plan and if we just trust our life, something usually fairly useful will happen. When we become more anxious it becomes more difficult, because we feel we have to get things right, to do things the right way. That can occur when we have a fixed view of ourselves as a set of representations, and we fear that if we don't meet some pre-established representation we will be in the wrong. For example, when I was first learning meditation, I learnt it in a theravadin system with Goenka, a Burmese teacher. He was very, very strict, and if you moved around he would take this as some terrible insult to his teaching. So I would spend all the time trying to stop my body moving around, and that became the main meditation I was doing: a self-imprisonment on the basis of trying to convince someone else that I was better than I was. And that's not an uncommon thing to do. We imagine we know what the other person thinks we should be like and then we try to become the thing that we think they want, even though it's not us. But the body is *made* to move, and the movement of the body is the energy just arising and releasing itself. If you keep the mind relaxed, the movement of your body won't disturb your meditation. And whatever other people think of us that is the movement of *their* mind!

It is often described in the texts that a yogi should be shameless. That doesn't mean that they should behave in a *bad* way, but it means that their behaviour should arise from an awareness of the situation, rather than an attention towards other people's expectations of how they should be. So, this clear blue sky is the space in which we reveal ourselves. And *how* we reveal ourselves, as we understand ourselves consciously, is an interplay between the dynamic movement of our body and sensation, and the particular constructions of thoughts that we have.

Following from this, the openness of the clear blue sky, we have the line about the arising of rainbow light which condenses as the seed syllable. This is called kuntu nang wai ting ne dzin (kun tu snang ba'i ting nge 'dzin) meaning the meditation which gives rise to appearances. This is referring particularly to the arising of the rainbow coloured light from the blue sky just before it turns into the seed syllable. These five coloured rainbow lights represent the five elements, and all the other attributes; the five wisdoms as well, but particularly the five elements. That is to say, earth, water, fire, wind and space are all qualities arising out of emptiness. As these condense into the seed syllable—and for the *Big Rigdzin* this is the letter HRI because it's the family of Amitabha,

the lotus family—the letter, at this stage, is called **gyu i ting ne dzin** (rgyu'i ting nge 'dzin). This means: the contemplation, or meditation, of the cause; because this letter becomes the cause of the mandala and all the deities.

At this point, you have the basis for arising yourself as the mandala house, as Padmasambhava, and as all the other forms. These are all identities which you take up: fixed identities like a building, dynamic moving identities like the aspects of Padmasambhava, and so on. So through your contemplation, if you have got some idea that your own nature all the time is empty, that you exist as this flow of ungraspable energy with a discourse running on top, it's very easy then to shift the discourse from the discourse of James, or whoever, into the discourse of Padmasambhava. The actually energetic manifestation will take its form according to causes and circumstance, as it always does.

So as you read the text, you create a situation of cues which allow you to develop these particular ideas of identity. These identities are as real as your usual identity, but if you believe that your usual identity is fixed and continuing and has its own essence, it will be very difficult. But through contemplation you can see, *'Oh, I am always constructing myself. I construct myself as James out of my memories, my thoughts, my intentions, and now, I am constructing something else.'* The same potential tools, the resources arising from emptiness, are now being transformed towards another task. And this is the essence of tantra. The clutch, if you like, to change gear, is emptiness. We are locked in the gear of our karmic identity, driving along at this particular speed, perceiving what we perceive at that speed, *then*, we change gear—we lock in—and now we're doing Padmasambhava!

So that is an example of how you can unify listening/hearing, contemplating/thinking about and meditating, so that ordinary life experience can help you go into your more precise dharma practice, and then that more precise dharma practice feeds back into ordinary life.

Five minute break

Questions

So, if there are any last questions?

Question: Please explain more about the last part in the **Big Rigdzin** where we are coming into the state of Padmasambhava. Do we lose all identity? Am I walking around like Tarzan?

James: OK. In the **Big Rigdzin** practice, it has a stage towards the end, of dissolving; the *benza mu* section, where the whole mandala, with yourself as Padmasambhava, goes into emptiness and you come back in this form [James points to his body.] But this form is a form of Padmasambhava, and everyone you see is a form of Padmasambhava; so everything has become Padmasambhava. The logic of the meditation is this: I start in my ordinary body, just attached to it. I then become Padmasambhava in this special form. I then do the mantra and he changes. Then at the end, I become my ordinary body again, with the clear experience that this is a form of Padmasambhava. Then probably, through interactions in the world, I forget this and so next time I come to do the practice, once again I start with just being me. The more often you do that, the more you start to build up a sense, almost like a wave motion: Padmasambhava in the classical form—Padmasambhava in my form—Padmasambhava in the classical form... So they are just pulsing together.

Cinema metaphor

Question: I have a question about these gaps. Because if everything is a process, I don't understand how gaps can actually ...

James: Well, it's a bit like the cinema metaphor which we used earlier. In the cinema you have frames with gaps in-between the frames. At a certain speed, this gap becomes invisible and you only see the frame. In our ordinary life, we are so caught up in what's going on, that we only see the movie of our life; we don't see any gaps. But through meditation you can slow the movie down and then you start to see there are gaps. How things appear always depends on how we view them. We take our ordinary vision—in dzogchen we would say our karmic vision—for reality. But it's not reality; it's not how things actually are. It is a particular way of experiencing the world, and if we change our way of experiencing the world, we will live in a different world.

It's not that there is this actual world and then we go and dream about something else; but *this actual world is a dream. And so if you make a different dream, you have a different world.* This is the heart of the Buddha's teaching on all the different levels. This world is an illusion; it's not solid, it's not fixed. And the way this illusion comes into being, is pulsations of experience.

We are very addicted to our movie; it is very powerful for us. It usually doesn't give us much pause. It may give us pause in the sense that we don't want the story line in our movie to continue; we would like another story line. But it usually does not make us think, 'I'd like to change this story,' because for most of us, the only way we could think to do that would be to kill ourselves. Suicide is very popular; a lot of people do it, because they feel the only way out of this movie is death.

Dharma is trying to show you how to change the movie while it's still running, because nobody can stop the movie. Even changing the reel while the projector is running is a very skilled activity. So it helps if we can slow it down. This is what a lot of the preliminary practices in meditation are about. For example, in the *Big Rigdzin*, there are the four thoughts that change our relation to our existence: precious human birth, impermanence, karma and samsara. All of these put in little gaps; they make us stop: *'Oh, why do I do that? Is this really what I want to do?'* These are very useful.

The more we can change our perspective, change our gaze, and look from different points of view, then the iconic quality of our existence—like a Greek or Tibetan icon that seems to be the thing itself that hooks our devotion, our attachment to it—becomes transformed into a three dimensional sculpture. Then we start to be able to walk around our own life, thereby seeing that it is very complex; it's not just one thing. So our tendency to tell a simple story about ourselves, a seamless story, breaks down, and we have to say, *'From this point of view it looks like that. From that point it looks like this.'* That is already opening us up to start understanding something of emptiness.

That bring us towards the end but we have time for a final meditation. We can do this Three 'A' practice, and at the end of that we can just gently release whatever merit or virtue we have generated by our study and practice together. Doing this includes all sentient beings in the practice, so that they automatically partake of it.

Three 'A' Practice, followed by

Dedicating the merit from this teaching and practice, for the sake of all sentient beings

So we come to the end of our brief time together. Thank you all for coming and participating so well. And thank you so much also to our dear translator, Kati Yahoual who works so hard!
[Applause from those in room]