
Awakening to the emptiness of the self

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Extracts:

From the point of view of dzogchen, collaboration and participation are much more important than dominance and control. That is to say, we work inside the field of our connection, whether it is inside what we call our body or inside the outer environment.

...

We can tell closed stories or open stories; we can have the story of the expert person or the story of the pathetic person, but best of all is the story that we tell with other people, a story which is allowed to emerge as a conversation.

...

I find myself being with you. I don't find myself inside myself but I am revealed through being with you. I am revealed as the one who is being with you. I am not revealed as 'the real me' because there is no real me.

...

"The most basic and central of all the Buddha's teachings—the one that you find in all the buddhist schools—is the fact of impermanence. Another way of expressing it is to say that all experience is dynamic. By simply staying open and relaxed we start to experience directly the coming and going of all phenomena. All the aspects I call 'I, me, myself' and all the aspects where we say, "This is other people," "This is a house," "This is a town," all change, and yet the presence itself, the basic awareness doesn't change.

...

The more relaxed and open I am the easier it is to have a sense of you all and by having a sense of you all, I can speak. The ground of the coming into being with the other is not a fixed recipe book. It is not a thing inside us but is the relaxing of our defences, which are linked with the intensity of our self-definition. In that way we become at home in not knowing, and that not knowing is itself what we could call 'wisdom'. That is to say, it is a knowing prior to thinking; it is not dependent on thinking nor is it based on expelling or rejecting thoughts. Rather, every thought, feeling and expression is allowed to arise, and within that field there is no real separation of subject and object.

...

When you are sitting in meditation and a thought presents itself, it doesn't have a front door with a bell on it. You don't say, "Oh, this looks like an interesting thought to enter" and ring the doorbell. Seemingly, without any effort we are in it, and then we are not. There is no obvious front door or back door.

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Sometimes it appears that we have a lot of work to do in order to become a better person. When we start to enquire into our own situation we see many problems and restrictions, many habits, fears and anxieties. The buddhist tradition often describes itself as being like a path, which leads us from here to there. The path's starting point is: *"Where I am now is not very good and where I want to get to is very very good. Therefore, I must really try hard to get there! However, I get distracted by all sorts of things and my intentions dissolve like water in the sand."* In contrast, the key point from the dzogchen point of view is to look without confusion and see where we are now.

All experience is contingent

Often when we are trying to make sense of our own situation we do it in terms of things that we seem to 'have' or 'not have'. For example, we might say, *"I have anger, and I don't have patience,"* or *"I have a lot of desire, a lot of attachment to worldly things"* or *"I am not satisfied with my life as it is."* When we say things like that other people understand what we mean. When we say, *"I get really pissed off with my boss at work,"* most people can understand this. Our map of the world then seems pretty accurate. However, from the point of view of dzogchen there is the question, *"Can we believe what we say?"* We are saying these things and there is some evidence for them, but what do they really mean?

What does it mean, 'to be angry'? I imagine that we have all been angry at some time in our lives but maybe we are not quite so angry this evening. That is to say, we were angry in a particular situation at a particular time. We might think that being angry is like having a little factory inside us and that this factory has a big machine and to start it there is a button. Then when we get angry we say, *"Hey, you are pressing my button! You are making me angry."* Alternatively we might say, *"My anger is my problem and so I have to work on it, maybe by meditation or therapy or singing."* These are the ordinary ideas.

Actually, the anger arose in a situation and in traditional buddhist language this is called dependent co-origination. That is to say, anger—which when it arises seems to be something quite direct, something immediately there and *mine* since it is filling me up—is actually an experience which arises in a communication. On the basis of one particular situation, one matrix of events, anger arises as part of that process. The site or the place of the arising of the anger is inside me and so seems to be mine, but the causal web or network of influences is between me and the world. Thus, if I want to understand my anger I need to observe how I am in the world with others, rather than thinking of anger as a thing inside me. That is the same with every aspect of our life.

For example anxiety states arise due to the interface of many factors. When we take the anxiety as being some-thing that we have and say, *"I am very anxious,"* and go to the doctor, the doctor says, *"I have a medicine to deal with this. Take this tranquilizer and you will feel better."* However, living in this world, you would have to be stupid never to feel anxious. If your eyes are open and your ears are open there are a lot of reasons to be anxious. There are issues of work, parents getting old and sick, issues with kids, partners that you might fight with a bit... There are lots of reasons to think that our life is not stable and secure. One of the things that can intensify the anxiety is the thought: *"My life should be stable and secure. When I look around, other people's lives seem to be fine but when I look into myself it is not so good."* This is a kind of confusion, of not knowing how to read the world, of not seeing people's faces. People do show their anxieties but what blinds us to what is in front of our own nose is that we are caught up in our assumptions.

That is to say, we come into the world not in a fresh, direct, immediate way but mediated through the particular shaping of the language games that we engage in. There are many different theories about how we enter into these limiting games.

Psychology explains this with reference to the influence of our early family situation. When we are very small we are not really in language but there are people are speaking all around us, responding to us, saying things to us, and we see their gestures. If you are two months old you see a lot and you *feel* the quality of the movement of people in relation to you. When you are small and your family speaks to you, they are showing you the shape of the world, your world, the world of your family. You have no access to anything else. You are building up your set of moves that you can make towards the other, in relation to the gestures that are made towards you. That becomes something about how we are in the world.

For example, when we see children playing with their toys, they often talk to the toy and you can hear them speaking in ways that are common in their family. As we get older we go to school and have many more influences and opportunities to learn different moves. And there is a way in which we inhabit these ways of speaking and these ways of using our body; they are the forms of our existence. And when you are a small child big people make comments on you. They may say, *"You are very quiet,"* or *"You are very noisy."* Sometimes we accept what we hear as a confirmation and sometimes we want to struggle against it. However, at the heart of all of these statements is that we are getting the idea that 'I am something.' Some-thing which can be defined and which can be changed. And the way to change it is: *"I have to act on myself."*

For example, your parents say, *"Listen, if you don't do your homework you are not going to do well at school and if you don't do well you won't get through the exam..."* We all know these stories. Thus, *"I have to force myself to do my homework."* That is an amazing thing to think: *"I am now going to make myself do something."* How do we do that? We believe that we can do this, as if there was a kind of line running down inside where on one side there is *I* and then there is *myself*. *"I am a bit disappointed in myself,"* *"I could have tried harder in my life- there are so many things I could have done but I didn't do them. That is why I blame myself."* This is very, very interesting: *"I blame myself."* Have you found that blaming yourself is very helpful? But somehow it is a recommended method: *"Don't let yourself off the hook."*

Notice how you construct your world

What is very important, then, is to observe yourself in the act of speaking and thinking and see how you construct your world. When you look at a bird flying in the sky you can see that it just flaps its wings and somehow moves through the sky. It does not have to have any theory of aerodynamics—it just flies. It is the same with a fish in the sea; from the very beginning it is moving its body and is going through the water. In the same way, when something is really natural it is perfect – there is nothing to be done. However, when we take something for granted—which is actually a construct—there is more of a problem because we have forgotten that the situation which we are inhabiting is actually a *product*.

Buddhism explains this with reference to karma. The word karma basically means activity, activity which is a cause producing a result. What is the relation between the result and the cause? Without the cause we would not have the result. When something *seems* to be existing in itself this involves a forgetfulness of the cause. For example, sometimes in my therapy practice people come and one of the first things they say is, *"I am not coming here to blame my parents. I have to take responsibility for myself."* From a therapy point of view that person is suffering from a confusion: either *"It is all my parents fault"* or *"It is all my fault."* But, of course, it is a

complicated interaction. If we can see our present situation as being the result of many, many events and interactions, we can start to see that it is impossible to say anything definitive about ourselves. For example, if you say, *"I am anxious,"* then start to observe the anxiety, even if it seems to be there a lot of the time, you can see that it will fluctuate. So the sentence gets longer: *"I am anxious under certain circumstances."* In that way, what was a definite assertion about my real identity is now revealed as a contingent or situational event in which I participate. You can apply that to everything you say about yourself.

Our self is like a noun with lots of adjectives flying around it

What continuing definite situation or knowledge can you have so that day-by-day you know you are the same person? Our mood is influenced by many things. Last night was full moon and many people are influenced by that. The fact that it is raining also influences our existence. You might notice that when it is raining and you don't have an umbrella, you cower down a bit. You might think, *"Well I am still me. I am just cowering down because it is raining."* So what then is that real me-ness? This is again something very important to look at: is our self like a noun and everything that happens, that we feel, like a set of adjectives that fly around it. You then have the sense: *"Sometimes I am happy", "Sometimes I am sad", "Sometimes I have a lot of energy", "Sometimes I can't be bothered"* and so on. *"I am so many things."*

Like a bead necklace with a string running through it, the string seems to be the continuity of me being *me*. What, however, is the nature of this thread? Whether we believe in previous lives and karma as a set of influences which move through our being and reveal themselves through the events which come to us in our life, or whether we believe a more western psychological belief of development that I referred to earlier, in each situation we find ourselves we find ourselves believing *something*. That is to say, we shape ourselves through identification with ideas, with concepts. Very often our social life is set up so that the kind of people that we meet and interact with, are ones that confirm our shape to us. And, of course, to be in the world, to get money for food and to take care of your dependents and so on, you have to *do* something, you have to, as it were, *be* something. The question is that as we go through the moment-by-moment sequencing of our existence, what are we identified with, what are we embedded in?

In the outer buddhist paths a lot of attention is given to changing the shape of your existence: to developing qualities like compassion, patience, endurance and so on. This is very good as it makes you a better person in the world and probably makes life easier—maybe not for you but for the people you meet—however, it is still a story. If you say, *"I want to become very rich and powerful like Mr Berlusconi,"* or you say, *"I want to become a bodhisattva and save all sentient beings,"* these are both intentions in which *I*, by mobilising myself, will find a way to have my dream come true. Thus, for meditators it is very important to observe, as it were, the religious aspects of something like buddhism. That is to say, the concern with making people behave in better ways. That effort can bring good outcomes but it can also act as a kind of distraction so that you don't attend to the central question of *'who is the one who is acting?'*

One way this is explored from the buddhist point of view is through understanding emptiness, understanding that many things appear in the world but they don't have their own internal essence which defines them. Thus, if I say, *"This is my body,"* it *appears* to be something uniquely connected with me, to be something existing in itself. However, the fact is that our body is always somewhere: at night you lie down in the bed, then you stand up on the floor, then you go and sit on the toilet – it is always somewhere. That is to say, your body is part of the environment. *I* am not moving *through* the world, I am part of the movement *of* the world. Thus, again, imagining

that there is some defining essence inside me is to be blind to the continuing interaction which is our embodiment.

For example, breathing looks like something *we* are doing. However, from the point of view of the body, the lungs are expanding and contracting, pulling air in and pushing air out. However, the air is very kind, it always goes in. That is the nature of air, it moves into spaces. Air is part of our existence. It is not that we choose to breathe in and out to get some air. It is not a choice; it is our way of being in the world. The world is not something outside ourselves that we step over a threshold to enter. And as with our conception, when the semen of the father unites with the potential in our mother's body and the interaction starts, it is starting in our mother's body and our mother is in the world. And when the baby comes out of the mother it is *like* they are born into the world but they had nine months in a particular aspect of the world; that wasn't somewhere else. Therefore, when we start to observe this *actual* nature of our being we find that we are revealed to ourselves *in* our interaction in the world.

In brief this means: "*I am not a thing.*" Thus, when I was young and some people would say, "*You are a bad boy,*" they were completely deluded because there was no '*thing*' to be given this label. That doesn't mean that I was very well-behaved, rather, I was doing things that adults didn't like. That is to say, the activity can be described but very often it is said to us in a way that confirms that this existence is a '*thing*' which needs to be improved – just as you brush your teeth, so you should polish yourself.

This is very important in giving us a sense of the world in which we live. If I am a thing, and you are all things, we have to be a little bit careful about who we are with each other. When we meet someone we are trying to check out what kind of a thing they are: "*Are you the kind of thing that might help me? Are you the kind of thing that might harm me?*" This is an objectification, a solidification, which is the real meaning of what in buddhism is called attachment.

For example, this is my watch; it is not yours. Thus, I can say I am attached to the watch and I call it 'mine'. However, this is a very small attachment. The much more dangerous attachment is that I am attached to 'this is a watch'. That is to say, I sit inside the concept 'this is a watch' and on the basis of this I can say "*I'm not stupid because I know this is a watch.*" Thus, all day long we enjoy the knowledge we have of the world – of all these different things. You pass the flower shop and say, "*The amaryllis is gorgeous,*" and the other person says, "*What is an amaryllis,*" and you start to explain. Thus, in confirming the object, we confirm the subject. And the reality, the givenness of the object, becomes mirrored in the givenness of myself. In that way, we run with this narrative: "*I am a thing that can be known, defined, and improved.*"

A great deal of the education we get in school turns out to be useless. Students get trained for an occupation which, by the time they are qualified, may no longer exist. For example, I grew up in Glasgow, a city that had many shipyards. I went to a school focused on science where we learned engineering drawing and things connected with making ships. However, all the time that I was studying this, the Japanese and Koreans were developing very cheap shipbuilding, and then the shipyards in Scotland started to close. Thus, there were many thousands of people who knew well how to build ship engines and all the different aspects of that but their knowledge was worth nothing.

In our lives we have to do something – so what shall we do? What we do is an *activity*, that is to say, a gesture moving through space and time. However, we tend to wrap these gestures in a package. For example, someone could say, "*I am a boiler maker. My father did this, I do this and it is a good job. One day my child will do this.*" But it is an illusion - nobody wants your boiler now and so you become an ex-boiler-maker. You know in the depths of your heart, "*I am a boiler-*

maker” and you think, “*Oh, God! Give me a chance once more to make a boiler.*” But it is an illusion because this trade with a lot of skill and knowledge existed in an intersection of many different factors.

It is the same for all of us: what we call ‘my identity, ‘who I am’ is created out of so many factors which are not in the palm of our hand. Therefore, the function of meditation practice is also to find a lighter way of being, in which the movement of our activity is part of our flexibility and our capacity to move in the changing world, rather than trying to stabilise something.

The magic fairy gave you a free bus ticket

When you were born the magic fairy came to visit you and she gave you a free bus ticket. This ticket gives you freedom to ride on anything which is moving. Thus, when a thought arises in your mind you don’t need to worry about having any money because you have your ticket and you jump straight on to that thought. Not only that, but because the ticket is free, you change buses all the time. When one thought gets boring you go into a feeling, and when the feeling is too much you have a sensation. In that way we are always moving. In the Tibetan language a normal word for a sentient being, for somebody who is alive, is a *dro wa* which means somebody who is ‘going’. However, because of this special ticket we don’t usually notice when we skip from one journey to another since something is always happening. Therefore, a key function of meditation is to try to have more sense of this.

When we talk of being mindful it gives the sense that we are able to see what is happening. Being mindful allows the perception of different options. That is to say, you become aware that you are standing at the bus stop and you see that there are many different buses, and you can choose which one to get on. Then, of course, you have to make a decision about how you will live, who you will be. However, that is usually a little bit frightening for us because it raises very big metaphysical questions about the meaning of life. What should I do with my time here? Is there any meaning to this existence? Then, maybe you start to get a headache – but don’t worry, just get on the next bus. You then travel somewhere else, get off the bus and don’t know where you are – but “*Ah! There’s another bus coming along.*” This, then, is the course of our life: moving here, there, and everywhere.

However, when we start to see this movement of our mind going here, there, and everywhere it starts to create a question about our ordinary story of “*I am in charge of my life.*” “*I am the one who decides what I am going to do.*” That is to say, if life is happening *to* me then maybe I am not in charge of my life. It is like when you go swimming in the sea, but the sea is moving. You are moving in a field that is moving; the sea with its lapping waves is moving you along just as you are moving yourself through the water. It is not that we are entirely a puppet with our strings being pulled by circumstances, but neither are we a dictator able to impose our will wherever we want. Moreover, we find our way. We don’t know what that way is going to be ahead of us. When we get up in the morning we don’t know what our day is going to be like. We don’t know what our life will be like one year from now. Of course we make some kind of plans—we maybe think of some insurance or some money for a pension when we get old—but we don’t know whether we will live or not.

Therefore, the basic function of meditation is to help us maintain clarity within the actual uncertainty, the not-knowingness of our existence. It is a way of moving from reliance on, and identification with, concepts in order to be present with our life as it arises in a way that gives us some degree of influence. The word ‘influence’ has the idea of fluidity; so we are flowing within the flow. We are like a small current within a big river where there is no dry land in sight, and

whatever we grasp onto is just a piece of wood flowing in the river. It is our very belief that our life should be stable and predictable which is the cause of many of our problems because we are asking our existence to be something it is not.

Shamata practice

This is a practice called *shamata*, or calming the mind. We choose a simple object of focus. Often it is the movement of the breath over the upper nostril however you can also focus on an external object, like a mark on the floor. We sit with the back straight, the shoulders relaxed and the chin slightly down. The eyes are open but not staring and are just gazing down the line of the nose. The tip of the tongue is on the hard palate behind the upper teeth. We decide on our focus, either the movement of the breath or an external object and develop a clear intention that this is what we are going to focus on for a period of time. And if we find that our mind has wandered off we just very gently bring it back onto the focus. It is very, very important to be tender towards ourselves. Blaming and criticising ourselves has no benefit. Our mind has been wandering here and there for a very long time so why would we be surprised that it wanders now? Therefore, when you find that you have gone off and are caught up in something just immediately and very gently return to the focus you have decided on.

[Practice of shamata]

Even when we wish to focus our attention I think that most of us will find that we get caught up in something else. This is not a condition created by meditation. This is going on all the time but we don't notice it because we are just going here and there. In a sense this is a problem of creativity; our capacity to create thoughts, feelings, sensations is enormous. Our minds are quick and responsive. We remember many, many different things and we have many pathways between all the many things we have already experienced in life. These various events can be joined in many different ways to create many different patterns. Does that matter? As long as our lives are ticking along, maybe not. However, sometimes life is not so easy. We might become prey to depression, to anxiety, to obsessional turns and so on; that is to say, a particular pattern which arises as our experience catches us. We are caught by a particular representation or picture or image.

For example: *"I am depressed."* As soon as we start to say that, either to ourselves or to someone else, it draws in many implications and we find ourselves creating a particular environment. Of course, when you have a bad day and you feel a bit down, that is real, that is part of your existence. But once we start to call it 'depression' it becomes something other than the immediacy of the experience. It becomes 'a condition that I have'. And in knowing that 'I have depression' it now becomes something that I want to get rid of. However, these states are not dead things. It is like when you have breakfast outside in the summertime. Maybe you have some nice bread and perhaps a little ham, and the sun is shining. The warmth comes to the ham and releases its sweet smell and suddenly some uninvited guests arrive—wasps. So you are quietly having your breakfast and "bzzzzz..." You flick your hand and say *"Go away!"* But the wasp is now thinking, *"What is this – what is this? Something very special is happening"* and it becomes even more interested in your breakfast. It is the same principle with depression: the more you try to push it away, the more it becomes attached to you because you now have this over-invested category which has been given a status of being something in its own right.

However, what is *actually* happening moment-by-moment are changes of sensation and emotion and so on. And these are being gathered together and homogenised into 'depression'. For example: *"I feel I don't want to see anyone because I am depressed."* *"I feel I have to stay in bed all day because I am depressed. What else do you expect me to do, I am depressed!"* However,

the evidence is that if you get up and you go for a walk that will be more helpful. *“Listen, I am very happy to go for a walk when I am free of my depression.”* In that way, we can see that we enter into the construction of a definition of ourselves which then carries an internal logic which determines the kind of moves we can make.

Even when something says that it is unreliable, we want to rely on it

Now, one of the many functions of this simple shamata meditation is that when we are focusing the mind on a single focus, we have the sense of these thoughts coming and going around us. That is to say, thoughts are dynamic. However, something which is itself moving in time and space, says or reveals as its semantic content, ‘I am stable.’ Thus, the facticity, the immediate evidence of what is there, is that this is something *moving* – yet what it announces about itself is *stasis*, a fixed state.

For example, to say *“I am depressed”* takes two seconds. That is to say, it is a speech act, a movement, but it is announcing, *“I am depressed.”* Buddhism and psychotherapy both describe how we talk ourselves and think ourselves into the illusion of fixed states by methods which are dynamic. That is to say, there is nothing in the thought that is stable, but the semantic, the place it takes up in the semiotic web, seems to indicate that there is a fixed definite thing there. Thus, observing how we fall into the illusions created by language is very important.

Even when something says that it is unreliable, we want to rely on it. For example, you might be familiar with the opera *Carmen*. There is a good simple soldier with a charming girl waiting for him back in the village, sweet Mikhaila who comes to him with some fresh-made bread and some fruit from the garden. What a nice story we can imagine them having: he will retire from the army and have some money so they can buy some olive trees and live happily together. However, one day, out of the cigarette factory come the girls moving and shouting together. And one of these women with the big hair and full of life, is singing, *“Love is like a bird, you cannot catch it.”* However, this poor soldier, Don Jose, thinks, *“Ha ha...I can catch it.”* So she catches him, and he catches her. However, the more he gets her he gets nothing, because to love Carmen is to fall in love with jealousy since she cannot be caught. And that is how the opera develops.

She has not cheated him, because from the very beginning she has said, *“No one can catch me.”* Even when it says on the lid of the box, ‘This is poison’ we still open it up and start to eat it. This is what we can start to observe about our own mind: we fall in love with, or we identify with, or we become part of, movements which offer no stability.

By stabilising our attention we start to experience the dynamic nature of all we participate in and to see that there is no substance, no true availability in the things that we long to be part of. For example, if you join any kind of group, the group is created out of all of its members. There is nothing in the group apart from the members and yet it appears as if the group is some-**thing** that I am going to join. We don’t think, *“I am joining together with people to create the illusion of a group,”* but that *“I am going to join this group.”* However, what is the status of the group? It is a name. And the name is the point on which rests the illusion that something of a group is really existing. That is to say, the life of the group is dynamic. It is created moment-by-moment by the quality of energetic interaction that people bring into that situation. It may have a name, it may even have a tee-shirt and headed note paper. However, that is only the sign that people want to wear a tee-shirt, and that letters have to be written. It doesn’t establish the **truth** of anything.

That is to say, a tool for activity, a piece of headed notepaper, is a way of participating in the world with others but it is not proof that the group really exists. Each of us can say, *“I exist.”* *“I*

have a name and I live somewhere." We all have friends who will go to the police station and confirm, *"Yes, I agree this is James Low."* However, does that establish that there is truly a 'James Low'? Where is the essence of James-ness? Is it in my passport? In my body? In my thoughts? Each of these is a method of participation. In order to come here to spend some time with you, my passport was a useful method of participation because it allowed me to participate in the notion of identity being established by paper.

How do we know that we are what we seem to be? Maybe on a down day you phone a friend and you say, *"Listen, I have had enough, I don't know where my life is going,"* and they say, *"Oh, don't worry, it is just one of these times. Remember a few months ago we were out and walking in the countryside and had a great day? We will do that again. Don't worry."* What they are saying is: *"How you are now is not really you. Your real self is happy and relaxed but this is something else – I know who you really are. Don't be deluded by this temporary astrological phenomenon."* Of course, it is nice to have friends to remind us, but what are they reminding us of? What essentially they are saying is, *"Oh, you can tell another story about yourself. Today you are telling this story but don't take it too seriously because other stories are possible."*

The difference between the story and the storyteller

This is what we do in psychotherapy. We help patients to reconfigure their life, to tell a different story. It makes a difference to mood, but does it establish anything in truth? Are we simply a set of stories? Psychotherapy has the notion of narrative therapy which is basically saying that, indeed, we are only stories. The story is something which is told but who is the teller of the story? In order to find the one who tells the story we have to start to see the difference between the story and the storyteller.

If you are sitting in a cafe with a friend and you fall into the story you are telling, you are completely in that story. That is to say, the story and the storyteller are the same. In that way, the story rings true; we feel authentic in telling the story. Of course, that is a validating experience; we feel alive and right there, and because it makes sense to the other person and they see the vitality that we express in doing it, it rings true. However, if you go into a bar late at night and you listen to two friends that have been drinking all evening and are now leaning forward gazing into each other's eyes saying, *"I love you so much. Being with you is so wonderful,"* so that there is no difference between the story and the storyteller, we look at them and say, *"Oh, they are just drunk."*

However, maybe a lot of the time we are also drunk but we use a very good kind of vodka so it doesn't leave too much trace. That is to say, we are so 'in it' that we don't know what is going on, but because of its feeling tone, it *seems* to be valid.

For example, if you are in the park and the weather is nice and you see children playing, when they are really into a game, maybe collecting twigs and making little houses, their attention is completely focused in what they are doing. They are full of life and energy and what they are constructing is very important, but we say, *"Oh, they are just playing."* For them, however, they are not just playing because they are in the game. Afterwards they may say, *"Oh, we were playing at making houses."* but when they are doing it, they are doing it.

Children can often recognise immediately at the end of the game that they were playing a game, but as we get older we get a bit slower. Maybe you keep doing the same job for years and years before you start to think, *"What am I doing? Why am I doing this job? I hate it."* That is to say, you were inside a game but you didn't recognise it. You were caught by the activity but you couldn't see it, because you were in it. However, as soon as you really start to see it, you are out

of it. You may have to continue because you need the money but your relationship with the activity will have changed. And, of course, this happens in relationships with people as well.

Mindfulness practice and the general movement of meditation is concerned with observing the nature of games in their performance. It requires a very subtle balance. You cannot fall into the activity but nor can you stand back from it and observe it across a big distance, because if you do that then that space itself becomes a space filled with alienation. That is to say, you start having thoughts *about it* and that in itself, is not mindfulness.

Life is being there in the moment it is happening

‘Mindful’ in English is the same as careful. In the Tibetan language it is *dren ba*. This means to remember and to recollect. In English ‘recollect’ means to collect. What are you collecting? You are collecting yourself again and again. It is the process of coming back again and again as the movement of dispersal and absorption goes on. However, we are not collecting ourselves into ourselves *apart* from what is there. Rather, we are collecting ourselves *into* the experience of participation in this unfolding field. In the practice of mindfulness if you focus, for example, on preparing vegetables, there is an attention to the various aspects: the sensation of the handle of the knife, the weight of the knife, the sense of pressure and resistance as you cut into a carrot or tomato, the colour, the smell and so on. All of this is the united field so that what we call ‘*me*’ inside and ‘*the world*’ outside are revealed in the same moment.

We can do this in different ways. For example, I could be inside myself, keeping my eyes closed and carrying on talking and some thoughts will come out. You all can be inside yourselves listening, in the midst of your own thoughts. Or, there is the possibility that we meet in the middle, of being here together. For example, I like to sit on a chair so that I can look at people and when I see you my words arise in relation to you. From your side the possibility is to practice listening *out*. Here we are in our bodies with these sense organs, and we experience the skin’s surface as the boundary between *myself* and the *world*. However, we have these holes in the side of our head and the world comes in. But what does it come in to? It comes into ‘*me*’. But who is the one who is listening? *You* are listening but what is the experience of listening? Is it like catching butterflies? That is to say, you catch a word and put it in a box? Or is it a kind of pulsation where sometimes we find we are more involved and sometimes less so; where you go off into your own thoughts and then come back? There is the experience of hearing sounds, the sound of our voices, and also the experience of your thoughts, feelings and sensations arising. In that sense, hearing is a dynamic interweaving – listening is participative. It is not like an active talker to a passive listener. We become aware of the different kinds of movement or energy which constitute the experiences of speaking and listening. The more we can see that, the more life is just being there in the moment it is happening.

When we think *about* something we are still present in a particular way but there is a distance that opens up because I am now standing in relation to the thing I am thinking about. One of the functions of meditation is to allow us to be more immediately; spontaneously available to what is occurring. That is to say, we don’t have to make sense of it. Life is not a problem to be solved. It is not something to *think about* but something which is revealed through the clarity of being available. That is to say, immediacy carries its own clarity. If we start to see that, then instead of getting caught up in a particular pattern of thought which we identify with so that it becomes the limit of our existence, we can stay open, naked and fresh. This gives the possibility that all our creativity and our freshness can be connected with the openness and freshness of the evolving moment, and in that we find ourselves alive.

Maybe there is a relation here between being alive and not knowing—that in a strange way knowledge is death. That is to say, when we know something we sit inside it and there is a security in that but there is also a kind of stupidity, a non-availability. For example, perhaps you are watching television and you think, *“Oh, it is summertime just now and they always show repeats in the summer. I have seen this before so I won’t watch it because I know what it is.”* However, the director of that episode had thought, *“This is very good. There are a lot of characters and many storylines going on.”* But, we, having seen it once, think we know all about it *“In this story Tisepi kills Sophia... what else is there to know?”* In that way we don’t look, but there are many things to see. There is the lighting, the way the set is done, the tone of the voices, how the emotions are revealed in the face and so on. That is to say, it is as if in *knowing* the storyline we have access to the entire phenomenology of the episode. This is stupid, however it is one of the things we do a lot. We abstract what we take to be the key points and everything else recedes into the background and we feel, *“Oh, yeah, I know what is going on.”* And in that way the world is predictable and I am a smart cookie...but this may not be true.

How we get caught. As my hand goes out to touch it, language is already there

Part of the focus for our time here is to explore how we get caught and what is the nature of that getting caught. There are two aspects to this. There is the side of the subject and the side of the object. These two sides are inseparable but for the purposes for describing them we can treat them as different domains.

Thus, when we deal with an object we see something which is there. It seems to be given just as it is. For example, here is a chair. As soon as we look at it we know it is a chair and we say, *“chair”*. Do we *see* a chair or do we *say* a chair? In actuality what we see is a shape, and that shape could have many different functions. If you were cold you could set fire to it to get some warmth; you could use it in many different ways. However, we see that there is an ‘it’, that there is a some-thing-ness to it. And the central question is: is that some-thing-ness out there or is it a quality of our interpretation?

This goes back to what we looked at briefly earlier. If there is a noun it can then be qualified or modified by adjectives. That is to say, there is a noun; there is an undeniable *‘thing’* to which we can put interpretations. You can like it or not like it; you can make all sorts of judgements about it – but what is there? Something made of wood. Is wood there, or is wood in your discourse? What do you think? It seems obvious that this chair is made of wood. However, wood is an idea. It is an interpretation. It is a name. Clearly, there is an immediacy of that: you could smell it, you could touch it, you could lick it and so on, and it would reveal itself in different ways.

Here you can spot one of the big hooks for getting trapped. We come back again and again to saying, *“If I touch it I will see what it is.”* The it-ness, the given-ness of *this* as a separate object, which exists prior to my experience of *it*, appears to be just the case. That is to say, there seems to be some-*thing* which is apart from the interpretation, and that we know as a true existence.

Moreover, everything that we say about *this* (the object) is in language, in culture. ‘It’ ‘this’ ‘that’ ‘thing’ –whatever it is we are still in language. We cannot step out of language. With some kinds of meditation you can to a certain extent, but the essential point is to see how language is so very much part of our existence that it is like an extension of our hand. That is to say, as my hand goes out to touch it, my language is already there; I am already working out what is going on.

How we reify objects. King Milinda's chariot.

There is a traditional example that many of you will know. It comes from a text called: *The Questions of King Milinda*. King Milinda lived in what is now Pakistan at a time when that area was buddhist, and his name indicates that he was connected with the line of King Alexander the Great.

When the King Milinda heard that there was a famous monk in the land he invited him to come and explain the basis of the buddhist teaching. The monk, Nagasena, said to the king, *"Your majesty, could you have your chariot brought out."* The chariot was made of wood and nicely carved with many different pieces to it. Then the monk said, *"Your majesty, could you ask your attendants to take out all the wooden nails and lay out all the pieces of the chariot."* So they took the chariot to pieces and then the monk asked the king, *"What do you see in front of you?"* And the king replied, *"A pile of wood."* *"Where is your chariot?"* asked the monk. *"It is not here."* replied the King. Then the monk said to the king, *"Your majesty, can you ask your attendants to put all these pieces together again."* So they put it back together and then the monk asked the King, *"Now what do you see?"* *"My chariot,"* replied the king. Nagasena then asked, *"So, which of your workers added the **chariot** to the pieces of the wood?"*

So what is the chariot-ness of the chariot? Is it out there? Where is it? When this shape encounters the interpretation or the naming of 'chariot' the word and the object merge together to be the chariot. In the same way with this chair we can see that there are many pieces joined together. If we were to take them apart and lay them down they would just be a pile of wood. And when we put it together there would be a chair again. By putting them together we make a chair but having finished making the chair there *is* a chair. Thus, in order to see the chair as a chair you have to forget the making of the chair.

Again, in the same way when you go out in the road you see many cars. We know that cars are made in factories and we know that they need petrol to be put in and we know that they break down and need to be repaired. That is to say, we are quite aware of the many things involved in keeping a car: insurance, parking permits and so. However, when we see the 'thing' we say, *"This is a car."* The car-ness of the car seems inherent in the very fact of what is there. That is to say, we believe that there is a direct relationship between how we speak, how we use language and what we see in the world. That is, we believe that our language is telling us about the world as an objective fact.

Our world is a world full of concepts

In fact, our world is a world of concepts. And these concepts move across the surface of whatever is there and create for us our individual sense of what that is. For example, we know that for some people their car could be a status symbol; for others it may simply be a practical means of moving around and for someone else it may be seen as an attack on the ecological balance of the world. That is to say, each of us inhabits a world constructed out of our particular tendencies. In Sanskrit these tendencies are called *samskaras* and in Tibetan they are called *du che*. *Du* means to gather together and *che* means to do, to create, to associate. The central point here is that the energy, the dynamic nature of the construction, becomes subsumed *into* and hidden *by* the assumption that the thing exists in itself.

For example, this watch was made in Switzerland. Some people put this together and when they had finished doing their work there was a watch. I then bought this watch. When I bought it I was thinking, *"What is the cost? Is it clear? Can I read the face?"* and so on. I wasn't thinking

who was the person who made it or if they were happy when they made my watch or whether they were vegetarian – I just bought a watch. The production of the watch was invisible to me; I just saw the watch. However, the production of the watch is in the watch. You can say it is in the past and it was in Switzerland far away and long ago, but the work of the watchmaker is here now making the watch work. This, then, is where we forget the history in the seeming givenness of the object. In English we say, “*We take it for granted,*” it seems to be just given – “*It is a watch.*” And we settle into that; there is a kind of confidence that comes from being contained within the concept that *seems* to speak the truth.

However, this, again, is a kind of stupidity but a necessary stupidity for moving in our world. Particularly with the rise of computers we become more and more stupid as we become more and more able to access information. When I was a child almost everything that you could see, with a bit of mental effort you could understand how it worked. The mechanical world is difficult but you can lay out all the parts and put them together. However, when you go to the electronic world it is very different. Children, certainly in England, and boys in particular spend a lot of time playing computer games; scoring points and playing all kinds of war games. They feel very bright and very sharp as they move all these things around. But they themselves out of their own choice are making themselves stupid, because, nothing is there – this is an illusion. However, for them it becomes very real. It is the same with internet pornography: all over the world millions and millions of people are rubbing their genitals while watching images on a computer screen. What a way to spend your life. Nobody is there – this is nothing – it is an illusion. This is obvious. However, people fall into the illusion and think that the illusion is more real, more amenable, more accessible than being with another human being. This is very very interesting: to abandon the vitality of one’s existence into a dream. One of the reasons why is because inside the world of the computer, once you start to learn the rules of the game, you can feel unimpeded.

However, in real life when we are with other people it is not like that. If you want to have a real conversation with someone, a relationship, there is a to-ing and a fro-ing – it cannot be just on my terms. That is to say, the face of the other person is showing me, through how they are, where I am with them. That is to say, my permission to advance or the necessity of stepping back is shown to me.

A conversation, then, is not a monologue; it is being in the world with others, in which my coming into being is co-created with the presence of the other. For example, I can say to this piece of wood, “*It is a chair.*” However, this chair does not start to cry if we call it a chair. This is the relation that we have to the material world: *we* say to the *world* what it is. It is like in the beginning of the book of Genesis where we are like god and say ‘this is this’ and ‘this is that’. That is to say, we name things.

This is really vital to see. The world is dynamic, the world is revealed through the nature of our participation. What we call an object is not fixed and what we call a subject is also not fixed. It is our moving together that gives rise to the personal experience of ourselves. Thus, we are not a thing, in a world of things.

What is meant by ‘illusion’? Echo, moon and mirage are examples

In buddhism they write about sunyata or emptiness, and in English we often say nothingness. In English nothing is also ‘no-thing’. If we say that this chair’s nature is emptiness or nothingness, it doesn’t mean that there is no-thing at all. That would be silly because our eyes are showing us some-thing. But what do they show? They show some possibility of a beginning of a conversation. For example, the object or the manifestation appears. And as it shows itself that is

its own way of saying “Hello” and we reply “Hello, chair.” In that way we start to create a world which is inhabited by ‘me’ and by ‘chair’. Buddhist language calls this illusion.

There are many examples to illustrate the idea of illusion, for example, an echo. If you are out in the mountains and you shout, shortly afterwards you may hear its echo. The echo is there but it has no true basis of its own. It appears that something is being spoken but nobody is saying it. Again, if you go out on a clear full moon night and look in a pond you will see the reflection of the moon. If it is calm and the surface of the water is not moving, it appears that the moon is there in the water. However, the moon is not there. A third example is a mirage. If you are driving along the road on a hot summer day you may see a mirage, the appearance of water ahead of you. There is no water there but there *appears* to be water.

In the same way, there is nothing which is really a chair. However, we can get taken in by what is *here* [i.e. in our head]—but we are not actually taken in by what is *there*. That is to say, we are taken in by our interpretation of what is there as if it was *what is there*. Although this can be difficult to understand, it is worth doing. It’s like being a prisoner and trying to understand the workings of the lock on the door. When you see how the lock works you can go out.

Illusion, then, means that we see something as being there which is not there, nevertheless there is still something which is seen. In the west when we say ‘illusion’, we talk about fantasy and reality and about them being two polarities. However, illusion is not the same as fantasy because there is not a reality. *Reality* is an illusion. That is why this is very different from our usual way of thinking. Clearly if I bang my hand on the chair very hard it will hurt. I could use the pain as a way of saying, “Come on, this is real! If I picked up the chair and hit you with it now, you would know it was real.” The chair is not just an idea, and yet, even if I hit you with it, everything that goes on to happen is within culture, within creation... You are now lying in a pool of blood; two phone calls are made, one for an ambulance for you and one for the police for me. Something has really happened. However, all of this is an experience that we are making sense of that we are interpreting. The police come and they say, “We need to interview everyone here; tell us what happened.” The police write down our many stories and they see, “Oh, these stories generally agree that this man hit this other man with this wooden chair. Therefore, the hitter is a bad man and needs to be arrested because he is dangerous.” This is a story; we could write a short story like this. This is not to say that there were not events, but these events are occurring inside our own fields of interpretation. And because we believe our interpretation, because it is the world we live in, we think it is true. It is not that it is true or not true, it is that this is a movement of meaning-making. That is to say, here we are moving in time together, we are sharing this space.

Don’t turn buddhism into yet another room to live in

We are about forty people here. You could all decide to leave here at lunchtime and I could go out onto the road, meet another forty people and persuade them to come back in here. I could then continue with them what we have been doing, and these people would start to look a little surprised: “What am I doing here? What is this madman talking about? Why would anyone listen to this? It is almost time for the football to start now...”

That is to say, you and I are here because we are caught up in something. We all have some thoughts of, “Who am I?” “What is life?” “Is there something to be understood?” We have entered into that and on the basis of that we start to have some way of meeting.

There are then two possibilities in this. One possibility is to think, “Oh, this is good, now I understand more. Now I am really inside something.” In which case you would simply be

entering a higher-order stupidity. The key thing is not to make another room to live in, but to see what the nature of a room is—‘What is going on when I enter into a belief or an idea?’—and if possible to relax and experience the arising and passing of these rooms by not entering into them but also not standing outside them. That is to say, to allow our experience to arise as it does, without confirming it as something solid and without using it to confirm our sense that we ourselves are each something solid. Then the freshness of the movement of our life moment-by-moment is something we are truly present with.

The traditional example for this in dzogchen is a mirror. When we look in the mirror we see a reflection and we see our face. We can pass the mirror to our neighbour and when they look into the mirror they don't see *our* face, they see their *own* face. *“But when I looked in it I saw my face. Where did my face go?”* That is to say, the mirror is not marked or shaped by the reflection. If you have a piece of paper, however, and you make a mark on it with a pen, the paper remains marked. If you then pass that piece of paper to the person beside you they have to work with your mark.

Things get marked

In the same way, when we experience ourselves as being a *thing* it is as if every event that occurs makes a mark on us. When we tell other people the story of our lives we tend to talk of the various things which have marked us: *“This happened and it was good”, “That happened and it was bad”, “That was very painful and I haven’t recovered from it.”* These are stories.

If somebody has broken your heart and you go to the hospital they have very sophisticated machines to scan the body but they won't reveal a broken heart. This is because the heart that is broken is not in your body. It is the centre of your being but it is not a thing. Having a broken heart is having a story to tell: a story you tell yourself, and a story you can tell other people: *“This happened to me. I was let down by a man but this isn’t surprising since all men are like that. You should never trust them!”* This is quite a popular story nowadays. Thus, inside that story something is created, a positioning.

For example, you are in a social occasion and you are introduced to someone and they seem quite nice but this mark on the heart starts to speak: *“Ah, but remember what happened last time. It looks sweet today, but it may not look like that tomorrow.”* In that way, instead of being open to the situation, in order to protect ourselves, we have already made a prediction on the basis of the past. Of course, there is a kind of wisdom in that if what we learn is to look more carefully, if we wake up to the fact that in order to survive in this world we need to develop some discernment. Living with our eyes open is not a bad choice. However, mostly, we don't do that. We enter into an assumption: *“I don’t trust people”* or *“I can’t trust myself. I always make the wrong choices.”* In that way, when we are marked by events there tends to be a foreclosure, a closing down which operates ahead of the next experience.

Again, the traditional example is the idea that our nature, or we could say our mind, or our being, or our presence is like a mirror. The mirror itself is not scratched or wounded or damaged by any event that occurs. What happens is that you get a more complex kind of reflection arising, so that the reflection of the present moment becomes mixed up with reflections from the past, and one cannot distinguish between what is actually here in the phenomenological field and what is an interpretation. This doesn't mean that we have to get rid of our memories in order to be just in the present. That would be a kind of confusion because our capacity to use language is based on having a past in which we learnt to speak.

Moreover, what is required is the clarity; that in the present moment the arising of our experiential field is allowed in all its complexity, so that we can see with as accurate a perception as possible what belongs in the other, what is arising from the past, and what thoughts are linked to what we think other people might think about what we are going to do. All of this is laid out like a beautiful buffet. Now, before you fill your plate you should look along the whole buffet to see what is available, because responding into the world with others means being able to speak in a way that they can hear. If you like to eat chillies that are hot and you eat them every day then having chillies in your food is your idea of food. However, if you cook that for someone else there is the question of whether they like chillies or not. The fact that *you* call that food doesn't mean that they will be able to eat it.

I hope you can see the meaning here. That is to say, this buffet of the possibilities of the moment is the potential; it is the shimmering field that is just there. However, as we move towards the other the question is: *"What is the otherness of the other? What is their difference from me? How do I have to be if I want to make contact with them? "* Thus, the truth lies in the meeting, not in my belief that chillies are good, nor in the fact that the other person says that they don't like chillies. Moreover, it is in the question: *"What shall we eat? How shall we be?"* That is to say, to live is to be in *we*, in *us*. It is not to be in oneself.

Even if you live on your own, you are not on your own because many people live inside us. We know that our body is full of bacteria; lots of little living things are moving around inside. Also, there is mamma and papa and all the people we have met who are part of our ways of talking and being. Therefore, part of the recognition of our nature as being like a mirror, is that the clearer we can allow the complexity of the reflection the more precisely we can move within that field of reflection.

In dzogchen this is referred to as 'the three dimensions of existence'. That is to say, our nature is open; it is not something graspable or definable. Sometimes it is called 'the nature of the mind'. However the mind is not a thing. It is impossible to describe what this openness is, although it is present in every moment of our existence. Because it is not a thing you won't experience it as a thing. However, we can find ourselves present in this openness. It is not something that we have nor is it something that we can say, *"This is what I am."* It is not a position that you can take up nor a site that you can inhabit in a fixed way, but it is the site of the absolute freedom, which is the freshness of each moment.

That is to say, all that we have done in the past has consequences. For example, we find ourselves having likes and dislikes, freedoms to move out, points of shyness and anxiety but none of these positions defines who we are. All our activities and habits just define our activities and habits. They don't define some essential core *me-ness* of me. Thus, this openness is our fundamental freedom, but it does not exist as some big empty space, rather it is like the mirror. The mirror is always showing reflections and the reason it can show one reflection and then another and another is because the reflection does not define the openness of the mirror. That is to say, the reflection expresses the potential of the mirror.

You are my world

Thus, moment-by-moment this world, which is *our* particular world, expresses both our capacity to show reflections and, inseparable from that, our history of expression. For example, when I am talking to you now, I am talking in this way because of all the things I have done in my life. My ways of talking have developed in time. I don't know what I am going to say, I sit here without any idea – I don't have a plan. When I look around the room I see people and I speak to the people.

That is to say, the more relaxed and open I am the easier it is to have a sense of you and by having a sense of you, I can speak. Thus, the ground of the coming into being with the other is not a fixed recipe book. It is not a thing inside each of us but is the relaxing of our defences, which are linked with the intensity of our self-definition. In that way, we become at home in not knowing, and that not knowing is itself what we could call 'wisdom'. That is to say, it is a knowing prior to thinking; it is not dependent on thinking nor is it based on expelling or rejecting thoughts. Rather, every thought, feeling and expression is allowed to arise, and within that field there is no real separation of subject and object.

For example, we can see this directly in being here in this room together. Each of us has an experience of the room with the people in it and ourselves in it. We are here with each other; this is an undivided field. However, it becomes split up or parcelled when we start to put names and labels on it: *'I am me and I live in this body, and you are you and you live in your different bodies. I look out of my body at you, because you are not me.'* Of course, you are not me. That is obvious: soon we will go for lunch and when you put food in your mouth it doesn't go into my stomach. This is not some abstract theory; it is quite obvious. And yet, in the moment in our being here, you are my world. That is to say, in experiencing you, I experience myself. I experience myself experiencing you. This field is integrated. Integrated does not mean homogenised. This is not an idealistic vision where I say *'Everything is just my mind; you are inhabitants of my mind.'* It is not like that. Here we are, in this experience which is a shared experience.

Then we may have the experience of standing up, putting on our shoes and going out. When you go down the stairs, you walk down the stairs according to the stairs. The stairs are having a conversation with you. If you don't listen to how the stairs are, you are likely to fall. This is the meaning of participation: not all on my terms, not all on your terms, but the co-emergence of the participative field which arises in all its changes from the ground of, or within the sphere of, the openness of indeterminacy.

Later we will do some meditation practice to open up more of an experience of this, but when you go off for lunch just now you can also just keep an eye on yourself as you are in the world with others. When you are talking just see how the way in which you are talking creates a pattern in the world which is then met by, or not met by, the pattern presented by the other.

If we are, as it were, speaking ourselves—that is to say, showing 'our shape'—the likelihood is that the other person is then going to speak 'their shape'. This may result in some irritation because the other person is not a doppelganger, not a simulacrum of you. They have their own history, their own way of using language, their own mind.

Some of you may be familiar with the writing of Martin Buber who distinguishes between what he calls *I/it* communication and *I/thou* communication. He says that when you speak *I/thou* you have an inter-subjectivity which brings a greater sensitivity and the malleability of finding a fit, of finding a place in the middle. However, when we speak as *I/it*—where I am a subject to you as an object, a thing—then there is a possibility for us to try to control the whole situation. Although one may have a sense of victory in this, it is also a highway to decimation because there is then no other. In that way, I have the unimpeded expansion of myself before the poverty of my being. That is to say, the richness of my being is you; without you I will just be little me. However, in order to meet you I have to step out of myself into this middle area of emergence. And in that way, being with the other, or in buddhist language 'to be in non-duality', is the royal road out of enclosure in our own pre-occupation.

A meditation whose object is whatever occurs

This is a very simple practice that some of you will know. When we talk about this basic state of the mind being open it signifies an infinite hospitality. It means welcoming whatever comes. Thus, it involves not hanging onto the ideas or thoughts that we like, and not pushing away the thoughts that we don't like. We are just allowing everything to come as it comes. This is different from many kinds of meditation because we don't have an intention to do or focus on anything in particular. The object of meditation here is whatever occurs. Sometimes that object may feel like what we call *inside*, and sometimes it may feel like what we call *outside*. Thus, we just sit with whatever is occurring.

Let's sit as before but this time the chin is slightly raised up. The gaze is open and resting in the space about two arms' length ahead in front of us. We begin by making the sound of 'Aa' three times. 'Aa' represents emptiness itself. It is a very open sound and through making the sound it can just release all the tensions in the body, voice and mind; they just relax into nothing at all. If you find yourself taking up a particular position or being identified with a certain pattern of thoughts, then don't worry, don't blame yourself, don't enter into judgement – just relax and the situation will change. In that moment you can also briefly recollect this image of the mirror. The mirror is not marked by whatever is placed in front of it, and in the same way our mind is not conditioned or marked by whatever kinds of thoughts or feelings arise.

[Practice of Three Aa]

It is helpful if you do this practice just for short periods of times at first. Finding the subtle balance point between being present without falling into the thought is not something that you can force or make happen. It is not a special shiny, exciting kind of practice and it is easy to feel lost inside it. You might think: "What am I doing? Nothing is happening – what is this?" Each of these thoughts is simply a concept which you have fallen into. The concept says, *"This isn't right. This is not good. This is useless,"* and like a little bus it has taken you off somewhere. You get off the bus and now you don't know where you are. Wherever you are in the mirror don't try to push the idea away but also don't fall into it. Whether happy, sad, bored or interested stay open and present with whatever is occurring. When you find yourself taking up a position in terms of the practice, judging it in some way, just stay relaxed with the judgement and the judgement will go. That is the key thing. If we keep feeding the concepts, if we feed the judgements they will keep eating us and come back for more. That is to say, I don't need to tell myself a story about who I am, because here I am, and stories are passing through but no story can define who we are.

The most basic and central of all the Buddha's teachings—the one that you find in all the buddhist schools—is the fact of impermanence. Thus, we can say that all phenomena are impermanent. Another way of expressing the same thing is to say that all experience is dynamic, that it shows itself, expresses itself but not in a way that can be caught. By simply staying open and relaxed we start to experience directly the coming and going of all phenomena. All the aspects I call *I, me, myself* and all the aspects where we say, *"This is other people," "This is a house," "This is a town,"* and so on, they all change, and yet the presence itself, the basic awareness doesn't change. In that sense it is like the open quality of the mirror.

At is very paradoxical that the one unchanging thing about ourselves is our ungraspable openness which is nothing at all, and all that we express ourselves to be, all that we experience moment-by-moment, is also ungraspable. So grasping is the wrong attitude and in the buddhist point of view this is the primary confusion. Many buddhist texts describe how attachment is the root of all suffering. By attachment, they are not meaning like in John Bowlby's attachment theory. What it means is that we try to stop time. And the way we stop time is by entering into the abstract

sphere of concepts. The domain of phenomena—of the arising and passing of everything—is ceaselessly dynamic but we create a pseudo realm, a false world, a world of confusion out of trying to hold onto ‘things’ when all we catch is concepts.

For example, we have been in this room from about 9.30 this morning and I think we can all agree that we have been sitting in this room. This gives us a sense that there is a *real* room that we are sitting in; however, this room is revealed to us through our concepts. The room as revealed through our senses is different. We started in the rain and now we are in the sun. Now the light coming in through the window is bright and illuminates what is here in a different way. What we see, what we actually get, is this. And *this* is not the same as what we got at 9.30 this morning. It just takes a cloud to go over the sun for the light to change and for us to get a different room. And it just takes one person to turn their head for the whole room to change. But, of course, we still believe: *“Yes, of course, that is all very well but we are in the same room!”* And this is the heart of attachment: we are so addicted to concepts as telling the truth about our world that we don’t trust the immediacy of our direct participation.

Systems of organisation in Tibetan buddhism: food and money goes up, blessings come down.

I will now say something to link what we have done with traditional buddhist ideas because some people here are interested in that.

Systems have to organise themselves around something. In general, systems theory, as it operates in biology and organisational consulting, would see the most basic organisational principle of any system as *inside* and *outside*. Thus, a system has a skin around it that separates it from other systems. If this skin were completely impermeable the system would die, and if the skin were too open, if the pores were too big the system would get flooded and collapse. Therefore, living systems have adjustable skins.

There is an old saying “The King is dead long live the King.” This means that when the flesh and blood king dies the role of the king has to continue even if the form completely changes. And in the Catholic Church when the allowed masses to be celebrated in not only Latin, many people thought that was terrible, that is was the end of the church. One of the aspects of having *inside* and *outside* is that the people who are on the inside can be punished by pushing them to the outside. Scapegoats are identified and expelled from village life, people can be excommunicated and driven out of the church. This highlights the confusions that follow when difference is given a moral reading. When the bulk of the people, the norm, appropriate to themselves that *‘We are right and we are good’* it means that the minorities are left with being not right and bad.

Tibetan buddhism is not exempt from this. In a hierarchical structure, a patriarchal structure, power is held in the hands of a few and maintained by various methods such as controlling education. This creates a system where up is very good, and down is very bad. The word *lama* means up, superior, and the title *Rinpoche* means rare and precious. And if things are superior, rare and precious like diamonds they have to be protected and – by definition — you don’t find them everywhere. However, we also say that everybody has buddha nature. So is some people’s buddha nature is better than others? *“Ah, well, you have the potential to realise your buddha nature, but for some of us...I don’t like to say...but..”* This is the funny politics of power. That is to say, when something is given a name and a title it has to be maintained.

What is important in this is to understand how many of the teachings are presented. First of all you have to realise that you are wandering in samsara, and that this is due to the ignorance that you have accumulated over millions of life-times. You have so many obscurations: you are born in a country where buddha-dharma is hardly established and the possibilities for you to get something are not very strong. Therefore, you have to try very hard:

— *“Ok, what should I do?”*

— *“You must do what I tell you!”*

— *“Thank you so very much.”*

You see people doing this all the time with tears coming out of their eyes: *“Somebody is going to tell me how to get through this swamp of samara. I know now that I won’t get through the swamp in this life – but one day...”*

Therefore, we have to think: *“What is embedded in this kind of narrative?”* A person is being offered a story: *“You have many problems, you have not many good qualities and there is not much hope.”* The implication of this is that you cannot do very much. In Tibet this kind of discourse was the basis for people being encouraged to make offerings to the monastery. That is to say, there are two kinds of people: holy people who live inside the monastery and unholy people outside the monastery who make money to feed the people who are inside the monastery.

Food and money goes up and blessing comes down. This, from the point of view of anthropology, is not an uncommon system and you can see it in many cultures. But of course we are not living in Tibet. Therefore, if we are interested in questions like ‘what is my real nature?’ or ‘what is the possibility of awakening?’ or ‘how can I become free from the restrictions that I live in?’ perhaps we need to come to the aspects of the dharma which are speaking in a more direct way.

In order to do this we have to find a very subtle point between believing in ourselves and doubting ourselves. That is to say, if you don’t have a belief in your own basic goodness, in your potential, then it is very difficult to make any progress. However, at the same time we have to know that we are full of shit. So what does this mean? It means that we get lost very easily and we get full of habits that restrict us. This then brings us to a central point: does that mean we need to get free of all the shit before we realise the potential? That is indeed one view and it is worth exploring what that view means.

Liar number one, cheater number one

From the point of view of dzogchen if you spend your time trying to purify the content of your mind, this is a task with no end. What is required is an uncoupling. And what is to be uncoupled is the fusion, which is a *con*-fusion between being enlightened and being a ‘good person’. When we have the idea of being good, particularly of being holy, we then have a hierarchical system full of projections and fantasies.

My teacher used to say two things very frequently. He would say of himself: *“I am liar number one, cheater number one,”* and also, *“I don’t trust anyone and number one, I don’t trust myself.”* This is the Cretan paradox in philosophy but for meditators it is true. That is to say, whenever we sit to meditate we cheat ourselves; we observe ourselves getting lost. The instruction for meditation is not very complicated: sit in a relaxed way and just let whatever happens happen.

However, this is like telling a four-year-old child to sit still; they comply for thirty seconds – and then they are moving about. And you say, *“What are doing? I thought you were going to sit still?”* *“Oh...”* And this is what happens to us. This is what is meant by lying and cheating, that we cannot trust ourselves.

Now, in relation to all that we have looked at so far what does this mean? It means that if you sit in a concept as a definition of yourself, no matter how clear the content of that concept is you will be cheating yourself. It is not about trying to be a good person; it is about seeing the nature of the mind – seeing that the mind is both open and closed. That is to say, when we focus our attention we lose touch with the other things that are going on. This is described in the therapy tradition of gestalt where they talk of the figure and the ground. For example, here we are in this room and when we relax our gaze we open up our peripheral vision wherein we can pretty well see everyone but not that clearly. When you want to see a particular person clearly you focus on them but then you don't see the other people so clearly.

Therefore, the function of the meditation practice is to integrate focused attention and panoramic vision so that the felt presence of the entire context is here while we move moment-by-moment into the particularity. If you are just relaxed and open all the time you couldn't do anything. You would go into the shops and look at all the things and say, *“Wow!”* After two hours the owner of the shop would say, *“We are closing now.”* You would not have bought anything but *“it is all amazing”*. In my youth when I used to take LSD I had that experience. You'd go into a shop and everything is shining and radiant and you cannot speak anymore. It is like that.

However, in order to be in the world with others we have to be here. But where is here? If you fall into here you are lost. And in the very moment that you are found – *“Here I am”* – where am I? It means in knowing that this is some-*thing* it feels very real, but it feels real because one is now encapsulated, wrapped into, a domain which has lost its context. That is the central point. That is what it means to cheat ourselves: to fall into the confusion of taking one intense thing to be all there is. That is to say, we have been captured by a situation which involves a self-forgetfulness. However, the intensity of the experience makes it feel to the person who is having the experience, that they are established, that they have arrived some place, that they are found. Many people have this experience when they take drugs: it creates exactly that wrapped-in feeling of being in a state which has its own validity.

In the same way, when somebody has what is called an 'obsessive compulsive disorder' they feel the absolute necessity of what is driving them; for them that is the truth. The person who tries to interrupt their movement in that becomes the enemy. For example, if somebody gets into the driven-ness of having to wash their hands all the time and dry their hands always on a fresh towel, if somebody hands them a clean towel they will say, *“No I cannot touch that now because you have touched it.”* That is to say: *“I am the king or the queen of my country; I make the rules. I understand how it works so don't get in my way.”* This is terrible. This is the end of a human life. It is a very terrible condition to be trapped in because in its intense form no one is allowed to interrupt that person at all. That is to say, when we manifest into the world, what makes our being in the world with others a form of compassion is the very fact of its interruptability.

This is different from our usual idea of compassion whereby *“I am a holy good person, let me help you.”* I who have no problems will help you, who have so many. And of course, I will do it with great humility! What I have just been describing is very different. It is saying that compassion is the availability of being penetrated by the state of the other. It means, *“I don't know how to help you. I need to be with you to allow you to show me how you are. Then I can find some way into being with you in a way that might be useful.”* That is to say, it is stepping out of a hierarchical line, a line of power, dominance, control and certainty, into an availability for participation in

which how you are—in terms of your manifestation—is not something to be corrected into its perfect form because there *is* no perfect form. What would the perfect form be? Who has the perfect form? Each of us has our form and what is imperfect about our form is that we haven't found a way to fully inhabit it. It is not that our form should be turned into something else but that it should be brought fully alive by being it—whatever it is.

This is when we see the nature of neurosis. Neurosis is alienation; self-hatred is alienation. When people are cutting themselves, taking overdoses, being drunk, having crazy sex, these are all forms of alienation, because there is an absence of satisfaction. That is to say, people are not at home in their own skin.

This then takes us back to 'liar number one, cheater number one'. What lies do we tell ourselves? How do we cheat ourselves? By falling into identification with restricted beliefs about ourselves. That is to say – and it is the same thing I have said in many different ways – we deal with ourselves as a thing. And then we put ourselves in the pan of the scales. We weigh ourselves, judge ourselves, and find ourselves lacking. That is to say, we live in the world of being back in school where you have to write a compare and contrast essay. There is *this* and it is like *this*, and there is *that* and it is like *that*. *"How am I?" "How are you?" "How am I in relation to you?" "Are you better than me?" "You are better at mathematics but I am better at football..."* In that way we are placing ourselves somewhere in terms of hierarchies: *"I am a **thing** amongst **things**."* This is the central point; this is how we cheat ourselves; this is the origin of samsara. In the buddhist texts it says many, many times that from the very beginning everything has been empty – everything is an illusion.

What I have been saying is quite dense but it is a condensation of a very big discussion in buddhist philosophy. However once we see the central point we can start to free ourselves a little bit: *"I am not a thing. I am not a concept but I have the potential to manifest in ways which can only be understood in concepts."* So if somebody asks me, *"James, what do you do when you are in London?"* I can say, *"On Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays I work in the hospital,"* and I can talk about that world. All that talking is creating a set of ideas which may have some resonance with the other person. What the other person can get is a sense of the kind of stories that James Low tells. We won't get to know James Low, as James Low is unknowable. That is because each story we tell is never the whole story. Even if you got thousands of bits of story and put them together it would be like a jigsaw puzzle with half the pieces missing.

Think of your own life and think of the times when you have been harsh on yourself, when you have been disappointed in yourself because you are not in a particular way. Can you see that that was concept hitting concept? You might even have said, *"I hate myself. I despair of myself."* That is a terrible state to be in, a state from which people may even kill themselves, but it is a state of blindness, a state in which we are so caught by an idea and the rest of our existence becomes unavailable to us.

That is attachment from the buddhist point of view—to be so caught up in something, so identified with it, that there is nothing else. This then is what we can observe when we just sit: we relax and open and that space of openness is quickly filled with stuff. Then when we fall into that stuff, when we identify with it, we become that. And in that moment, that is all there is. Once we can observe that, then we start to see how we abandon ourselves.

This is difficult so don't be disheartened if you find it difficult – because it is. At the end of our time here we will get up and go out of this room into another room and out of the door. When you go out of this building you are not in the building, and if you turn around you can see the door for going back in. However, when you are sitting in the meditation and a thought presents itself,

it doesn't have a front door with a bell on it. You don't say, *"Oh, this looks like an interesting thought to enter and ring the doorbell."* Seemingly, without any effort we are in it, and then we are not. There is no obvious front door or back door.

This is the same as the anuyoga of tantric transformation—instant and without effort. In the mahayoga system if you want to visualise yourself as Chenrezig or some other deity you build it up bit by bit: this is the colour, these are the arms, this is what they hold and so on. But in anuyoga, in an instant we become Chenrezig or Padmasambhava or Tara.

Stay on the one who is lost

Similarly when we do the meditation, instantly, we become lost: *"I have attained the state of effortless stupidity."* This is what we have to watch, as it is very quick. But don't worry. It is not anything that has to be changed. It is not that we have to guard ourself against the danger of getting lost. Where do you get lost? In your own room. That is not very lost.

That is to say, the mirror is the mind itself. It is without any limit. Inside this mirror arises the reflection. We fall into the reflection and we have lost the mirror. Where is the reflection? It is in the mirror. We are lost where we are – but because we are where we are, we are not lost! This is what is meant when we read in Tibetan buddhist texts that samsara and nirvana are inseparable.

The reflection cannot be taken out of the mirror. This is very important because it means that rather than being lost in the semantic content, in the story line about what is happening, we focus on the actual integration of the reflection in the mirror. Rather than trying to sort myself out which will bring me simply into chasing one idea with another idea— "I must try harder," "I need to book into a retreat," "I need to do more of this,"—in the very moment when you feel lost and confused, who is the one who is lost? Without doing anything, stay with the one who is lost, or in Tibetan they say, stay **on** the one who is lost. This means don't fall into further identification with the lostness, don't enter into judgement about the lostness, don't try to free yourself from the lostness but just relax and be present in being lost. The lostness will go. In Tibetan this is called *rang drol* which means self-liberation. Whatever state arises, passes by itself. You don't have to do anything to make it change because everything is impermanent. If you stay with this, even in the worst states of confusion or lostness, anger, jealousy, pride and so on, the reflection dissolves. There is the sense of the mirror and then another reflection arises. This is the central point of the dzogchen teaching.

In the morning when you look in the mirror when you clean your teeth, you see your face. You don't see the mirror – you are looking at your face. However, you can only see your face because of the mirror, but when you look at the mirror to try to see what it is, you just see your face. Therefore, when the teaching says that you must recognise the nature of your mind, look into that naked nature. You don't see mirror, mirror, mirror... you see the reflection and the mirror together. *"Yes, that's all very well but I want to see my mind clearly. I have to get rid of the reflections and then I can see the mirror."*

What is happening, whether you think it is 'good' or 'bad' is the reflection of the mirror. Therefore, don't enter into judgement, standing apart and saying, *"I like, I don't like,"* but just be with whatever comes. The mirror is not damaged by the reflection. What we call the ego or 'myself', is a reflection in the mirror but the ego is not the mirror. The ego is a reflection that tries to control and dominate the pattern of reflections. Reflections have no independent existence, they are mutually influencing. Therefore, it is not surprising that the ego is affected by whatever else is going on. It is not possible to have a fixed sense of self. If you read John Bowlby's

attachment theory, what he refers to as ‘secure attachment’ is the capacity to be flexible and responsive. It doesn’t mean that you are living in a castle secure enough to keep out the enemy. That is to say, when we are most healthy we are part of what is going on.

Therefore, the function of the meditation is to help us to relax into the state of the mirror so that the free flow of the reflections can continue. Because when we become trapped into the level of the reflection and then strongly identified with a particular range of identifications, our world becomes very small.

The difference between attention and awareness

I would like to say a little bit now about the difference between attention and awareness. The shiné practice we were doing earlier is very often taught in terms of learning how to discipline the mind. Sometimes the mind is compared to a monkey, sometimes to a wild elephant or sometimes to a buffalo. The mind is not like any of these but they speak of an idea that: *“Somehow I am out of control and if I learn to control my life then I will be better.”* In the Tibetan tradition they have a sequence of drawings of somebody being pulled around by the elephant until eventually they sit on top in charge like the mahout with his little hook.

Clearly, when you were at school and you had homework to do and didn’t want to do it, there is a question of how you control your mind enough to do what you have to do for the next day. Maybe sometimes you have to force yourself to do housework. Cleaning is not always so interesting to do but you think: *“Oh, I have to do it.”* The structure of this is that the object is allowed to dominate the subject. That is to say, there is a necessity and in the general buddhist tradition we say we are going to die and that when we die we can be blown here, there and all over the place in samsara by the winds of karma, therefore, we better try hard to make sure we go to a good place when we die. Part of having a sense of discipline, then, is to be able to direct the movement of your activity day-by-day. However, as we were looking yesterday the one whom I call *I, me, myself* exists usually in the form of a series of concepts. We can all tell some stories about ourselves: where we were born, what our childhood was like, what we do now, what we like and what we don’t like.

These are a linking series of concepts and what we actually are is the flow of these concepts. That is to say, ourselves as manifestation is movement in the world, or in the language of dzogchen it is an energy. For example, when I say, *“I am going to stand up,”* there is not some self-person, some machinery of the self inside that is cranking it up. Moreover, the idea ‘I am going to stand up’ is an organising movement so that there is a flow of the body and this is how our lives are, moving in the world in the interaction with other beings. Thus, if we have a reading of this that says *“I—somebody who is me, the essence of me—is the agent, the one who makes things happen. Therefore if things go wrong I need to try harder to make them go right.”* this in itself is the basis for being lost. According to the dharma tradition it is a false understanding and you can see the same conclusions reached at by Husserl, by Wittgenstein and by many other western thinkers as well.

Where am I located? If I think, *“I am going to focus my attention on the breath coming in and out of the nostrils”* that is a statement. It is a flow of words arising with some concepts. We then sit in meditation and find we go off somewhere. Then in terms of the task of focusing the breath I recognise that I have got lost. I have gone somewhere I shouldn’t be, so I bring myself back. I am both the sheep and the shepherd. This is madness. This is a story. Where do I go to when I get distracted? You are sitting here and remember your summer holiday and you are on the beach some place. Have you gone there? No. The experience arises, it registers, it is *as if* it is

happening, and then a thought comes, “*No I am not in Sardinia, I am here in Milan,*” and you come back here. How do you come back? In the summer time you have to take an aeroplane to come back but with meditation it is much quicker and cheaper – suddenly you are here. And where is here? If you try to describe it you are in the realm of concepts: “*I am sitting here on a Sunday morning in a mindfulness centre in this part of Milan.*” Again, this is a story. That is to say, our world of meanings that we share with each other is a set of cultural concepts. It is not true – it is not false. It’s that the frame of reference is inappropriate; it is an illusion. That is to say, something is appearing which has no essential truth within it.

To discipline the mind is a particular kind of story. Essentially it means disciplining concepts so that they go in the direction you want them to go in to create the kind of story that is appropriate. If we see this it is very interesting because when the story arises it is creating its own context, that is to say, if I say, “*I am sitting here,*” the ‘*here*’ that is established is established through the telling of the story. That is to say, the mind is not anywhere. It is not in the body and it is not outside the body. Inside my body and outside my body are concepts arising in the mind. The mind is not a thing, and a concept cannot be grasped as it is like water. This is why the idea of discipline is not very helpful because it gives the idea that there is a subject that has to act on an object to make something happen. It is very solid, very dualistic, very reified.

When we actually explore what it means to be aware we find it involves a sense of presence. That is to say, we are present in the moment of the arising of experience. Are we present as something? In a short while we will do some meditation to explore this directly for ourselves. However, earlier we were looking at it in terms of the image of the mirror. The reason that the mirror can show reflections is because it has no content of its own. However, in our ordinary life when we have an intention, this intention when it fills us, organises how we go into the world. That gives us a selective attention in terms of what is important. For example, if you go to the shop to buy some coffee, there are many other things available but your attention is on the coffee. This selective attention or this editing of the phenomenological field means that even before we see many things we know that we are not interested in them because, “*When I looked earlier in the kitchen for coffee there was none left so I want to buy coffee.*” This is the organising principle of this moment of my life. And as we looked yesterday, this has both a clarity and a stupidity. It has the clarity of me meeting my needs because I don’t get distracted but it has the stupidity or the lack of presence because I am not attending to everything else that is going on.

Awareness is different from that; awareness doesn’t have an intention. Thus, in the traditional example, the mirror has no intention; the mirror just shows what is there. You could say that it is passive/reactive and yet there is also a kind of active hospitality or an active potential for showing what is there. In the same way, when we relax and open, many things come. We are not trying to create a particular kind of experience but, rather, we are allowing life to come as it comes. The traditional example for this is a waterfall where the water tumbles down the mountain falling as it falls. By doing this, by allowing the mind just to be as it is, by allowing the world to be as it is and because we are meditating with our eyes open and not making a difference between inside and outside, the tendency to edit, to organise, to select is gradually deconstructed, released and opened.

That is to say, this practice in traditional dzogchen is not about making ourselves into a better person. It is not about developing the qualities of a bodhisattva or a buddha, because, if the buddha is a construct then like all constructed things eventually it will start to crumble. Everything that has a beginning will have an end. Awareness, however, has no beginning or end. It has no top or bottom, no colour, no shape. Therefore, it is not something which has to be created because it is there from the very beginning.

Our consciousness is different from this; our consciousness is made up of moments which have a beginning, a middle and an end. What we call consciousness is the energy of the mind as it moves in interaction with the field of experience. It is not a thing that we have; it is a movement of manifestation, of things happening. Awareness, however, is constantly revealing the movement of the energy of our existence. Thus, it is simultaneously empty and full. It is empty of any essence you could use to define it as being 'this' or 'that', and it is full of all the richness of existence. In particular, because it resides in the state of non-duality, there is no wall between oneself and other people, and therefore our attention can open to other people.

The immediacy of ethics

Here we are and we see each other. When you see someone's face, why would you hurt them? This is very important. You don't have to struggle to be a good person; just observe when you become a bad person. What are you like when you are not very nice? What is it like, maybe to be angry with someone and want to hurt them? What is going on in that experience? *"I hate you. You always do this..."* It is like living in a soap opera: the words that are said are pretty stupid but they seem very important because they are given the full intensity. However, the one that one is spoken to is a construct, because the real person in this moment is not the person who did the thing yesterday that upset you. That is to say, moment-by-moment our world is reconstructed yet we build up a composite picture of other people. This is a picture in the map in our head. There is a particular topology with its rolling mountains and valleys and when you are located somewhere in it, you can only see the view from that particular place. However, the map in my head does not tell me about you; only you can tell me about you. And the more constructions I have in my head about you the less I am going to meet you because the one that I meet is my version of you. And if you don't fit my version of you then I am sure you are lying – because I know what you are really like!

Here we have the immediacy of ethics. That is, instead of trying to struggle to create a field of morality with rules and regulation to tell you how to behave, by freeing oneself from the prison of one's own constructions the immediate presence of the other is there and we then speak to that person. Of course this is difficult to do because as we looked earlier, our knowledge is reassuring to our ego self; we like to feel that we know something. Obviously, if you are driving your car through Milan it helps if you know how the streets work. Certain kinds of things absolutely belong in the world of language because whether a street is two-way or one-way is simply a convention – it is a cultural determination by the city council. There is no natural truth in a one-way system. Thus, it is something you have to learn.

However, how shall we be with another person? Who will teach us? In some ways our mother teaches us when we are young. Maybe one of the main things that parents say to us when we are young is that other people exist. For example, if their children are making a lot of noise they may remind them, *"Eh... there are other people in the world you know."* Or, if in the playschool one child takes the other child's toy and does not want to give it back they say, *"Look you are making him cry," "But I want it!" "Yes, it is a very nice toy but look, now he is upset."* Of course when you are a small child you don't care about other people's tears. This is a struggle we have all through our life: to move out of a world of one and inhabit a world shared with others.

The difference between impulsive and spontaneous

In the dzogchen tradition they talk a lot about spontaneity but we need to be clear about the difference between being impulsive and being spontaneous. When we are impulsive it means we

have a tendency which has already been developed inside us and which we bring out into the world when it is triggered by some event. For example, for some people, if they had a bad day, they want to drink some wine when they get home. The movement to have wine is based on a habit inside a blinkered notion of: *"This will be good for me. I don't need to think about it. I know this is what I need."* That is to say, the internal map, the habitual map is the one that is determining the line of experience. We are taking the pre-cooked food out of the freezer and putting it in the microwave and within two minutes it is ready. Very quickly we are into that situation. However, this is not fresh food; this is something out of the freezer. That is to say, our behaviour is arising from our past, from our beliefs.

Spontaneity, however, is always fresh. It arises in the meeting with the other person. How the other person is calls us forth in a new way, because even if you know someone well, you don't know how they are going to be in this moment. And if you open to how they are now without covering it over with your knowledge about them, you find yourself being invited into the freshness of their being which is refreshing to you. That is to say, we don't need to know what to do. We just have to trust that it will be OK. That trust is not a kind of concept; it is the felt sense of being part of what is going on.

At my work I am always very interested in the clinical assessment to find out if the patient dances because when people say that they cannot dance that usually tells a lot about their life. Human beings always dance; everywhere in the world people dance. Not to dance, to have a thought *"I can't dance"* or *"I look stupid"* or *"I don't know how to do it,"* is to interrupt yourself. Music is pretty simple. We are probably not going to be dancing to Stravinsky. It usually has a slightly more simple rhythm. That is to say, if you let the music into you, the movement will come out of you, which is the basis of the dzogchen understanding of being in the world with others. By deconstructing the wall, the perspex wall that exists between ourselves and the world, we start to be fed by each moment of existence. What is necessary is already there. Thus, the word dzogchen means 'already completed'. This indicates that it is fine as it is.

For example, if a friend tells you: *"I have just been to the hospital and they say I have cancer,"* what shall we say? It is very difficult to know what to say if we think that there is a right thing to say. But there is no right thing to say. Maybe we can speak from the heart, speak from the belly, and then we are connected since who knows what to say? We know that $2+2=4$. There are some things that you can know, but we don't know what to say to somebody who now has a very serious illness. Thus, the rulebooks, the ideas that you have inside your head can come between you and what is happening. In other words, our existence is not a theory; it is not something abstract. There is no right way to live.

In that sense we in Europe we are in a very fortunate time because we have the freedom to question many things. A few hundred years ago that would have been very difficult when you had a dominating interpretive system. But of course, the more we ask 'How shall I live?' the more we can increase our despair; This is something that Nietzsche and Kierkegaard wrote about. This lies behind the idea that as the edifice of christian culture starts to crumble, we need to collect some bricks from the ruins and build some new system to live in. We have seen how people created communism and fascism out of that. That is to say, some people prefer to replace the anxiety of not knowing with the certainty of "This is the truth. Now I've been given a nice uniform. I know who I am, and the mark on my arm can tell everyone else who I am. I am on the winning side."

However, in dzogchen we try to move through this barrier of anxiety to see that the anxiety which arises from 'not knowing who I am' is a confusion based on that the idea that 'I *should* know who I am'. This is the fundamental confusion: to imagine that self-knowledge is like the workings of a

car. Nowadays neuroscientists are examining the mind to see what is there. Of course what this generates is a sense of reassurance because of the possibility of mastery. We have a war on terrorism but we also have a war on cancer and on mental illness. *"We will dominate and control these conditions and maybe eventually people will never die because we will dominate and control everything."* However, we are going to die; always some new thing arises that we die from. For example, in Britain the sperm count of men is going down every year, and there is some evidence now that this is due to the increased use of plastics; that when people have food and drink coming out of plastic this affects fertility.

And this is how it should be. You cannot make a division and say, *"Here are the good things and here are the bad things."* Things have some advantages and some disadvantages; life is complicated. Motorcars are very helpful but every year many people are killed and badly injured in motorcar crashes. This is life – it is complex. It is not a simple problem to be solved, because every time we create something and some light seems to open up, some shadow comes as well. Therefore, dominance and control become highly problematic.

The whole world is a conversation, listening and talking

From the point of view of dzogchen, collaboration and participation are much more important than dominance and control. That is to say, we work *inside* the field of our connection, whether it be inside what we call our body or inside the outer environment. The key point is to observe again and again how we become wrapped in a conceptual understanding of the situation. Therefore, if you experience a concept as a storyline or as a shape, you will find that when you inhabit that, it places you moment-by-moment in a particular relationship to whatever else is happening. That is to say, our intense, particular vision is always partial. Therefore don't be too confident –walk a little bit lightly. This means being a little bit porous, more open and able to work with how we can be with this situation.

As a metaphor for this we could say that the whole world is a conversation; listening and talking are both required. And, again, this is the basis of spontaneous ethics because if we listen before we speak and we know what we are speaking into. And if we find that we are so full of a position that we want to say something irrespective of how the situation is, this is a good indication that we are lost; we are lost in ourselves although the intensity of the feeling may give us the sense that we are really here present.

What, then, is the purpose of speaking? Is it to establish the 'truth' or to stay in relationship? *Relat-ing* is an ongoing dynamic interaction. If you study history you can see that in the last 2,000 years many kinds of truths have been established, many different kinds of politics. Even inside the Catholic Church there are many different kinds of groupings and sometimes these groups develop great hatred for each other. What appeared to be the truth at one time, a truth that many people were willing to fight and die for, afterwards looks like a crazy idea. People get caught up in political beliefs, religious beliefs, economic beliefs, and when you are in that state there is a particular kind of clarity: *"I know I am right, I can feel that I am right."* Later we might well think, *"Well it seemed a good idea at the time but if I knew then what I knew know I would do something different..."*

This, then, is a kind of litmus test, a definite test for showing where we go to one side or the other. When we become *convinced* about something that is probably a sign that we are wrong because the conviction is something which *seems* to be true through time: it was true yesterday, it is true today and it will be true tomorrow. However, when we are relating to people, to situations—"What is happening now?"—this calls us out *into* this world.

You could say in traditional terms that the movement is from samsara to nirvana and is a kind of paradigm shift. A paradigm is an inhabited heuristic and interpretive vision which operates like a world. Nirvana means peaceful, free of trouble, not having to struggle. This could be because you have arrived in a very safe place, but that would be a very static reading of it. Actually, it is more like being at home with how things are, not standing outside our situation and trying to direct it and neither feeling controlled nor crushed by circumstances. Moreover, we are just present in our life as it evolves in relation to others. Here we are—and it is always changing. This is how it is. Fighting how things are is a bit silly. Rather, we need to work with circumstances. That is to say, the circumstances are not an enemy attacking us. They cannot attack *us* but what they can attack is our plan, our master map of the world. Therefore, it means being available.

Some of you may have seen statues or paintings of the goddess Tara. In most of her forms she has one leg out which signifies that she is ready to get up and do something, that she is available. This is the idea of the bodhisattva, somebody who is available, available to help. However, the bodhisattva doesn't know *how* to help. There is not a recycling factory to turn lost sentient beings into buddhas. There is no technique to make people enlightened but there *is* a way of learning to drop the self-preoccupation which hides one's natural openness. This is embedded in the three principles we looked at yesterday:

- natural openness awareness as an ungraspable, infinitely hospitable presence.
- within this spaciousness there is the immediacy of *this*, whatever is here.
- within that immediacy, there is our momentary gesture, however it is.

This is not something high and holy, and it is not something that we have to make happen. It is how it is and how it has always been but it is hidden from us by our own concepts about who we are and how things are.

The function of the meditation practice is to experience the dynamic nature of conceptualisation of your own creativity. That is to say, the concept is part of the movement of the creation of the world moment-by-moment. It is not telling us about a world that is already there; 'Milan' doesn't exist, without you there is no 'Milan'. When you walk down the street and you see 'this' and 'that', this is your Milan. If you ask in the tourist office they will give you a map of Milan and if you go to the library you can get a book about the history of Milan. You can read the history and you can memorise the map so that now you 'know' what Milan is. However, with all that knowledge you don't know what is going to happen when you walk down the street; you don't know whom you are going to meet. Who you meet is *your* Milan. That is Milan revealing itself. This is so important to see. There is the spaciousness and there is the phenomenology. We are moving in this field of transient phenomena as a transient illusory phenomena ourselves.

Therefore, when we get into difficult states of mind such as anxiety, depression, psychotic states and so on, these are simply extreme forms of the lostness which occurs when we are trapped in the world of concepts as indicating something truly real. For, example, somebody says, "*I cannot bear being with other people. It is too much for me, I am not going out of my house,*" we could say that this is a description of their internal state. However, it is also a communication that someone else is going to have to do my shopping! "*I cannot leave the house to go to the hospital so you must get the doctor or nurse to come here to see me.*" This is the inverted power of the helpless person. It is a communication about being in the world and the possibilities of being in the world and in that sense it is a dynamic gesture into the possibilities of how they can be. It is not a pathological condition inside the person; it is a way of being, one that is influenced by many things including aspects of biochemistry. However, it cannot be reduced to some perverse

essence. It is open to different possibilities of communication. But the more we give a concrete reading to that as a condition, *"This person has this diagnosis or suffers from this diagnosis,"* then there is a person who has something added onto them. We have to try to take this off them.

How can we separate the person from the condition? We are always in a condition: happy, sad, energetic, tired, hopeful, depressed. The more we can see that this condition fluctuates and doesn't define some essence inside us, the more it becomes possible to offer hospitality. Luckily the Buddha has explained the importance of impermanence – every phenomenon which arises, passes. This is the basis of buddhist courage—if you just relax it will vanish.

About doing the three 'Aa' practice

When we do this practice of the three 'Aa's we are sitting in an easy, relaxed way with the gaze open into the space in front of us. We make the sound 'Aa' three times and then just open and allow whatever comes, to come. Whenever we find ourselves resting on something we don't try to change it or push it away but just stay present with it. 'With it', however, is quite difficult to find. It means not being inside what is happening but also not being outside looking at it. Again, it is helpful if you think of the image of the mirror. The reflection is in the mirror but it is not *in* the mirror. Therefore, the hospitality we offer to whatever is arising is fully able to fill the space. The mind is relaxed away from the position of working hard to see what is happening, especially what is happening to 'me', so that there is a naked presence or awareness which is not positioned or resting on anything. If we become wrapped in thought and maybe have the thought, *"I am caught up in the thought,"* then one thought is starting to link onto and chase after another thought.

But remember, there is no problem here to be solved; there is nothing to do. There is no right way for your mind to be. When you leave here, if you get into your motorcar then there *is* a right way for your mind to be—there is the mind of the driver of the car. That is to say, driving a car is a manifestation of energy; you mobilise yourself as a dynamic form attending to the various things, the mirrors and so on. Or in other words, the experience of oneself is arising as energy in the field of energy. And as we have just been looking, the way our energy arises depends on what we see. For example, if the red light is there and you stop the car you can look around, but if you are driving fast through traffic on the motorway you cannot just look around. That is to say, if you stay connected moment-by-moment you are called into being in different ways. You can call that the post-meditation experience but really it is an extension of the meditation.

However, now we are sitting here we don't have to worry about the roof falling in or some bomb going off, so just relax. There is nothing to do except to be here. When thoughts and feelings come, don't identify with any of them. Because the mind is empty like the mirror no thought can tell you who you are, just as no reflection can show you the state of the mirror. The reflection is an expression of the potential of the mirror but it doesn't define the nature of the mirror. In the same way, the thoughts, feelings and sensations that arise are the expression of the creativity of the mind or our nature or our potential – however we describe it – but they cannot define or tell the truth about who *we* are.

Who we are is not a thing that can be caught. If you have many good thoughts this does not create the buddhanature. If you have many what we call 'bad' thoughts, this does not destroy the buddha nature. There are many kinds of apples in the world. If you pick an apple off a tree and it is a 'Granny Smith' the fruit tells you what kind of tree it is: *"It is a granny smith apple tree."* If you plant maize you won't get wheat. That is to say, cause and the result are linked together. In the Bible St Matthew said *"You shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?"* This is true also on the level of energy, on the level of manifestation.

Manifestation doesn't define the person. We can be caught up in a pattern of activity for a long time and then suddenly not do it anymore. For example, if you know something about a person's story you may then say, *"Ah, but they did that, and therefore they are a thief."* In that way the action defines what we see as the person. We are very used to this way of thinking; in fact it is our usual way of making sense of the world. However this very search for definite knowledge is the nature of obscuration; it is a false illumination. And in order to free ourselves what we have to do is observe again and again how we come into a position of defining ourselves, how we come to some conclusion.

When we do the three 'Aa's now we will be sitting and things will be coming and going. In that state, very, very gently we can raise the question: *"Where does my mind stay? What does it rest on?"* Just let it hover in the air like a perfume. But again we have to be careful: by 'mind' here I am not referring to the thinking apparatus but to our basic noetic capacity, our capacity to know something, to know anything. This is the aspect of our awareness which registers, which shows, which illuminates, what is occurring. Thus, we just want to see: *"Is this resting on anything? Can it be located somewhere?"*

We can also enquire: *"Where does it come from?"* and *"Where does it go to?"* *"Does it have a colour?"* *"Does it have a shape?"* We don't have so much time to investigate this together today, but in your own time, these are very important questions, because it is through this enquiry that we put into question some of the assumptions we have about ourselves. In this practice now we are just looking at where is the mind resting.

[Three 'Aa' practice]

Through the practice we can see that we are not who we think we are. Our thoughts, when we identify with them, influence how we become in the world with others but since we have no fixed essence, we cannot be defined by any thought. This is infinite freedom.

In the buddhist tradition this is referred to as *vajra* or *dorje* which means something that is indestructible. Clearly, when we create a pattern of thoughts we hold that for a while and then circumstances change it. We will have experienced this many times in our life. For example, when we are young we get caught up in particular kinds of toys or games or friendships. They seem central to our lives. Then after some years we no longer play with those children nor play those games. That is to say, that which defined who we were, no longer has anything to do with us. When we really observe this we see how we are like sailors whose boat has sunk and are swimming in the sea, and every now and then we see a piece of wood to hold onto. Then that piece of wood gets saturated with water and sinks and we splash about until we find something else. This then is the function of this meditation—to reveal how we cling onto an idea, and then it has gone. Underlying this is a root belief that clinging will make us safe: "I need to hang onto something, otherwise what will happen?" Therefore meditation is a place to explore what will happen.

Thoughts can no more support us than a feather can support Dumbo the elephant

Maybe some of you have seen the Disney film called "Dumbo"? Dumbo has the idea that he wants to fly. There's a feather and he's trying to catch it and finds himself launched into space. Suddenly he becomes frightened and starts to fall. Then when he sees the feather he suddenly is flying again. This is so important—there is nothing to catch. Like a feather in the wind, it moves here and there. However by collaborating with the space Dumbo finds he is moving in space, and

instead of thinking, *"I am heavy and solid so I need a heavy and solid support underneath me,"* he finds a way to use what he has, his very big ears, to move in space. This is the same for us in the meditation: we become identified with the thoughts, but the thought is moving in space like the feather. A feather is not going to support an elephant but we are all the time trying to hang onto these thoughts. Therefore, the more we see that the thought is coming and going, that it is not something that we *are*, that it is not even something that we *need*... Here we are, but as what? We cannot say. It is impossible to describe.

The quality of this experience that we can call 'mind' or 'presence' or 'natural being' is not like anything in the world because it is the dimension or the basis in which the world occurs, just as the mirror is the dimension within which the reflections arise. This is the paradigm shift: moving from relying on thoughts as a necessary support or definition of one's existence, to experiencing them as waves and movements of our own energy.

Again, we have to be careful as it is difficult to describe this in language. For example, if we say, *"It is the expression of our own energy,"* this should not be understood as meaning that we have the energy inside us and it comes out of us. It is not like expressing toothpaste onto a toothbrush. The expression of our being moment-by-moment is not being squeezed out from something inside us since it is not coming from somewhere else to be here. It is not the platonic notion of there being a pure form somewhere else and that we are a kind of dulled expression of this. It is a revelation, similar to the way that the mirror expresses its reflection. It is not like me putting my hand in my pocket and revealing what is hidden inside, because nothing is hidden – everything is here. It is not coming from somewhere else to be here. There is just this.

Best stories of all are the stories that emerge as a conversation

Although I can say, *"I came from London to be here."*—and yes, there was a James that *was* in London and has been transported to be here in Milan, an entity, a thing which has moved from one place to another—this again is a story. By staying present in the experience moment-by-moment there is the unfolding of the only place, which is here and now and although we can tell many stories about where we are, these stories are only *part* of how it is to be here.

That is to say, a story is not coming from outside and telling the truth about the situation. For example, in the afternoon I will go to the airport. It is a very big airport and I will wander around in this big place. I will be *in* the airport but that doesn't mean anything; it is an abstract idea. Moreover, I will be where my feet are and I will see what is in front of my nose, and if I turn my head to the right my nose is now pointing somewhere else. And even the people who work in the airport for thirty years can never understand the airport. They may know theoretically where each room is but they are always somewhere, and where is that place? It is determined by the story they tell themselves about where that place is. That is to say, we are always living in stories; we cannot live anywhere else.

We can tell closed stories or open stories, we can have the story of the expert person or the story of the pathetic person, but best of all is the story that we tell *with* other people, a story which is allowed to emerge as a conversation.

This, then, is the meaning of meditation. It is not something esoteric, spiritual, something apart from ordinary life. It is about being alive and present in the stream of unfolding experience, seeing how different circumstances open us in different ways, just in this room there are many different kinds of people and when you have an interaction with different people you find yourself speaking in different ways. Would you say that is true? That is so fantastically

interesting. It means I *find* myself being with you. I don't *find* myself inside myself but I am revealed through being with you; I am revealed as the one who is being with you. I am not revealed as '*the real me*' because there *is* no real me.

Out of what do we arise? Out of space. Therefore there is the freedom to be in different situations. However, when we become trapped in identification with a concept about who we are, our freedom to relate to other people is diminished because we then only tell a very small story. For example, when people develop anorexia nervosa they are telling a very small story. It is a story about how many kilos they weigh. It is a story about the impossibility of you telling me what to do; it is a story of my struggle to stop time. Work with people in that state can be very frustrating because what they say is "*I already have everything that I need. I don't need food. I don't need advice. I don't need help. I have my goal and that is enough for me. Don't try to interrupt me. Your interruption of me is a violence – leave me alone.*" We have probably all been in that kind of place, like the tortoise who, when it gets frightened, pulls its head and legs into its shell and thinks "*Now I am safe*". But then somebody picks it up and scoops it out, showing how whenever we retreat into a fixed place, actually we are making ourselves very vulnerable.

We can see, therefore, that the many different kinds of so-called mental illnesses, and the many different kinds of trouble that we have in life, come from an over-identification with the small, as if it were the totality. Thus, without necessarily changing the forms of our lives, the transformation is to experience the dynamic nature of our embodiment—our speech, our thoughts, our feelings and sensations—and to see that these are all simply gestures within the movement of existence and that they don't in fact establish anything.

For example, we work for a while and then we lose our job, or we come to retire. The world inside the realm of work is full of things that are very meaningful, and then, at a certain point it is gone and all the little signifiers that reassured us about our place in the world and our function are removed. In the Bible it says, "*Don't build your house on sand,*" and the Buddha too pointed out that everything is impermanent. If Jesus and the Buddha had met they would agree that there is no solid ground, that everything is sand. This doesn't mean it is a disaster rather that we have to find a way of living as movement in a field of movement, and that means collaborating with our capacity and the capacity of the people around us. The freedom to do that comes from deconstructing the fixed images of who we are, of how we should be, how others should be and so on. And there is a kind of paradox here: the more relaxed and open we are, the more precise and finely tuned our behaviour can be. The more we try and make effort the clumsier our behaviour is likely to be, because whatever is brought fully formed into the moment is a violence to the emergent potential of the situation.

So, if you have any thoughts or questions that you want to raise...

Question about not being able to sleep

Question: I have a problem with sleeping. I go to bed at 11pm and I am waking up many times.

James: So are you unhappy about not sleeping?

Participant: Yes, I am unhappy.

James: Whether you will ever be able to sleep more or not, we don't know. Therefore, the question then is: "*What does it mean to be awake in the middle of the night? Is there something that should be done?*" From the point of view of practice there is nothing to be done. Awake in

the middle of the night or awake in the middle of the day is the same. To be awake means you know something is happening, and these can be grouped into three things: thoughts, feelings, and sensation. Thus, in the middle of the night you also have an opportunity to understand what is the nature of the thought, feeling, and the sensation.

When we are tired and the world is sleeping there is not much reason to get out of bed, so in terms of what we were looking at, in terms of these three aspects of experience, something is happening. The more we can relax and open and just be with that without having to do anything to it, we start to see what its nature is. That is to say, something is coming and then it is going. However, that can be difficult to do if you already have an idea that you don't want this to be happening, that this is not right. In fact that it is terrible since I will be tired tomorrow. What you are doing then is taking up a position in which you are being persecuted by this thing, but it is like fighting with a ghost. You can't see what you want to punch on the nose, and the more irritated, frustrated and angry you become by it, the more you shrink into this upset position.

Therefore, in moments like that we have to examine what map is in our head? That is to say, *"I have an idea about how life should be and life is not fitting my map. This is very bad; how dare life give me the wrong thing?"* It is as if life is a terrible restaurant where the waitress gets all the orders mixed up. Somewhere in Italy there is someone working in a factory late at night and they keep falling asleep and you are lying in your bed waking up – you've got his dinner! However, what arrives on your plate is your luck; we cannot take that away: "This is my life. Therefore, how do I live my life?" "How do I eat what is in front of me?" "I am not sleeping, so now I am awake what can I do?"

You could investigate the nature of sleeplessness and in that way it can become an opportunity just to be with yourself when the whole world is quiet and observe that movement of experience: "I like; I don't like," and see directly for yourself what happens when you enter into a strong position. On one level, when we get irritated, there seems to be some truth in that but where does it take us? By being right, I become wrong. Thus, rather than coming to a conclusion, *"This is not good" "I hate this"* we have to relax again and again and stay with the question, *"What is this?"* and look again and again. For example, sensation comes in the body and you turn over. And the more we can just gently observe what is going on we can have the continuity of the observer which illuminates the transience of the strong feelings. In that way, it becomes easier to tolerate them which in turn allows us to be a little more peaceful. Because we are calmer we can now see what is happening, and instead of me *telling* this experience what it is, I am offering a space so that the experience can reveal itself as it is. In that moment there is an awakening to the coming and going of the illusory experience.

Again, because something is an illusion it doesn't mean that it is not hot or cold or painful or happy. It will have a quality however, because it is an illusion, you cannot grasp it. Whenever we think that we have caught an experience, what we have actually caught is a concept about the experience and when you catch a concept, the concept catches you. Thus, when we have something like: *"This is terrible, it is not fair, it should not be happening to me,"* actually, we are simply tormenting ourselves. We are caught in a labyrinth of ideas that never takes us to the central point – because the central point is the ungraspability of self and other.

Some of you may be familiar with pain clinics where a meditation is used nowadays to help treat people with chronic pain. Somebody who always has pain, in their back for example, will go to the doctor who asks, *"How is your back?"* and the patient says, *"Ah, no change it is always sore."* The clinics encourage them to observe the pain in their back and write an account of it. What they find is that the actual phenomenology of the pain—how it shows itself directly—is changing. That is to say, sometimes it is throbbing, sometimes stabbing, sometimes tearing, and the intensity is

varying as well. This establishes that there is no such thing as ‘my’ pain. ‘My’ pain is a wrapper which seems to illuminate something but actually disguises it. Therefore, when I talk of ‘my pain’ I am not seeing what is there.

In the same way the invitation would be for you to try to observe what is happening in the middle of the night. Don’t *you* tell the experience what *it* is, from the point of view of yourself as somebody who doesn’t want to be awake in the middle of the night. Try to record in the simplest terms what is occurring, then it becomes simpler to be interested in this display of your existence. We can apply this to every situation we find ourselves in. If we find ourselves being bored or getting a bit sick or any other situation where it is reasonable to say: *“I don’t like this; I don’t want this.”* Rather than going into a resistance against it, it is a question of *“What is this?”* If you start to get a cold, for example, what is happening? For some reason bits of water start coming out of your nose. That is what is happening: water is coming out of my nose. You can make your own diagnosis by saying: *“Oh, I have a cold,”* but that doesn’t really illuminate anything.

This is a very central point: to see how the clarity that arises when we make these sorts of statements, is a dark clarity. That is to say, so much of what we think is obscuring; we are caught up in concepts, ideas, interpretations which look as if they are doing the real business, but are not. And that is why, from this point of view, not knowing is more useful than knowing; because not knowing opens the space in which something new can be known.

Any other questions or thoughts?

Question about not adhering to a model of therapy

Question: As a therapist when I work within a rigid and well-structured model, I feel safe. My question is how it will change my work as a therapist if I listen and offer a space for us both to reveal ourselves, in the way you describe. My worry is that I won’t be able to control a situation.

James: When somebody sits in your room and they are suffering and they tell you about their suffering, you engage and you find that both of you are in this forest of possibilities. Through the conversation a little clearing, a little opening, occurs in the middle of the forest. With that you have the possibility of sitting in the middle, having a little picnic, and looking around at the forest:

*“Ah, this is what is happening, this is where we are – we are in the forest. I am a human being, I don’t know why I was born, I don’t know what will happen when I will die, and I don’t know what the purpose of my life is. I can be depressed about this or I can be curious. Bad things have happened to me and I can take the wrong road of curiosity—which is to explore **why** they happened to me, the answer to that question always being “My mother.”— or I can start to be curious about the experience of not knowing. My dogmas and assumptions are not sufficient to answer these questions and if I can let them go then there is a space in which I can start to see what is actually there.”*

However, if the therapist has an anxiety about not knowing and uses the structure of a methodology as a defence against this, then it is unlikely that they can be very open to this unformed state of the patient.

In that way, it is like being a new mother with a small baby. In the middle of the night the baby wakes up and it is making noises. What is the baby saying? Maybe the mother gets upset and so

phones her own mother and says, *“What does this mean?”* Or maybe the mother can say something reassuring but, essentially, the task is for the mother to stay with the baby and find out what is being communicated. There is no textbook of baby noises that can help you identify what it means—which means you learn by getting it wrong, but luckily the baby will keep repeating the noise until you get it right!

Maybe this is at the heart of it: our willingness not to know and to get things wrong. If we can do that and remain calm, then the possibility is that the patient can do the same. They learn that making mistakes is not the end of the world. Thus, if they feel that the reason they are depressed is because they have ruined their life because they have made a terrible decision, the *certainty* of their knowledge ‘that they have ruined their life’ is causing the depression, not the particular mistake they have made.

Therefore, learning to think involves allowing something to be present in our mind long enough for it to reveal more aspects of itself. And this again is very interesting because we often think that thinking is a proactive subject onto object, an active engagement of problem solving. Evidently when Voltaire had political problems in Paris he would go out into the country near Geneva and there he would write a lot. He would sit by the big fire in the kitchen and look into the flames and then write something and then look into the flames again. In a sense he was in a kind of reverie, a receptive state and in that way, the fact that he didn’t know what to write didn’t get in the way of him writing. By just being open, it came through him.

The heart of the practice, whether it is psychotherapy or meditation, is looking and seeing what is there. It is not about finding some duvet of beliefs to wrap around ourselves. We already have enough things to fall asleep in. By having an attitude of enquiry, enquiring into ourselves and into other people, we start to see the movement, the interaction of subject and object that constitutes our existence. This enquiry is only possible if you don’t know. However, this is quite difficult for us to see because getting power in the world is based on knowing some-*thing*. But if you meet someone—whether in a dharma setting, or in a cafe, or in a therapy setting, or in your family—and if we really want to know them, we have to stop knowing them. As parents, with each year that goes by we have to forget what we know about our children in order to know them. That is to say, when they are six they are not four, and when they are fifteen they are not twelve. You cannot build up an image of your child like a big lasagne, because the child is being reborn in each new movement of their life.

For me, and maybe for other people, I found it terrible when I was out with my parents and they would meet other people and start to describe to them how I was: *“Oh yes, James is doing this and that.”* That is to say, knowing about someone or something is not at all the same as the immediacy of being in living contact with them. That is a different kind of knowledge and is what dzogchen is referring to when it talks of rigpa, of ‘knowledge’. It means not falling asleep into concepts. It is being open and present in all situations.

It is very nice for me to be here exploring these interesting topics with you. I think this kind of practice can transform our lives and make it much easier. It is not that we have to become something different but we just need to find out how things are.

If there is any merit or virtue from our practice, we offer this to all beings.