

# *Focusing and Distraction*

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## Excerpts

*According to Buddhist thinking we lose the open spaciousness of being, which is our original nature, when we collapse into a false identification with momentary arisings as if these were truly ourselves.*

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*In order to develop we need to find a way to balance the tension which always exists between excitement, creativity, expansion and new possibilities on the one hand, and comfort, reassurance, and security on the other.*

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*It is important to stay relaxed and open with the experience. It's as if you were in a forest looking for a bird, you have to become very still. You can't really look for the bird since that would create disturbance, yet if you're open and relaxed the bird will reveal itself within that space of awareness.*

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*Thoughts, feelings and sensations are ceaselessly arising. They're arising from emptiness, in emptiness, as emptiness.*

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*The flow of my experience is arising, and I can be both open to it and apart from it simultaneously.*

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## Investigating the root of the problem

Buddhism developed from the quest of Buddha Shakyamuni, the historical buddha of our time, to understand why life was so difficult. His first teaching was about the Four Noble Truths: about suffering, the causes of suffering, the ending of suffering, and the way to end suffering.

Through his own investigation of himself the Buddha came to the conclusion that the root of all dissatisfaction was the arising of an attachment to experience, an attachment which is based on a misunderstanding of the actual nature of experience. We take situations which are actually dynamic, unfolding and changing and organise them according to our pre-existing notions and templates. We are surrounded by suffering, dissatisfaction, confusion and irritation; so many events can provoke a sense of '*dis*-ease', of not being relaxed, open and free in ourselves. As with the Buddha, the starting point for each of us has to be enquiring into why our lives are difficult. How do I, perhaps unwittingly, encourage these difficulties in my life, and how can I start to get free from them?

For example we might consider how we relate to the growing independence of children. When you have very small children they don't move around much so you can easily keep an eye on them, they are either lying in a cot or hanging onto your body. Sometimes this seems a bit much and you'd like them to go away, but anyway you are stuck with them! However as they get bigger they start to crawl about, then they go out to play. Later they want to go off with their friends, and at this stage, if they're not back home at the agreed time, perhaps you worry about them. You might start to think about going out to look for them.

Your involvement, anxiety, and love for them create an attachment which is both useful and not useful. The positive quality of the attachment is that you are thoughtful about them. You give them the kind of food they like to eat, you think in advance of nice things you might do with them and try to clear the path ahead for them in life. The negative side is that you can worry about them and hold them in mind when they are not there in a way that creates an unnecessary concern for you. Then, when they return, you might present them with this concern, 'Where were you! What have you been doing?' The children are growing and changing but we hold onto an image of them as if they could be known – *my son, or my daughter, should* be doing this... so why are they doing *that*?

Maybe they were just out having fun and being happy but we think that they are very selfish because they were not thinking about us worrying about them. If someone asked 'Don't you want your kids out having fun and being happy?' you'd say 'Of course!' but often our attachment winds us into worry and anxiety which does nobody any favours. If they go out to play they can't know in advance what will happen. Perhaps it's been raining then, just as it's time to go home, the sun comes out. The rain stopped them from playing football earlier, so now that the sun is

shining, what do they do? They play football! They use their natural intelligence to seize the moment and be present, but they also get carried away in the moment, and forget the frame of what they had said to their Mum or Dad.

## Forming identity

I imagine that we all struggle with being attached either to frames and structures or to impulses. People who get a bit obsessional like to hold the frame – they like to know what's what and where everything is in advance. These people tend to find impulsive people very difficult. People who are very impulsive and 'leap into the moment' want to respond to what's there and they find people who are always holding the frame a real pain. We tend to get stuck in one of these patterns and it becomes part of our sense of identity. As we become aware of what we don't do and don't like an indirect sense of who we are is created. We know we are not like other people because they behave differently.

In our attachment to this sense of identity we lose the freedom to explore our potential to respond to evolving situations in different ways. We can see that other people are able to behave in ways which are different to ours, so we could think 'Well, what's so great about always being 'me'?' and move out towards the situation in a different way. However, if we have built up a rather solid view of ourselves it will act as a barrier to prevent that from happening... 'No, that's not me! I couldn't do that. I wouldn't be 'me', if I did that.'

This apparent solidity of ourselves is actually a composite formed from the accumulation of experiences in which we were making choices, such as 'Shall I do this, or shall I do that?' If we are a hesitant, shy, kind of person we'll tend to step back, and if we are an enthusiastic impulsive person we'll tend to step forward. With each repetition of the developing tendency, we get used to responding in a particular way. As our attitude to the world becomes more engrained it is in operation before any new situation arrives, for we have already taken up our position – that of just being 'us'. Thus we import a kind of patterning, a staleness or fixity, into a moment which is potentially quite open and fresh, where many things are possible.

This behaviour finds expression in many ways. For example, my mother has always eaten the food put on her plate. Now that she's almost ninety she doesn't like to eat very much and she can feel quite persecuted by the amount of food put in front of her. When we go out for a meal she always says 'Please don't give me very much food' but even a small portion is too much for her. Then, although everyone says 'Oh mum, it's okay, nobody cares, it doesn't matter' she feels very bad because in her mind there is a rule, reinforced by living through the war and rationing, that you have to finish the food on your plate. This rule that she lived by, which gave structure to her life, now becomes a kind of limit because she knows that for her to be 'her' she has to finish the food on her plate.

During World War Two, because there wasn't much else to eat and you needed the energy, it was probably a good thing to be able to eat everything, even if you didn't want it. However, fifty years later, this useful and attuned attitude no longer makes any sense. It's not in tune with my mother's health or her body, nor is it in tune with current attitudes in this culture of freedom for people to pick around food. So her decision towards the current environment comes out of her history, from a pattern that was formed at another time in her life. I'm sure that we all have these markers in which our decision is already made before the event.

When we take an attitude from one situation, where it was effective, attuned and valuable, and apply it into another situation where it is not useful, the problem caused by attachment becomes clear. The response—which I know how to make and which I identify with as it gives me a sense of me being 'me'—becomes more important to maintain than exploring the possibilities of a new approach. In this way we strengthen our tendency to respond in familiar ways with the result that we find our lives becoming rather boring, for nothing very fresh can come from maintaining the same attitude. In order to develop we need to find a way to balance the tension which always exists between excitement, creativity, expansion, and new possibility on the one hand, and comfort, reassurance, and being able to know what's what in advance, on the other.

Very often we are using habit as a way of reassuring ourselves, rather than being present with ourselves. If we start to trust our own experience we might find that it is naked, open and unformed, and that as new situations come we can respond in different ways. At this point we often encounter an anxiety about what to do and it can be very tempting to retreat to that familiar choice.

In terms of radical practice, some of the great yogis and practitioners in the past would leave their country and go to an entirely new environment, cutting off all the external stimuli for their attachments. They might go and live in a cave or go to a country where they did not understand the language, where nobody knew them or had any expectations about them. That's quite a severe leap to make and it doesn't always turn out well. Many people retire to Spain, but they are not Spanish, and it's a bit hot in the summer, and they get their Daily Mail a day late, so after a while they want to come home again! If you move to somewhere different you have to be able to open to that difference and find a way through it. I don't think we need to take such extreme measures but we do perhaps need to look at the nature of the 'rock' on which we build the church of ourselves? What appears to be the solid basis of who we think we are? We have to explore whether the building blocks of ourselves are really as reliable and as useful as we think they are.

## Conditioning and expectations

The story of prince Siddhartha, who became the Buddha, recounts how as a youth he was being groomed to become the ruler of his small territory. He was protected from difficulties and offered a way of life that was pretty much guaranteed. He was given a package-deal which included horses, chariots, good food, friends and servants. Yet actually he was imprisoned within this package. For a prince living in an Indian extended family situation there would be nowhere to hide – someone would always be keeping an eye on you, the servants gossip, and everyone knows your business. Also people have lots of expectations about you and if you deviate from these they will either tell you or gossip about you.

He was caught in a self-perpetuating loop of desire and expectation: *'I want to be liked by people, so I do what they think I should do, and then they approve of me. They approve of me because, by me being reliably 'me', I fulfil their expectations about how their world is and so reduce their anxiety.'* Most of us get caught up in this kind of cycle where, in order to make other people happy, we give away our freedom. Yet the belief 'If I behave in this way and make you happy, you will always be there for me' seems to have little basis in reality, it is an illusion. Many mothers' hearts are broken when their children emigrate to Australia or they get into heroin or marry the wrong woman or they don't get married at all and have twenty kids! Children become whoever they are, they are not an extension of the parent's fantasy. Often we have made little contracts in our minds, little deals about how we think it will be... 'if I do this, they will do that'... but life does not seem to work out like that.

When you retire from work after forty years at the mill, you might be rewarded with a clock and some thanks for your reliability, but then it's 'Off you go and don't come back!' Suddenly the little box that you have been living in for all these years has gone. Habitual work had given an apparently enduring pattern to life and when the safety of the pattern is seen to be illusory it often leads to a collapse of confidence, sense of purpose and identity. Using attachment to try to secure an insecure territory is not very helpful. When we try to solidify a dynamic evolving field of experience it's like trying to underpin a house that does not have solid foundations.

### Working with life's patterns

Often our tendency is to pump more and more energy into 'holding it all together'. However the Buddha found a different way to experience life. Rather than trying to impose patterns on life, he found that by relaxing a bit and stepping back and observing the process of existence, it becomes clear that the flow of events has patterns within it. These patterns can be seen, identified, and responded to, so that as a situation emerges and evolves you can be with it. You don't need a huge amount of knowledge to do that, what you do need is the willingness to be present. That is to say, not to be in your own head, not to be filled up with worries and anxieties, not to be filled with plans about how you would like things to be, but to actually allow yourself to be here. Nobody can make their life how they want it to be because life is as it comes.

I think it is very unlikely that Her Majesty the Queen would have liked her life to be the way it is or that her family life has brought her great happiness. So if somebody with a huge amount of money, a big title, lots of flunkies and armed guards cannot live life on their own terms, then it is not so likely that we can. One of her kindnesses to this nation state is to indicate the futility of power: 'The paths of glory lead but to the grave.' The notion that you can control the situation is one of the biggest myths and illusions that we suffer from.

When we try to install control rather than responsiveness, aliveness, freshness and openness should be, we get lots of problems. Sometimes we just want something to happen although we know it's not ideal, and we push it through. I would imagine that we have all, at some point, tried to ensure that an event would occur which might not have happened without our blinkered intervention. Sometimes people stay in a job that is not very good for them. They reassure themselves that the job is not so bad because to give up the job would mean to give up the salary and then they'd have a problem with the mortgage. So in order to pay the mortgage they stay in a job that really breaks their heart. The years go by and, as the years go by, their life vanishes. They've got a house but they feel sad and dispirited.

### What is important in life?

Part of the problem with making plans is that the sense of agency and mastery it generates, leads us to live in the future rather than in the present. A plan is a construct in our mind – it's a set of representations, of thoughts, of concepts. Although what we imagine may be very clear and can have a beautiful shape, it is at odds with our much less reliable day-to-day life.

One of the really interesting phenomena in the last twenty to thirty years has been the rise in the divorce rate. Apparently almost seventy per cent of all divorces are instigated by women. Once women have a bit of economic freedom, they are pretty clear that they don't want to hang with some guy who's giving them a bad time, who's not being affectionate and is more interested in golf! Seventy years ago, if the man left the woman it was a disaster – she would be left with the kids and have no money. Nowadays, with the Child Support Agency, the child financial protection service, women feel that they have some economic security and that they can start to make choices out of their feelings. We can see that in the past the fear of things going from bad to worse, perhaps of losing a house, has led to people making terrible compromises. They haven't lived from their heart, their belly, their energy, and their fresh relation to the world, they have lived out of their anxiety, worry and fear, which is a truly dreadful way to live.

If you have been constrained for a very long time then experiencing freedom is, at first, a bit unsettling. However as you become alive, attuned, and in your senses, you experience a world which has pattern and shape. The rain, for example, easily evokes a particular response. When it



starts to rain, you don't have to think too much about what to do, you run for cover or you get your umbrella up. If a car is coming at you rather fast you get out of the way. If we stay alive in our senses we can respond to many of the situations that come. Moreover opening to the freshness of the unfolding situation brings about a parallel sense of freshness in ourselves.

The larger structures, which are outside immediacy, like working out how you are going to pay certain bills, can be done with paper a pen and half an hour of thought. Most of the practical problems in life are not very difficult to solve.

In my hospital work I often see people who lack both a clear sense of themselves and a sense of how the world functions. Due to this they often don't pay their bills on time. Then they get involved with loan sharks and pay huge interest rates. Everything seems completely unmanageable because each time a new bill comes, rather than being able to think about how the practical details could be better managed, they have an emotional reaction and feel overwhelmed. The feeling of being overwhelmed often leads to compensating behaviour such as getting drunk or gambling in the hope of a magical cure. If they are willing to see a debt counsellor all the loans can be consolidated. When the repayment schedule is worked out they start to relax because now the problem has a shape. If they can hold to that shape and don't unravel it like an old jumper, they will stay big and the problem will stay small. However, if they lose the shape, chaos will return and worry will mushroom like summertime clouds.

When this happens we become very small and disempowered. When you get caught up in an issue you lose your sense of proportion. From a buddhist point of view this is a sign that attachment is operating. As you get caught up in attachment you lose the felt sense of who you are – you lose your true size – and, as it takes on connections with other problems, the issue also loses its true size. From this we tend to build up an image of who we are: 'I'm a useless person' 'I'm a failure' 'I never get it together' 'relationships never work out for me' or whatever the story is. Then as new events arise we don't attend to them correctly because, in our shrunken and collapsed state, we don't see the actual shape of the problems and so we respond to them out of our fantasy – which creates more trouble!

### Present and relaxed with things as they are

The purpose of buddhist practice is to help us stay present and relaxed in ourselves and connected with the world. We cannot be present in ourselves but apart from the world because we are always already part of the world. Part of our problem is that we try to push the difficult things of the world away and pull in the nice things of the world in order to have more of them. However, we make our choices inside a world that is *our world*, so as we push things away we push them into our own world. It's like throwing your rubbish out of the window into your garden – it is still in your space!

All the problems that occur are in our space because this whole world is ours. We might say 'Well, if people are hungry in Africa, that's the Africans' problem it's not ours' but we know that, with the interconnection of all communities and social functions, problems anywhere in the world come back to us with increasing rapidity. If an oil pipeline is blown up in Alaska that affects world oil prices, which affects the cost of driving at home. There is no way to cut something bad off and put it outside – to project it onto someone else and think 'well now I'm safe' – because actually every single incident in the world has some impact on our lives.

As we begin to see that we can't ring-fence ourselves and we can't control our interaction with the world we realise that we need to work with the fact that we are part of the world. Becoming more open does not mean becoming more vulnerable and ready to be overwhelmed. A present focused awareness is actually very powerful. It is not a weak absorbent thing like a sponge but it has a kind of backbone of its own with an energy of radiance and effulgence. This gives a sense of identity which is sparkling and luminous rather than concretised.

In order to achieve this it helps to understand both how problems arise and what it is that problems cover over. Buddhism offers a description of how ignorance and attachment function and how this relates to the experiences that we might have in our lives. It also offers descriptions of how our original nature – our buddha-nature or potential – is covered over by the insistence of these limitations.

### The nature of the mind

In this tradition our mind is said to be like the sky. Many things can pass through the sky – rain, clouds and sunshine, aeroplanes and birds – but because of their impermanent nature they don't fill the sky forever. During the monsoon in India, there can be two or three months when it's very, very cloudy up in the hills. It can seem as if the clouds and the sky are the same but actually the clouds are always moving through the sky. Just like the clouds, our thoughts and all the things that we cling to, externally and internally, are in movement. It is a kind of ignorance to keep thinking that impermanent phenomena are fixed.

In the very moment that we say 'I need a drink!' or 'I'd die for a cup of tea' we are identifying with a thought which has arisen. This thought feels like a true definition of me, 'This is who I am!' Yet although it feels as though it *is* me – fully 'one hundred per cent' who I am – it soon goes. The danger with this kind of identification that has us jumping from one thought to the next, is that we are so busy we are unable to delight in the exquisite movement of the mind. Being fused with each passing event, it becomes impossible to enjoy the beautiful dance of the flow of experiences, some happy, some sad, some open, some envious, some greedy and so forth. We are unable to see that all these are the wonderful display of the richness of our potential. Instead there is an attempt to appropriate some experiences and to push others away.

We then hang onto the ones that have been appropriated and say that these experiences 'are me'... but the one who is saying that, is also a thought.

If I say 'I like chocolate' I am expressing a thought; it cannot be an identity because this thought comes and goes. Children show this very clearly ... 'Anyone here like chocolates?'... 'Me! Me!' They are one hundred per cent into the liking of chocolate but if you then say 'Shall we go out and play football?' they are then fully into that. You can see them throwing themselves around into all these possibilities and each one seems completely real and then it's gone. Of course if you've got kids you learn not to take these enthusiasms too seriously, because if you buy them everything they yearn for, you'll go bankrupt and they'll never play with the damn things!

### Separating from false identification

So we need to learn how to enjoy the energy of our experience, our world, as dynamic and unfolding, while maintaining the profound integration into relaxed spaciousness. According to Buddhist thinking we lose the open spaciousness of being, which is our original nature, when we collapse into a false identification with momentary arisings as if they were truly ourselves. The one who clings is in fact nothing other than transient moments of experience; the one who is aware of that clinging does not cling and does not change.

One style of practice is to relax into the natural openness of being while another is to disrupt our attachment to the veils that cover that openness of being. These veils are not, in themselves, something wrong or bad but if they interrupt our own relationship with all the aspects of our being they become unhelpful in that they perform a disintegrative function. Work designed to disrupt the identification with the flow of arisings can be peaceful or more intense.

Peaceful disruption includes things like mindfulness practice where, by focusing the attention on a simple object, the ordinary identification with the flow of arising is interrupted again and again. This involves a struggle because our tendency is to see ourselves as inseparable from a dialogue with whatever is arising. In other words our 'sense of being conscious' is always intentional – as the subject it always takes an object. You cannot have consciousness without an object so our mind is always tilted towards something – either looking back to the past, preoccupied by something in the present, or looking forward to something in the future. We are always gestured 'towards the other.'

This dialogical or relational mode is not wrong in itself but it is over solidified in that there is 'me' in relation to 'that', subject in relation to object. However, because consciousness is an aspect of awareness, this sense of being a discrete subject is not an accurate definition of who we are. Consciousness is the quality or the clarity of the mind as it turns towards the object but, even in turning towards the object, there is an awareness of that movement. For example, as I'm

talking to you I'm also aware that I'm talking. I'm conscious of being *in* the speaking as I am speaking and I also have a sense of speaking to you. As the people I'm relating to, you are in a sense my 'object'. So as I am talking, you are in 'my' awareness just as much as I am in 'my' awareness. 'My' awareness should not be taken to indicate that it is a possession or property of 'myself'. Rather, it is the immediate sense of knowing presence – awareness – which is itself our ungraspable, impersonal, self-validating identity as 'nothing as such'. Paradoxically nothing is closer to us than this impersonal awareness.

However, if I lose that sense of awareness and just become 'me' speaking to 'you', then there's a sense of shrinking in and settling into a position in 'me' in which I'm solely identified with the consciousness which is intending towards you. The enquiry into who is the one who is speaking becomes solipsistic or self-answering. 'Who is speaking?' 'I am.' 'Who is that 'I'?' 'Well, it's *me!*' It's as though you're trapped in a prison and you want to get out of the window, or through the door, but there's always a guard there. You can't get out because you always get nailed down into an identification, which stops the enquiry. 'Knock, knock.' 'Who's there?' 'Me!'

Meditation is a way of loosening that intense identification and trying to bring more spaciousness to it. This puts us in the way of the revelation of awareness, an experience which is both profoundly personal and profoundly impersonal at the same time. If your mind is a bit relaxed and open and you look around, you see that life is going on. You don't have to work it out, there is an immediate accessibility, a givenness, a meaningfulness. If you stop working it out you don't die, however, in our ordinary dualistic consciousness we often have the sense that 'It's up to me! If I wasn't doing it, who would be doing it?' 'No-one, so I've got to!' and we take that attitude out into everything in life. 'It's up to me. It's all up to me!' In this way we never let ourselves off the hook of being an intentional agency directed towards the accomplishment of a task. That identification with agency is an *aspect* of our being but not the whole story and so we misconstrue, we misunderstand, who we are.

The energetic flow between subject and object takes place within a space of becoming, a space of revelation. That space is not a dead space; it's actually luminous with a natural intelligence. Even if we are just lying on the sofa, experience is occurring. It can be dull stupid experience but it is still experience! Who is the one having that experience? It's not a bright focused subject. The quality of the capacity to be present, to be aware, sometimes called noetic being, is linked with gnosis, wisdom. The presence of wisdom as a non-constructed, ever-present, original, foundational aspect of our identity is very important.

### Consciousness—always on the go

Because our consciousness is intentional and responsive it is always changing. As I look at my watch, I think 'I have this much time left'. As I lift the glass of water I think 'I don't actually want any water' and I put it down. So as an object arises, different kinds of consciousness – thoughts, feelings, sensations – also arise in relation to it. There is a moment of interaction and then, as the mind is distracted onto something else, another moment of interaction arises.

Consciousness is pulsing along moment by moment as a kind of beat – like a drummer in a band it whacks out the rhythm. The melody is the various strands of experience, the story lines, which tangle themselves around that rhythm. From morning until night we are conscious of something – we’re conscious of being late for getting the kids to school, or needing to put some petrol in the car – there’s always something! That’s how life is, consciousness means busyness.

In Tibetan the ordinary word for a person or sentient being, is ‘*drowa*’ which means ‘to go’, i.e. one who is always moving. *Drowa* does not refer to a person who travels, but to the fact that we are ‘processes of going’. We are always busy, busyness is our nature, but this busyness is inseparable from an infinite calmness, warmth, and welcome.

We often find that our life is tilted too much in the direction of busyness and, as we over-identify with the moments of consciousness, we’re running on a treadmill like a little mouse in a cage. Peace will not arrive in the realm of consciousness because there is always something to be done, always something to worry about, that’s just how it is. Even if you go on holiday and lie on a beautiful beach you can worry about skin cancer and if this ceaseless activity becomes the whole of one’s world then it’s a hellish state to be in. In Tibetan this is called *khorwa*, which means turning, moving, revolving. So we are ‘movings’ in a revolving world. The whole thing is a dynamic system that never stops, and if we imagine that we can bring peace to it, we are mad!

Sitting in a circle, holding hands and singing ‘give peace a chance’ will not bring peace. This world will never be at peace because human beings are not a very peaceful kind of people; warmongers and troublemakers are everywhere. Even the pacifists are troublemakers for the war-mongers. Some human beings actually like to chop up the little bits of remaining jungle cover, the people who are doing this with their big machines are happy, they’re getting money. The people who are over-fishing the seas are also happy to be doing that – it’s their fishing boat, it’s their life, it’s their identity and they want the fish! China is sending out the most horrendous quantities of industrial pollution and is buying up the world’s resources in order to build more factories which will produce more pollution. Yet the World Bank is saying, ‘well, this is not a bad thing because, if the Chinese economy keeps growing, that could help bring a revival to the world economy.’ So the World Bank is very happy with the situation but the ecologists are not.

People like different things and what makes one person happy makes someone else sad. Some people like love, some people like war; some people like hatred, some people like envy. If you like envy you can read ‘OK’ magazine. If you’re lucky there’ll be page after page of someone famous wearing a terrible dress. You can sit there and think, ‘Stupid bitch, ha! ha! ha!’ which makes you feel good! Magazines like this are sold on the basis of being able to mock the people who are rich and famous – it is our revenge moment.

People have been trying for a very long time to bring peace to all the levels of manifestation but because the very nature of our mind is busy and because our world is dynamic, peace on these terms is unattainable. In other words, you will not have peace in terms of the content of your experience because the content of experience is always linked with the environment, and we live in a world of rapidly accelerating and unavoidable change. It is in the nature of our experience that things happen that we don't want to happen. Instead of accepting this we spend a lot of time trying to secure a territory that cannot be secured.

### How not to be caught in the turbulence

It is the same when we try to use control to stabilise situations in our own lives – often it just makes things worse. Because we are living in complex systems which are all inter-related, as you try to straighten out one aspect, that shift has an effect on the homeostasis – the general balance of the system – and brings about a radical shift in another part of it. The whole system is dynamic, tumbling on and on.

If we understand this we have two possibilities. One is that as peace and calm are impossible so 'Let's have another glass of sherry, it's a bit early but it's raining and you know it helps the afternoon go by.' 'Ah! Lovely!'... that's how many people pass their lives. They think 'I'm out of here! What else is there to do? I've had it up to here! I'm going to vanish in some way.' So they get drunk or stoned or whatever it is that takes them out of it. However doesn't lead to any resolution, it just increases the turbulence. The other way is to think 'Well maybe there is calm but it is not where I have been looking for it.' Calmness is not going to arise as an object of consciousness. Calmness is a quality of the experiencer, but it is centred in the aspect of the experiencer which is not a dualistic or dialogically attuned consciousness.

To put that into ordinary language, it means that our basic presence, our awareness – our basic openness to existence, to the fact that experiences arise for us – is not resting on anything, it is self-existing. In a PET brain scan, as the subject in the scanner is exposed to certain stimuli, you can observe all kinds of shifts in electronic activity in the brain. However in buddhist language, the responses to these stimuli are always on the level of consciousness – awareness itself doesn't change.

If you are happy you can just be aware that you are happy. This doesn't mean that your awareness is happy because the one who *is* happy is consciousness. If you are sad it is your consciousness, your identification as a 'self-subject' in relation to objects, which is sad. Feeling that there is nothing good in the world, that all my objects and all the possibilities are bad, gives rise to a mood or feeling-tone of depression that pervades the conscious subject. However, if I am aware that there is depression then, in that moment, the depression and the one who is

aware of the depression are seen to be different. This is the point where we can start to see that our awareness is actually uncontaminated by experience.

Awareness is not far away from experience, it's not locked away in a box, it's not some mystical soul-substance. Although it appears to be inseparable from the experience it is actually just very, very close to the experience – it is not the experience and yet it's not something different from the experience.

In meditation there are always choices to make, difficulties always arise, so if you have some understanding of this structure before you start it's easier to practice effectively. Otherwise, if you put energy in the wrong direction, nothing of real benefit takes place and the meditation may not be very helpful. It's a bit like learning surgery. Human anatomy is pretty well understood now, so when a surgeon takes a scalpel and cuts into a body he has a fairly clear idea of what he is going to find. There are some pretty weird things inside people's bodies – strangely shaped cancers, fibroids and growths – but although the body can mutate in very bizarre ways the general pattern of internal structure is known. For a surgeon it is really important to know what is in there, in this amazing glistening stuff under the skin. This knowledge makes it easier to make an incision to the right depth in the correct place, and not cut through a nerve that would leave you paralysed after the operation!

In the same way you could say that the great yogis of the past have, in many ways, established the main anatomical structure of the mind. They help us to see what the pathways are and if we understand these, then we don't have to re-invent the wheel when we do our meditation. However, the intention is not to use some imitational mode to clone ourselves but rather to use the maps of the traditional teaching as a support for our own clear investigation of what is there. It is always an investigation – it's both a discovery because it is new and fresh for ourselves, but it is also a return to something which can be known. Once you are at home in the territory you can find your own way and don't have to rely on maps anymore. The key point is to have the direct experience of your own natural state, the state that never changes despite all the busyness.

### Dang, Rolpa and Tsal

In the tradition, the energy of our existence is often explained using three different images. The first of these is a crystal ball. If this is placed on a red cloth it will appear to take on a red colouration. If it is then placed on a blue cloth, because of its translucency, it appears to be blue. It's not that the blue cloth enters the crystal, the crystal just allows the blue light not absorbed by the cloth to pass through and so it appears to be blue. The crystal itself does not become blue or red, it is always its own clear self. As a result of its capacity to allow light to travel through it, it welcomes and offers space to the colouration that it is put upon. The crystal ball

does not resist the colour, it allows the colour into it, but it is not contaminated or damaged by that colour.

In a similar way, our awareness is open and clear. So when there is happiness the mind appears to be happy, when there is sadness it appears to be sad. When happiness arises it fills the space of arising and then we think 'I'm happy', but with that definition, 'I'm happy', we have lost the spaciousness. In terms of the meditation, that's the point we have to look at again and again. As you identify with the arisings which are linked with whole chains of thoughts, memories, and feelings, you lose the open clarity of spaciousness. If the arising is a bad one then, as you have less and less sense of relaxed open spaciousness, you will feel very depressed.

So, as experiences arise in our mind we don't want to identify with them but neither do we need to push them away. Remembering the image of the crystal, we see that these experiences don't fill our mind in a negative way, they are not fundamentally contaminating. Although they appear to be there, as they have no substance, they just arise and pass. Therefore don't push away bad thoughts, don't hang onto good thoughts, just remain relaxed and open and allow experience to arise and pass. This will reveal the clarity of your presence. This is called *dang* – the quality of spaciousness that allows manifestation to pass through unimpeded.

So, when light hits the crystal ball it passes through it and illuminates it in a particular way. It adds a colouration but that colouration is contingent, that is to say it is dependant on conditions – it is not innate or inherent and it doesn't linger after the moment of the juxtaposition. In the same way when we sit in meditation all sorts of thought and feelings arise for us yet we don't have to be worried about any of them. If your mind seems very strange, if thoughts arise and you get worried or you might cry or suddenly find yourself smiling, don't try to correct yourself. There is nothing wrong with the experience, if you just give it space it will resolve itself.

### The mirror-like mind

The second aspect is shown by the image of a mirror. A mirror always has reflections in it because its quality or potentiality is a capacity to reveal what is set in front of it. If the mirror is turned one way it shows some images, if it's turned another way it shows others. Each revelation is therefore dependent on an interaction and none of the particular images revealed is held on to by the mirror.

The playful display of what is in the mirror-like mind is called *rol pa* or, in Sanskrit *lila*. It's like the play of Krishna – a playful interaction in which nothing serious is transacted. As we tend to take our lives rather seriously it is important to remember that if we can laugh at ourselves, lighten up, and say 'Ah, whatever, life goes on' then life gets easier. But if you take it seriously and think 'Oh my God! How could this have happened!' you can feel the tightening up of your body. The



muscles tighten, the tendons tighten and it gets to you. As the experience gets very solid, you feel hurt, harmed, and battered by life – ‘It’s terrible, this shouldn’t be happening!’ and you feel the world coming at you. It feels contaminating, foul, awful – ‘this is hurting me, this is harming me!’

When we are in that state we are identified with consciousness which – in its intentionality, in its direction towards the object – particularises itself and takes on a fixed identity. When it does that it can hit, it can be impacted. But just as the mirror is never contaminated by the images that arise in it, space cannot be impacted or contaminated. Things just flow through it. So when good experiences happen we can be relaxed and open with that happiness, when bad things happen we can be relaxed and open with the sadness. It would be crazy to smile when bad things are happening; it’s absolutely fine to be upset, to weep, and to feel distraught. If you are aware then you are not captured inside the event, rather, you are present with it.

Often we can find ourselves not fully in an emotion and then we feel self-conscious and almost hypocritical. If we are crying and we are aware of ourselves crying we might feel that we are crying crocodile tears, it feels false. Something rather different from that self-referential self-consciousness is being considered here: the fact that the flow of my experience is arising, and I can be both open to it and apart from it simultaneously.

It is similar to the way that a dancer moving on a stage has to hold an awareness of the space of the dance and be fully bodily present at the same time. This is vital because the gestures that the dancer makes are made both into the space of the dance and also out towards the audience. They have to hold their poise and simultaneously be projecting. Opera singers also have to be in their role as well as in their voice and also connected with the audience. If, in a very seductive mode, they move too much out towards the audience then they lose the role and just become ‘the star’. To be able to fully be in a role and stay connected at the same time is difficult – if you lose the spaciousness of the stage and just collapse into the role it becomes a bit deadened and self-referential however if you have too much of the sense of the stage then it seems too big to fill.

The issue in meditation is very similar. To be like the mirror you have to relax into the state of the mirror, into open presence – always empty of itself but welcoming the arisings. Our nature, is also empty in the sense that it’s not already filled with stuff, it is always open and welcoming to what arises. What can fill the space of our nature is not that nature itself, not its basic capacity of awareness. The flow of linked thoughts and feelings can appear to be ‘us’, to be who we are. Yet it is always passing. When we identify with these thoughts and feelings we seem to exist in a substantial form but we have lost our spacious ground, the basis of existence.

It is very important to get some understanding of this and you can practice it for yourself when you go for a walk in the park. As you are walking along you can shift the focus of your attention between your body – where you are aware of the quality of your skin, the pressure of your feet on the ground, the breath moving in and out of your lungs – and your visual field, to what you see on the path in front of you, to your peripheral vision with a wider sense of the whole park and the sky and the spaciousness. As you focus your attention in and out of these different registers, you have very different experiences. Each experience is valid as experience, and none of them defines who we are.

The image of the mirror can help us see that we do not have to make an ‘either or’ choice, we just be with what is there as it changes. It’s not that you are either in full participation and absorbed with what’s there or you’re disconnected and not involved. We don’t have to defend ourselves against experience; we just have to be present with it. Spaciousness and manifestation are inseparable. Manifestation doesn’t contaminate spaciousness and spaciousness neither diminishes nor overwhelms manifestation – they exist side by side. The emptiness of the mirror is the very basis of its welcoming of the reflections – if it wasn’t empty it wouldn’t allow a reflection. So the shininess of the mirror, which allows the reflection, operates on the absence of inherent content in the mirror. This understanding is very important because we are so used to privileging manifestation.

### Infinite potentiality

The third image is that of a crystal prism, which as light shines through it, refracts the white light into its constituent rainbow colours. These colours, which are the hidden potential of the white light, are revealed through the interface with the particularity of the crystal. In the same way we have a huge capacity to manifest in the world in different ways with different people. When we meet different people they have an impact on us – some make us happy, some make us sad, some people make us feel very deep in ourselves, and others close us down. Rather than trying to control the impact of what happens we can just be with the unfolding, with the revelation, of the infinite possibilities of our life.

We can do this because what is revealed is dependent upon conditions. So if you think that someone makes you feel bad, that’s only half of the sentence. Someone makes you feel bad *when* they say this to you or *while* you are with them. In fact you don’t usually spend all your time with that person and they don’t always speak to you in that way. So, what we often do is take a momentary event, say when somebody insults us and we feel bad, and then think ‘I don’t like that person because they do this to me.’

We need to look at what it means to be a person. If we say John is a bad person because he insulted me we need to think ‘Who is John?’ ‘Well, because he insulted me, I know who John is,

he is a bastard! He must be, why else would anyone want to insult a nice person like me? The only possible cause of that is some fault in John. John's a bastard, I *know* what John is.' That's the very primitive logic that we tend to use and elaborate.

Of course John could have insulted me because of something that I've done or maybe a memory, some kind of shift in his mind, provoked his action. These words have come out but they are not what John always says. What we've actually had is a moment of interaction and a feeling tone, an affective response, to that moment. This is followed by the elaboration of a narrative to explain that moment and to try to prepare a pathway for myself. I might think 'I need to defend myself against John because he's the kind of person that says that to me.' Or, if Mary insults us 'I don't trust her anymore. If she was a nice person she wouldn't have said that.' In this way we are reconfiguring our map, or image of the other person, on the basis of a moment.

Now, of course people do have personality traits and particular styles of being, but from a dharma point of view that's not because they are truly like that. It is because their 'freedom to be' has been constrained by the development of certain attitudes and habits so what is exhibited is their manifestation of this restriction. So if, on top of their restriction, we then layer our own restriction of 'I don't like you because you do that' then we reinforce the fact that we both become conditioned and limited by our hurts. Instead of thinking 'Oh well, if you slap me I'm going to move a bit more' we armour ourselves against further hurts and, in that process of armouring, we diminish *our* freedom to be. If somebody whacks you, you move. If you just say 'Oh, you hurt me!' and then after another whack 'Oh, you hurt me again!' and another 'Oh no! You keep hurting me, I don't like it!' that would be stupid.

To deal with problems effectively our mind needs to move. Rather than saying 'this person is terrible because they have hurt me' I need to think 'because this event has occurred due to causes and circumstances I need to re-position myself and think what is to be done?' Not 'what is to be done' in terms of building a wall of defence against the person but 'what is to be done' in terms of a moved, shifted, energetic engagement to transform the situation. When our creativity is limited the world seems fixed but when we are present in ourselves and our creativity comes through, then any situation can be moved.

Very often we might want a situation to unfold. We might meet some one and like them but we don't say to them very clearly 'I like you' or 'I want to get to know you better' and so the moment of that potential connection passes. In the same way somebody might be doing something that hurts us or offends us and instead of saying something into the moment, we put up with it until we have cooked it up inside so much that we explode and whack the person. By not being present and fresh in the moment, the intensification of the energy leads to further solidification that intensifies the patterns.

This third aspect of the mind, called *tsal*, can mean energy or kind of force, in the sense of a force that makes something happen, rather like the force in an old steam train when the steam builds up and it starts to drive the wheels. It's the force of engagement that we have with the world and part of it is to trust spontaneity, not to worry so much, not to inhibit ourselves with our anxieties of getting it right, because actually it's pretty impossible to get it right. What would it mean to get it right? If you please someone is that getting it right? If you displease someone is that getting it wrong?

So the image of light coming through the prism with the refraction into possibility, illuminates the ways in which we can allow ourselves to reveal ourselves into the world according to circumstances rather than according to a self-referential template of 'I know who I am, this is what I do, and this is what I don't do' or 'I know who you are and therefore, because you are like that, I have to be like this.'

### Fixity is stuck, spontaneity moves

I would suggest that a huge number of our interactions with others are based on predicting the sort of moves that the other person might make in response to our moves, as though we were playing a game of chess. In this way we import a kind of staleness or fixity and so find it difficult to speak into the actual truth of the situation. Whatever we do is just a moment, if it isn't well received by the other person we can always apologise – we have another moment in which to make a difference. However, if we think that somehow our actions are infinite and eternal and truly definitive then, through that misunderstanding, we become paralysed by a false sense of the consequences of our actions.

We might think 'I couldn't do that! Oh no! What would happen?' Well, we don't know what would happen; you have to do it before you can know what would happen. If you think 'I should only do things when I know what the outcome will be, so if I don't know what would happen I'd better not do it' then that's very artificial, disjointed, and confusing isn't it? We don't know what will happen, we just don't know. What are your criteria for perfection in life? If your primary concern is not to upset anyone that's quite difficult, because to do that you have to be omniscient! To know what will make other people happy or unhappy you have to be able read their minds. Then, so as never to disturb them, you can exquisitely attune in advance all the things that you do. That's a kind of madness isn't it?

Realistically, because people are who they are, they will respond in varying ways according to all sorts of aspects. People have secret lives: they have hormonal lives, they have diurnal lives so some are fresh in the morning and others are fresh in the evening. Some people are affected by their blood sugar level to the extent that if it dips too much they become a bit fractious. People are operating from many variables that we just do not know about, so it is madness to think you

can know what is the right thing to do with people. When we think we know what to do we insert this knowledge as if it was a bridge towards others but by doing this we interrupt the living fresh connection between us.

Not knowing and remaining open reveals a fresh spontaneity. This spontaneity is not the same as self-indulgence, I'm not suggesting that we should just take the brakes off our impulses and whack out into the world. It's more that if I am attuned to the world, to the other persons lived energy, how they are, how their face is, how their attention is, that will give me lots of fine cues as to how to position myself. Then what is arising is a true communication and a true connection rather than a pre-figured, pre-ordained, pre-choreographed set of moves from the rulebook with which I was educated, that tells me how to be a good person. These rulebooks are always becoming obsolete!

Together these three qualities are central to the dzogchen understanding of how to be in the world. Firstly we have the openness which allows whatever is arising to arise; then secondly the clarity which is the quality of the mirror, which reveals what's there. Thirdly we have spontaneous expression, which is the movement into diverse forms, according to being present in the world as it is – where we are called out into responsiveness, not from a rulebook but from the lived interaction of what is there. These three functioning together are seen as the re-articulation, the re-wiring, or re-integration of ourselves and with this comes the removal of the constraints of attachment and ignorance.

### Dealing with the 'difficult'

If you find yourself dealing with someone who is a bit angry and cantankerous, never satisfied and quite critical, and you think 'because you are sour-faced and horrible I don't want to have to hang out with you' then you have made a judgement that they're not good. You are already lost because you have decided that they should be different from how they are. If, besides this, you are identified with 'I want to be happy and relaxed but I cannot be happy until I have made you happy too, and because you are so horrible I can't make you happy' then that's terrible. In that way you have given your life, your power, your centring over to the other, the site of power is in them not you.

From the view I've been explaining, subject and object arise together – they arise together in an openness which is not 'my' openness but the openness in which subject and object arise together. In being present to the situation, as awareness rather than as personality, there is no pre-existing positioning of myself. That is 'I' as presence aware of 'I' as participative energy, as part of what is going on. I experience my 'self' as a creative potential which I can adapt in various ways to various situations. With this view the limitations of the other are seen as an invitation for me to manifest in a different way. But if we construe the situation in terms of

power – ‘Why do I always have to give in, you always have to win. When’s it going to be my turn? We always have to do it your way!’ this thinking is not very free and will lead to a reaction.

For example, in order to be available for a small baby who can’t do anything for itself, parents have to forget themselves. At the same time part of the joy of having a baby is the freedom to be yourself in the different ways which a baby allows, a freedom to do all sorts of things that you couldn’t do as an adult with other adults. You can’t make all those little baby sounds and noises in the middle of the night in your ordinary life but as soon as you get a baby you can be nutty, you can just be weird – this is one of the reasons why people like small babies. When kids are about five or six it’s more boring because you have to be more rational with them as you try to help them to be rational, but small babies are free of that. If you take that kind of freedom as the prevailing mood in interactivity then there’s the possibility of being for the other without feeling that it is a won or lose situation. We could spend a lot of time in connective mutually responsive play.

It’s the dualistic reading of subject versus object which creates problems. If we start off from the primary position, ‘Well if I’m not for me, who’s going to be for me?’, then I’ve got to look out for number one. It becomes ‘me against the world’. With that attitude the other becomes the enemy and we react to the situation with a move of power – ‘I’m not submitting. I’m not going to bend the knee and let them get away with it. I’m not putting up with this anymore!’

This image of the prism offers a completely different way of seeing this. It says that I have many, many possibilities for finding and expressing myself and how the other is reveals this to me. So if somebody is angry and critical, what are the many different ways in which one can respond to that? You don’t have to tell them off or try to change them. You could sit and turn your back to them – that might surprise them! You could just turn your back and say, ‘Well, you talk to me as though I’m not here, so I might as well not be here, but I’m not going to go away.’ You can do something radical as an intervention.

In the realm of psychotherapy there have been certain people, notably Milton Erikson who would behave in a sort of left-field way, with a sideways movement, which could be very helpful in disrupting peoples’ assumptions. The critical controlling person is used to dominating the other person and, as we lose spaciousness, we get hooked into these games. If you don’t enter into the game that allows something new to open up, so the key thing is to stay in the freshness of the response. When you feel induction into a standard response or a standard reactive positioning, try to shake that off. The easiest way to do this is to relax back into open spaciousness; without an on-going sense of this it is very difficult to remain open in the world with others.

If you have kids you might think, 'I was shouting at them this afternoon, but I'm not going to do that again. The next time they are like that I'm going to say this, or do ... instead.' But when that next time comes, the kids just get to you and these plans fly out the window. You think, 'Why! It's so incredibly annoying!' 'How many times have I told you?' – there cannot be any parent in the world that has not said that. 'Why can't you listen, why don't you learn?' Well, the fact is they don't listen and they don't learn. We have an agenda which says 'Life will be easier if you fit in with the plan' and whilst that is absolutely true, since it is not going to happen, it's a dead end. One has to attend to what is actually there and find a way of speaking into it, because if you just repeat the same old thing nothing will change. Power, control, insistence and domination don't work; they just create more resistance

In some ways this is very helpful because it shows that freshness, creativity, and attunement are more useful ways of being in the world with others. This helps us reveal ourselves to ourselves because, if for your sake I step out of my familiar world, two people benefit. You get the benefit because I make a gesture towards you but I benefit in that I suddenly realize, 'Ooh!' there's a bit more leeway here; I have a greater range of possibilities than I thought I had.'

In that way the limitations of others that make us transcend our own limitations, are actually a blessing. Perhaps we don't need to clear problems from the path. In the Tibetan tradition you will often come across the saying 'May the problems become the path' because, if we open to them, the problems and difficulties in life do actually *become* the path. It is through them that we find ourselves being returned to ourselves in a different way.

### Resistance to change

Sometimes you find yourself in a situation where, as you try to be open and spacious, because you are not behaving as your 'usual self', others are unsettled and this seems to make the situation worse. So how should we respond in situations like this? If it's at work and it's with your boss, then you need to be a little bit careful, the appropriate response in these situations always depends on what is at stake. There is no rulebook that can show us how to behave.

Often we are already caught up in part of a 'set move' game where the other person already predicts where we are going to be so in a way they are resting on us. So if we move in a new way, because they have predicted how we are going to behave, they feel as if they are falling. They are not going to thank us for growing and changing. In fact because they then feel as though they are collapsing, they are going to get angry and try to pull us back so that they can resume resting on us. If the price for belonging in this deal is that you have to placate this person or fit in with them and you agree to that then you have signed away your freedom. You have said 'I contract to be, for you, the kind of person you need me to be.' When you then try to

change that you get a lot of resistance. With this understanding one learns that that it's best to start fresh and stay fresh.

One of the original ideas in psychoanalysis was the rule of abstinence: that the analyst should not reveal anything personal about themselves and that they shouldn't aim to reassure the patient. This is because as soon as you say 'My function is to make your life easier' the patient knows what you are trying to do and can start playing your game, rather than doing their own work. The analyst has to try never to be pinned down, since once you're pinned down, the other person starts tracking your moves and establishes yet another ego-affirming game. Then your freedom to respond in a fresh and useful way is compromised.

It's the same with football teams. They look at videos of how the opposition play, in the hope that in next week's game they'll repeat the moves of several months ago. They imagine what the opposition strikers and goalie will do, and plan different moves in advance to overcome these moves. The opposition are of course also watching videos! Yet the match itself is never going to be a replay and sometimes knowing what people have done in the past can get in the way of what is happening now.

Your response to the desire from the other for the status quo to be maintained will very much depend on how much power the other person has over you. We often imagine the consequence of an action and then terrify ourselves with it. For example, if the consequence of me doing this will be that some people don't like me, then what does this mean to me? Can I live with the fact that they don't like me?

It is useful to think about whether or not you are being locked into a set piece encounter in which you are acting out of fear of the consequences of what the other person might say. Maybe the other person will not act as we predict; often we terrify ourselves on the basis of what we think will happen, but what actually happens is different.

When we do not understand that life is a moving, ceaseless flow of possibilities we can lock onto something and not let go. With people who can be bitter and hateful one has to take care, but I don't think that anyone is a hundred per cent bitter and hateful. If, as they start to act in a bitter way, we think 'Whoa, I'd better not go there because this is dangerous' we are thinking that 'bitter' is all that they are. But this isn't all they are; for them this is just a moment. So what we are doing is reacting to their moment as if it were the whole thing. If we can hang loose and allow them to be, it will pass.

This is similar to how it can be with kids. They might get in a really bad mood and smash something and say 'I hate you, I don't want to live in this house, I don't want you as my Dad' and



so on, then after a while their mood shifts. If you let it get to you and say 'Well, I don't want you as my son either so I'll arrange the adoption! You're off!' That would be rather extreme. It's not about acting as if the incident hadn't occurred, but rather of thinking 'This is just the expression of a moment'. If we focus in on that momentary expression and make it an enduring truth then, in believing that this person has told us the real truth about what they feel about us, we close down other possibilities. However, if we stay open I would probably find that they turn and change a bit.

This would be responding in the manner of the mirror-like mind because, if we can allow the person to be angry and remain open, their anger will change. Of course if for example, on the basis of a prejudiced opinion someone strongly defines you, then you would need to take care. If a kid is being bullied at school they need to take immediate action. Once you get known as a kid who can be bullied then lots of people will start to bully you so you need to act firmly to interrupt their fixed view of you.

### The 'self'

When we think about our current condition, wandering in samsara under the power of confusion, we may have a sense that something has gone a bit wrong. Our DIY efforts at trying to fix the problem don't work out too well as we use tools that aren't up to the job. It's like trying to mend something at home with the wrong size of screwdriver, or using a fret saw when you should have used a heavier saw – you won't do a very good job and you may break the tool. According to buddhist understanding we have been using the tool of thinking for the wrong tasks. Thoughts have been made to do too much work. This has obscured the clarity of our awareness and made us unable to identify the correct tool or to realise that new tools are needed.

If you read buddhist books you often find that they talk about 'going beyond thinking' or 'mind free of thoughts.' This doesn't mean that you should try to keep thoughts out of your mind. In fact that's quite impossible because thinking is the energy of the mind. What is meant is that thoughts cannot identify their own ground, their own nature. Thoughts relate to other thoughts, and they establish their validity by comparing and contrasting. Thoughts cannot see beyond thoughts. So what we have to do is to try to see where thoughts come from, what their nature is and what would be the proper task that they might perform?

You'll also often see a reference to 'no self' or 'no ego' but clearly we all have a sense of self and we all have an ego. In some ways this is not a problem as the ego is simply a site of self-referencing, without which life would be impossible. If you went to put your coat on but couldn't remember which was yours, or if you didn't know which car was yours then this would be highly problematic. It is necessary to have a point in yourself which can recognise particular kinds of

identification and also be able to claim ownership. Liberation does not come through saying 'Well I don't know whose it is. You have it if you want it!' To say 'That is mine' is not a statement of fundamental ignorance.

What's important is to know that when we say 'this is mine' the reason why it's 'mine' is because I am the person who went to the shop and purchased it, having made the decision to get this rather than that. Also that the 'mine-ness' of the object arises due to a whole range of causes and conditions and after a while it will no longer be mine. Through this I know that being 'mine' is a relationship of connectedness – the object is something which I stand in relationship to rather than being an extension of myself. There are no self-existing entities; to claim ownership is to manifest one mode of participation in the evolving field.

In the same way, to have a self is not the same as to *be* oneself. The self as the familiar site of self-consciousness and inter-relationship with the world is just one of the ways in which we experience our existence – it's not an ultimate identity. The self is the site of finite interdependent identity. It functions as the means whereby I am able to say things about myself and where I am in the world in relation to others. What makes me 'me' is the fact that there are prejudices which are part and parcel of having a self – I prefer some colours to other colours, I prefer some foods to others and so on. These discriminations and attributions of value create the particularisation, or specificity, of me being me.

The image of refraction which we looked at earlier is indicative of the many possibilities which we could manifest, the many ways in which we can extend our sense of how we are. Nonetheless we each have a kind of rhythm, a basic sort of pulsation, in which we are ourselves. It's not that you have to become 'anything' in order to avoid becoming 'something' – we are both something and the possibility of being everything. We can have a wider range of displaying our own potential according to circumstances and yet there will be some particular things that we like. However, what we cling to doesn't define or limit who we are; it just defines what it is that we cling to. If you like Maltesers that doesn't make you a Malteser, it just says you like Maltesers. Whilst it's possible to create a whole psychological profile on the basis of whether or not somebody likes Maltesers, this won't tell you anything about the true nature of the person.

If you prefer blue to red that reference defines itself, all it's saying is that you prefer one colour to another. If you prefer blue then you buy more blue clothes than red clothes, this limits your wardrobe but not your infinite potential as a human being. Buddhism is saying that it is a mistake to allow our felt sense of self to be defined by the choices we make – the infinity of our being is not conditioned or limited by the finity of our choices.

[Look at the options, make a choice and stay with the decision](#)

We necessarily have to make choices in order to be a person. If you went to the supermarket and you couldn't decide what to buy because everything was interesting you would probably either have ingested some mushrooms or LSD or be on the edge psychosis. You do have to make choices, you have to be able to say 'I don't want this and I do want that' or you'd never get your trolley filled. If you can't fill your trolley, you're off your trolley – basic psychiatric diagnosis! To function in the world we need to be able to look at the options, make a choice and stay with the decision. People who are very anxious pull a decision apart by going over it again and again endlessly reviewing the options because they can't commit themselves.

Part of being finite is to say 'I'll eat the chicken, I don't want the lamb'. Then, when someone else says 'I'll have the lamb', you might think 'Ooh!' but you steel your resolve and eat your chicken. It's essential to see that to be finite is not to be diminished but that it is a gesture into each moment. You can only be finite moment by moment and each of these moments has a particularity. In allowing oneself to be momentarily defined by the precision of the moment, there is no need to lose the infinity of the potential that continues to reveal itself in the changes that occur moment by moment. The infinite is not conditioned by the finite and the finite is not diminished by the openness of the infinite.

Sometimes people get into a situation where they think 'what have I done with my life? Other people have travelled the world, and done this and that, I haven't done very much at all' and they can feel very sad. But to have a full life is to stand in a full relationship with oneself. This is not developed by the richness or the complexity or the multiplicity of the activities in the world. If you go to the Caribbean or cruise around the world and dine every evening with the captain, that will not give any more infinity to your life. It will give you a further range of interesting finite experiences, but you cannot transcend the limits of the finite by having more interesting finite experiences.

This is the problem with addiction. People take cocaine because it gives them the sense of something opening up, but then this temporary opening collapses. The finite will always be returned to itself and so, in trying to resist the collapse, we always want to take more. But consuming the world is not a method to gain the infinite, the infinite is already there and it's absolutely free. You don't have to buy it, you don't have to improve it, you can't appropriate it to yourself in any way, and yet moment by moment when we relax there is liberation, a givenness in the fact that we are fundamentally unconditioned.

Thus having a sense of self, having particular thoughts, making choices, having a cosy little life, is not an impediment to enlightenment. You don't have to throw away your life; you don't have to introduce huge amounts of turbulence into your existence. You can have a nine to five job, you can look after your garden, you can take care of your kids, you can bake a cake for your mother's

birthday, you can do all these things. These are finite activities and they are experienced by whom? By you! But who are you?

### Two modes of existence

You have two modes. You have the finite mode in which you bake the cake and you give the cake to your mum, which defines you in the particularity of being the child of that particular woman. But in the moment when you offer the cake, or whatever the particular unique activity is that you're doing, you do it in the way that only you can, with the patterns and rhythms that identify you as you. So who is the one who is having that experience? What is the nature of the awareness that is present in that precise moment? When we look for it what do we find?

Well, *I* am putting out my hand, *I* am breathing, *I* am smiling, *I* am saying 'Hello mum, here's a cake'. Do the hands have some consciousness so they are telling me that they are doing this? No, my mind is doing this. Who knows that *I* am smiling? I know I'm smiling because there is sensation coming from my face which my consciousness reveals to me. I am aware that these things are happening but who is this one who is aware? This is the fundamental question that we need to address, because as long as our answer to the question 'Who am I?' is 'Me!' then the question which could open and provide a movement towards the infinite is collapsed back onto a finite definition through a concept, the familiar notion that *I'm* doing it. There is nothing more to ask is there? Who's doing it? *I'm* doing it. Who am I? *I'm* me! It goes round, and round and round. What we have to do is examine: Who is the one who asks the question? This is a central field of enquiry in buddhist practice.

We will do the three 'Aa' practice, so let your gaze rest in the space in front of you. Experience is going on, you're maybe a bit sleepy after lunch but you're not dead, something's going on, somebody is there. Maybe it's a bit foggy but anyway, who is the one who is there? The key thing is not to ask the question as if you are a detective investigating a case – you're not looking intently for clues. You want to look with the same kind of attention as you would have for the movement of your hands if you were dancing. You wouldn't be looking from the outside and thinking 'I wonder what my hands are doing?' Through your awareness you would know what your hands are doing, because your awareness encompasses your arms and reveals them as they are. Although awareness is always open, it is also precise, offering a very closely textured presencing with your experience.

We relax and sound three 'Aa's and then we are just sitting. Some thoughts and experience are going on. We are aware of this, so the experience must be being registered by someone – by me. Where is the mind that is having that experience? Where does it stay? Is it located in your body? You might decide that your mind is located in your left knee – a very interesting solution! So you stay with that, and look again and again, perhaps each time you find that your mind is in

your left knee. Then you have to ask who knows that my mind is in my left knee? Some other bit of my mind! Where is that it located? You keep looking and whenever you find that your mind seems to occupy a particular site look again, and keep looking until you find a stable location for your mind.

Then you can look further: what shape is your mind, is it square, is it round, is it big, is it small. What colour is it, is it blue, is it red, is it green? Where does it come from, where does it go to? These are the key questions that we investigate by staying very close to our experience, staying with the presence of an awareness which is inseparable from experience yet not collapsed into the experience. What is that awareness? Where does it reside? Is it inside your body? Is it outside your body? Is it created by your body? Is your body an experience which is experienced by this mind which you are seeking to find? Continue this investigating.

At first it's best just to do this for short periods because it's rather an unusual experience, later it's very helpful to sit with these questions for a long time. Actually it's difficult to learn how to ask these questions without creating a further duality of investigator / investigated. Our tendency is to tool up and mobilise in, but here it is important to stay relaxed and open with the experience. It's as if you were in a forest looking for a bird, you have to become very still. You can't really look for the bird since that would create disturbance, yet if you're open and relaxed the bird will reveal itself within that space of awareness. Usually what happens is that as something arises we become attached to it as if that arising is our mind. In this way we take the fruit of the mind or the energy of the mind, to be the mind itself. So it's a matter of trying to tilt back just a little, away from the experience.

If you just stay quietly with an experience, without trying to shift it, I think you will find that it moves. The thoughts of the mind, the creativity of the mind, are coming out of and vanishing into the space of the mind. However they often don't seem to just arise and pass, for they seem to leave a trace, like skin forming on coffee. Thoughts seem to get a bit sticky and tacky around us. As we become more curious about them and become actively involved in exploring or elaborating, it's as though we become the movement. This points to our identity spanning both infinite openness and precise identification as this or that. When we lose our actual ground of openness, over-identification with arising forms leads us astray without our ever actually leaving the ever-open field. So as we lose the stillness, movement is chasing movement, and we go all around the houses. The feeling that this is 'me', or that this is happening to or for 'me' is a narrow focus that is forgetful of the actual context. Yet these feelings are not something separate from the field of experience. Self and other, subject and object, are both experiences arising in and from the ever-open field of awareness. So relax and stay present and let the mind reveal itself. We're not chasing it, but being with it, as it; something is going on but what is it? If you come to an answer, the next question has to be 'What is the nature of the one who knows this?'

Because of the quality of attachment, for a long time we have been holding onto impermanent transient experiences as if they were us. We've been like somebody crossing a river on stepping stones, leaping from one stone to another to another to another. With familiarity with the practice, the 'stones' are still there – in that experiences are still arising – but we don't need to put our weight on them so much. If we stay calm, then the movement of energy which we take to be our individual self, dissolves. There is nobody who needs to be stepping onto what would appear to be something reliable. The 'self' which attaches is simply the energy of the mind turned back on itself.

We can see this in operation if we look at worry. You can only worry when there is something that you can think about. If you are waiting to catch a train you might think 'When will the train come?' If the 'delayed' sign comes up lots of thoughts arise – 'What will happen? Do I need to phone ahead?' – but if you recognise that you're a bit anxious then you can subsume all these thoughts into the word 'anxious' and you don't need to be so concerned with them. The thoughts can still arise but you know that you're a bit worried about being late and this is just what your mind does when that anxiety is there. In that way instead of getting into the worry and leaning into the worried thoughts as if they will produce a meaningful result, you let go of them. Allow them to be just 'worry'. Just as in the meditation, when the mind tends towards clinging to and identifying with particular things – sensations, thoughts or whatever – it's a matter of catching the moment and tilting back to allow the dynamic and impermanent nature of these phenomena to reveal themselves.

### Stillness and movement

The critical question is, 'What is still and what is moving?' Our representational self, the self that says 'I am me', 'This is this', 'That is that', appears to be stable but is actually always moving. What happens is that through claiming knowledge, I am repeating, or reiterating, my existence. Because I keep doing this I seem to exist in myself, but actually I am dependent upon a repeated activity – the repetition of impermanent identifications.

The recognition that existence is not stable and fixed, but dynamic and linked, and that somebody is aware of this, is at the heart of the buddhist understanding. If you relax into awareness you'll find that it doesn't change, although all the other aspects of yourself do change. Awareness itself is free of content like the mirror. However in meditation we again and again experience the collapse into identification with what's arising. So in the practise, as soon as you collapse in and identify, just release yourself. You can do this by relaxing into the out-breath, breathing out deeply, and then staying present, you, the awareness, experience the thought as it comes and goes.

A first it can be very difficult to see the difference between awareness and our usual sense of self. However we can think of the example of the crystal ball which appears to be red when if you put it on the red cloth. It's as if the crystal ball is filled up with redness, but it is not itself red in the way that the cloth is red, it remains a colourless crystal. Its unobstructed clarity is not changed by the red colour that suffuses it. In the same way when a thought arises in my mind, it seems to fill the mind. It's not that my mind is over here and I'm looking through binoculars at a thought that is over there, somewhere else. When we say that the mind is open and infinite, this does not mean that it is like a vast room and that the arising thought is something small, like a bird, flying through it. The mind is without shape or colour; it is not fused with arisings nor does it stand apart from them. Wherever something is being experienced it is there without having to move to get 'there'. You can't actually separate the thought from the mind, yet the mind is not the same as the thought.

When thoughts arise in your mind you don't have to push them away, they are arising in and through your mind, but also as your mind. This is because the mind has two modes, it has its openness and it has its energy. Energy is revealed as thoughts so if you want to see the openness you need to avoid becoming fused with the energy. The openness and the energy are inseparable for it is the nature of the mind to have thoughts. So it's a matter of being present in the moments when there are no thoughts and then observing thoughts arising. You see that they arise into this space, through this space, and back out into this space. Because thoughts are patterned they generate the seeming continuity of a self-identity. Therefore the key point is to maintain the integration of the openness and the movement so as to avoid duality, reification, attachment, and ego-based sensitivity. Stillness and movement are not homogenised, you can't collapse them into each other, and yet they are inseparable. To experience this in meditation takes discipline and effort, but in a relaxed way without striving, and it becomes easier with time and experience.

Sometimes in buddhist teachings they say 'everything is mind'. How can we relate this to our external experience? Well, this watch that I am holding exists for us as an experience. As an experience it exists on the level of perception because we can look at it and see it, but it also exists as a site onto which can be projected our memories, associations and interpretations. We can each say 'This is a watch', yet our experiences of it will be subtly different. The watch is a mental experience. Even if I think 'Oh it's not just a mental experience it is a physical experience!' who is having the physical experience? Me. Okay, but where is this physical experience taking place? ... Within my mind!

Some of the experiences of our mind are motorcars travelling towards us at high speed but if you just stand in the middle of the road and say 'Stop mind!' it might not work. The fact that the objects of our world are experiences doesn't mean that they are somehow like candyfloss. If you have a sharp knife in your hand its glinting edge is an experience and if you pull it down on your

finger the glistening blood will also be an experience! It's all experience, but we want certain kinds of experience to occur in particular places. Experience is dream-like but it is not a dream. It's like a dream in as much as it is unfolding moment by moment. It is a revelation, within which there are patterns and sequences that have their own logic. There are no substantial entities anywhere – only appearances devoid of inherent essence or self-nature. Yet, because these empty appearances are energy, they impact each other. This is the middle way: not just form, not just emptiness, but form *and* emptiness.

### Walk lightly in this illusory world

To imagine that appearances cannot be dangerous because they have no inherent self-nature, or to put it in another language are just 'the radiance of the dharmakaya', would be a big mistake for they are mutually influencing.

It is a common mistake to solidify what is actually a teaching example. When you read that experience is like the reflection of the moon on water, or that it is like a mirage, this doesn't mean that because you see its emptiness a motorcar *becomes* a mirage. Emptiness is not the antidote to form; it is the antidote to reification, to attachment, and to the resultant confusion. All forms eventually dissolve by themselves, but until the time of dissolution has arrived, form will be in form mode. And when our bodies are in form mode there are many other forms that can afflict and damage them. To see the illusory nature of appearances is to hold them lightly, to work with them whilst not disregarding their qualities. What one can achieve in meditation is the realisation of the emptiness of all experience so that if a car does hit you and you are dying, you can be as open and as relaxed as possible under the circumstances, and not be too disturbed. Understanding emptiness will not stop that car hitting you if you are distracted when you cross the road.

The stories of miraculous events that are prevalent in the Tibetan tradition are designed to inspire us with the sense that our habitual and limiting beliefs about the world and about ourselves are not inherently true. These are very wonderful stories and if we understand them symbolically or use them to reinforce our faith, we can use them like a kind of internal tai chi to loosen up the constraints in which we feel squeezed into boxes by the incredible regulatory dominance of a material world. A world in which we feel we are about the size of peanut, that everything else is very big and strong, and that unless we fit in and adapt ourselves all the time we won't exist. What these stories are saying is to hang loose, be in your energy, and work with the world. When you do that you find the world is changing and revealing ever new possibilities.

There are no guarantees in life. We want to substitute control for awareness because awareness offers no guarantees; it's not safe. If you're aware of something then that will give you the best chance of working with what's there, but it doesn't necessarily mean that it will work out fine. It



means that you will be there as part of what is unfolding, and have the best chance to influence what is going on. But you cannot guarantee the outcome in advance, nobody can do that.

### The danger of definitions

Dzogchen texts alert us to the tendency of the mind to turn impermanent phenomena into permanent states. For example some people come to think 'I can't meditate, my mind is never clear'. That is to say, on the basis of a certain patterning of arising, they feel that they are defined by that pattern, that it is the limit of their existence. The instruction is always 'Don't worry, don't despair, just relax into the presence of the one who is aware that you can't meditate.' 'I can't meditate' is just a statement that you make to yourself, yet if you believe it, it will be functionally true.

Most of the conditioning and the limitation that we have as people is based on internal dialogue. Self-hatred is very, very common. People say 'I can't bear myself.' 'I can't stand myself.' 'I'm stupid.' 'I always do the wrong thing' and they run these thoughts in their minds all the time. Their internal world is operating as a discourse between two voices, one is active and attacking and the other is passive, accepting, and moulding to the attack, 'You're stupid!' 'Yes, I am stupid.' 'I hate you!' 'Yes, I'm unworthy, I'm unlovable'. This is very, very common.

In the same way when we say 'I can't meditate, I can't do this, I'm too stupid to understand this, this will never happen for me' in the very moment that you define yourself as somebody who can't have success, or if you are aware of what is happening you will not be conditioned by it. The one who is aware of the thought 'I am stupid' is already wise. This is why we don't have to change the form of our experience, simply relax into the nature of awareness that is pure and wise and alert from the very beginning.

If you are depressed then the experience of depression, in the aspect of 'I am merging with what is arising' feels limiting and constraining. Yet even in a profound depression, although you may not be able to change the external state, the experience of depression itself is still an experience. The central point of this meditation is that there is one who is experiencing it and that one is uncontaminated and unconstrained by the experience. The point of freedom is the point of dis-identification from the temporary arising. When we do that we start to experience that all sensations and thoughts and feelings arise and go free by themselves and this is the basis of liberation.

The reason why we do not experience them as going free by themselves is that we keep sticking this thought to the next one, and then to the next and so on. In fact the thoughts *are* liberating themselves, but as we jump from this one to the next, we create a concatenation, a linked sequence of thoughts, which we take to be a composite package with an internal unity which it

does not possess. What it does have is a performative continuity –it looks as if it is *something* because of *how* it appears.

The traditional Indian example for this is that, if on a dark night you put a stick into a fire so that the end burns and then you twirl it around your head very fast, an observer will see a ring of fire. There is, in fact, no ring of fire, there are just moments of the stick passing through space. The serial but discrete moments create the image of a complete ring of fire. In the same way our thoughts arise in juxtaposition with an intention to identify truly existing phenomena, i.e. our usual sense of the world. This intention, in leaning towards the thoughts, gives them the benefit of the doubt, and creates the feeling tone of continuity. So, in the meditation we relax back from involvement with the arisings in the mind. Relaxation is the essence of this kind of meditation practice.

### ‘Phat!’

The other aspect we have to consider is disruption because when thoughts start to link together they create a kind of crust, like ice forming on the surface of a pond in winter. Water is fluid, if you pick it up it flows through your fingers, so in that sense it is ungraspable. You can’t really capture water because its nature is to move but when it freezes it becomes brittle and fixed in a particular shape. In the same way our mind seems to become brittle as we freeze up in response to difficulties in the world.

Often our response to trauma situations, to feelings of failure and hopelessness and pain, is to tighten up. A strong resistance, a strong impactful negative take on a situation such as ‘I don’t like this, this is awful’ makes us both hard *and* fragile. There is an increase in the earth element, and a decrease in flow. This earthing, or compacting of thoughts and feelings together, seems to create an enduring identity which constrains us as it feeds into our fragile sense of self. Then we’re holding ourselves together, frightened that there’s going to be some further impact on us.

As I become preoccupied, both full of thoughts and caught up in them, more thoughts are generated – ‘This is terrible! How am I going to get out of this? I can’t bear it!’ These thoughts can then evoke more wide-ranging thoughts: ‘I don’t know what I’m doing’, ‘I’m lost’, ‘What am I going to do in my life?’ They all come together and create a density and a fixity in which I feel trapped. They’re so energised and powerful, that it’s difficult to pull them apart and it’s as if all my energy has been invested in these thoughts which are now constraining me.

We need to disrupt the linkage between our open awareness and our involved consciousness, the mental function of intentionality towards an object. We want to force a disruption in the illusory construction of a rigid carapace, a shell of thought, around the infinite freedom of being. The syllable ‘Phat!’, as a violent response, is the method we use in meditation.

We allow this sound to arise from the belly in a relaxed way and come right up through us, as if it's coming right out the top of the head. When you do that, although your awareness is present, consciousness is momentarily obliterated and your mind empties. When the mind is empty you no longer have the thoughts of your ordinary controlling consciousness to rely on. There is only open ungraspable awareness, revealed by the shock.

This is a very good moment to recognise the difference between awareness and consciousness. As thoughts arise you can see them more directly as temporary movements of energy in and through the mind, rather than prison bars constraining you. This is a simple practice but it's actually very profound because it allows you to taste the freedom of presence.

In a domestic situation, this is similar to the point when a woman who has been battered is able to think 'I don't need this anymore. I'm going to cut right through all my anxieties, all my fears, all my hopes, all the history' and she turns around and says 'Get out, just get out of my life!' There's great freedom in that, it's enormously liberating because suddenly, with the absence of the controlling object, there's a new perspective. 'Ah, I feel better now. What was that all about?!' In therapy I often see situations where people have been constrained by trying to hold together all the aspects of their life, when actually what they needed to do was to disperse their fixation. Not by being in despair and seeking oblivion through alcohol etc., since that only leads to another kind of lostness. What they need is a method for cutting through their attachment to unhelpful situations.

When the sound 'Phat!' is arising, it brings the energy – which is dispersed, through all the side channels, where it is knotted and trapped in habitual resonances of worries and anxieties – back into the central channel. When you make this sound, keep your spine as straight as possible and relax your throat so the sound can rise right up through the body and come out of your throat with full force. Relax your shoulders, so that the force passes through you. You could imagine you're in the park and a dog's coming toward you and you want to get the dog to go away. Your sound has to have that kind of force, it's saying 'Out!' 'Go!' If you keep the sound small and constrained nothing much will happen: 'Shrinking violet seeks enlightenment' ...maybe not!

Start with the three 'Aa's, relaxing, then whenever you find yourself getting caught up in thoughts, getting distracted, just release this sound at full force. Having done that, stay present in the next moment. The 'Phat!' gives you an openness and an energetic vitality. When you really do it, it's as if the skin comes off your face and often the air around you is sizzling and you feel very alive – in that state you experience the energetic nature of all appearances. This is the non-duality of appearance and emptiness.

### A moment of awareness

The experience arising from practising 'Phat!' can be achieved in different ways such as riding a horse very quickly, downhill skiing, running down a hill at top speed, orgasm during sexual intercourse, or sneezing. These are all methods whereby the intensity of the relation between the experiencer and that which is experienced is so great that thought is collapsed out of the picture and you have an unmediated experience. All of these are very good moments for recognising the primacy of awareness before the conceptual organising function of consciousness comes into play.

Another good time to observe yourself can be as you wake up in the morning. You might be a bit foggy and disoriented, present but a bit dispersed; you haven't quite gathered yourself together for the day. In this hazy state just relax and observe the strands of yourself in this state of 'unwoven-ness'. Gradually you come together, but you come together out of these strands. The various lines of your self have now come into a pulsation, which then goes into the pulsation of the world. Although at this point you might think 'Ah yes, now I'm back to my full self' the intensity of that sense of self, created out of lines of energy, is not a 'thing'.

The central aim of all this practice is to open up the possibility that there is nothing substantial to us. We are not a '*thing*' at all. We have skin and we have bones and, through time, our bones continue to manifest a particular shape. However, when we look at the physiology of bones we see that they manifest as the evolving fruit of continuous dynamic processes. The bone-marrow at the centre of some of the large bones in the body is ceaselessly producing many of the aspect of blood and facilitating their introduction into the circulatory system. The whole of our existence is dynamic, interactive, communicative.

To be human is to be in communication, in relationship, with the world. An intimate relation is one that intimates or communicates something, so intimacy is simply a quality of attuned communication. Often we have very partial or limited communication because we feel inhibited – doubtful about ourselves and cut off from the world. So the focus of our meditation is to relax, to open, to trust, and in so doing to experience the emergence of ourselves as energy in a world of energy. This energy has forms and structures and patterns but is nonetheless unstoppably dynamic. The world never stops for a moment.

### Keeping continuity of meditation

Because we meditate with our eyes open there isn't such a big threshold between being in the meditation and being in ordinary existence. As we move from one to the other, although phenomena start to take on more definition separation and distinction, we're not going from an 'inner private world' to an outer public world.

As we move in the world of objects we tend to use naming and labelling to organise them so it's important to try to rest in the open, relaxed attitude as much as you can. As you move from the meditation back into conversation with others, open a gently enquiry into 'Where is this language coming from?' and 'Who is speaking to whom?' In that way you can be present with yourself in the act of speaking – not fully identified with speaking, but aware of the flow of speech as energy. I think you will start to find that your speech is not so much about 'you speaking' as it is a quality of your relatedness with the other person, for speech arises from and in relationship.

Speech is often conceptualised as some kind of internal message that you write on a bit of paper, make into a paper aeroplane and fly over to someone else. Then they read it, write their own reply, and send it back. However speech is actually an interpersonal movement, it's a quality of the field of relationship. The more we allow the truth of that, the more we can let go of the burden of 'What shall I say?'

Speaking easily cannot be accomplished if you are not at ease, but this ease does not come from knowing in advance what you're going to say. Many people are paralysed because they are afraid of not finding the right thing to say. They think that somehow the words should be already inside them and that, if they poke around enough the right words will come. However, because the right words just reveal themselves, they won't be found by looking. It is because you are at ease and therefore connected that you find yourself saying what needs to be said.

This is a rather a reversal of our usual thinking and leads us to trusting the non-duality of self and other. Non-duality is not the same as homogenisation in that we don't become fused with other people, yet neither are we separate from them. We have our separation, our difference, but because the two polarities of self and other are not inherently real true essences this difference is an energetic exchange. Self and other are points of energy, points of emergence, points of manifestation and becoming. As there is an affinity between these points they start to come into a resonance and this is where speech arises.

Usually we can speak more easily with our friends than with people we don't know. That's because we have an affinity with our friends – we're on the same wavelength. Through further relaxation it should become possible to speak to anyone because actually, if we are open to the other, the words will arise in the space. This is about shifting the focus and burden of activity from the self into the space in between, so that space is central and all manifestation is around the edge. After all, when you look at another person there is space between you, both of you share space. You each see the other, not yourselves, but what you can both see is the shared common ground of the space in between you. This space is actually the site of the dynamic movement of connectivity, so how we relate to space is important.

It helps if we are aware of the nature of attachment, in particularly how we essentialise experiences that are momentary, and make them substantial. For example very often we sustain negative thoughts about ourselves for long periods of time.

An event in childhood can create a sense of identity beyond which it becomes impossible to move. For example, many people who have been sexually abused as children carry a sense that there is something bad or wrong or defiled about them and that core belief operates both as an energetic restriction and as an on-going set of beliefs and thoughts. This inner story-line continues to dominate and control how they can be in the world – it affects how relaxed they can be into their body, how open they can be to being close to other people, and what they imagine will be the expectations that other people have about them.

That's quite an extreme case but most of us have certain fixed views about ourselves. Most systems of psychotherapy try to take these fixed views and to put them into a context. This context helps a patient to see that at the time when the event happened they were not a powerful person, they were not choosing to do what happened, but they were forced to submit due to direct or indirect pressures. Through that historical contextualisation the person can have a new story about what happened. The event still happened but their role in it, and the implications of that for them, can change.

### Karma – relative truth

In buddhism, on the relative level, we look at events in terms of karma and dependent origination. The idea of karma is that whenever we act there is an immediate effect and as well as ensuing long-term consequences. The immediate effect is the impact of your action on yourself and on others and their reactions to you.

For example, if you steal a car the owner of the car will probably call the police. The police will come looking for you and you will worry about the police coming; maybe you will be arrested and fined. When the sentence is carried out we would say that it's spent, so you might think it's all over. You've committed your crime, you've paid the socially decided price and so now it's all resolved – cause and effect.

However there are also consequences into the future. In order to steal a car one has to be in a particular state of mind, perhaps one of manic hyped-up energy, wary watchfulness, and aggressively putting oneself first. These attitudes indicate a lack of concern for others, a lack of articulation into a sense of social obligation, mixed with a sense of superiority and fear. These attitudes continue after the event as an orientation of our being in the world.

The traditional buddhist view indicates that at a future time, this turn or twist or tendency in our energy will ripen and manifest. Then we will find ourselves in the position of being exploited by others who are pitiless towards us, where we find ourselves unable to protect our own interests, unable to find allies, and experiencing that whatever we hold precious is stolen from us. The idea of karma is that everything in the world arises from causes and as there are no self-existing entities so there is no such thing as a bad person or a good person. All of us manifest into the world according to the interweaving of a huge number of different factors and these factors can be altered very easily.

We might think 'I'm a good person', but this is not a true definition of who we are. Who *we think* we are is a *story* about our self that we are able to manage as long as certain causes and conditions are there. However, if the environment we are in changes then we are very likely to change our behaviour pattern. The notion of karma is useful for trying to deconstruct the hubris or the inflation of thinking 'I am this particular kind of person.'

Whether we are thinking 'I am a very good kind of person' or 'I am a very bad kind of person' how we have evolved in life depends upon the opportunities we have had. Some people are born into wealthy households and have easy access to education while others are born into poorer households where there are lots of difficulties, maybe without access to education. Life's pathways take many different forms. Even if you are born into a wealthy family, problems come, and if you are born into a family with lots of difficulties, some happiness also comes.

We always experience so many different movements and turns in our lives that no-one can say that their life has been the same, continuing in a straight line. We might look back later on an event, one which in the moment that it arose appeared terrible, and say 'That was a very helpful turning point in my life, it transformed me.' We didn't see this at the time because when we are in our karmically defined situation we don't see the whole picture. In a real sense it's not for us as human beings to see the whole picture, we just see little snippets.

The notion of karma is very helpful for de-centring our selves, for preventing us from regarding ourselves as a conscious agent who can make our lives the way we want them to be. The fantasy of democracy is that each citizen is an independent, rational, autonomous being who makes clear decisions. We live in a world of consumer capitalism where we are all supposed to read 'Which?' magazine every month and make informed choices! Of course it's not like that, we are easily swept along by circumstances.

### Not always so

If you feel a bit sad you might go out shopping, the things that you buy in order to cheer yourself up are probably not very wise but they do the business for a while. Like this, our consumption of

the resources of the world is often in response to impulses or reactions from something else, from another place; we are not very rational and clear. A notion of karma helps us to understand this because it suggests that we have had many past lives and, in each of these lives, we have been involved in many kinds of activity. Because of this, at any moment, many contradictory tendencies may arise in us.

We often experience this as we swither in uncertainty about what to do. We could do this or we could do that – we want to do this, but then we pull back against it. This is because we are not simple but highly complex; we live in a world of plural discourses arising from the huge number of causal situations in which we have been involved. So, from this point of view, whenever we find ourselves making strong statements about ourselves or about others, what we say is probably false.

If we love someone we are probably going to get annoyed with them at some time. If we hate someone we are probably going to find that they also have some good qualities. As this is the nature of our existence, whenever we have an intense feeling it's wise not to be too nailed into a box, not to be too committed to a narrow view, but to keep re-contextualising it. To hold the sense that due to causes and conditions I feel this way, and when these causes and conditions change I will feel differently.

When we were small we had certain favourite toys and then, as we got bigger, we didn't like these toys anymore. There's no better way to embarrass a teenager than to bring out the toys that they played with when they were eight or nine. They'll say 'I'm not like that anymore. Put it away Mum!' or 'Give it away I don't want it' and then, if you do give it away, by the time they're twenty they say 'Where are my old teddy bears? What do you mean you threw them away? They were mine!'

We can see from this that the strength of our identification is variable; in certain situations something can be fully 'us' and in other situations we want to put it away. The intensity of a feeling is no definition of the *meaning* of an event; it is simply the *intensity* of the emotion. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't have intense feelings – we can't help having intense feelings – however we can see that these feelings arise due to many factors. Just as I cannot know all the complex causes of these feelings, I also cannot know for how long they will last.

Let's say for example that I got a letter through the post that I've won a prize and that I'm going to have a thousand pounds a week to spend for an undecided period, what shall I do? How many weeks am I going to get this for? I don't know. So should I spend it all because it will keep coming or shall I hang on to it all because I might only get it for one week? I don't know. It is the same situation with our karma. As something good starts to manifest in our life, we don't know



what the contract is concerning the causes giving rise to that. The sun is shining this morning, but what is the weather karma of Macclesfield? Very uncertain!

If we predict that situations will continue then we tend to be a bit laissez-faire, we don't take things so seriously. When we get an intimation of mortality for ourselves or for those dear to us, then everything becomes more precious. That's why we spend so much time in buddhism reflecting on death. Death shows us that our current experience is finite, it won't last forever. There's not just the death of our physical body, we also have the death of our years. Once we were ten years old, then we were twenty, then thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, if we are lucky. In each of these periods some doors open to us and some close; what you can do when you're fifty is different from what you can do when you're twenty. So karma helps us to think differently about our feeling of having infinite time in which to be 'just as we are.'

Some people are really into sport and they think 'I'm healthy. I'll always be healthy because I've got a healthy body.' If they are in a car crash and suffer multiple fractures then suddenly their healthy body is not so healthy anymore. Many sports people have very serious injuries, tendons get very badly torn, cartilages are damaged and so on, it can happen very easily. What we imagine to be our continuing and enduring self-identity is not arising from some private and controllable source inside our self; it's not a private possession. Rather it is a pattern of manifestation that's arising in relation to many different factors, most of which are not in the palm of our hands. We don't make our lives the way we want them to be, for very many factors are involved. If we are lucky, things turn out fairly well, but it is luck.

### Concretising passing moments

The purpose of looking at life in this way is not to make us think 'Oh my God, it's all out of control, it's too complicated, I can never understand it!' It is simply to help us dissolve our tendency of attachment, our over-identification with passing moments. If when you're happy you are very, very happy and you think it will last forever, and when you're sad you feel suicidal and hopeless and that life is worthless, then this is terribly imbalanced. It is a kind of manic-depressive mood swing. In one of the texts that I translated years ago it says 'If you find a needle lying in the road and you start laughing with joy, and if a bottle of beer goes off so you can't drink it and you feel very sad, this is a sign that you don't understand the dharma.'

The money markets of this world are unreliable. Shares go up and down in value and the stock market is a gamble. At the time when the small building societies were turned into public companies the people who had accounts in them were given shares so people were rushing to put their money into different building societies as a gamble – the real nature of money transactions is always about gambling. It's not to say that we shouldn't be interested in making money and having financial security but we should know that this 'security' is always uncertain.

Nothing is guaranteed in this life: not health, not relationship, not finance, not the weather, not whether there will be war or peace, because so many factors are in play. So, in seeking to give ourselves refuge and security by investing in external phenomenon, we are clearly making a very big mistake. We need to have *some* reliance on external phenomenon, we need to make sure that we have a house where the roof doesn't leak, a car where the brakes aren't going to fail, the best school that you can for you kids and so forth, you have to do your best but nonetheless there is no way to make any of these factors really secure.

What looks like a good deal on one day won't look like a good deal the next. Something will please one person and not another. The idea that my happiness as a person is going to be dependant on things outside myself is enormously destructive on a fundamental level, since it destroys our fantasy of autonomy, of agency. However becoming aware of this mistaken belief can free us from two common pathways where either we feel powerless and helpless because we can't control what's going on, or we go into control mode where we're doing our best to dominate the situation and set things up on our terms. If we choose the latter pathway then we disregard what other people would like and what they need.

Karma is a way of allowing ourselves to participate in the flow of the world which is evolving and changing, with ourselves as participants who are also evolving and changing. Through that sense of movement and fluidity, and with the corresponding flexibility it brings, we don't rest so heavily on external phenomenon. We don't take refuge in them because if we take them to be enduring and reliable, then sooner or later they will betray us; sooner or later they will let us down.

We often try to stabilise phenomena by sticking labels onto events that are moving and changing. This label is an abstract concept, for example 'Great Britain', but we identify with it in a particular way that reflects our own experience and think 'Oh, this name means this thing'. But this 'thing' is not an entity, it's actually a dynamic appearance which changes and mutates. Since we keep sticking the same label onto 'it' we get very confused when 'it' no longer fits our assumptions about it.

So thinking about karma is a good way of trying to hang loose and stay with the unfolding of experience rather than grasping at it. There are many good texts that have been translated and many teachings on karma that you can study.

### Seeing the ground of phenomena

On the more absolute truth level, when we look for the causes of things, we look to the immediate ground from which the phenomenon is arising. For example, if I think 'I'm a very bad person, and I'm stupid and wasting my life' these negative thoughts will swirl around me. If I get

caught up in them I seem to be enveloped by them. It's like with an old-fashioned candyfloss machine where, when you hold a stick in the spun sugar, the threads wrap around the stick and it puffs up. In just the same way we wrap ourselves in these entangled sticky threads of thoughts and even though our thoughts of self-hatred are horrible they are also somehow tasty and we get right into them.

However, these thoughts are not self-existing. We can track their origin in one of two ways – either by looking at their historical origin or by looking directly at the thoughts as they arise. When we look for our mind in the meditation we can't find anything solid and enduring and yet thoughts, feelings, and sensations are arising ceaselessly. They tend to link together, one onto the other, onto the other, onto the other, and through that linked movement they give the sense that they are 'all of a piece' – all going in the same direction. The felt sense of continuity of these thoughts feels like a validation of their power and even their truth, but if we look directly, where do they come from, what is the ground of these thoughts?

When you look carefully at an idea you see that it comes out of the spaciousness of the mind – out of the open space of the mind's potentiality – its ground is the ground nature of the mind which is emptiness itself. Thoughts, feelings and sensations are ceaselessly arising. They're arising from emptiness, in emptiness, as emptiness. The fact that they are empty doesn't mean that they don't exist – our thoughts manifest, they're undoubtedly there. Rather it means that they don't exist as fixed, true, self-existing entities. In this sense 'to exist' means simply to manifest.

In the examples we used to illustrate the nature of the mind – the crystal ball, the mirror, and the prism – the understanding of the infinity of the ground potential is like the crystal ball which, though empty itself, takes on various colourations moment by moment with the arising of thoughts. So a sad thought arises and we feel sad, a happy thought arises and we feel happy. When the happy thought goes we don't continue to feel happy, when the sad thought goes we don't continue to feel sad – these are momentary events. The key thing is, through the practice of meditation, to gain the brief but direct experience of the mind without thought. That doesn't mean that thoughts will have completely vanished, it means that the mind is not resting on thought.

Most of the time I think that I am 'myself', and I know that I'm me because I can tell myself stories about myself, so my identity is resting in my storylines. When we do the three 'Aa' or the 'Phat!' practice we are trying to open the space so that the thought, the thinker of the thought, and the ground space that gives rise to this can, all three, be there at the same time. When we make the sound of 'Phat!' and have open spaciousness, the awareness of this experience and some thoughts about that experience will arise together. You don't just do 'Phat!' and then nothing happens for a very long time, you do 'Phat!' then immediately thoughts come back with the sense of a thinker of the thought. Where do these thoughts come from? It is essential to

investigate this because if you think 'I'm just me being me'... 'Phat!!'... 'Oh, where am I?'... 'I'm just me being me' then nothing is changed, nothing is transformed. There is a moment of opportunity when you get a gap, and by looking into the gap you see that all the stories of 'I'm me being me' are arising out of emptiness.

### Non-duality

The samsaric view, in which we are trapped, is that there is a real continuity of hardwired reality: that things *are what they are*. There may be brief interruptions – of meditation, or falling asleep, or getting drunk – but then you come back to your senses, to your ordinary life as it really is. The view in this meditation is completely different – it says that normally we're trapped in the continuity of thought, in the interwoven cultural belief system that encapsulates and traps us. When we do the practice we see that this whole experience is like a hologram, it's like a dream, in that it arises but it is without inherent self-nature, without true essence. We hold to the presence of the spaciousness of the mind, the mind which is not this or that, not me or you, but just an ungraspable and yet presenting quality of awareness which is open and generous. Within this space all sorts of experiences, of oneself and of others, is arising.

When we can do that we don't need to try to change the external world, we don't need to push away some experiences and get more of others, we can integrate manifestation with its ground nature. This is the key understanding of buddhist non-dual teaching. You might find it expressed in slightly different forms in the different schools but they all agree on the basic principle, which is about re-centring oneself. Its not that you have to abandon the world and take on a 'spiritual' life, what you have do is to integrate emptiness and form or emptiness, radiance, and manifestation.

The key thing for us is that we don't have enough direct experience of spaciousness and emptiness so it is as if we are cut off from our own ground. This time, as we go back into the three 'Aa' practice, whenever you get caught in a thought you can make the sound of 'Phat!' , allowing it to rise straight up from the belly, giving full expression to it. Use it to momentarily push away all thoughts, feelings and experience, and in that moment just see what is there.

### Naked under the clothing

What is there is yourself when you are unobscured, when you are uncovered. When you see the covering to be just a covering, then the covering is no longer a problem; it doesn't matter. This is a key point, as long as we only have the covering – the mental clothes – it matters a lot what the clothes are. However, if we really understand what is underneath the clothes then the clothing is unimportant. They just express, or are minor ornaments to, the person.

C. R. Lama was my main teacher and I lived with him in a small village in Bengal, in India. He taught in a university that was not far from the house but, because from a young age he didn't like walking, he always had a rickshaw waiting outside the door. He didn't like formal things very much and in the house he would just wear a little wrap-around lungi. Often he would leave for the university just wearing this and his wife would come out after him and object. She would say to him 'Rinpoche, you can't go out looking like that. Put on some clothes!' and he would say 'When people see me coming do they say "C.R. Lama is coming" or do they say "C.R. Lama's clothes are coming"?' !

He trusted himself, and he was sufficiently at home in his own skin to say 'People will make of me what they will. If I put on nice clothes and they think I am nice because I am wearing nice clothes; what is the meaning in that?' Most of us are not as free as that, most of us are anxious about ourselves so we put on nice clothes in order to make a nice impact. There's nothing wrong with that but if, throughout life, we feel a core anxiety that is merely covered by the nice clothes, or we think that unless we put on our make-up first thing in the morning people won't like to look at us, then that condemns us to a cosmetic existence.

A friend of mine in university had a very macho boyfriend and she would get up really early in the morning and put her curlers in, and by the time he woke she would be completely in her maquillage! The terrible thing about that was that she believed that if he saw her without her make-up he wouldn't like her anymore. The underlying thinking was 'He doesn't really like me as I am' and 'I will never let him see me, because I know that who I am, underneath all of this, is not loveable.' This is terrible, but it's actually how many of us spend our lives. We are living with such enormous anxiety that we feel we need to present a 'personality' or a cover-up. It is as though we think that who we are is secondary to our clothes but it is the clothes which are secondary, who we are is primary.

When we do this 'Phat!' practice we are trying to disrupt our reliance on our usual ornaments and coverings of thought and see the mind in its nakedness. Then, when the thoughts and feelings and sensations return we can wear them with pleasure and ease and a kind of indifference because we are not defined by our 'clothes.' This is a very essential point for turning things round and settling into our true nature. If we think that who we are is defined by the size of our house and what kind of car we drive then we are simply deluded. Our identity will always be at the mercy of market forces.

### Practicing 'Aa'

The sound of 'Aa' is used a lot in Tibetan buddhism because it is the most basic simple sound in life. It's the sound babies begin with and it's the kind of sound that people make when they are dying. All morphemes and the variations of linguistic sound arise from this sound. So saying 'Aa'

a kind of essentialisation – a way of condensing all the meaning and labelling that we have in the world which is created by language, back into the root sound from which all language arises. As we make this sound we are relaxing into the slow out-breath. According to the tradition, and I think you can observe this for yourself, there is less mental activity on the out-breath than on the in breath.

As we say 'Aa' we release the tension in our body, the tension in our throat and the tension in our mouth. 'Aa' is just like the sound you make when you are exhausted and finally get to lie down – 'Ahh!' – it's a very releasing sound. When we say 'Aa' we have a sense of the space in front of us, we are not staring into it but just letting our gaze rest in the space, evenly and peacefully. As we release everything, we are open and spacious in ourselves and connected with spaciousness outside. We still have the sense of light and forms around us but we're not busy naming and identifying exactly what they are. We're just allowing different sounds to come in, like the sounds of children playing outside. We let colours come in, we see peoples bodies move and we just open to that whilst staying relaxed in the space. Allow whatever moves outside and whatever moves inside, thoughts feelings and sensations, to just come and go without blocking.

It's useful to try to practice this intensively for some time if you can, perhaps do a weekend retreat. Also, when you get a clear blue sky or even a sky where the clouds are very high it's useful to sit outside with the sun behind you and allow your gaze to rest in the big expanse of space in front of you. This is a good way of bringing about profound inner calm – you don't have to have any thoughts in your head. When you look out you often see small balls of white light moving around, just allow those to be there, they are just a sign of the energy of the mind's connection with nature. When you sit for maybe half an hour, just very open, your ordinary sense of self often starts to change. You might feel you have no idea of who you are or where you are, everything just becomes dissolved in space.

Of course with any practice like that, if you're not feeling very well or if you have a history of psychotic disorder, you should always be very careful and build things up step by step. Also don't drive a car immediately afterwards or do things where you have to be suddenly focused. It's not just that it could be unsafe but that if we don't give ourselves time to move from one state to another state we miss out on the subtle nuances. In our culture we spend a lot of time under the power of the will, most of us are very good at making things happen, even if we're not in the mood to do something we do it because 'the kids need it' or 'it just has to be done.' Through doing this repeatedly we get used to overriding our first sense, our natural feeling tone, and one of the functions of this kind of practice is to relax all the busy energy and to be in that state where nothing is going on.

Coming out of the state is as important as how you get in to it, so be with the gradual transition. Through that you can start to see the step by step movements whereby you gradually get glued into ordinary habitual thinking, how your experience goes from expansive freedom to the very tight habitual construction of a person who has lost touch with their own ground.

### Living impermanence

Whether you're beating up egg whites to make meringues, whisking whipping cream or making a white sauce, you can notice the turning point where the consistency of the ingredients changes completely and one thing is transformed into another. It is the same with the mind – if you observe the stages whereby a particular situation is constructed then you *know* it's a construct, and by knowing it's a construct you can be in it without having to take it so seriously.

For example, the building we're in functions to separate us off from the elements outside. It is a construct – you can see some of the places where joints have been made – and because we can see the way in which it is put together we don't feel so tightly enclosed by it. If you see the artificiality of something then you have more room to manoeuvre. It's the same in the practice. So don't worry if you feel trapped, don't worry if your mind becomes heavy and dull and stupid. Without trying to push that situation away stay relaxed; no mental state will last forever. Impermanence is the most basic of all the Buddha's teachings and it really pays dividends to study it again and again and again. Look at it in terms of people playing tennis, making a cup of tea, going on a journey, things are always changing and moving, changing and moving.

When you are live your life as a movement within this ocean of impermanence it becomes much easier to avoid being trapped. We become trapped on the basis of the assumption or the fantasy that something is fixed, yet nothing is fixed, everything is in movement and transition. If we can be clear about this then when we experience our mind as being difficult in the meditation we can ignore our first response of trying to change it. We can relax, stay open, and the content of the mind will change without us having to act on it to make it different. This is a key point, because if as we feel caught up in the content of the mind we feel defined and implicated by this content, then the fact that it is in our mind becomes a personal affront and trying to get rid of this 'shit' makes us very busy and controlling.

As you start to recognise that the mind itself is not the personal subjective consciousness but is a state of open awareness then, as you rest in that awareness, everything will change and move. You'll realise that you don't have to make such an effort to control events, in fact you might find that basically everything is just as it is, already as it is. In being open to this you experience no threat, for you are at home in the ground of your being, rather than camping out in the ever-changing field of events. This is the happiness of self-liberating happenstance.

Consciousness will move and the objects of consciousness will move and when you realise that you begin to taste the meaning of dzogchen. Dzogchen means 'always already perfect', that the world and everything in it is perfect. 'Perfect' here means 'complete', 'as it is', 'as it already is'. It is not a moral judgement, rather it points to the fact that because experience is flow, each moment is what it is, and is complete and unchangeable. What we *can* change or influence is the next moment, which in turn will be just what it is and no other. 'Could's' and 'should's' cannot change the moment that they comment on. They are just another moment. Nothing has to change because everything is changing anyway; if you sit for long enough everything will change. The more we sit paying attention to things as they arise, the more we realise that these changes are occurring moment by moment. However, the more you assume something to be the case as an enduring fact, the more dull your perception will be and you will create a conglomerate image of the thing. The reification of that abstraction creates the fantasy of permanence.

### The violence of knowing what's what

In terms of applying this kind of practice in daily life it is helpful to start to trust ourselves. Very often when we were small we were told that 'how we were' was *not good*, that we were too loud or too disturbing or not trying hard enough. So we have experienced a deep message that the purpose of life is the continual correction of our selves; that if we allow ourselves to relax, we will get into trouble. There is a saying: 'The price of freedom is eternal vigilance' but is it true? Well, perhaps under certain circumstances, but the problem is that eternal vigilance can turn into eternal vigilantism.

In our daily lives 'trusting oneself' does not mean operating from a blind narcissistic inflation, but rather to *be present* in our existence with others. If we are really attentive to other people then what we have to do will be revealed to us. The more we are attentive to other people, the more the precise presentation of their existence will act as a great inhibitor of our impulses.

I think probably each of us knows that the times when we have behaved badly in our lives, when we've hurt other people, maybe exploited other people or been very selfish, have all occurred when we didn't allow ourselves to see the other person. There have been times when we have moved the other person around in our world, to fit in with what we wanted and we didn't take them seriously. As soon as you take the current shape of another person seriously, and you allow the felt sense of their existence, there is an immediate interpersonal shaping of the situation. When we are part of it, we speak as part of it and not as an 'individual' solely caught up in our own concerns. This constraint as arises not from a prohibition, but from the exquisite aesthetics of affinity.



If you truly see someone then you'll know what to say. If you see a baby you speak in a particular way, if you see somebody who's sick you speak in yet another way, if you see somebody who's old and very frail then you speak in yet another way. So if you actually allow people to be present in your life then your beautiful, sensitive, creative, imaginative modulation will find the fitting way to respond. However, if we don't see the other person – if we assume something about them, or we want to subsume them into the categories that we already have – then their absence, their felt absence in our world, will mean that there is no blocking of our impulses toward them. Not seeing others clearly opens the door to stereotyping, belittling and insulting. This, as we sadly know, can easily lead to war and atrocity. Totalitarian thinking doesn't only come with a large state apparatus – we can carry out our own totalitarian thinking when we know 'what's what' and then insist on implementing that view towards others.

### Trusting immediacy

Although it may seem a strange and unusual approach 'trusting in the immediacy of the moment' will provide you with what you have to do. We often think that we have to prepare in advance, however the preparations that we make often become an obscuration or an obstacle to our participation in the lived moment of the experience of being with the other.

It's not that one should have no preparations at all but we prepare most effectively by creating resources to which we have access, rather than by preparing a fixed position. By remaining flexible and having a range of options available to us, it becomes easier to respond directly into the situation. Also, if we put the other first, then their need allows us to move out of the narrow restriction of our own being. In that way compassion – as an open gesture towards the actual situation of the other – develops wisdom as it frees us from the encapsulating bubble of our self-concern and self-belief.

So if you're working with someone or talking with someone then, whatever their need is, you can speak into your sense of the moment and they will give you feedback. The response is always 'in the moment' and if they don't want that then you can do something else – we can't somehow work out what to do away from the situation. If you want to bring compassion and wisdom into the world you have to be willing to stumble and mumble and fumble ... and tumble... you can't get it *right*. It is the notion of rightness, of holiness, of goodness, which is paradoxically a great obstacle to open communication.

It is beautiful to see a skilled therapist working with a child. The therapist rests in 'not knowing' anything, not having a plan or insisting on anything. They're always stepping behind the child, letting the child determine the situation but not letting it get out of hand. In this way there's both an abandoning of self for the sake of the other and a close presence with the child as they are.

What somebody needs will often be revealed through our stumbling attempts, we don't know in advance what they need. If somebody asked us 'Well, what do you need? What do you really want out of your life?' we wouldn't know what to say because life reveals itself – it's not a game that is knowable in advance. None of us knows what tomorrow will bring so a big game-plan is not much help. Moreover we don't know who we will be tomorrow, we may well be different. We may enter into a period of depression, or anxiety, or we may enter a period of calm and peacefulness, where after perhaps a year of turmoil, confusion and self-doubt, things suddenly seem easier. Then for a period of time we're responding from that mood, in that manner, then that 'structure' may swirl and change away. Although we may have fantasies that it's onward and ever upwards – that life will get better and better, and that the older we get the clearer we become – actually we just have to be trusting while stumbling and fumbling all the way through!

There's that fabulous Bob Dylan song 'I know you're looking for someone who's always right and never wrong. It ain't me babe!' Making mistakes is not dreadful. It's an ordinary, unavoidable part of the randomness of life. If we're ashamed because we don't get it right then we often can feel that our mistake is terrible, but a mistake is just a *miss*-taking where, because we didn't know how to take whatever was occurring, we took it the wrong way. We can retake it and as we make new gestures towards the situation it will evolve. That's what happens in a conversation; it becomes interesting – a real dialogic communication – when as each party grows and learns, they are *both* transformed.

### The meaning of life

If someone feels that their life is meaningless: when they experience that everything that they held to as giving meaning to their life – house, job, relationship – is just a construct and they have lost the capacity to keep investing in it and generating its value, then they are very vulnerable. They have lost the ground that supported them and taste the bitter emptiness of the nihilistic void. The way back from this lies, perhaps, not in finding a new big idea but in re-learning how to participate. For example, what is the meaning of eating an apple? There is no meaning *per se* but there is aesthetic pleasure: there is the crunchiness, the smooth squelching, the taste, the smell, all of which invites us to be present in a precise and vital way.

Meaningless acts can be very meaningful but the meaning generated by them is of brief duration. That's why the next moment has to be meaningful as well. The idea that you can get one big idea, which will be there forever once you've got it, is a bit silly. What we need to do is to find a way to live fully in each moment. Not looking to the past moment and saying 'Oh, I wish that could have lasted forever' and not worrying about the future, but being present in *this* moment and through that presence, through that openness to the moment, finding the best possibility of on-going liveliness.

That's something we have to learn how to do. If somebody keeps asking 'What's the point? What's the point?' that is a sign that they are lost. The very formulation of the question is leading them astray. They are looking for an answer on the level of a representation – some meta-meaning – which they can then carry with them and look at it: 'Catch a falling star and put it in your pocket, save it for a rainy day' and this is what dogma is all about.

Falling stars are happening all the time, you don't need to catch them and hang onto them, what you need to do is work with them. In Tibetan buddhism, if we get a practice, say on Padmasambhava, we learn the mantra and this gives us the support for being present in the situation in order to work with it. It's not that we can then wrap ourselves in the mantra and use it like a protective duvet – any attempt to turn away from the world as a method of being safe is false. So the question 'What's the point?' is meaningless in that it can't be answered in its own terms of reference, but it's meaningful in that it's a real cry from the heart.

Well, we might ask, 'Who is the one who feels this despair? What is the nature of your despair?' Not the nature of the despair as in the whole story about why you feel it, but what is its nature now? At this very moment, what *is* this despair? If the person can shift their attention away from ideas and concepts onto the actual lived embodied experience then immediately they have a question that can become a pathway. The question 'What is the meaning of life?' is not really a pathway except to a library, but the question 'What is this doubt in me now?' is a question that can take us back to ourselves: 'Who is the one that is uncertain?'

If you believe that life should be easy and that life should make you happy, then when life gets difficult you might want to go somewhere else, to vanish. As we know, suicide sadly is quite a popular choice. Although we don't know what happens when we die most religions say that there is some kind of continuity which can be pretty bad news if life has been a bit of a botched job. Though we don't know whether or not that's true, if we took that as a working hypothesis, then to kill yourself in despair in this life is not likely to lead to great happiness in the next.

## Refuge and sangha

In order to be open to a new way of experiencing, one has to let go of one's previous approach and that creates a transitional period between the two modes. In buddhism, the practice of going for refuge the Buddha, dharma and sangha is seen as a major support in periods of transition. Availing oneself of this requires a kind of humility, a sense that I can't make it on my own. As the Beatles sang, 'When I was younger, so much younger than today, I never needed anybody's help in any way'.

Coming here to your small dharma centre, it's very impressive to meet a group of people who meet and practice together and who operate in a very lovely and attuned way. With clarity of

focus, people see what needs to be done and do it without bossing each other about and without giving orders; just finding the right way in. It's exquisite, like looking at some beautiful jazz dance improvisation; people just find the pulse. It seems to me that this is a wonderful kind of experience to take through into the practice; trusting that if you do your bit someone else will do their bit. Without worrying about what other people are up to, you simply trust them to get on with it, and they do.

This makes life safe in a way which is still quite naked and open – you don't know how it's going to work out but somehow it does, and you trust the process. However, for people who have no experience of this way of being with other people and who are experiencing their familiar world falling away, then life is truly a frightening experience. If they don't get some kind of refuge, some kind of sense that there is a way even if they haven't found it yet then, if there's no hope, feeling vulnerable can be very difficult. If our sense of self is as a 'thing', then it feels very fragile and if the supportive environment around it is becoming more and more barren then that is really a perilous situation to be in.

How much importance do we give to people? What do we centre our lives on? Do we privilege inter-relatedness, connectivity, or do we focus on things? If we put our energy into things, whether that's polishing the new car or reading a dharma book, is that more helpful to ourselves and to others than being with other people? It's a real question. If you have a busy life, does your meditation practice help you to develop compassion or is it a retreat from the demands of a family system?

If everyday life and dharma practice are split apart then they will just become parallel streams of our existence and we won't have any long-term gain. We can also bounce between the two: 'When I'm with people, I like being with them but then it gets a bit stressful so I go off and do a retreat. I feel better on the retreat, but then I get lonely so I want to be back with people.'

The solution comes through bringing the spaciousness of the practice into ordinary life connections, so that the turbulence and the distractions of ordinary life are seen, but not felt as something troublesome. They actually become our path because each time we have a problem in the family, with kids or parents or whoever, there's a question. 'How can I re-situate myself to make this flow more easily for everyone? What is it in me that blocks the pathway of energy?'

In our own families we probably recognise that many things are not said, lots of topics are avoided. Often with people who are close to us there's a lack of intimacy, either because we can't find the words we seek or because it seems too terrible to speak them. This indicates that even in the midst of connection you can have loneliness, alienation, confusion, and bitterness. The view of dzogchen is, 'Never mind what the other person does, what can I do to move myself,

to open up some pathway of communication?’ Our view is to see that all that manifests is the movement of energy, an infinite communication. To not find a way of moving with that energy is tragic.

Whenever we accept ‘I can’t speak to this person’ we are accepting half a sentence. The complete sentence is ‘I can’t speak to this person using the resources I currently have available.’ If we miss out the last part of the sentence, it becomes an absolute statement. ‘There’s just something about them that I will never ever... I just can’t get through to them. They’re not my cup of tea.’ If we leave it like that then there is an interruption, or hiatus, on the micro-level between ourselves and this other person; we’re blocked and set apart. It also means that permission has been set up to abandon other beings. A permission has been set up to say ‘I don’t know who you are but I can’t get on with you. There’s just something about you. If I never saw you again, I wouldn’t mind. You don’t mean anything to me.’ People feel and think these things and may even say them. Although this may feel like a healthy act of autonomy and self-assertion it does not fit with the idea of dependent co-origination and the mutual affirmation and co-emergence of all beings.

The mahayana view proposes that we engage with the belief, as a basis for altruistic practice, that we have all been born many, many times, and in each of our past lives we have had a mother who has been kind and done many things for us. So each human being we meet, each sentient being, each bird, each insect, has been our mother at one time and has done many acts of kindness for us. If, in the midst of our debt of gratitude we now responded to this person by saying ‘Go away. You are nothing to me’ then this is not the practice of mahayana buddhism. Rather, it is the practice of saying ‘I will control situations!’ It’s saying ‘I will take the things that I like and that make me happy, and I will cut myself off from the things that I don’t like and that don’t make me happy’. This is the common view: that we can, and should, live our life on our own terms.

From the point of view of buddhism we are all connected to all other sentient beings. Connection and obligation are not optional. Although on the level of energy we have more or less capacity to relate to particular people, because that’s just how it’s given, even a difficult relationship is still a relationship. To cut it off and say ‘I’ve had enough of you’ is truly tragic. If you believe in karma and rebirth then this is not an option to adopt lightly because, as in the popular saying, ‘What goes around comes around’. If we cut ourselves off from others we are cutting ourselves off from the world. In doing this we diminish ourselves and those close to us. Working with our own capacity can help us to be aware of the capacity of others.

If you take the bodhisattva vow, you take on a huge social obligation to be as open and as friendly and as responsive as you can be to all beings, for all time. Of course sometimes you

don't feel able to do that so the advice is: 'In as much as you can, according to your current capacity and conditioning'.

Conditioning arises due to ignorance and this conditioning manifests as the functioning of our internal predispositions, so that we feel more, or less, open and available. We can't just suddenly dissolve this conditioning because it influences us without our even being aware of it, but what we can do is not use it as an excuse to step back. Our limited capacity is not something to hide behind and use as a way of avoiding changing and moving forward. Rather, we can live on our growing edge, at the limit of our capacity, and keep trying to move that forward. We do this because who we think we are now, is not who we actually are.

### Compassionate manifestation

On the level of manifestation, we are not really anybody. This may sound strange yet manifestation occurs according to the needs of the context. What we take as the indicators or the signifiers of how we really are, are actually supports for our delusion that we are truly real individual self-existing entities. Yet each of us can find that our lives develop in many different ways, ways we had never imagined. Some people have worked in factories all their lives and when they retire they take up painting or making movies and may spend the rest of their life doing that.

We cannot know in which directions our lives are going, and part of that 'not knowing' comes from allowing other people to take us out of ourselves – which is the essence of sacrifice. To sacrifice the stability of your ordinary sense of self through your connection with another person is a major thing to do; it's saying that how you are – your need or your presencing – will determine how I am.

In the bodhisattva tradition we say there are three main paths for the bodhisattva. One is to gain enlightenment first and then come back to save all sentient beings. The second is to go step by step together with all sentient beings and enter enlightenment at the same time. The third way is to encourage all beings to enter into enlightenment and to be the last one to enter into it, to stay in samsara for as long as there is one being left wandering in it.

If we were to take that third notion and put the others first then it requires self-abnegation – to put away the sites of identification of self so that one's energy is free to respond rather than being tied in self-referential loops. This is very difficult to do unless you've experienced emptiness. Many people who have made sacrifices for a long time want something at the end. Many, many good people end their lives doing bad things because they start to think 'I sacrificed so much; I did this and this and this. What about me? What about me?' So their generosity was like a rubber band going out and out and out and then – 'twang' – and they got back into 'Oi! –

Numero uno! – What about me!’ which is very understandable. This is why, in buddhism, wisdom and compassion always have to go together – wisdom allows us to keep up the practice of dissolving ourselves in order to act openly and generously.

For example, in psychotherapy, it’s very important that the therapist is paid, because the payment allows them to not squeeze a psychological return from the patient. The payment acts as a symbol showing that the therapist is getting something out of the work. Otherwise the therapist could be looking for gratification – wanting to be adored by the patient or using the patient for their own needs or converting them to her view of the meaning of life. Whether it is finite or infinite, if we don’t have some agenda of our own clearly in mind, compassion is likely to collapse. This is why, when we do the tantric practices and pray to Padmasambhava, for example, the rays of light go in all directions, but some of the rays are coming into me. We get the blessing, and all beings get the blessing. Everybody needs the blessing – to say that other people should get the blessing but I can do without is a very big mistake.

Self-sacrifice is a very important area to think about – there has to be a source of gratification and satisfaction somewhere. The bodhisattva who puts other beings first has the satisfaction of completing their vow. So when we do things for other people we have to have some sense of why we are doing this. If I am doing it just because I love them, that’s a beautiful though self-referential reason. However if I’m making a sacrifice so that other people will notice that I’m a good person then that has very little value.

## Summary

I’ll briefly summarise the key points. Firstly it is important to maintain the understanding of impermanence at all times. If you’re driving your car you can practice observing this as you pass other cars or they pass you and all the while the white marks in the road keep going by. If you're eating your food then you start with a plate with lots of food on it and at the end there isn’t so much. If you're cleaning your teeth, at first there’s toothpaste on the brush then it’s all dissolved. Ceaselessly, day by day, in every moment, impermanence is part of our lives. Impermanence is not an abstract concept; it is an accurate description of our lived situation. So if we live in impermanence, as impermanence, we immediately have a loosening up, a freeing up of our potential and more capacity to allow a creative responsiveness.

However, our creative response is moving within a world constrained by karma and dependent co-origination. This is the second key point and it means that we take our place in a world which is already formed and that our freedom to act and move is constrained by the needs of others. This is why developing plans together with others is always the healthiest way forward.

One of things that I often see in my couples-work therapy is that couples fight because they don't do things together; each party does something on their own. One person plans the holidays, and then the other person doesn't want to do what the first one's organised. Then the first one says 'Well you do it next year. I've looked through all the brochures, I've phoned the hotel; I got all this information while you sat on your arse. What is up with you? Why don't you help me?' 'Well, how *can* I help you because you always want to do it your way!' A lot of domestic disputes are like this.

It is very difficult for them both to start from a place of not knowing and to build it up from scratch. 'What do you think about this?' 'How shall we do that?' If couples are saying '*you* do that' and '*I* do this' and the word '*we*' doesn't seem to exist between them, that's a good indication of how bad things are. This also applies with dependent co-origination because, if we want to do things with other people, we have to be responsive to how they are and not come up with a plan in advance and try to impose it.

The third aspect is to pursue our investigation of emptiness; to look again and again and see that there is no inherent self-nature in any phenomenon. To see that whatever seems to exist as a real discrete entity is in fact a pattern of movement – a series of movements which is given a sense of fixed and real identity out of the naming function that goes on. That naming ascribes a sense of inherent self-nature, where none exists.

Emptiness does not mean that there's no meaning to anything and that it's all nothing in a nihilistic sense. Emptiness means there are no entities only events, relationships, connections, co-evolutions, co-emergences. This really means 'Stay on your toes, keep dancing, don't fall asleep!' It also implies the practice of deconstructing our own heaviness, solidity, entropy and tendency to rely on things as if they were fixed.

Then the fourth aspect, in relation to dzogchen, is to trust the power of relaxation. Allowing the burden of our tendencies and positionings – to try harder, to strive, the will to power, the will to perfection – to relax and just see what happens. 'Oh, let's see what happens' 'No! no! We have to prepare'. If you *see* what happens then you're alive, but if you prepare then you won't be seeing what happens you'll be *imagining* what will happen.

These are always the two choices, whether to go off into a fantasy dreamscape of imagination, (and this world is nothing but the process of imagination) or to take a phenomenological turn back to being present. If we choose the latter then we can be *with* the presencing of the imagination, the shared group imagination, rather than over-layering imagination with fantasy. This route is linked to trusting that creativity will arise with this openness of being and that how we emerge in the world with others will be okay. Trusting that just being ourselves will be



enough. Being, as it actually is, is open, fresh, available and always already satisfied. It is complete and not hungry for, nor forgetful of, anything.

In dzogchen, and this is the final point, seeing how you cheat yourself is a most important lesson. Don't be afraid of being honest about your dishonesty. We all cheat ourselves all the time – we betray ourselves, we tell lies to ourselves, we're full of justifications, prevarications and all the rest of it. Whenever the smaller self – our ego self – loses contact with its own ground, it is bound to be false, so its activity will be false and deceptive. Recognising that you are living a lie is the basis for waking up. It is the beginning of the end of complacency and defensiveness. It is not about blaming yourself but rather developing a curiosity towards the myriad ways in which you delude yourself. By watching this in action, seeing how energy ties itself in knots, you start to see how these knots can be released. That's at the heart of the work in dzogchen.