

NGÖNDRO 1
AND
SHORT RIGDZIN
PRACTICE

FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND FROM SAMSARA¹; REFUGE;
PROSTRATIONS; BODHICITTA; GURU YOGA; DISSOLVING;
DEDICATION; ENDING VERSES.

COMMENTARY ON THE PRELIMINARY PRACTICE FROM THE
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¹ Tib. *blo ldog nam bzhi*

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ENTERING THE DHARMA

Starting in the dharma is very much like starting in a relationship. As we probably all know, we can start relationships in different ways. We can have a sudden infatuation with someone, a sudden interest, and get involved with them very quickly and then afterwards wonder what we've been doing. Or we can start more carefully, get to know the person, talking together about what it would be like if we became more intimate.

Perhaps it doesn't really matter how we enter, but it's more important to think about how we deal with problems and difficulties that arise once we start to get involved. We can see from this that when we take refuge in the buddha, the dharma and the sangha, there's a question about how much knowledge we need to have, in order to do the practice properly.

Is simple faith enough or do you need to learn many different things? I think that it's important to remind ourselves the Buddha taught many, many different ways of practice. He did this because people have different capacities, attitudes and interests. Traditionally, it's said he taught eighty-four thousand dharmas. This is a way of saying that he taught a wide, wide range of possibilities of meditations and spiritual growth in order to fit the wide range of the human condition.

These methods have come down to us in a variety of traditions. By studying in a particular tradition and learning particular ways of meditation and practice you can have a way opened up for you which you become increasingly clear about. If, after a while, difficulties occur, and you don't feel you're making any progress, what is going wrong? Then different possibilities of inquiry can arise.

Clearly sometimes what happens is that our faith or our devotion or dedication to doing the practice starts to waiver. At that time it is important to go back and get more in touch with our original inspiration that took us into the practice.

A QUESTION OF PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

But it may also be that the kind of practice that we are doing is not the best possible fit for us across the wide spectrum of possibilities within the dharma. We may need to study more, get more teachings, have different initiations or do a different kind of practice. Right from the beginning there is this question of personal responsibility.

Often we come into the dharma because we feel we are not doing very well in our lives. Things are a bit of a mess, and so we go to the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha for refuge. It is as if we are outside where it is very cold and wet, and we can come inside through this door to a place that's warm and safe. That is a very important thing to do, and we'll be exploring this weekend various approaches to that.

The Buddha taught about the nature of impermanence, that everything changes. All outer phenomena change. All the metabolism of our body is constantly in a process of change. Our thoughts and feelings and perceptions are constantly changing too, so it wouldn't be surprising if, after a while, the ease and the relief we feel at having taken refuge and come into this warm house, wasn't quite the same.

I don't think that's a negative thing, because we have a great potential. Buddhism describes this as having buddha-nature, the potential to become enlightened. So when we come into the dharma, we are saying "*You great people, you know what's going on, I'll follow you and then I'll be safe*". But it's not like getting a complete rubber suit, like a deep-sea diver, as if we could put a second skin all over us and then feel protected all the time.

SEEING THE LIGHTHOUSE

I think it's more like being out on the ocean in a little boat, our ego boat. When we get in touch with the dharma it's like seeing a light-house; it gives us a point of reference and introduces the possibility of an enduring safety and security. We still have the responsibility of maintaining our connection with the light-house, and as the waves get high and our attention has dashed off in some other direction, that can be very difficult. So, we need to be thinking about the nature of this light-house and asking ourselves what is the nature of the relationship that we can develop towards it.

TAKING REFUGE

Traditionally, in terms of taking refuge, the motivating factors are two-fold: one is fear and the other is hope. When we think about the suffering in samsara - in what Indian cosmology describes as the six realms - then we start to see while we remain focused in our ego identity, all possibilities open to us are suffused with the flavour of pain.

Sometimes that pain is absolutely inherent in the situation. For example, in the depictions that are made of the hell realms, and sometimes we have a sense of that in our own human dimension, for example, in the killing that's going on in Rwanda where it seems people encounter other people whose only desire is to kill them. No matter what you offer to the person who wants to kill you, money, sex or whatever, that just doesn't interest them. The only thing they want is your death.

That's the real quality of hell, both the pain of it but also the total helplessness that none of the resources that one can normally call upon to mediate one's situation in the world, to improve or negotiate, none of that means anything. In our human existence here, we often experience situations in which we are confronted with the limitations of our power and autonomy. We might work hard, and gain some security in life, but then we become sick, or we think we are secure in a relationship—and our partner leaves. Or we do a lot of training for an occupation, and then become redundant. Or you might spend a lot of

time bringing up your children, for them to turn into crazy teenagers who do your head in.

In these ways we are constantly faced with situations in which the trajectory of our desire, what we want to achieve in life, is being interrupted by the imposition of reality. We get wakened up to our limitation.

Modern society, with its capitalistic structure and its great reliance on scientific thinking, developed many, many impressive ways of dealing with problems in which a busy intelligence responds very effectively and creatively towards new problems that arise, but from the buddhist point of view, that creative response actually only takes one into a more developed form of the same sort of experience, because one is always faced with limitation.

I listened to the radio in England last week, and there was a programme from America where the mayor of a small town had a major problem. An elderly man living in the town had died, and he had no known relatives. When they came to tidy out his house and look what was there, they went into the basement and they found a big box. In the box was the dead body of his wife, which was in deep freeze. He had wanted to preserve her body until science found a way of reviving her. The mayor of this town didn't have the resources to keep freezing this corpse but they also felt somehow it wasn't quite dead. It wasn't dead like someone buried in the ground is dead, so they weren't sure whether they should thaw out the wife and bury both of them, or to freeze the husband and keep them both together.

In the dharma, what they're saying is we need a paradigm shift, a shift in the real matrix of perception, so that we turn things around, we go through a radical turning about in ourselves, as it's described traditionally, and a new perception opens up to us.

By meditating, and contemplating and reflecting on the suffering that we experience all around us, and the nature of impermanence, it's as if we come up against a wall in front of our face. It becomes clear that it becomes silly just to try going on in the same way because there are these underlying truths of suffering and impermanence which just make our very busy endeavours somehow silly.

This perception is not just a cognitive idea. It's not merely one idea placed after another, after another. If we allow it to be woven into the ordinary pattern of our thoughts it simply becomes another bit of knowledge or information. A lot of our behaviour is based on the idea that we will be able to make the world secure for us, that we will be able to appropriate a nice situation: "*If I do this and this and this, then that and that will happen*". But when we think of the suffering which is all-pervasive, and of impermanence, and we actually allow ourselves to see it as it manifests in the world, then it's like getting a slap in the face. If you like, that's the first awakening in the dharma. In many ways you could see the dharma as a progression of small awakenings that open us up to more and more direct perception of reality.

NOT TAKING REFUGE IN OUR EGO

The thing about impermanence is that it opens us up to seeing things in a different way. So we have to be aware: there's a sort of double move that occurs as we start to learn about the dharma. Our ego, our ordinary sense of self, is very used to taking things from the world and storing it around us, and this is how we build up our sense of personal identity and continuity, through our personal history and our hopes for the future, and where will we go for our summer holidays and, you know, the things we use to flesh out our bare existence.

That incredible capacity to take experience and to turn it into something solid, something that can be appropriated, is also a habit that we can bring to the dharma, in which we use the dharma as a way of building up our sense of self so that we can feel more competent, because we can know what's in the paintings or we know how to recite a puja or know how to play cymbals, and then we can feel we're really buddhist, as if it was a construction out of knowledge. In that way, dharma can become a habitual, comforting something that we know and feel at home in. Then, in a sense, we've taken refuge in the dharma, but really what's happened is that our ego has taken refuge in the dharma and managed to make a comfortable nest for our ego!

Really the dharma has to be shocking. When we study things we need to allow them to impact us in a way that shocks us out of the patterns we are already in, otherwise nothing changes. In the traditional path, part of the way we can make ourselves open to the shock of the dharma is by letting go of the familiar props of our identity, in the way that Buddha Shakyamuni, as Prince Siddhartha, gave up his existence in the palace and went out, with no money and no resources, to beg, and in the early days encouraged his followers to become monks and nuns.

It's not so much about renouncing things and giving them up so that one is free of them, as if one's free of sexuality and free of property and free of all these disturbing things, and so one is at peace. That's part of the story, but there is also the fact that if one is begging for one's food, sleeping under a tree, there is little protection between oneself and the world, and one is actually impacted by lots of situations. Now, clearly for most of us, in the lives that we lead, it's not likely or perhaps very useful for us to become monks or nuns and we've probably got responsibilities to other people and commitments, in terms of work or whatever, that we're involved in. It's important that we meet our responsibilities in the world, and in order to do that, we have to be competent. But when we come into practising the dharma, there are certain moments where we need to be very incompetent, rather than immediately understanding things and tying them up. Allowing these thoughts to be somehow new and fresh, and somehow disturbing, is also important.

THE DHARMA IS DISTURBING

That's why, although impermanence is in many ways a simple idea, traditionally one comes back to thinking about it several times a day, and one

does that for years and years. It's not a principle, like a mathematical principle, that one has to understand and then know what it means. Rather, it's a disturbance into our ordinary mode of living, which by going back to it again and again, helps to waken us up from the ego's desire to smooth things over, round things off and make things known.

So, in that sense the dharma is disturbing. The teachings from the Buddha are there to upset us, and through that upset to help us to shift from one way of experiencing the world into another. We may experience that when we do meditation, and are trying to track our breath and keep our attention focused, we get distracted quite easily. The power of our concentration and clarity is very small and the power of our habits of perception, of our karma, is very, very powerful. What we are entering into is a struggle, a real battle. There's a sort of paradoxical situation. We come to the dharma because life is very troubling and difficult and then, when we come into the dharma in order to make it work, we have to struggle with it.

So, certainly at the beginning stages in practice, the dharma is not a comforting thing. If we think, *"Now I've taken refuge in the Buddha and all these buddhas, and they're looking down at me and I'm looking up at them, and rainbows are going up and down and it's all very beautiful and safe."* that's maybe just a cosy story. Basically, in entering the dharma we are entering spiritual work.

There are some practices in the dharma which are more about relaxation and pleasure than about work in the ordinary sense but, none the less, the entry-point into these is usually having put in a lot of effort beforehand. In starting to think about practising the dharma it's important to think about the resources that we need in order to continue once we've started.

LIVING WITH IMPERMANENCE

I think we need quite a degree of self-doubt, we need in many ways not to trust our motives—not to doubt it in the sense of a guilty self-blaming—but to doubt it by putting it into question, not allowing ourselves to feel safe, feel that we've arrived somewhere, that the problems have been solved. This really means a commitment to living with impermanence, because as the Buddha said very clearly, all compounded things are impermanent.

The only things which are not impermanent are the things which are not compounded. Traditionally, these are described as being just two things, sometimes three, but usually just two. One is the sky, open space, because traditionally it's uncreated and it's never destroyed, and it's the space in which things come and go, but in itself, space itself is never destroyed. And the other thing is buddha-nature, which is never destroyed. The reason it's not destroyed is that it's not compounded, it's not created, it's not put together.

So we have another sort of paradox: that the state we want to achieve, to realise, is uncompounded and yet, in order to achieve it, we have to do lots of things. When we do all the practices of the dharma—prostrations, mandala

offerings, whatever it is—we have to do them both full of faith and with the understanding of their impermanence and lack of self-substance. If we practise thinking that we are achieving something, and that through this meditation I really am Padma Sambhava and now I have all of his hats and cloaks and things, and make that a kind of concrete, real experience, then that in itself—it's as if we had established something permanent and enduring—and that is an error. On the other hand, if we say everything's just empty so there's no need to do anything at all, then that's another error.

The Buddha explained these as being the two basic wrong views: the view of permanence, that things will exist for ever, and the view of an absolute annihilation, that nothing is real or important. What the Buddha taught is the Middle way, that goes between these two extremes, in which there is form, but it's empty; there are practices to do, but the practices are not the truth itself, they are gestures from the truth, into the truth, towards the truth.

What we have to be suspicious of is the tendency in ourselves to turn the practice of the dharma into something substantial, something real, and build a new, more fancy ego-identity out of it. Each level of practice in the dharma has its own way of questioning, its own presentation. For example in the basic calming-the-mind practices, *shyiné* and then *lhagthong*, where one's trying to really see the nature of what is occurring, one is not affirming something substantial, but enquiring, enquiring, looking again and again.

In tantra, in the pujas which we do, there's openness, and within that visualisation arises. Then the visualisation dissolves and transforms into something else. There is this movement of form/emptiness, form/emptiness, one movement into the next. The form puts the emptiness into question, and the emptiness puts the form into question. In this way there's a continuous process of interrupting our desire to arrive somewhere to be safe, somewhere to be the master, to know what's going on.

So maybe we could see if there are any thoughts or questions about that and then we could have a tea break.

QUESTIONS

Questioner: In the beginning you said hope and fear are the two motivations that drive you to the dharma. Is this a good or a bad motivation, or just how it is?

James: It doesn't really matter how you come into it, as long as you are able, as long as there is a real interruption to what's been before. We have to make a distinction between the form, or the ritual, and the real experience. For example, two people might get married. They get married in a church and there's a big ritual and clearly, they exchange the rings and they are married. But it may be only ten or fifteen years later that they understand what it means to be married, that there's a kind of deepened experience, where one is just in something, and one recognises that one's world is different, that one is living as a married person, and that one's individual identity—which, in a sense, you

formally renounce in some way in a marriage ceremony—has gradually, through being with the other person, transformed and you are now part of a couple.

In taking refuge you might go to a Tibetan lama or a monk from Thailand and go through some formal ritual of taking refuge in the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha, and you might get a new name from that, and we would hope that that is a significant event in your life. But it's probable the real taking of refuge may not occur in that moment. It may occur some years later, when you've been doing some practice and you realise that you've been living your life in a different way; that something has shifted in you.

The experience should actually impact on one's life, so that something is transformed. It's not a mere saying of words, or a social convention. There are famous stories like when Milarepa hears the name of Marpa, he gets all shaky. That also happens. There are many stories that when people just hear the name of the person who will be their teacher they have some physical response to it, and something very different happens.

ASANGA MAITREYA

James: It might be. You may know this famous story of Asanga Maitreya. Asanga had been meditating for a long time in a cave and felt he was getting no result, and went out and saw a man on top of a hill taking stones off, small stones, one by one. He asked the man what he was doing and the man said, *"You see down in the valley there, there's my house, and when the sun goes behind this hill here, my house is in the shade. So I want to move this hill so I can have sunshine on my house."* And Asanga thought: *"Wow! If someone can do that, then I can go back to the cave and meditate."* so he went back.

Ten years later, still nothing much is happening in his meditation and he's really pissed off, so he goes out again, says *"I've had enough of this."* and he comes along the road, and he sees a man with a block of iron, and he's rubbing it with a piece of cotton. He asks him what he's doing, and the man says, *"Well, you see my trousers, I've got a rip here and I want to sew it together, but I don't have a needle so I'm going to make a needle so I can sew up my trousers."* And again he thinks: *"Wow! There are some pretty heavy people in the world. I'd better go back to my cave."*

Another ten years pass. Nothing's happening. He goes out and he sees a dog in the road. The dog is whining and scratching at something with his paw. So he goes up to the dog to see what the matter is, and he sees that there's a wound in the dog's back and inside there are some maggots. He gets a little stick to try and get the maggots out, but as he does it, he can see that the stick is going to hurt the dog with his wound, and he's frightened that he might kill the maggots. So he thinks that maybe he'll pick the maggots out with his fingers. He's not very happy to do that but then he thinks that maybe he'll squeeze the maggots...

Comment: He was a good buddhist.

James: He was a very good buddhist. So then he thought, “Well, what can I do?” He thought, “Well, I need something very soft, so what I’ll do is I’ll put out my tongue and see if the maggots will go on my tongue.” He was really kind of horrified at this idea, but he really had to do it. So, he closed his eyes and he put out his tongue. And then suddenly, he feels this beautiful thing on the edge of his tongue, and he opens his eyes and there’s Maitreya Buddha in front of him.

That story’s pointing to the nature of experience, that it’s one thing to take a bodhisattva vow and to have an intention to help others, but when the intention is coming from me that I’m going to determine how I’ll do it and I’ll do it on my terms, that’s one thing; but this experience, which was a really powerful experience, came to him from outside, where he abandoned his control of the situation and just surrendered to it. His sense of control—his sense of knowing what he was doing—collapsed, and something new opened. It was by the ego collapsing, the ego going beyond itself, that something new was able to enter. That’s a sort of archetypal story but I think that the basic principle is clear: it’s that we need to be interrupted by reality rather than wrap reality up in our fantasy. That’s the struggle that the dharma’s all about.

Questioner: How is it possible for the ego to collapse because on one hand, maybe that the ego says “OK, I want to collapse now and I have to wait”, and on the other hand, how can this be? I mean, is it something that the ego does, or is it something that the ego can not do?

James: No, the ego can’t collapse itself.

Questioner: OK, then it must be something that comes from outside.

James: Yes, like the compassion, the fact that in that story, Asanga is trapped. There is a dog and there are the maggots, and he doesn’t want to hurt either, and because his attention is fully focused on them, in a sense his ego is collapsed. In that moment, he’s altruistic, he’s in alterity.

Questioner: I’m still concerned about the paradox of something to do or something not to do from the point of the ego. Because if there’s nothing to do, then what’s the use of it? If I depend on this grace, then there’s nothing to do.

James: It’s not a grace that falls out of heaven for no reason....

Questioner: Why not?

James: Well, it’s maybe falling all the time but we don’t see it. From the buddhist point of view one would see it in terms of one’s karmic disposition to understanding.

Think of the story of Prince Siddhartha, growing up inside the palace and then one day he goes out and he sees an old person, and then a sick person being carried to hospital, and then he sees a corpse. He is shocked by that. This

cuts right through the simplicity of his life and he's deeply troubled. I mean, he is open to being disturbed in that way. Many other people saw the corpse and these other things...

In England at the moment, we have a king—yes, we have King John Major. King John Major travelled in the streets of London and he saw some beggars, but instead of being enlightened, instead of waking up and thinking “*My government policy is making all these people beg.*” he has decided that these people are a disturbance and should be removed. He has a disturbance, but he seeks to smooth it over to keep things proper because, “*I am the king.*” But he is not able to be shocked, so he has a good strong ego.

Break

OUR MOTIVATION

Over this weekend we must start to think more about motivation and particularly how to sustain motivation through time, because I think that's a very important thing for us in the West. Sometimes it's useful to do intensive retreats and really get a dense experience, but a lot of the time, when we're mixed up in our ordinary life, we are being distracted and dispersed. We need to find a way of maintaining our dharma practice through that confusion.

Before the break I was talking about taking refuge on the basis of fear and awareness of the dangers and difficulties that are around. But we also take refuge on the basis of hope. Because suffering has a beginning, it will also have an end, and so we can obtain a state that is free of this suffering. But it's not hope for anything in particular. Rather, it's a hope for the absence of the known, so in that way, again it's a disturbing kind of hope. I mean, of course on a very simple level we can say that the Buddha is enlightened, it's very nice to be the Buddha, golden colour and very wonderful, and he has all these qualities, and that we also have the potential to become like that. Basically we are saying that when I grow up I want to be a Buddha.

The cultural form of these paintings shows that that is really the dominant model in traditional Tibetan art. Like on this painting here where you have a big Buddha and everyone else is getting smaller and smaller according to where they are. There's an idea that one has something definite to aspire to, that one will get to this place of greatness and bigness and radiance and have one's own little gang, and so on. We can see why that model makes sense, because European art also at certain periods painted the king much bigger than his subjects. It's a way of showing authority and position.

The question for us is whether we choose to take a literal or a metaphorical reading of these particular sorts of presentations. Of course, if we do take a literal one, then we do have a definite goal to aim for. The Buddha's made it, the Buddha's safe. If I get to be the same as the Buddha, then I'll be safe. So in that reading, what I have to do is be like the Buddha. I'm trying to learn more about what shape the Buddha is and then I slip into that shape and try it out. Of course that attitude is made use of in the practice of tantra where one

visualises oneself as a deity and, as it were, acts into that particular way of manifesting.

But if we see this sort of depiction as being metaphorical then it's gesturing towards a place of plenty, of openness, generosity, that it to say, to a particular possibility of being and responding, rather than a place of safety and arrival.

Buddhahood itself is simply another point of departure. This is what we imagine: that in the pure Buddha realms, Buddha Amitabha is sitting there and suddenly there comes a telephone call: "*Someone doing puja. Please send down a manifestation.*" So the Buddha's body is like a huge airport with endless departures and arrivals passing out through him. And I think that's not a frivolous example, because the whole issue of buddhahood, certainly in the mahayana and tantric and dzogchen traditions is that it's a place of open responsiveness.

I mean one wouldn't want to live in an airport; it's not somewhere to make your home. It's a place of busy comings and goings. In a sense, that's what buddhahood is: it's an open mind in which thoughts are coming and going, things are passing through but nothing is really taking up residence. In that moment it's contradicting or counteracting our desire for this secure safe haven, this place of arrival. Safe in the arms of Jesus, as if there is some holy, safe place, where you can lay down your burden and be rocked and suck your thumb, and it's wonderful—back in the womb of the world. I'm sure we all have these kinds of longings, whether we see them as infantile or a return to the origin, but some kind of longing to merge back into that place of safety, free of difficulty.

The danger of course, is that we then seek to appropriate a particular situation and hold onto it, as, "*This is my mum, this is where I'll be safe.*" We know that that kind of attachment leads to suffering, so how can we make use of this incredible longing we have to be safe, to take us into a place of safety that is radically different from the way we would normally conceptualise safety?

This is very much what tantric practice attempts to do. By setting up a field of devotion to Guru Rinpoche or Tara or whoever, one is able to put out all one's longing for identification, for safety. "*When I'm with you, when I merge into you, I will be safe, all my troubles will be over, I must be with you.*" Then in the practice, (and if you are not familiar with this practice then we'll do some of it tomorrow so that you'll get a real sense of what it means), but in that practice one is then dissolving into the deity, and in that dissolving one is dissolving into openness.

The place that one is merging into is the state that is not something in itself, not a particular point, not a particular place of safety set off from places of danger. Rather than arriving in a place which is then cut off from the place that one has left, one arrives in a point of arrival which is then opening into the next moment of departure which is in response to the next moment of arising.

DIFFERENT WAYS IN

I think that one of the most beautiful things about the structuring of Tibetan buddhism is that whatever point one is at one can find one's way into it. If one has very intense simple faith and wants to burn candles and make offerings, that's a very good way in. If you're an intellectual person and want to study philosophy and want to learn through that path, that's also very open. And if one's a very physically-oriented person then there's yoga that one can practice, or doing full-length prostrations or being engaged in learning thangka painting, in which one uses one's body and one's creativity.

Going back to the very beginning and the different capacities and the Buddha teaching all these different paths, I think it's very important that we allow ourselves to be ourselves coming into the dharma, that we respond out of where we are, rather than imagining that we have to pretend to be somebody else before we can get through the front door. We have to actually be in our own life in relation to the dharma, being ourselves with our own dispositions, because if we fit the dharma in that way we are much more likely to have a real experience.

Questioner: Everything which is around us is impermanent, yet when we enter the dharma it should be a permanent thing. When we are in the dharma, do we fight impermanence? Do we struggle against impermanence?

James: Say for example, you are doing the basic calming meditation and your mind is being distracted. You could stay with impermanence. You could say, *"Thoughts come and go, awareness comes and goes, everything is just being impermanent,"* so that instead of focusing your attention back on your breath and forcing it, as it were, to a kind of permanence if you like, to a kind of focused attention, you are just letting it go.

But of course, it's not just a mad chaos, because you are then focusing your attention on the fact that everything is impermanent, so that, in a sense, one should be permanently linked to the idea of impermanence. But you can't do that in a conceptual way, because just to fill your mind *with "It's impermanent, impermanent, impermanent,"* you'd go nuts. It's a little more subtle.

Questioner: We can start doing dharma but when we have problems, can we really stick with it, see it through? Can we be permanent in our practice?

James: Well, if the dharma becomes a burden and an obligation and a duty, it will be quite difficult to stick to it. I don't think we can make a general answer to this. It depends very much on the individual. It depends on the level of practice, but for some people, having a very clear, definite commitment, *"I will practice meditation in the morning and the evening every day and I will never stop doing that"*, is very helpful. Just as some people go to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings every day so that there's a regular point against which the chaos of life that one could get one lost in again, is held. Fixed points are being installed.

There are other people who maybe sometimes can drink alcohol and then other times know *“Uh-uh! I need to cut back and stop drinking for a while”*. They are able to stay in touch with their own capacity at the moment, and make the adjustment in terms of their own understanding of their self-state, rather than in terms of a rule that has been fixed outside. Clearly there are some people whom rules make more rebellious and other people for whom no rules is just a way of self indulgence. So we are stuck always with these issues about whether we want to take responsibility for ourselves, which is a big burden but also has a great potential, or whether we want to take our lives and give the responsibility over to someone else, but then we have to do what we're told.

Obviously probably our capacity will change at different times. Sometimes we may be more open, more healthy, more happy and we are able to be really in touch with ourselves. Other times we might be very depressed and at a time like that we might need to force ourselves: *“I'm going to sit and do some meditation”*, otherwise we might just lie in bed and get drunk, or whatever.

In all the cultures where buddhism has been a strong force, monastic life has been very important. But it doesn't seem to be a way of life that attracts many people in the west. *“Now,”* you might decide, *“if Samsara is dangerous the best thing is to go and live in a monastery where I'm quite protected and I can do my practice all the day.”* If that is your desire, it could be very helpful. But if someone was to say, *“You are a man. Being a monk is a good thing. You must become a monk. I will make you a monk. That is a good thing, because Buddha Shakyamuni was a monk”*. That would be the same structure which we are all confronted with all the time—through advertising, the language of generalisation, of totalisation— where some particular behaviour is set up in an abstract way as being good, or precious, or valuable, and because it is good in itself, it must therefore be good for everyone.

Different people will give you different readings about this. Traditional Tibetan teachers would probably give you a very different interpretation from mine. In most of the traditional cultures, life was governed by fairly well-defined customs: extended families, arranged marriages, feudal responsibilities and rights. Buddhism entered most of these countries from the top down; once the king and the royal court were converted they then converted the rest of the people. In the west, it's been very different. It largely started with a bunch of refugees coming to the west and then a bunch of freaks and hippies hanging out in India and learning a bit of dharma. That was the interface. It's very much from the bottom, from the outside. In the traditional structure, the dharma entered into the hierarchical, patriarchal structure of society, which predicated resistance to change—everything in its proper place. In a culture like that, obeying the rules, following what you're told, doing what you're told is very important.

Western European cultures are predicated on very different principles. So we can say what we need to do is take the whole of that cultural package of principles and bring it into our culture because our culture is perverse and lost. And there have been various attempts to do that by small monastery groups

being set up in various places. But of course, these monastic groupings are embedded in a culture that's completely alien to them. In terms of their environment, they're some weird sect. They may be going in the right direction. They may even expand gradually.

LIVING A LIFE OF INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY INSIDE A FIELD OF DIFFERENCE AND CONFUSION

Or it may be that the dharma, in coming into the West, needs to take account of the cultural presentation that's here, which is after all an expression of the group karma, in which the dharma helps people to live a life of individual and social responsibility inside a field of great difference and confusion. Otherwise we might be trying to run away from the confusion of our situation, and, rather than understand it, impose a set of fixed rules. Yes? The Weimar Republic period shows how when people fear chaos, they can prefer to put themselves inside a set of rules and orders with some dictator telling them what to do. Living now in the 1990s there is no simple buddhist culture left that we can turn to. Communism, capitalism, tourism have all transformed these countries. Maybe Walt Disney will build a kind of Tibet Experience somewhere, and then you have these big dancing masks and Mickey Mouse shaking hands with Guru Rinpoche! We can't jump out of our karmic situation as it is, and it's complex and difficult.

One thing that certainly strikes me is that now—when the situation in Tibet eases from time to time, and it can be possible for Tibetan lamas to go back to live in Tibet—so far as I know, none have done that, at least not permanently. That may be because they have great compassion for us but it could also be that when they go back, they go back to something that doesn't exist.

They are confronted by the absence of what they thought was there. So it may be that for us, the dominant image is one of exile, that we are all in a sense exiles, we are exiled from our own buddha-nature, we are exiled from these mythical pure buddhist countries from the past where everybody could practice without difficulty. And as exiles, we should be kind to ourselves and kind to each other. Rather than putting huge burdens onto ourselves when we are travelling with a little rucksack, we should be in tune with our exhaustion and our tiredness and our hopes and make the dharma part of that, instead of being an extra burden to carry.

Questioner: Can the individual have his own road, in group karma? Is their flexibility? Can an individual have any impact on the group karma?

James: It's an interesting question. I suppose there would be two things. In buddhism, as far as I know, there is no culture of martyrdom, 'martyrdom' meaning where culture is going in one direction and you stand up and say "No! I am different!" whereupon they pluck out your eyes or cut your throat. Buddhism would be more of a Ta'i chi sort of movement, adapting to what's around rather than trying to confront it.

Questioner: If you have taken vows or commitments and people want to distract you from your commitments, kill you even, should you stick to your commitments?

James: I remember when I was living just outside Darjeeling, and some yogis had come down from the hills, and they had very, very long hair. I was very impressed—probably a very romantic vision, but I was very impressed with how these people looked. Then a few weeks later, I noticed they'd had their hair cut and I thought that this was something very, very bad and that they had broken their vows and that they should stand up for practicing in this way. Then one Tibetan told me that the reason they cut their hair was that they couldn't get a pass to stay in Darjeeling if they were looking like that, and since they wanted to stay in Darjeeling, they had to cut their hair. They had taken yogi's vows not to cut their hair yet they broke their vow in order to stay in Darjeeling and get some teachings.

I don't think life presents us with just an either/or. There's usually either/or/and. There's always something more. Martyrdom sets up either/or. Either I give up my vows and I'm a bad person and I betray God, or I die true to my faith and I go straight to be with God. It's very straightforward. For example, Tibetan lamas were quite good at doing *mo's* in India to tell people where to go to apply for visas, and were helpful at teaching Western people how to offer bribes in the visa office, because the Western people didn't know that. Offering bribes is to break the laws of India which is an insult to the hospitality of the land that is welcoming one. It also would be breaking one of the basic ten vows of morality, but at the same time it's helping people to stay in India and practise the dharma. I think that's how life is. It's complicated, and although it says, "*I will never abandon the dharma even if someone is going to kill me,*" it might be easier to say, "*Ah! I'll become a Muslim, stay alive and do some meditation.*" A dead holy monk becomes something for other people to pray to.

It depends whether you think the form is most important, or whether you think the principle is more important. If you go with the principle you can be just bullshitting and giving yourself an easy time. If you go with the form you can be acting in an unnecessarily rigid way which doesn't help yourself or anyone else either. That's why we can't escape the burden of responsibility and awareness. We have to be aware in our lives, taking responsibility, thinking and responding in a way that will ultimately be for the benefit of ourselves and others. Easy answers are usually answers to abstract situations. But we live in concrete situations where easy answers don't really help us very much.

Maybe we can take that up over lunch and in the afternoon and bring it into the practice.

Afternoon session

NGÖNDRO: OPENING UP THE WAY

The weekend is marked out under the heading 'Ngöndro'. The first part *ngo* means in front of, or before and *dro* means to go. It's what has to go before one begins the main whatever-it-is, like hors *d'oeuvres* or an *aperitif*, or seductive play before you get into the main event. So there could be the question: why do we need to bother with this? Whatever the preparation's going to be, it's not so much that it's dictated by the system or the lineage, although every lineage has some suggestions and recommendations. When we look into what this ngöndro or preliminary practice consists of, and what its function is, we can see that it's trying to help us to be confident that we've got everything in place.

PRECIOUS HUMAN BIRTH

You could say, taking the broadest sense, that preliminary practice begins in a previous life. When we consider having a precious human birth—that is to say, having a birth in which one meets with the dharma, is able to practise, has the particular qualities of being born with a healthy body; living in a place where the dharma is taught; having the opportunity to study and so forth—all these things are arising on the basis of one's previous karma, the actions from a previous life. This is very important. The view in buddhism is always a vast view in which there is a great wave of activity that continues.

BEING IN THE FLOW OF IMPERMANENCE

All these actions which have been made in the past are echoing on and on and on into the future. Being nudged and pushed and pulled by the influence of these waves, we find ourselves reacting to situations in a particular fashion. So, in a sense, we must already have done something of value in the past to have come into a situation where we can think about these ideas.

Then we have an understanding of the suffering that permeates all our experience and of impermanence. That reflection on these phenomena and the direct experience of them opens the way for something else to occur. That's essentially what the preliminary practices are for: they will open the way to make an easier access to something else.

This afternoon, when we were in the forest, and I was walking and being aware of birds flying across the path and planes going overhead there was a sense of something starting and then moving to an end. I could think then, "*Oh, that's impermanent.*" Being prepared by previously thinking about impermanence, one is able to recognise or think more clearly in terms of seeing just how much things are in flow. There's the experience of just watching a little beetle walking along a dead tree trunk and the whole universe moving along at the same time. Right there is the experience of being in the flow of impermanence, not outside observing it, but just being it. Everything is moving.

That sort of experience is not dependent on a previous conceptualisation about impermanence, but somehow thinking about impermanence sets the scene and helps it to arise more easily. So that, when we sit to practise meditation, our actions from previous lives and all our experience in this life—how we were brought up, our experiences at school and so on—are echoing around the way we approach the practice of meditation.

As I was suggesting earlier, some people may be more anxious and tense and driven, and others may be more laid-back or lazy, so then, thinking about preliminary practice we have to think, *“Well, what is the main practice that I want to do?”* And who am I? What is my present karmically-influenced position? So what do I actually have to do for myself to prepare for doing this practice?

Let’s say someone invites you for dinner and they want to offer you an aperitif before you eat and you can smell something very nice coming from the kitchen. But first they offer you this aperitif, and it’s a special—I don’t know, some special schnapps made by their granny. You don’t like schnapps but somehow you feel there’s a pressure to have this because it’s obviously special for them. So you’re politely sipping this thing, not enjoying it at all, and by the time you sit down to eat you’re somehow not in a mood to open to the pleasures of taste. In the same way, a ngöndro that is somehow running across our desire may knock out our appetite for the main practice that we want to do.

WHAT VIEW TO HAVE WHEN DOING NGONDRO

²[.....] I now have a motivation for doing this, which is my intention to benefit other beings. So I’ve got a sense that there’s a journey marked out ahead of me and there’s a motive that can keep me on the journey, even if I get tired. That would be the commitment which one has made to help others. In the same way, you might not worry too much about how tidy your home is, but if your mother is coming to visit you, you might get busy tidying it up. The sense of the other’s need extends you beyond what you would settle with. This is the basic structure of mahayana buddhism: one wants to enter enlightenment for the sake of all beings and to bring all beings into that state of happiness and fulfilment.

What comes after that is then the method. What method is one going to use to achieve this goal that’s been marked out? It is said that the methods of tantra are very rapid. They are rapid because they help you to make use of whatever is occurring. For example, say you were trying a mind-calming meditation and the people in the flat next door are playing music very loudly. You might find that you can’t concentrate, you just get caught up in the rhythms or become distracted or angry. You’re trying to establish one particular state and something else is happening which can’t really be incorporated into the state. You can’t really incorporate that noise into the state of calm very easily at first.

² Change of tape

But if you were doing say, a small tantric puja, and you were reciting a mantra or a prayer, you could imagine that this music is all a great heavenly choir joining in and building up. The intention is that anything that occurs, whatever occurs, can be incorporated into one's practice. Nothing will be seen as acting against it, and in that way, all of samsara becomes an assistant on the path towards nirvana.

Now the basis for all tantric meditation is a clear understanding of emptiness. It's through this state of emptiness or openness that we're able to see forms changing and one thing becoming another. If I have a conceptual understanding of emptiness, and I think to myself, "*I am empty, there is no inherent self-nature in me*", on the basis of that I may imagine that I am now Padma Sambhava. I may be able to stay for a long time with this felt sense, this sort of feeling tone of being Padma Sambhava, and I may understand whatever is occurring in my body as being an aspect of that. But if something happens in my body or in my remembrance of my ordinary existence that reminds me very strongly that, actually, I'm James and not Padma Sambhava, then there will be a rip. Why? Because the actual core belief has always been that: "I am James" and on top of that was layered the idea "*Actually, I'm Padma Sambhava because I am empty*". Then one's actual meditation practice is in fact just as if we were an actor, pretending to be in a role. Instead, what is essential is to be able to go beyond this purely conceptual understanding of emptiness to a direct, felt experience of it, and to know that the continuum of being is empty.

But where are you going to get this direct experience of emptiness from? It's a bit of a chicken and egg situation because you have to do the practice to get the experience, but you can't really do the practice until you've had the experience.

This is where the ngöndro comes in. It is a preparatory practice to try to create an environment— both in terms of one's relationship with the world and one's relationship with oneself— which will bring one towards a point of relaxed openness.

Traditionally, for nyingmapa and kagyupa, ngöndro has five stages. Many gelugpa practices often don't have a formal ngöndro but they do something fairly similar with some extended *lam rim* practices. In the sakyas they have something quite similar to the ngöndro which I will also talk about.

The first stage is prostrations, usually one hundred thousand prostrations. You count them on a mala which would have one hundred and eleven beads, so you end up doing one hundred and eleven thousand. While doing the prostrations you recite a long refuge prayer. Traditionally, the recitations were quite long. Recently, in the last one hundred years or so, much shorter forms have come into being and are quite popular. You've got to remember that a lot of these practices were developed for a sort of cadre of professionals, who would have had a lot of time.

Questioner: My knee is bad, and I cannot make that many prostrations although I would very much like to.

James: Then it's not necessary at all. But maybe you can do something else instead....

As I was saying earlier today, we have to remember the purpose of doing prostrations is to help us deepen our relationship with the dharma. It is not to punish ourselves. And, you know, if this was a magical thing and everybody who did one hundred thousand prostrations turned into a rainbow and flew up in the sky... Well, it's not like that!

Later in the afternoon and tomorrow we can talk about how one might want to extend this practice and if you want to meet together regularly to do some practice. We could then think of instituting doing this together from time to time. But I'll just describe the over-all structure of it now and begin by saying why it's done in this way.

VISUALISE THE REFUGE TREE

In front of oneself one visualises the lineage tree. Generally, in buddhism we've got the Buddha, who is Buddha Shakyamuni, and who is represented in this room here by statues. Then we've got the dharma, often represented, as here on this altar, by a book; and then we have the sangha which are the assembly of those who are committed to the practice of the dharma. Here in this painting at the back, they'd be represented by these *arhats* and *maha-staviras* sitting in the front, the people in the monks' robes.

INITIATION BECOMING YOUR PATH

You can approach the dharma through these accessible and general categories. But when we come into tantra, the entry into practicing tantra is through initiation. In the initiation, the teacher initiates you into a practice which he or she has received from their own teacher. So it's no longer a wide-open public practice, but it becomes a precise, individual and secret practice. It's secret because it's not generally available. One has to go and ask for it.

In the west, things have slightly shifted because you often see flyers or adverts in magazines saying such-and-such a lama is coming and giving a Tara initiation or whatever-it-is initiation. People go along and get the initiation as a kind of blessing. They have no particular desire or commitment to do the practice that's established as part of the initiation. You have these very large initiations, such as when the Dalai Lama gives a Kalachakra initiation when there may be one hundred thousand people. Very often it's explained that that initiation is a blessing. That is to say, it gives you a little boost of energy or some help on your way. But it's a boost on your way, wherever you are going.

In an initiation which is focused on a practice that you want, you go to a specific teacher because you want some contact through them, with their

lineage, because you're drawn towards the way that they are. They give you an initiation which is an initiation into the practice that they do and into their lineage. This initiation is not just helping you on with your path wherever that goes. This initiation then becomes your path. It's as if the initiation is like the points on the railway track, when they click over the track to go in a different direction.

YIDAM

The guru, in giving the initiation introduces you to the yidam, which is the Tibetan word for the deity whom one meditates on following the initiation. The yidam is a method. We make use of the meditation on the deity to get something. And what is it that we want to get? It's the hope of enlightenment which we are establishing during refuge with our intention to help all sentient beings, and which we began to establish during bodhicitta practice. So tantra is not about setting up some new intention or some new purpose, but it's giving one a very powerful method of realising what one had already set one's sights on before. The yidam becomes the method because it becomes the object of love and devotion and faith. It becomes the sort of point through which all one's spiritual aspirations are channelled.

WELCOMING YOU INTO YOUR LINEAGE FAMILY

In the prostrations, the refuge tree, this lineage tree, the focus of one's devotion in taking refuge, the tree is populated with all the gurus of the lineage through which one has had the main initiation.

It's as if, on the day you were born—this is an old-fashioned kind of story so it's not meant to prejudice any group—but on the day you were born, some gypsy stole you away, and they took you travelling through many different lands, and you learnt many, many things, but one day walking through this town, you looked up and you saw someone's face, and you felt this feeling in your heart and you just said "*Papa!*" and in that moment you recognised your true father, or it could be your real mother. So then your parent recognises you and they have a big party to welcome you. They invite the grandparents and the aunts and the uncles and the cousins and the nephews, and you sit there and they introduce: "*This is Aunt Mary and this is Uncle Joe*" and then you say "*Uncle George*" and they say "*No, no, this is Uncle Joseph*" and then gradually you start to recognise your family.

It's very similar when you're doing the prostrations. In front of you there is your new whole family, so as you're doing the prostrations and going down: "*Uncle Joe*", "*Aunt Mary*", "*Red Dakini!*" It's a very intensive induction of one's psychological being into a new family. Sometimes the hinayana systems of meditation—because they are generally about cooling things down and making a lot of space—can seem almost a little clinical. Tantra is much more rich and welcoming. It is not that you're leaving samsara and then having to walk across a great big desert to nirvana.

Nirvana's already there, and your lineage family are reaching out and saying "Welcome!" It can feel as if you are looking at them, and they are looking at you, and there's a meeting. By this repeated physical movement of prostrating your body is being shaken up and changed. There is nothing to think about except reciting the verse that you're saying and keeping your body moving in rhythm. The whole body and emotional life is being brought into this joining a new family, finding a new path, finding a very rich way forward in which you are welcomed into the sangha, into the living family of the dharma.

PEOPLE'S LIVED EXPERIENCE

So, who is the family? The different lineages will have different historical figures and meditation deities involved in their lineages. One of the preparatory practices that we might need to do in the west is to learn a bit about Tibetan history and working out who these people are. Why? Because it's through the actual living historical presence of these figures that the dharma moves from being a set of books or a set of ideas into becoming an actual living experience. This is what people have done. This is the product of their lived experience. It actually becomes embodied in a different way. It becomes less abstract and something that real people have done. So we could see how the preliminary practice, as it's described in the text, may have extra elements for us, if we're coming from a different culture, because we have to make links with the practice which will involve us in a lot more study and reflection.

I think this is very, very important. There's a danger that all the great yogis and saints or whatever we call them, of the past, just become somehow abstracted into wonderful beings. But in fact of course, they were people who walked on the earth, who were eating and shitting and getting into fights and having friends and having enemies. All of these people in the lineage had to struggle themselves to work out how they should practice, how much practice they should do, what did they really want to do, where did they want to live. If we want the lineage to become alive for us, we will then need to take responsibility to go and ask people questions. We might need to travel around and ask lots of people questions.

Questioner: Then to practise dharma it's very expensive?

James: Yes, it is very expensive. There are stories of Marpa when he went to India, taking all this gold with him to offer for initiations and for books. But it was also a business move for him: he could take it back to Tibet and 'sell' it again. You know, we might think that's a little bit strange, but certainly in Britain, the Church of England used to be very wealthy, because they had accumulated a lot of property over hundreds of years, but due to some bad business deals recently they have been in a lot of financial trouble. Now they are having to talk a lot more openly about money. It's not that money is a bad thing, or a negative thing. It's part and parcel of all that we are caught up in. In a sense money signifies value.

NEW LOCUS OF MEANING

The dharma, however, is suggesting that there is a different set of values, a different paradigm in thinking about value. How each of us scans the relationship between the dharma and money will be different. Certainly if you wanted to buy a new car you would have to spend a lot of money. If you had a new car, people could look at it and say, *"What a lovely new car!"* In a sense, in our culture, the value of the new car would be approved by everyone who would say, *"Wonderful!"*

But if you took the money value of a new car, a new Mercedes, and went to India and brought back a huge stash of Tibetan books wrapped in gold cloth and put it up on a big shelf in your room, what would your friends say? They might say *"Well, what do the books mean?"* And you might even say *"Well, I don't know, but they're very, very precious"*. Then maybe one of your friends might get so angry with you that they would just take the book and throw it out the window. But the next morning, when you woke up and looked out the window, there might be a huge bean tree, growing up into the sky! Because it is a similar kind of story. You know the story of Jack and the Beanstalk? There is some magical value around in the beans, but Jack's practical mother scolds him, *"You sold the cow. What did you get? Beans!"*

In shifting from one paradigm to another it's not very easy to see the value equivalence which moves across. It's a different ball game that you're into. Eventually, one may be able to have a state of openness and an easy situation in ordinary life, but in the middle, when doing the practice, one may be in a state of considerable confusion and be behaving in a way that other people would regard as somewhat silly. When I was in India, I had a friend, Michael, who used to write to his mother *"Dear Mother, Om Mani Padme Hung, Om Mani Padme Hung, Om Mani Padme Hung, hope you are well and everything is good, Om Mani Padme Hung..."* Because for him that was very important and he wanted to share that.

In doing the prostrations one is trying to locate a new matrix of value or a new kind of locus of meaning. Are there any thoughts or questions about that before we have a break?

Questioner: Is ngöndro in tantra and ngöndro in dzogchen the same?

James: No. Ngöndro in tantra is what I am talking about just now. In dzogchen they don't really use the word ngöndro so much because dzogchen is direct. It is not mediated by preparation, although there are all sorts of preparations that can be located around it.

Questioner: I have a yidam practice which I feel very much attached to and long to do it. I got it from a lama whom I have quite a good relation with, but it's not a close relation. There is another lama I do have a very close relation with, but my relation to the practice he has given me is not like the relation to the practice from the other lama. There's a kind of criss-cross.

James: It's difficult. It's like someone saying "My wife's my best friend, and sex is OK—but my lover! A really good fuck, but we fight a lot!" A common problem is that it is difficult because one is entering into a system which is very, very complicated and if one's not careful one ends up being a servant of the system, instead of finding that the dharma is supporting you.

In many ways the dharma is like some of these very fancy restaurants that they have in London where, on the menu, they don't put any prices because they imagine that everyone is so rich they can pay whatever it is. But we are poor people. Poor in all sorts of ways. We don't know Tibetan, we're not really in that culture, we don't have very much time, we're easily distracted, and we've got lots of things to do. So before we go to eat we should count our pennies and say "What's the cost please?"

Very often Tibetan teachers will say, "This is a very good practice. You could do this practice". And there's no doubt that in terms of practices it is a good practice and it may be good for you in a kind of abstract sense that, yes, fits in with many things about you. Like a restaurant—it's a fish restaurant and they cook just your favourite fish and the chef does it just the way you like it—but the key issue is, can you pay for it? It doesn't matter if the fish is good, it's beautiful, but next week, next year sometime, but today—do I have the money to pay?

Questioner: You can pay. Always you can pay. (Translator: even by washing the dishes.)

James: Well..., but you are saying you can't pay because there is this refuge tree and that refuge tree, and there's so many refuge trees... here and here and here...it's difficult to pay these bills. It means to do a daily practice, to do so many mantras, and the bill comes in, you know, and it's ten o'clock at night and you're tired and you've been rushing all day and the kids have just gone to bed and you've got to sit there and try and do the practiceand it has become bla-bla-bla. We might ask ourselves "Why am I doing it?" and tell ourselves "You know, I'm just paying the bills." And that's not what the dharma's for. So there is a danger there.

Translator: So you insist on daily practice?

James: Can I insist! [laughter]

Question: At least you recommend it?

James: Again, it's back to the question of what's good for you, of what you need to do. If you know yourself and you know you need to do a daily practice, then you need to know: is it better for me to do one hour deeply in one practice? Or is it better for me to do lots of little bits of practice? We have to know for ourselves. Nobody can tell us from the outside. It is an absolute myth that somebody whom you meet and who looks at you, and who might wear a funny hat, can tell you what's good for your life, other than in the most general terms.

In the end we have to take responsibility for our own actions. If the Buddha could save people, if the Buddha had the power to save people, people wouldn't be having the tops of their heads cut off in Rwanda, as they are in the news just now.

This morning I was trying to make the difference between a literal depiction of something and a metaphorical one. When it says in the text that the Buddha has compassion and helps beings, that is undoubtedly true, but he does that primarily through teachings which help people in their struggle to understand and then improve their lives. Not through magic. Otherwise, the teacher goes around and gives you this one magic night of bliss, then nine months later you've got a little baby, and you've got to bring it up on your own! When the teacher has vanished back to Tibet or India, or died, or something, then all you're left with is a whole lot of mantras to say and a practice you don't understand. It's very important that we get a practice and understand it thoroughly, understand the principle of why we do it.

THE PRINCIPLE OF THE PRACTICE HELPS US UNDERSTAND WHY WE DO IT

In a sense this is the real ngöndro, this is the preliminary practice, to understand why I am doing the practice, what the purpose of it is for me, so that I will know why I am doing it, not just tomorrow, but a year from now, ten years from now, so that one's not doing it just to please someone else or because one promised to do it, but because one actually understands that by visualising, by dissolving in this way, one is opening oneself to the nature of one's mind, that there is a real structural meaning. This is a very beautifully designed psychological experiment or laboratory situation through which you can prove to yourself again and again just what reality is. It's a beautiful thing with a meaning and a purpose which is not simply doing it because somebody said you should.

That's why I do these sorts of seminars, to try to show the principles that underpin the practice. That's why I think it's helpful to study buddhist philosophy, so that you understand the view, the way it has developed and why it has developed in that way, and what the consequences of this for the meditation are. Then the power is in your hands. Then you are in the centre of what you are doing.

Because otherwise, if your main line into the practice is simply depending on the teacher and doing what the teacher says, if your teacher ends up in some kind of confusion, like this whole Karmapa/Sharmapa story, then it knocks people's practice right out of the window, they get so confused by all of that, they lose any sense of why they are doing it.

The Buddha taught this dharma of the middle way and it's the middle way between theoretical analysis, understanding the principles and the practice of faith. Both of these are brought together, they are not either/or.

Break

³[.....] and attachment is when we find ourselves caught up with something which we feel is not us, so that we either get what we don't want, we get attached to and caught up in things we don't want; or we find we are not getting what we do want. We can start to recognise the habitual movement of the subject/object interaction so that we are not as if living in a dream, just getting caught up in this ebb and flow of feelings, action and reaction. Instead we recognise that we are making choices and then take responsibility for the choices that we make. (What we're trying to do is to shift the relationship of subject and object into this new paradigm.)

KEEPING ATTENTION FOCUSED

In the simplest form of buddhism—that's one way of putting it—where one is trying to calm the mind, one is trying to stop attachment by keeping a clear focus on a neutral object. I'm not going to go to the left, I'm not going to go to the right, I'll just keep going straight down this road in front of me which is an open, empty road. By driving down this straight road long enough, I get so used to keeping my focus on it that I'm not at all aware of what's going by. Now I've got confidence that I can drive in a straight line, I can start to look around at what's going on, on either side. And while I'm being aware now of what's occurring on the left and the right, I'm centred in my attention down this straight road. That's the basis.

It is similar to when we start to focus our attention on the breath, usually focussed on the upper lip. At first we find our attention going here, there and everywhere. Gradually, by practising, we can keep our attention coming back to this point of the subtle sense of the breath moving out over the upper lip out of the nostrils. That's like driving down a straight road. Things may be occurring, thoughts or whatever, but you're not distracted, you just keep going straight down that road. When one's established in that, and able to do it without being pulled off course very easily, you can open your vision and start to watch what is arising, the thoughts and feelings, and allow one's attention to include them more. Be aware of these sensations, feelings and thoughts arising, staying for a while and then passing away. Just as if you're driving down the road and you can see an old château, and it looks quite nice but you don't turn around to look at it, you just let it go by, because basically, you're focused on the road. You just note for yourself: "*Château. Beautiful. Old.*" Just some simple recognition of it, but not enough to pull you into a spiral of conceptualisation and attachment.

What one is permitting is a phenomenological description without being seduced into an elaboration around it. In the hinayana or theravadin system that becomes a way of giving deep peace and clarity. One has a sense of clarity of purpose and intention which carries one through one's experience, inside the meditation of thoughts and feelings, and yet one does not have to blank everything else off. One is also, to a certain extent, aware of what's going on.

³ Change of tape

In tantra, one's taking up the same issue, but in a different way. It starts in the same place: suffering arises from attachment. What one's attempting to do inside tantra is to shift the nature of the interaction, so that there is less attachment to things and more sense of a rich, unfolding flow of experience. By understanding emptiness one is able to take all the forms of the world that might attract one and pull one into a situation of hopes and fears, wanting to get this, not wanting to get that, and make them transparent.

A traditional example for this is to take a piece of rope and lay it on the table—it would be Indian rope, fairly loosely tied, like coconut coir rope—and just let it burn through. As it sort of glows and burns its way through it leaves an ash which is in just the shape of the rope itself. The form is still there but there's no essence in it, there's nothing to grab. If you tried to grab it your fingers would just go through it. In a sense this is what an understanding of emptiness does: it can take away, it can suck out the seductive life of things. Knowing that things are empty and devoid of self-substance, there's nothing there to get. (I'll come back to emptiness again in just a moment and say a bit more about it.)

Having been able to set everything back into this empty, sort of shadow-like existence, one's also aware that things don't vanish, they return. The world is still there. But now, as phenomena are starting to appear out of this openness, they are the appearances of the openness. As one is having the aesthetic moment, the moment of the appreciation of this richness, there's nothing at the same time; because it's the appearance of emptiness, there is nothing to grasp in it.

In that way, by being able to stay with the richness of the presenting form of things, with the sense of the openness and emptiness of them, one has the pleasurable sense of being with phenomena as they manifest without the danger of being sucked into a tight appropriative relationship. It is that experience that the visualisation types of practice are designed to bring into a living reality in one's life, that one makes use of the method of the deity to give oneself the direct experience of this rich, empty display of the continuum of the world.

The word 'tantra' means continuity or continuum. Here it's particularly meaning the continuum of samsara and nirvana. In a sense, the world continues the same, but now nirvana is also present and is present in samsara as the depth which opens up and empties out the substantial graspability of things as we ordinarily experience them. So one is focused in this relaxed, open awareness of the richness of the world as it presents itself, as if it were the empty, rich display of the body of the deity. By continuing with this sort of practice, one is then not distracted by the world, one is not pulled back into trying to solidify things.

EMPTINESS

We can maybe see just from this very brief description the way this first path of calming the mind (shi-né) and then doing a sort of examination (lhak-tong)

deal with the issue of attachment and involvement in a very different way from tantra. But the key difference between them is the idea of emptiness. Emptiness basically refers to two things: it refers to the absence of inherent self-nature in a person and then, secondarily, it refers to the absence of inherent self-nature in phenomena. This is a sort of a clumsy language but it's trying to make sense of a fairly technical vocabulary in the Sanskrit and Tibetan texts.

Ordinarily I just have the sense of being me. We probably all have that sense. "How are you?" "I'm fine. How are you?" Since we were children we've been inducted into a world where that's the standard belief. Our experience as social beings is predicated on our ability to recognise others and respond to them as if they were someone. But from the buddhist point of view this coherent sense of self is an illusion, because it presents itself as if it were a given, as if it were something which was just there, *sui generis*, of itself, somehow, and yet it's actually a construct. From our western thought at the moment we can see that it's a construct through language and the vagaries of history and culture.

FIVE SKANDHAS AND A GESTALT

Traditionally in the buddhist understanding, it's understood in terms of being a composite created out of the co-presencing of five basic building blocks. In Sanskrit these are called *skandhas* which means 'heaps'. You take these five little heaps and put them together and it makes a person.

As with any gestalt, the total is always greater than the sum of its parts, but the magic ingredient that makes the total greater than the sum of its parts is ignorance. In fact, in this reductive analysis, it's actually less than the sum of its parts, because our assumption that we truly exist in this way, disguises to us the actual dynamic play whereby it's being constructed all the time.

There are five building blocks of form, feeling, perception, association and consciousness. These five skandhas have a huge literature about them and they are a key notion in buddhist philosophy and psychology. I think it's very useful to get quite a thorough understanding of them. I want us to go on to do some practice so I'm not going to describe them in very great detail just now. However I will describe them very briefly.

Form is described as colour and shape; *feelings* are good, bad and neutral; *perception* is through the six senses; *association* means the ability that we have to construct things, to put them together; and fifthly, *consciousness* is seen as either six or eight consciousnesses. Each of the senses has its own consciousness that takes care of the data coming through it. Then there is a central mental consciousness which organises that sense data. In some systems, there is a seventh consciousness which deals with how confusion comes into that system, the way that we can have thoughts which are angry or thoughts that are proud etc. In our terminology it's maybe the consciousness that deals with the irrational forces. The final eighth

consciousness is the basic sense of a self who is making sense of these things, so it's a kind of root self-referencing function.

Now these five—which we can read about, and there's a lot more to say about them—these five are like the five building blocks. That is to say, that every experience that we have can be made sense of just by using these five. They are seen as sort of primordial essences or irreducible absolutes.

In this system of analysis, what one has to do is examining oneself and examine others when one is just on the point of recognising, "*You are a person and I respond to you as a person.*" One has to hit that, run across it with an analysis of what is occurring in the perceptual field in terms of these five determinants. Nightmare territory now. One is confronted with the delusion that one is speaking to a person and one is trying to contradict that illusion by installing that there are just five heaps of stuff moving about.

This analysis is then subjected to a further analysis that says for each of these moments of the five skandhas, each moment cannot be atomistic in nature, cannot be irreducible, because of the nature of the contiguity, the connectedness, that's required to build up the whole gestalt. So all phenomena, when you actually look into them, are empty of any self-substance. What seem to be these irreducible essences, when you analyse them, can be analysed *ad infinitum* until there's nothing at all.

This is just another system of psychology. The world is full of systems of psychology like this. But if you don't understand the axioms which are embedded, the assumptions that are embedded in this system of psychology, then you can't understand any of the critique of this system which is the basis for the whole edifice of tantra. If you want to read Hegel's critique on Kant, and you've never read Kant, then it gets a bit confusing because there's a missing bit of the argument which you have to imagine. This is the reality of how this is structured. I am not personally responsible for the complexity of it!

POP IT IN A BOX

This is why, when we do mind-calming meditation, trying to keep the calmness and openness as thoughts arise, we want to be recognising whatever is arising in terms of the five skandhas. It becomes simple: we just calm the mind down until we can be focused on one point. Then with the confidence of that focus we gradually relax the focus, allow ourselves to become more aware of what's arising. As the sensations and feelings are arising in the meditation we respond to them, but only in terms of the five basic categories. So whatever arises, maybe a colour—some sort of green thing seems to rush over the top there—and you just say "colour". Then from that, you could have a perception of heat which would be in terms of sensation in the body: "perception". You simply label it with the descriptive title.

It's a very, very reductive, neo-scientific procedure. It's not at all concerned with the aesthetics of what's arising. It's not concerned with being fascinated

by them in any way. It's just wanting to pop them in their little boxes. But it's also very powerful. In the moment the thought arises you pop it in a box. What you are actually doing is running across, or contradicting, the habit you have of being fascinated by the thoughts that arise, being seduced by them.

We'll go on and practice some of that in a few minutes, but first I'd suggest that you maybe talk in pairs and see whether this last thing makes any sense to you and whether you've got a sense of what doing that kind of meditation would entail.

Questioner: It's easy when it's colour like green, but with strong emotions like fear....?

James: Well, in terms of feelings, the second one, you've got good, bad and neutral, so then it would be bad feeling. That's all you would say: "bad".

I want you to talk in pairs for five or so minutes to clarify it, and then we can come back with some thoughts and then we'll do the practice together.

Questioner: In the process of watching and supervising, the question of form and colour and sensation whatsoever, who is the one who watches?

James: Who?

Questioner: Is it the ego? The ego watches everything, but you said the ego decomposed in these five skandhas, so it cannot be the watcher.

James: Well, the bit of the watcher that wants to respond with enthusiasm or disgust or disinterest or something like that, that would be the ego. Say for example, you had a sensation of hunger, and the next thought coming after that was "*God! I've got no food in the house. I forgot to go shopping today going to this stupid seminar!*" Then more thoughts come and the ego is involved in these thoughts. The purpose of this kind of analysis is to be able to stop it at the first point, where it's hunger, right where it's a sensation. Hunger is also a broad term; you want to break it down, so that it might be "hot, burning" or "liquid, falling" trying to go more and more subtle, into paying attention to what's there.

We live our lives in a continuous flow of narrative where we are telling stories about ourselves or about others, both through our mouths and on an almost sub-conscious level in just the flow of thoughts. If you can cut through that language-game by simply labelling things as they are, then you will feel better. It frees one from the web of pseudo-meaning that is the actual living reality of samsara. Although it's formal and artificial and is not something that one can easily do while in a supermarket, it's quite a useful practice to do for a while in meditation, as it gives a good basis for going on to do more dynamic meditation. What you're experiencing is sort of swimming in this thick soup of familiar ideas and responses, the whole play of language and response, and trying to interrupt it.

Questioner: When and how do you need the label of consciousness?

James: You could do it just as “thought”. For example, say there was a colour, then you could do “colour”, and if the colour repeated then it could be “eye consciousness”. The consciousness and the object that the consciousness is aware of arise together in the same moment. It’s not as if there’s a pre-existing consciousness waiting for an object to pass through it. They are co-emergent.

Of course, reality is very, very complicated and multi-layered, and this is a somewhat primitive tool to try to chop everything up into these things. But it does slow things down and give some clarity and interrupts the very seductive flow of this narrative. Tomorrow I’ll show how these categories link into a lot of the actual practice in tantra, where it is taken up in a very different way, as if turned through a hundred and eighty degrees.

We’ve had a lot of talking and ideas, and we’re probably all a bit tired but let’s just do fifteen minutes now of sitting with this. The first five minutes or so just focusing on your breath and then when you’ve got a little bit of focus on that, opening up, being aware of the thoughts and trying to put simple identifications on them and not getting caught up in what they’re trying to tell you.

Meditation period

THE THREE POT FAULTS

First of all I will say a little about attitudes to study in the dharma and then maybe open up some questions. Some of you may be familiar with this, but traditionally it is said that when we start to study the dharma, we have to be aware of ‘three pot faults’. They are called ‘pot faults’ because it’s described as if one’s talking about a pot.

If we imagine this bell is a pot, the first pot fault would be that instead of having the pot open so that it could contain something, one had it upside down. If you tried to pour something into it, it would just flow over it and nothing would go inside. This is similar to listening to the dharma, or reading the dharma, and it just flows over us. We don’t really engage with it. We find ourselves day-dreaming or thinking of something else. Or we may go into dharma situations just for the social contact, but without any real desire to have the dharma touch us.

The second pot fault is to be like a pot that’s open and ready to receive things, but it’s got a hole in it, so that whatever goes into the pot just drains out again. That happens if we don’t transfer the information from our short-term to our long-term memory, in particular if we don’t attempt to apply the knowledge we get and it remains an empty knowledge. For example, if ‘impermanence’ remains a word rather than something that is incorporated in how we are in the world with others.

The third pot fault is considered to be like a cooking pot. You want to cook some good food in it but the pot is dirty, there's some rotten old food left inside. If you put new food in it and start to cook it, the good new food will be corrupted by the rotten, old food. This refers to the way in which we can take the ideas from the dharma and get them all mixed up with our previous thoughts, with our worldly concerns. The dharma and our ordinary way of looking at the world have no point of separation and become one jumbled mass.

PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

Questioner: Also many people who are here now have had teachers before. Some people have been with Bhagwan Rajneesh or have listened to other teachers and teachings, and now they come to this buddhist dharma. How should they regard their old teachings?

James: There's a story in the Bible about a master who has three servants and the master is going away and he wants to give something to each of his servants to make use of while he's away. He gives them each some weight of money, some talents. From this parable, the word 'talent' has come to mean in English one's abilities or possibilities. So to one servant he gives five talents, and to the other he gives three, and to the third servant he gives only one. Away he goes and after some time he returns and calls his servants together and asks them how they're getting on.

The one who had got the most talents said, *"I bought a vineyard and I've been growing these grapes and you can see they're almost ripe and we have a very good crop and we're going to make a lot of money and things are going well."* The second servant said, *"Well, I bought some grain and I took it to another city and I changed it for something else and I lost some money on that but then I did another deal, you know, so it's about the same at the moment, but a bit uncertain."*

The third servant said, *"Look, master. Here I have it in a pot. It's just the way you left it to me. I buried it in the ground to keep it safe, and it hasn't been touched at all."* And the master said: *"You useless servant. Here was a possibility, and you did nothing with the possibility except keep it safe. By keeping it safe, it lost all its possibilities."*

Now, this parable is a very different kind of story from the one of the three pots, particularly the third pot. The parable points out that if we want things to grow and develop and become of value then we have to take some risk. We have to go out into the world and not simply try to keep things safe.

In the case of the third pot fault, you can see the intention is that if one can somehow separate out one's past—get rid of the bad past things and have a fresh new future with the real truth—then all will be well. This is a metaphor. It's not a literal depiction of how things are. It's like a fairy tale story where after many difficulties and problems, the prince meets his true beloved and they live happily ever after. Life isn't like that. The pot is not dirty with an old

past that you can scrape out and then have a clean pot. We are the pot and in us the dirt keeps manifesting because that is the karma, that is the way thoughts and feelings arise. It's not that we can drive out all the things from the past, but rather that we should be trying to understand what we were about, in entering these different paths.

If you were with Rajneesh, what did you get out of being with Rajneesh? What did you learn about yourself from that and what did you learn about the way you sabotage your spiritual endeavours? If you've already been in one system and left it, something ejected you out of that, you were thrown out in some way. I often get patients coming into psychotherapy who've had many different kinds of therapy before, so I'm always very interested to know what they have learnt from the previous experiences and what they feel made these previous therapies not really work for them, so that together we can try to do things in a different way.

One of the things you can do with previous experience is to do a kind of structural analysis of it. What was the procedure you were caught up in? If you've already been, say, through a Christian education in childhood, what's of value in that and what attitudes from that can help you to understand something in the dharma?

In Britain in education, they tend to make a distinction between children learning and adults learning. If you think of studying buddhism in Tibet, you'd be starting as a small child like this small child here, the mother would be doing mantras and saying prayers and the child would just be hearing the echo of that all the time. It would gradually build up and one would be inside, it would be as if one was living 'in' this world of meaning and one would be just breathing it in, it would be a natural adaptation and incorporation. It's a bit like that when we're at school because as children we're still used to a power differential where the big people know things, and even if we don't want to, we have to somehow fit in with their desire and do things on their terms.

When I teach in adult education, like teaching in a university, particularly with mature students, I think you have to take a different approach. These are students who already have a life, they're already grown up, they've found a place to stay, they may be in relationship, they may even have children, and they may have part-time jobs to support their study. They are not helpless, dependent creatures. At that point, what one really needs to have is a dialogic form of learning, in which there is an aim or a task, which is to develop understanding and to open new areas of experience. What's required then is usually learning in small seminars where people come prepared to think and to engage and everybody puts their energy in. My own sense is that that's a very useful model for thinking about how to study and practice in the dharma in the west. In a university seminar, the tutor will probably know more than the students, but the learning exists in the relationship, in the engagement together, working together on a problem, on a question.

I think what's called for is for us to think about how do we engage in a process of learning by mutual respect and by the endeavour to read, to think, to

practice and to bring our experience into a place where it can be thought about together. One aspect of that is being able to reflect on previous experience. There are two levels here. On the one level, of course, many of the ways in which we have understood our experience may not have been helpful. We may have thought that money was the most important thing, or that sex was the most important thing, or fame, but then we found there was no real satisfaction in that, that something was missing. So we come into the dharma. The dharma hopefully opens some deeper understanding of things.

It is important to realise that some ways of viewing the world, of experiencing the world, lead to suffering and others lead towards openness, relaxation, pleasure, fulfilment. Once you've understood some of the basic dharma principles, you can then go back and reflect on the experiences that you've had, whether as a Christian, or with Rajneesh, or through yoga or whatever it is. The deeper your meditation understanding is and the clearer you are in the understanding of emptiness, the more you can finally incorporate anything into the dharma.

We know the historical movement of buddhism into different cultures has always involved the inclusion of new art forms, new forms of music, new forms of meditation... In a sense, what we have in this room here [*gestures at the various statues, thangkas etc*] are representations of buddhist ideas through a particular cultural form. These forms are not the real image of the Buddha, they are representations, and representations are part of culture. If you believe that this statue here is the real form of Buddha Shakyamuni, then if you go to Cambodia and you see statues that don't quite look like this, what are you going to do? Can you say these Cambodian buddhists are heretics; you're going to smash all these bad statues? I think not.

Luckily, buddhism doesn't go into that line, but many other religions do. Even in Tibet people have been murdered for their different philosophical views. The most important thing, I think, is tolerance.

Tolerance however is always problematic. For example, you have the debates in America about freedom of speech, particularly just now around the issue of pornography. If pornography is an insult to women, why should it be allowed? Yet, if looking at pornography gives some people a sense of freedom and some release from tensions in their life and they want to express themselves through this medium, then they're going to be limited by someone else's distress.

There's always the dilemma: if you allow freedom and possibility, you may get into a mess; but if you start to limit freedom and possibility you may move toward fascism and the institutional control of some people, in the name of a higher truth which is held just by a small group of others. This is why we have to be very careful not to literalise, not to make absolute and real the expressions which are really metaphorical and symbolic and which are an attempt to open things up in some way.

Now this was a very long answer to your question. The short answer would be: *“You must wipe out from your mind any traces of these previous things and you must now become a pure and good buddhist!”* I personally think this is something that we will all have to struggle with. There is also an easy answer, which is: *“Do as you are told”* but as I’ve suggested before, that solves the problem for one second, because the next second we ask: *“But how do I do as I’m told?”*

If I’m going to work out how I should do it, I have to be able to think. If I’m going to think, I have to be free to think. If I’m going to be free to think, I’m going to have thoughts which are related to the past, which I’m trying not to think about. That’s why it’s very important that we understand the basic principles that underpin the practice of the dharma rather than going for a formalistic belief in the expressions themselves, and then trying to constrain ourselves so that we always fit into that form.

THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF DHARMA

Questioner: I don’t yet understand what the principles of dharma actually are?

James: OK. Well that’s what I will attempt to explain something about. There are three basic principles that I think all schools of buddhism would accept: impermanence, absence of inherent self-nature, and suffering. *Anicca, anutta,* and *dukkha* in Pali.

Buddhism is about trying to understand how these principles are suffusing our experience and how to take up a position against them, not trying to make the world a safe place, when it’s actually impermanent and changing. As I was trying to suggest yesterday, our automatic response to things changing and feeling out of control, is to try to put on the brakes. But what the dharma is actually showing us is how to go into the movement and to resolve the movement, in the movement, rather than applying an antidote from outside. It’s a bit like if you are in a car, and you hit some oil and you start to go into a skid, the automatic response is to slam on the brakes. But that’s likely to lock you into a tight spin, so it’s much better to try to move as the car is sliding and then you have some manoeuvrability.

All these meditation practices are ways of trying to interrupt this habitual response to situations that will tighten and try to appropriate the situation and bring back to ego central control. It’s trying to lessen that, to open it up, so that one’s moving and flowing with the world as it arises.

Questioner: Tom Geist, he said we need skilful methods and wisdom to deal with these things. Right or wrong?

James: Wisdom and skilful methods are at the heart of every buddhist practice. In terms of tantra, wisdom means emptiness. Skilful means is all the richness of the visualisation and the transformational process that that entails. Wisdom and skilful means are often compared to the two wings of a bird. If you have only one wing, if you only have emptiness or if you only have the

visualisation, it will slip off into some kind of fixed position. It's a case of balancing the emptiness, the openness and the manifestation. Which again is different from the kind of balancing that one would seek to do by appropriation, by construction, by creating a safe ego territory. It has to be a dynamic balance.

A very important thing is to be able to think about the dharma, to try to apply it to our lives. As we try to apply it to our lives, we will get lost, we will make mistakes. When we make mistakes, it's important to be able to recognise that we are getting a bit lost but then to take some action to change the situation.

BODHICITTA: I WILL BE AVAILABLE FOR OTHERS

Yesterday I talked a bit about the first part of the ngöndro, prostrations. The second part is bodhicitta, also doing this one hundred thousand times. Sometimes there are two separate verses: one for refuge and one for bodhicitta and we do them as separate cycles. Other times they are condensed into a single verse.

Bodhicitta means an awakened mind. Bodhicitta is that the mind needs to awaken from is the bubble of self-referencing, the bubble of relating everything back to oneself. In order to awaken from that bubble one needs what is both the cause and consequence of the awakening. This is the awareness of the other, of other people. We need to see that other people are not simply agents of our desire, they are not simply objects or tools that we can manipulate in order to have our needs and desires satisfied, but they actually exist with their own subjectivity, with their own needs and desires.

So there's a question for us: how can we know what other people want? One way to know what other people want is to tell them what they want. And that's a very common way of communicating in our world. We can do it directly through use of our power, and we can do it more subtly by simply not listening to what other people say and imagining that they are saying what we want them to say.

In the practice of bodhicitta one is attempting to awaken to the fact that one is living not on one's own, but in a world, in fact in a whole universe, of many, many different kinds of beings. Bodhicitta in this sense basically means altruism, and the way we develop it formally is by making a statement that, "*In this and all my future lives I will work for the enlightenment and happiness of all beings.*"

We are making an intention. We are making it clear to ourselves, but we are also saying it out into the world. If you take this vow of bodhicitta or the bodhisattva vow, if you take it formally, it's as if you make a promise out into the universe to echo for ever and ever through time that "*I will be available for others*". That's a very, very big promise to make.

For me, when I come home in the evening, I'm tired. If the telephone rings, I usually let it go onto the answer-phone so that I can work out whether this is a

person that I actually want to talk to just now. This is a subtle use of technology to break the bodhisattva vow. Very often we want some mediating device between ourselves and others, we want to give ourselves the choice as to whether we respond or not. What's set up with the idea of a bodhisattva vow is the sense of an infinite responsibility, an unlimited responsibility.

This responsibility, again, has a double edge to it. On the one hand it speaks of a kind of mastery, a superior status where you have some difficulties and I will take responsibility for you. From that perspective one can look forward through one's buddha practice, to arriving at a state where one has a beautiful throne and one sits in power, majesty and glory, not on the right hand of God, but pretty much as God himself, (and it would be a 'himself' I think, in this system) dispensing one's beneficence on those below.

The other way of taking up the word 'responsible' or 'responsibility' is to think of being responsible to others, which means having to respond to the other as the other is. This then means that what one does, how one behaves, is dictated not by one's own desire, not by the majesty and glory of the understanding that one has established, but rather by the state of the other. It might not be too extreme to think that there might be some gender bias in these two readings.

To take the vow is to say: *"I am prepared to be disturbed by anyone who wants to disturb me, and their disturbance is something that I will be grateful for, because their disturbance, as long as it disturbs me, will be awakening me to the fact that I'm not free of my egoistic desire to maintain a controlled territory."*

In taking up this point of wisdom and skilful means as a bodhisattva, one is using the other, one's awareness of the other as the skilful means to increase one's own wisdom, by interrupting the desire to have one's self-territory. It's often presented that the bodhisattva path is that we become great bodhisattvas and we do things for others. But I think we can also see the bodhisattva path as us opening up to letting others do something for us. The interruption of the other interrupts our ego-concern and this develops our wisdom, out of which we can then have a compassionate response towards the other.

I would suggest that maybe we talk in pairs for five or ten minutes to see if they have some relevance to your life because I think that these ideas are absolutely vital as basic principles.

Break

Questioner: What to do now you are a bodhisattva and you promise to bring everybody to enlightenment, but some people they don't want to be enlightened. What to do with them?

James: Beat them! Tell them they must be enlightened! [*Laughter*] It's a very interesting question. In general the main practice in bodhicitta is through

meditation. The meditation gives two possibilities: one is that through the meditation one is opened up and has a more relaxed open way of being, and the second is that you learn lots of different techniques that you can use with lots of different people.

That's very similar to psychotherapy where in some approaches like psychoanalysis one provides a space in which the other person, through their talking, starts to recognise something about themselves. By offering a profound, attentive silence and not responding in the way that the patient is accustomed having people respond, the patient's normal way of creating a continuation of assumptions and patterns falls away because it has nothing to hold on to. There are also many other kinds of therapy, like family therapy and cognitive therapy where the therapist is much more directive, telling people what to do, giving advice, setting up experiments for the person to do, in which it's as if we are two people working together on a common problem which is out there.

Similarly in the bodhisattva approach, one of the most profound things that one can offer to the other is one's own understanding of emptiness. One doesn't offer it to them in the sense of saying, "*I had a wonderful meditation this morning and my emptiness was terrific,*" that would be like saying "*I was in Greece for my holidays and would you like to see the photographs?*" It's more to do with bringing it into the quality of the relationship.

The thing about that sense of openness and emptiness is that it allows us to tolerate and accept the fact that some people are truly fucked-up, even want to be fucked-up. It may be that your perception that the other person is fucked-up is making you feel fucked-up and pissed-off about them. In that way one has lost one's awareness of emptiness and gone into a real relationship where you have a desire that the other person should be different from the way they are. In that way, if we become aware of that, our feeling of disturbance can tell us that something is going wrong in the practice, just as counter-transference feelings would be helpful in analysis.

If one is being in the world with people who have no concern for enlightenment, on the one hand one needs to have compassion for them and think about them, and generate some warmth and tenderness towards them, but we have to be careful not to turn that into a demand on the other that the other might find intolerable. One needs to balance that with the sense of the openness, the emptiness of the situation, so that however they are, what they actually are, is empty.

This is why we have to be very aware of going into this expert, powerful position that "*I should be able to save all sentient beings,*" because it also raises the question of what would another person's enlightenment look like? As long as we can say that everyone's enlightenment looks like having an orange robe and sitting with a bowl, then, if I look around the room—there's no orange people here and no-one's got a bowl! We haven't made it yet! *[Laughter]*.

IS THE GURU ENLIGHTENED?

Is the guru enlightened? And if so, what does it mean? And if he's not, why not? I want him to be! I think he should be! [*Laughter*] In a sense we are back here with the examples of childhood and adulthood. Small children often idealise their parents and imagine they can do everything. As they grow up they come to realise the limitations of their parents and they often want to tell them, "*You're no good, you're hopeless, you haven't been able to achieve anything in your life.*" Whereupon the parent then says, "*Well why talk to me that way, when you can't even do your homework and pass your maths exam?*" So it's easy to get into a kind of blaming in which both people have to encounter the fact that the other is not the garden of their desires, in which they can grow and flourish. It's more the wasteland of their weeds.

The Tibetan tradition is very much concerned with keeping the idealising moment maintained on the teacher. That whatever thing the teacher does or says is good. Now of course, it's not good, but we are required to imagine that it is good. That creates a certain point of tension in which one has the evidence of one's senses and one's ordinary way of construing reality, but this is being contradicted by the belief or the view that one is trying to hold onto, because one has been told that this is the way to have some kind of movement forward. So, there's a point here of struggle.

At first one might be thinking, "*Well, the guru does these funny things because...*" and it could be because he's from Tibet, because he doesn't know our culture, because that's the way they did things over there, because he's had a vision.... Because, because, because. But all the 'because's' that we come up with might not be sufficient to fill the gap between what we imagine should be happening, and what we actually experience as happening. This is a process we probably all have to get caught up in. It is similar to 'transference' in psychoanalysis. The 'because' will never take us anywhere. We have to come to a point where we drop the 'because's' and we simply accept.

Whilst we are stuck in this 'because' situation, what we've got on the right hand is nirvana, and on the left hand we've got samsara. We are trying to stuff them into each other. Why? Because they 'should' fit. Because. Because. But you can't stuff samsara into nirvana like filling a turkey for Christmas. Even if you do that, it just sits inside and when the turkey's cooked, you take out the stuffing. That's to say you can't use a rational basis for trying to fit these two incompatible domains together. They can only really fit together when you have a situation in which you shift paradigm, in which the basis for the contradiction collapses.

THE GURU AS METHOD

In this way the guru is the method, just as in psychoanalysis the person of the analyst becomes the method. By having all sorts of feelings about the analyst as if they were one's mother or father or people with whom one has an unresolved relationship from the past, on the point of the actual embodied

existence of the therapist one can have a resolution of these old confusions. Thus, the guru is the place in which nirvana and samsara are integrated by being the place where one can resolve all the projections and habits that have been accumulating for a very long time—through one's karma.

I think that's really the basic principle. With that principle, having doubts, having worries, is not a sign of error but it's a sign of the process in work. There is a tradition in Tibet of hagiography, of idealised biography. There are the accounts of *"When I first saw my guru it was so wonderful. It was all so great. Everything he taught me transformed my life"*. I think one has to see this as a literary genre rather than representing in any way the substance of the relationship. Much more realistic is what happened between Milarepa and Marpa, in which Milarepa was in an almost suicidal despair. He kept finding this gap, this lack of connection with the person who was more and more important in his life, and that caused him enormous distress.

However, later Milarepa said, *"When I understood my guru I understood my mind."* It was through that struggle that he was forced to meditate and to reflect deeply on the dharma. Otherwise he would have gone mad because he couldn't make sense of what was going on in terms of 'because, because, because'.

TRADITIONS OF TEACHING IN TIBET

There are two main traditions of teaching in Tibet: one is teaching through texts; giving commentaries and explanations. This is the tradition whereby scholars are given different titles such as *khenpo* or *geshe*. Then there is the tradition of teaching much more through a direct engagement, which would be through engaging in a direct relationship with a tantric teacher. I think it's often very helpful if you have both.

In Tibet this would have been normal; that through an education either in the family or in the local monastery, by the time somebody had reached their late teens they would have studied logic, epistemology, poetics, a whole range of topics in which buddhist themes are taken up and explored. Then, at the end of that, they would want to start some meditation and they would look around for a spiritual teacher. That would be a different kind of engagement, because the nature of that relationship would be to transform the conceptual, intellectual knowledge that they had into a living experience.

A bit like a friend of mine who studied music through his childhood, and then he started jamming with some musicians and that was going OK, and he was playing some gigs with a jazz band and was kind of getting into it when he met some African musicians and started playing with them. And he just lost everything because they were playing rhythms, changing them so quickly he could make no sense of it, and so he had to shift from a state in which he felt some kind of expertise and control into just allowing himself to flow. This transformed his playing completely.

Certainly I would see that the kind of seminars and things that I do in Germany as being very much in this khenpo tradition. My aim and intention is to help people to understand the principles. A somewhat post-modernist khenpo tradition...post-khenpoist!

IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR A GURU

I would suggest that it's very important, if you're interested in really pursuing this, to go and see some of the older Tibetan teachers. Since I first got involved in Tibetan buddhism twenty-five or so years ago, many, many of the teachers I have met have died. In my own experience, there's a huge difference between some of the younger lamas who have a fairly westernised education, and the older teachers whose life has been very much just immersed in the tradition. I would very much want to encourage people to go and see these lamas, here and in India if you've got the time and the resources. Because once it's gone, it's gone.

What these people can give is the presence of their energy which is a particular kind of initiation through energy and the living tradition of the dharma. You really get a flavour of what can be achieved through their living presence. You can get some profound inspiration not just in the realm of ideas and stimulus and interest but in terms of your own being.

It may be that the whole cultural shift from Tibet through India into the west will bring about a radical transformation of these forms, but traditionally it's said that if you're looking for a guru you should look for someone who has studied a great deal in their youth; then has practised with diligence until they achieve some realisation in their middle period; then in the final period of their life they teach people with love and compassion. I don't really want to get into a big discussion about reincarnation and the relative position of rinpoches, all of that story, but there's very definitely some tension in Tibet between yogis—people who really spend their time in meditation, in caves or in wandering—and those who take up a position of power and authority in a monastery.

In terms of thinking about the value of a possible relationship with a teacher one can look at the formal characteristics and one can look at one's own experience. Someone might be famous, might have a good reputation, people say this person is enlightened or this person is the reincarnation of such-and-such but when you meet them you might not feel anything. Then you might meet someone who doesn't seem to be anybody at all, but they mean a lot to you. They impact your life in a profound way. Again you're faced with a question. How can you know your own mind? How can you know what to trust? Should you trust what everyone else says is good? Or should you trust what you feel is good? Just because something is good doesn't necessarily mean it's good for you. Swiss chocolate is very nice, but if you're diabetic it's not very good for you. So there is specificity about relationships.

From the Tibetan point of view, relationships with teachers are usually on the basis of karma, there is some karmic connection. It's a relationship that has been re-staged through previous lives. This relates back to some of the

questions yesterday. If you have a range of teachings or a range of practices, what ones should you do, and how should you set that up? Now, one could say that in theory, you should wait until you meet somebody who makes a profound impact upon you, and if you do that then, when the relationship starts. You will be able to make a full commitment, and the simplicity of that will carry you on through your life without introducing too many questions and problems.

In a sense that's the perfect model. Maybe it's very similar to the relationship between love and having sex for the first time. You might read some very romantic books that say that what will happen is you will meet this perfect person and your heart will be pumping, and you'll just feel so amazed and gradually the relationship will build up with all sorts of winks and gestures, and there'll be all the courtship and then there will be a wonderful night of bliss in a beautiful room with a canopy bed, silk sheets, champagne...Mills & Boon! Mills & Boon! [*Laughter*]

A MIDDLE WAY

But most people's reality is not that. If that is set up as a kind of archetypal notion as to how things should be, then one's own experience will always be less. One will be persecuted by reality. It's not reality that is persecuting us; it's the ideology of the fantasy that's persecuting us. What's important for us in the dharma is not to persecute ourselves in that way. Not to turn the dharma into an ideology that makes us feel worthless and useless. We have to work with where we are, what we are, respecting who we are, and what we are—whilst maintaining an awareness of the great development that we can enjoy, and what we can become.

If reality doesn't turn out for us the way we see it represented in books, we shouldn't beat ourselves up or try to distort ourselves, to coerce ourselves to fitting into the shape that we see in books. Rather we should have compassion for ourselves and use that experience to reflect on our own capacity, rejoice in the achievements and special gifts of others, so that without envy we can share in the pleasure their good luck brings them and focus our attention on our own actual state, working with our own possibilities, wherever we live, however much time we have to practice the dharma.

The Buddha's 'middle way' invites us to experience the tension between many positions. The 'middle way' is not just a relaxed, easy flowing, like a boat down the middle of the River Rhine. It is something between what the books say and what we experience, between what we had hoped for and what we get. It's engaging with that situation in the middle.

Break

PADMA SAMBHAVA PRACTICE

We start just with the title that's on the front page. It says 'Padma Sambhava Praxis' but in Tibetan it says 'Guru Rinpoche gom da'. [Tib. sgom bzlas] 'Gom'

is meditation and it means a particular focusing of the mind, giving your attention fully to something. 'Da' means recitation.

This is particular to tantra; that a meditation which is directed towards deepening and calming the state of focused awareness is united with a recitation, with sound. When we recite something, we are uniting our attention with the energy of breathing, breath coming in and out, so we are uniting our energy with our main connecting point with the world, and also with sound.

Sound is the way that we establish our identity in the world, and sound, as it's structured into language, is also the way in which we are woven into culture and the assumptions that keep us in our samsaric vision. Doing this kind of practice of united meditation and sound is a way of subtly altering our relationship with language.

TRANSFORMING OUR DESIRE TO IDEALISE

This is a ritual devotion practice. It has a specific structure which doesn't change. It makes use of the structure of worship and devotion to a meditation deity, who is represented as being both superior to us and as the expression of our possibility of being. The puja is structured in a way that takes us both into ourselves, and into the world. In doing this it makes use of this sense of the deity as something both superior and other than ourselves but also as a kind of mirror through which we can recognise ourselves. It's as if in visualising this deity, this divine form, we are seeing ourselves as we would be, freed of the obscurations of our ordinary perception.

Tantra is all about transformation. What it's doing is transforming the desire which we have to idealise, to set something up as separate and different. Tantra transforms that desire into a method whereby we realise the non-duality and unity of all phenomena. In a sense, it's taking a limiting tendency in ourselves and— instead of trying to remove it, to pluck it out, to get rid of it—by making use of it in a creative way, transforms what would be a limiting function, into one which is opening and expansive.

BASIC STRUCTURE OF A TANTRIC PUJA

Tantra makes use of all the beauty, all the sense of richness and possibilities which we could ever imagine in an ideal object, locating that outside ourselves. We then take up the opposite polarity about how weak and hopeless and bad we are, and intensify it: *"You are so great, you are so wonderful, you must save me because I am so hopeless and bad and worthless."* By intensifying this splitting-off of the creation of these two polarities, one is then able to bring them together with enormous force in the dissolving stage of the meditation—so that the idealised pure and the focus of one's own limitation that one's been working on, are able to come together. By the merging of the absolutely pure into its opposite there's a gradual sense of purification and release. This builds up to a point where there's an absolute merging of these two positions. In that moment of merging, there's the possibility of recognising the non-dual, completely open, nature of awareness.

This is the basic structural principle of a tantric puja. to increase a dualistic state, build up the tension, collapse the two polarisations into one point, and then go through that one point to enter spaciousness.

From what I'm saying, it's clear this involves the use of energy and some kind of emotional involvement and that might be a clue to the questions that were around yesterday in terms of should I do the practice every day on a regular basis even though I don't feel like it? To actually do the practice means to be able come at it with a degree of energy, and commitment and desire. To be actually hungry to get some result from it.

In a sense all that the preliminary practices that I started to talk of yesterday—impermanence, suffering, refuge, bodhicitta, all of this—is setting out just how great the task is. One is saying, *“Look, there's all this suffering in the world. I'm suffering. All beings are suffering. I want to help all beings. How am I going to do it? Something has to be done. Please, you have to come and help me. Give me the power to be able to do this.”*

SIDDHIS

So we'll go into the text itself. It starts, on the first page with a four-line verse which is a general invocation.

First we've got to separate out two things. One is what's called in Sanskrit *siddhi*, the power of being able to make things happen. There are two kinds of siddhis. What's called the 'supreme siddhi' is enlightenment. The Buddha is said to be omnipotent, able to do anything. This doesn't mean that he's able to stand at the platform, get the train to arrive on time and when he gets on the train, if all the seats are taken, that he can look at someone, dissolve them into emptiness and then sit on that seat! It is like an infantile omnipotence fantasy and there are many examples in Tibetan culture. There are many, many stories about yogis who could do this, that, and the other. For example Milarepa, when he was in competition with the *bon-po* master at Mount Kailash was able to bang his drum and fly through the sky and land on top of the mountain. He may well have been able to do that, but he couldn't do that sort of thing twenty-four hours a day, all the time!

So, *ngo drup dru pa jin gi lap du sol* means 'Quickly give me the real attainment of understanding who I am'. Because if I understand who I am, then a lot of the things I want to do, not knowing who I am, I won't want to do when I do know who I am. In general, the more satisfied one is in oneself, the less one is disturbed by desires. In particular, it concerns the relationship between the arising of phenomena, either inside our meditation or outside in the world, and the dissolving of phenomena—that is to say them going free without our attachment, our hopes and fears. So that, when we say 'Please grant me whatever I pray for,' there is some expectation that we are not praying to win the lottery!

Questioner: Why not?

James: Well, the other siddhis, the ‘secondary siddhis’ are called ‘ordinary siddhis’. Ordinary powers include knowing the future, being able to fly in the sky and remembrance of past lives. The danger with these is not just how one would handle them oneself, but the fact that because we live in this social world, other people will see these things and we will then become a focus of their desires. If you were able to predict what horse was going to win the next race it wouldn’t be unlikely that the mafia would kidnap you. Your good achievement, your positive power, would be turned into a focus for envy, desire and evil actions on the part of others. In general, the advice is not to pay any attention to these powers as they develop.

LIFE OF GURU RINPOCHE

Then on the next page there is the Seven Line Prayer to Guru Rinpoche. There are many commentaries on this prayer. This is the most famous prayer in the nyingma tradition, and it is also recited by many kagyupas. It’s a prayer to Padma Sambhava. Padma Sambhava was born in what is now Pakistan and there are many, many stories about his life and the wonderful things he did. I’ll give you a very brief synopsis.

The king of the realm where he was born was old and blind, and there were so many troubles in the land. He had no son to continue his royal lineage. He had offered many pujas, acts of worship, but no son had come. Eventually this prayer came in a vision, and by reciting this prayer the local monks were able to call on Buddha Amitabha. From Buddha Amitabha’s heart there arose the letter HRI which came down and landed in a lake in that land, the Danakosha Lake. There are many elaboration’s to this, but in the simplest way, it transformed into a multi-coloured lotus flower and revealed in its centre, an eight-year old boy, Guru Rinpoche. This is the origin of his name in Sanskrit; Padma Sambhava means ‘arising from a lotus’.

He grew up with his father, King Indrabhuti, and then travelled in India where he received many teachings. There are many, many stories but finally he was invited to Tibet in the time of King Trisong Deutsen, at the beginning of the eighth century in our period. The king had wanted to build a very big monastery and had appointed the Indian scholar Shantarakshita to build it, and every day they would build up the walls, but at night the local gods would come and pull them down. Shantarakshita, who was a monk, was not able to overcome these demons who were the representatives of the traditional religion in Tibet, Bön.

SEED SYLLABLES

So Padma Sambhava, who’s also known as Guru Rinpoche or the Precious Guru, was invited. He came into Tibet and travelled around sealing the land by placing imprints of his hands and feet on water, in the air and on rocks. He summoned the local gods of Tibet and he made these gods show him their heart syllable.

According to the tantric idea of sound, all of us come into being because of the vibration of a particular sound, and if you know the person's sound, or seed syllable, *bija* as it's called, then you can control them. This is why in mantras the seed syllable of the deity is always included in the mantra. So we say OM MANI PEME HUNG HRI, because the HRI is the seed syllable of the deity Chenrezig. When you say HRI he hears this sound, and he wakes up and is available to respond to you. It gives you a particular power over the deity, or power of connection.

There was a similar situation with these local gods. Guru Rinpoche was able to force them to come, and they would usually be wearing a big mirror over their heart which was a custom in Central Asia. Chinese generals would also do this. In that mirror would appear the letter that was the deity's seed syllable. In the texts this is what is meant when it says that they 'offered' their heart syllable to him, since by knowing their secret name he was able to control them. This is clearly a magical procedure. Tantra is a form of magic. That is to say it uses the forms of magic to transform them as a way of spiritual development, since magical movements are usually about controlling others and subjecting the other to our desire.

If we've taken the bodhisattva vow, then our desire is to help all sentient beings, so there is then the possibility of using these magical means to help beings. This addresses your earlier question of how can we help people who don't want to be helped, because at least what he was trying to do was stop people causing harm.

TERMA

When Samye Monastery, the first big monastery in Tibet, was built, Guru Rinpoche gathered around him a number of disciples, including the then king of Tibet, with Yeshe Tsogyal, Mandarava and many other famous saints. He taught them many, many important teachings and instructed them that when they were reborn in future times, they would be able to remember these texts and be able to reveal them when it was appropriate. That was the basis of *terma* or treasure texts.

Termas are a response to the idea that in an open lineage—where there's teacher-student, teacher-student, continuing through time—is contained an inevitable entropy; a dropping of energy and an increasing of confusion. Because these treasure-texts have been hidden, either in rocks, or in caves, or in the deep minds of the people who will be able to find them later, they have been as it were, hermetically sealed. They've been kept safe and unsullied; so that when they are revealed they are fresh, and able to help people.

At a certain time, Guru Rinpoche left Tibet. He didn't die, but instead a great white flying horse arrived which he climbed on and flew off to the south-west. He arrived in the country of the rakshasas, of the demons. These demons were going to take over the world so Guru Rinpoche dissolved into the King of the Rakshasas. Then the next day, when the local people looked at the king,

he didn't look any different, but gradually, bit by bit, he began to change the culture of what was happening in the country, so that people became friendlier, less warlike, and more compassionate. It sounds a bit like a C.I.A. plot for putting a deep agent in the K.G.B.!

It's a very interesting idea that the best way to help people is not to confront them with an enormous difference, but is subtly, by taking the same place, to gently open up something different. In the nyingma lineage, the belief is that Guru Rinpoche is still in this island, the island called Camaradvipa which some people say is Sri Lanka.

ON THE BEAMS OF THE RISING AND THE SETTING SUN

Before he left, Guru Rinpoche made a promise that he would return every morning and every evening to those that prayed to him. He would return on the beams of the rising and the setting sun. By reciting this prayer, from the distant land of Zangdopalri, Guru Rinpoche arises as the expression of form and emptiness and appears in the blue sky in front of us. Usually, when we say the prayer at this point in the practice, we say it three times. The first time it's an evocation, the second time it's in praise, and the third time it's to receive the blessings. We then imagine rays of rainbow light are flowing out from this form of Guru Rinpoche and merging into our own body.

Questioner: If a story like this of Guru Rinpoche is a myth, couldn't one also take the story of Christ like a myth?

James: Well you could, but if you wanted to take a Christ myth, then why do this practice? There's a church across the road for Christ myths. We do Buddha myths here.

Questioner: Maybe there were also myths like this in Greece but they are gone—or somewhere under the ruins for ever—and we cannot find them any more. But in Tibet this lineage or this tradition of the myth is still there and so we can find it in Tibet but we can no more find it in Greece.

James: I think there is a difference and it is about the nature of compassion. The relationship of the Greek gods to the people on earth was a fairly manipulative one. There was no autonomy in individuals and people were the puppets of what the gods were doing. This 'myth' of Guru Rinpoche has a very different understanding. You might like to read one of the full biographies of Guru Rinpoche which have been translated, certainly into English.

MYTH AS METHOD

Questioner: I have a similar problem. What did you mean exactly when you said there is some kind of infantile omnipotent fantasy [...]?

James: When I said it was an infantile omnipotent fantasy, I meant that there is the expectation that wonderful people will do wonderful things. I think the reality is that wonderful things happen, but it's not certain that the wonderful

people do them. Usually if you ask lamas how they do things, they say, “*Oh my guru helps me, or my yidam,*” and you know it’s flowing through from somewhere else. It’s not that somebody is somewhere in the centre able to do things out of themselves. The power and the creativity flow through people but it’s not their’s, it’s not something they own.

The important thing is faith, whether you have faith in these things as transformational myths, or stories or whatever. In order for it to have any effect, you have to act as though it were so. Not because one is trying to brainwash oneself and make oneself believe something which perhaps, through a western historical analysis, is not true. If you ever read stories to small children, there’s a particular way that children hear stories whereby the stories becomes very, very real to them. That is to say, they can surrender themselves into the story so the story takes them up and melds them, takes them into something different. That’s what makes story-telling magical.

All of this practice, as I’ve said a lot of times now, is method. This is all a method to help us get a realisation which is inexpressible. It’s not a true story, in the sense that if it were true then we would all be better than Jesus. It’s not on that level at all. It’s an aesthetic story, a story in which one enters into the feeling-tone, and uses the feeling-tone of the story and the practice, in order to bring about a particular orientation of oneself to the world. This re-orientation is transformatory.

For example, it is often a very magical thing to take young girls to the ballet, and you just see their eyes, how they can imagine, and all the dreams that follow. You know? This is the sort of attitude that we need to bring to this, an attitude of openness and wonder, not sort of wondering whether it’s true or not. It is the efficacy, it is strategy, and it is method. It is not truth, it’s not ontological.

REFUGE VISUALISATION

In doing this refuge one would visualise in front of one the form of Guru Rinpoche and you can make prostrations as you recite this verse as well. He is sitting there and you can imagine that all sentient beings are gathered around you, so that Guru Rinpoche is in front of you and you are here. In front of you are your enemies and behind you are people whom you like. Your father’s family on your right and your mother’s family on your left, together with all your relations and all people you know. In the visualisation one imagines that rays of light are coming towards oneself, which is why enemies are in front. They will get it first, and your friends are behind you so they will get it last, so it always involves the practice of equalising the relationship between friends and enemies.

On the next page is the bodhicitta. This Rigdzin Lama here, *Vidyadhara Guru*, means ‘enlightened’. Let me go on to the main text. So read quietly to yourselves page 5 and 6 and then we’ll see if there are any questions on that.

Questioner: 'I have mastered all the mandalas of the six mantras.' What does it mean?

James: It means he had initiation into all the mandalas of the deities, and practised the mantras sufficiently to gain the full power of the mandala.

Questioner: What are the 'Eight Manifestations'?

James: This here is the short Rigdzin practice, but there is also a long one which Chimed Rigdzin Rinpoche often teaches. The long practice describes the eight different forms of Guru Rinpoche. It includes some wrathful forms such as Dorje Drolo and Sengyé Dradog and some peaceful forms such as Nyima Ödzer and Loden Chogsrad. In India there is a tradition of eight great cemeteries and at each cemetery there is a pond, a tree, a burning place, and a dakini. Each of the eight forms of Guru Rinpoche is associated with particular practices which Guru Rinpoche did in each of the great cemeteries, and where he manifested in different forms.

It sets up the model that we, as people, are not just one thing. We have the same name, but if we each thought about our lives, we have been many, many people in this life. This points to the richness and complexity of identity. Guru Rinpoche is in these different identities, in different places, meeting different people, just as you might be in one state if you see your parents at Christmas, and be in another if you're out with your friends having fun.

The real phenomenological quality of that difference is often screened to us through the use of the same signifier for this wide range of experiences. So we could say, "*I was with my mother, and it was like that, and then I was with my friends and it was like that,*" but the 'I' that was there was actually quite transformed by the nature of the encounter. It's not as if there is a constant 'I' which simply feels different things in different situations, in a Cartesian sense. Rather, we are actually different in different situations. That's roughly what these eight manifestations gesture towards.

One starts the actual practice here with the visualisation of the Guru in the sky in front of one. Then you recite the verse, and as you say this you visualise in front of you a clear blue sky, with the form of Guru Rinpoche that is in the image at the front of the altar there. [Gestures] Of course, if you're new to this, you won't have any real sense of the colours or of what he looks like. An important part of the visualisation is the imagery and the richness that's built up in that. However you could try to have a sense of the outline drawing that's there at the beginning of our book, but if that doesn't make much sense to you, you can have a sense that in the middle of this clear blue sky is a ball of rainbow-coloured light.

The form of Guru Rinpoche is form and emptiness. He appears as if like a shimmering rainbow, like a mirage, like an image in a dream. You want to have some clarity in the visualisation, to see it clearly, but also to never lose the sense that it's simply a form arising out of this clear blue sky. The form can dissolve back into the clear blue sky, so you can bring it into focus and

then dissolve it back. If you remember, yesterday I was talking about how all phenomena are compounded apart from two particular things: one is the sky and the other is buddha-nature. This visualisation in the clear blue sky is the unification of these two points of uncompoundedness.

One then says the prayer. By reciting this prayer one is intensifying one's sense that in front of us here in the sky is this shining image which represents full enlightenment and also our own nature. We are seeing our own potential shining in front of us and we are saying, *"I respect you, I honour you. You have all of these qualities. You must quickly give me all that I need."*

DEVOTION AND DISTRACTION

We use this sort of prayer to increase our energy, to increase the intensity of our devotion as a way of dealing with our distraction. If you remember, yesterday when we were talking about shyiné meditation, we were talking about how, when you get distracted, to bring your attention back to the breath. In that kind of meditation you are trying to be calm so when you get distracted you try to come back to being calm.

This meditation here deals with distraction in a different way. By being very busy, you've got no time to be distracted. We won't do it today. but very often you've got bells to ring and drums to bang, pages to turn, there's so much going on you couldn't possibly be distracted! It's important to recognise it. That's why all this music and stuff is done. It's a way both of intensifying the aesthetic richness of the experience but also of involving all of one's embodied existence so that it's moving in one direction in a way that has both meaning and the dissolution of meaning.

Then we recite the mantra OM AH HUNG BENZRA GURU PEMA SIDDHI HUNG. If you are doing it on your own you can do it a lot. As you're reciting this mantra you are imagining that from Guru Rinpoche rays of rainbow light are streaming down into your body, purifying all your obscurations, purifying all the bad things you've ever done, filling your body with light. The more you do it, keeping this focus of attention, gradually your sense of your own body is that it's filling up with rainbow light. You no longer have a heavy flesh body. You have a body that's full of light.

DISSOLVING MEDITATION

Then, the form of Guru Rinpoche dissolves into your heart. So as you're coming to the end of the mantra recitation, you imagine Guru Rinpoche moving to the top of your head, dissolving in a ball of light, dissolving down into you, and you dissolving into him. Your own awareness transforms into the letter HRI which then transforms into Guru Rinpoche who dissolves into your heart. In your heart-place is manifesting this letter HRI which then, in an instant, transforms you into the fully-formed form of Guru Rinpoche.

Reading these next few lines, you get a description of yourself as Guru Rinpoche, so read these through and see if you've got any questions.

QUESTIONS

Questioner: Why do they mention his under-robos, his underclothes?

James: Za ber. The *phod kha* is a tunic. It's a bit like your red jacket, it's a tunic, and it hangs on the shoulders and goes straight down and it's often with brocade and in England, the royal trumpeters, they wear something like that. This *bhod kha* is like that. Each of the kinds of clothes that Guru Rinpoche wears has a symbolic meaning. We don't have time to go into that today, but they are arranged in a particular order to display something.

SAMAYA

Is that line on the top of page 9 clear to everyone? The *dam* means that having had an initiation you are entitled to meditate on the deity. For our purposes today we can do the practice even if you haven't got the initiation, but as I say, I would recommend that you do get the initiation. *Dam* stands for *damzig pa* and *damzig pa* means *samaya*. *Samaya* means a bond or a commitment.

When you get the initiation you get a connection with the deity, so you make a kind of relationship. As I said yesterday, it's a bit like a marriage or it could be two people going into business and becoming partners. So, like with your partner, you're saying, "*I promise not to cheat you,*" and the other says, "*OK, and I promise not to cheat you, and I'll be there for you.*" So part of our agreement is that we will do the practice frequently. Often one promises to do it every day, but certainly to remember one's connection with the practice.

On the basis of the initiation and our commitment, we do the visualisation, we create this visualisation, visualising ourselves as Guru Rinpoche. This form is called the '*damzig pa*' or '*samaya sattva*', that is to say, the being or the form which is created on the basis of the vow. The next syllable *yi* stands for '*yeshe pa*', or '*jnana sattva*', meaning the wisdom form. The idea of this is that from his pure land in Zangdopalri, the palace in the land of the rakshasas, Guru Rinpoche himself arises and comes and merges into you. By the union of these two forms, you're not simply imagining this or playing at it or trying to construct it, but it becomes actually true: there's a union of these two forms.

Then in this state one recites the mantra again, the same mantra OM AH HUNG BENZRA GURU PEMA SIDDHI HUNG!

That brings the basic practice to an end.

This is a terma practice which was recovered or revealed by Chhimed Rigdzin in his first incarnation as Nuden Dorjé Drophan Lingpa, so although it's written down by C.R. Lama's first incarnation it's actually written in the original by Guru Rinpoche, and these are his words here. So this little bit at the end with the funny symbol is him saying, "*I've written this and I'm going to seal it in the great emptiness in this kyab dal state*".

Then he says “*Benza samaya*,” ‘indestructible seal’, then *Gya Gya Gya* means like a seal and then *ter gya* means a treasure seal, *ber gya* means a secret seal, *zab gya* means profound seal. *Sang gya* is again like a secret seal. Then *mantra* is like to seal with this mantra. Finally Guru Rinpoche’s particular sign which is in dakini script.

VERSES AT THE END

After this we come to some verses that have been added on. At the bottom of the page we have the offering mantra, which is a standard mantra for making the basic offerings, linked with the offering bowls on the altar here. There’s a lot you could say about it, but traditionally, this is the same offering practice as you get in hindu temples. It comes from the idea that the god lives in the statue in the temple, and that every morning you welcome the god to sit down on the statue, and every evening you say good-bye to the god as they go off to their own place. So the god comes everyday to kind of sit in your little hotel.

One makes offerings as if the deity were a tired traveller; you give them a drink, you wash their feet, you give them some flowers, you give them a bath, you burn some nice smells for them, you give them some food and then you play them music.

Over the page we have a praising verse. This is very famous verse, so read that through and see if you have any questions.

Then we have another offering which is very common in Tibetan practices like this. Having invited the deity—only now the deity is different because the deity is yourself—you’ve now created yourself as Guru Rinpoche—you’re going to make offerings to yourself, which raises interesting questions about the nature of subjectivity. What one’s trying to do is please the senses, both to give honour and in order to evoke a positive response.

A French anthropologist, Jacques Lacan, took up the idea that the gift is always a demand. This is not a new idea in Tibetan buddhism. Every time you give a gift you want something back. We offer all these things up: “*Please, you’re great, you’re wonderful, I love you,*” but the punch line comes at the end, “*You must make me enlightened.*”... “*I bought you a dinner, let’s go back to my place.*” T

That might be rather a new or a different approach to things for many western people as we often don’t have this idea of a kind of mercantile relationship, certainly not in spiritual terms, but it was like this in medieval Christianity. Essentially it’s saying that behaviour is intentional: we make relationships, we do this practice, not just to pass the time between birth and death, not just because generally it’s a good idea but because we want something. In a sense, every time you do this, it’s a career move, it’s a strategic movement designed to promote your career as a bodhisattva. I mean it actually is that. It is functional—again, this word is strategic—it is designed to produce a particular effect.

DEDICATION OF MERIT

And then over the page, on page 14, is the Dedication of Merit.

The idea of the dedication of merit is to round off the practice by saying that whatever benefit one has accumulated—and as I've just said, this is strategic; one is trying to accumulate this merit—you want to get something, but then you turn it around to say, *"It's not just for me, again it's for all beings"*.

Pujas are structured a bit like the way people could, in the Catholic Church, have masses read for a particular purpose. It's not so common now, and the protestant tradition is much more saying, "We can only humbly ask, but we cannot coerce, God". The structuring of these sorts of practices is an instrumental one. It is a method for shifting one's relationship with the world and with oneself. It is a way of opening up wisdom. There's nothing in it that's just there for effect, it's all to generate a particular kind of transformation.

Then finally on page 15 there is a good luck verse. It's a tradition at the end of practices to recite some auspicious verses, to say, basically, *"May there be good luck in the world."* This verse here does it by saying, *"May the doctrines of Padma Sambhava continue for a long time, May many people come to practice in this way because this will make people happy."*

Over the page there's a verse from the *Bodhicaryavatara* which is a book written by Shantideva, and there are translations probably in German as well, which I think would certainly be a very interesting book for everyone to read. Finally there's a long-life prayer for Chhimed Rigdzin. So, let's see if there are any questions on the meaning of that.

Questioner: I attended the Machig Labdron puja Chhimed Rigdzin did here in Offenbach, when Rinpoche also recited this text. Is this an initiation or not?

James: No. What that's normally called would be a *lung* and a lung is where somebody reads a text through, or you could read it through with them, and through that you gain the permission to read the text. So it's a connection through sound. Having heard the sound, you're empowered to repeat the sound. In the initiation, usually you do part of the practice and then at a certain point the teacher does some other practice and touches you on the forehead, throat and the heart with either the same object or different objects, giving a direct transmission.

So, this is a practice that you can do every day. It has taken us about twenty, twenty-five minutes when we've been doing it. You can do it much more slowly if you have time. In particular at the top of page 8 when it says *Guru rang gi nying wue tim*, that's the time when you want to imagine Guru Rinpoche in front of you, coming to the top of your head and dissolving. You might take easily five minutes to do that very slowly, because you've been praying, saying this mantra with Guru Rinpoche, and then you have the sense of this form coming and dissolving. Guru Rinpoche dissolves into you, you into him and then there's a state of openness.

In that state you don't go after past thoughts, you don't go seeking future thoughts, you just abide in this state of great openness. If thoughts arise, you don't go chasing after them. Just stay relaxed in this open space and if you find yourself going after thoughts, just relax, relax, and open again.

From that state there arises the letter HRI, and it's as if it's in the middle of your heart and you're back into the sense of your body, and then your body is transformed into the form of Guru Rinpoche. That is really the essential point of the practice, the key point of the practice, but very often when it's done as a group we just ride right through that point.

RECAPPING THE KEY STAGES

Once again, the stages of the practice are: remembering, "*I'm ordinary, Guru Rinpoche's great.*"; then the Guru dissolves into you; you go into the same state as the mind of Guru Rinpoche, an infinite openness in which thoughts and feelings are the richness of one's being—one is open, allowing the reality just to flow through one. Then arising out of that state with the HRI in one's heart; transforming into Guru Rinpoche. You continue the rest of the practice with the visualisation, or the living sense, of yourself as Guru Rinpoche. It doesn't matter too much if your visualisation isn't clear, what's most important is the felt sense of just being the flow of light radiating out from your heart, and experiencing your body as a very light, easy-moving phenomenon.

One takes that sense of lightness and playfulness back out into the world. Everything that one is experiencing is the living form of the guru; all that we see is the form of the deity, the form of Guru Rinpoche which is now not different from our own form. It's an appearance, but it's light and translucent, shining. All the sound that we hear, we try to hear as if it's the sound of OM AH HUNG BENZA GURU PEMA SIDDHI HUNG! This mantra is sound and emptiness, sound which is just dissolving from sound expression back into silence, openness, emptiness. Whatever thoughts occur to us as we're walking about in the world, we just experience as the free play of open awareness.

By doing this practice as regularly as possible, if possible once a day, and particularly at first paying attention when you're starting the dissolving practice, it will become easier to have a sense of openness. This part of the practice, with the dissolving, is like the alchemist's oven in which one is transforming the raw material of our experience into the mother essence. When we get that experience of pure gold everything becomes transformed into pure gold.

I hope that you will find some benefit in doing this practice.