
Linking View and Meditation

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James Low

Excerpts

...As long as the seed is just a seed, weeds don't matter – weeds only become important once the sprouting has occurred. So when we start to engage in meditation and spiritual activity, we often encounter more problems in our life, not less. We become more sensitive to difficulties that surround us...

... It is not that this world is a dreadful place that we need to get out of. Rather it is that this is a wonderful world that we don't quite live in – we don't fully participate in it because we are not fully present.

So the Buddha's teaching on impermanence which is a very central notion, is designed to help us relax and accept that flow is what there is. And that if we can trust the flow of life, if we can allow ourselves to be flowing with others in the flow, we will find that what we need comes to hand, comes to mind.

This involves learning to relax the body, so that we don't hold muscular tension and so on. It involves allowing speech to flow freely, not to over edit, not to block, but to stay present so that one can work inter-personally with the consequences of one's speech acts. And with our mind, to trust that thoughts will arise...

... Practice letting go of our attachments, opening to our connection with others and settling into the natural spaciousness of our being...

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The purpose of the Buddha's teachings

These teachings are explicitly designed as a method to bring about a change. They are not there to provide a support for something, which is already crumbling. Our situation is always crumbling, our bodies start to crumble, the content of our mind is always changing... The path of the Buddha is designed to help us live more authentically in the nature of things as they occur.

So in the vast range of buddhist teachings that are available, there are some which are concerned with the elaboration of fantasies, and through these fantasies, to provide a kind of comfort, a method to help make life easy, whereby it is easier to avoid distraction and easier to practice meditation. We can see just from that brief description that these methods are not an end result. They are a set of propitious circumstances that permit more focused activity.

According to the view of tantra, there are two key aspects to existence: wisdom and compassion. Compassion is also described as method. Through wisdom, we recognise that the root of our experience is the natural condition of our awareness, or presence, which is something ungraspable and unchanging. This is also described as emptiness.

Emptiness means a state which is not *'nothing at all'*, but a state which is free of, or empty of, all the usual constructions whereby we support a sense of our own identity and the identity of the things around us. The other aspect of emptiness is to see that the constructs that we are relying on are empty of any inherent truth or value. On a very general level, for example, we can say we are now in the month of September. It is early autumn and in autumn we expect the weather to be... Can you expect the weather to be anything nowadays? So in a sense the term 'autumn', empties itself, it deconstructs itself, because it seems to have little predictive power.

So there is a double move here in buddhist practice: through meditation to realise the openness of our own being, the fact that it is not a thing; and with that, to analyse the way in which we constantly create ourselves as a process of manifestation. When we realise how little stability there is to our sense of self, then instead of using our energy to try to stabilise who we are, we can use that energy towards responsiveness into the environment as it displays itself.

The Four Noble Truths. What do they mean for us?

When Buddha Shakyamuni gave his first teachings, he set out the Four Noble Truths – a truth about suffering. Suffering covers many different aspects, including disappointment, betrayal, unsatisfactoriness and pain. He said this arises due to some causes, causes like ignorance and attachment, and all that develops from them. Then he said as the third truth, there is a way out of this, and the fourth truth was the teaching of the Noble Eightfold Path – how to end sufferings.

In order to get some benefit out of buddhism, we need to think whether these Four Truths have any meaning in our lives. Do we really believe in suffering? If we think that life is basically ok, but from time to time some bad things happen, then all you really need is some kind of compensation when bad times happen. You can drink some alcohol, take some drugs, have another pizza... This is a very normal western way of responding to the world. We are basically quite hopeful. Our economic system is not so bad, most bad things seem to happen to other people so we don't have to be too worried about them... If we have a bit of money, we

can go on holiday, we can go to the movies, we can distract ourselves away from the difficulties that we have.

From the point of view of buddhism, this would be a manifestation of our own ignorance. The situation is much more serious. This is because the one who is having these experiences of happy times and sad times, is not itself some stable and well defended core, but is itself, in all its aspects, impermanent and vulnerable. Our social situation is vulnerable – while we sit here in this room, car crashes are occurring, ambulances are going to hospitals carrying wounded bodies, doctors are looking at these bodies and thinking, *'We might have to amputate.'* Life gets changed radically for many people. All over the world wars are occurring; they may not be immediately occurring for us, but they are part of the phenomenological field in which we operate. What is there stable and reliable in ourselves?

Differences between western and buddhist ideas of who we are

In terms of our western european frame of reference, many buddhist ideas seem very strange. For example, buddhism teaches that we have many, many different lives, that we are not primarily a materialistic phenomenon. It is not that when our parents had sex, and the essence of our father met the essence of our mother, that these material qualities then generated complex processes, part of which was the development of the brain. As the brain developed through the process of Darwinian evolution, it developed consciousness and what we experience ourselves to be, an epi-phenomena generated by movements of brain chemistry. Buddhism has a completely different view.

The point of view of buddhism, particularly tantric buddhism, is that the root of all phenomena is the mind. The mind is not a thing, it is not made up of matter, and it is not a fruit of matter. Rather what we call matter, is an experience arising for the mind. Without mind, it does not matter whether there is any matter; mind is chief, mind is the most important. But what is our mind?

What and how is our mind?

When we sit and do a simple bit of meditation as we were doing earlier, we have many different kinds of experiences, different thoughts, different feelings, different bodily sensations. Usually we not only have the experience that this is something happening to me, but indeed this *is* me. That is to say, I appear to be the content of my mind. So if we experience tiredness we think, *'I am tired.'* All the other things that I am, all the other potential that I have in this moment, collapse into the state of tiredness and become the delimiting experience of 'who I am'. Yet of course, that tiredness is arising due to causes and conditions. If you rest a bit, if you have a good night sleep, you don't wake up so tired. So that tiredness, which seems to be essential and definitive of you, is a momentary phenomenon arising due to circumstances.

Due to our attachment to these circumstances, we create a false sense of identity. And if we reflect on the flow of our experience, we find that very often, moments which when we look afterwards we can see are impermanent, in the moment of their arising appear total, absolute, to completely encompass who we are.

For example, in the summer I was in France, in a very nice restaurant. I was sitting outside, with some delicious food in front of me. I had, moreover, a special companion with me. It was a wasp. And the wasp was flying in front of my face all the time. So between me and the union with this beautiful food [*Laughter*], this wasp was very annoying. My mind was being

distracted with 'What is the wasp doing?' Then it would land on my glass of wine and go inside, so then I was having to rescue it from drowning, and at the same time, my food is getting cold. In this way, the mind becomes attracted towards whatever is arising. We may feel that we have a situation which is secured, where we know what is going on, but very minor irritations can come and cause confusion.

So in the course of our lives, many, many events are happening and many of these events are interrupted. Nowadays, with sophisticated machinery such as mobile phones, e-mails and so on, interruption is occurring through the course of the day for many people. That is to say, these tools to help us develop are lives, to give us more capacity to engage with the world, also cause a kind of chopping up of the continuity of attention. We can see how our situation has little stability in it.

Our mind has an infinite potential to produce experience

This mind – this flow of mental experience, this interaction with this shifting surface of the world – if it is not generated material phenomena, then where does it come from? According to the tradition, the mind itself is the source, or the ground of all experience. When we look for our mind we can't find something substantial, and yet this mind is constantly revealing many phenomena, some of which we take to be self and some of which we take to be other. So our mind has an infinite potential to produce experience.

This potential does not cease at death. As we move to the ending of this life, which for some people happens very suddenly and for other people much more slowly, the pattern of associations, of memories, of linked sensations and so on, out of which our current identity is constructed, collapses back into its own ground. You can read many translations now of traditional descriptions of this; how the gross outer elements of our body collapse into each other and the parallel, more subtle elements also collapse. Briefly, earth goes into water, water into fire, fire into wind. Wind is seen as the connective vehicle for the movement of consciousness through our body, through the channels that we have. Then, this subtle wind dissolves back into space, giving rise to many different experiences. Then out of the space, the elements unfold again, and we find ourselves born into another form.

According to the dispositions, the karmic tendencies which are ripening at that time, we could take on a human body again, or perhaps an animal body, or a body linked with states of great pleasure, a heavenly body, or a body experiencing states of great torment. This is because it is our own mind which is generating the nature of our experience.

One of the important things we could perhaps try not to do is to limit ourselves by a kind of failure of the imagination. For example, when you go shopping, whether for clothes or for food, it is very helpful to look at the things that you *don't* buy. To see not only all the things that you *don't* buy, but also the things you would *never* want to buy and watch how someone else is buying them. Is it your duty as a citizen to point out to them the error of their ways? Should you say, '*Excuse me madam, lime-green is a colour that should not be worn under any circumstances*'? For that person that lime-green is a very special and beautiful colour. That is to say, the constellation of their embodied energy causes them to have a positive associative vibration with the colour lime-green. We can also see this very clearly with food.

When you observe clearly, you will see that your doors of access into this world are quite small. Your world is determined by your habits, your associations, by what we would say is 'your character'. Because you are 'you', there are many, many things you can't do, but *other* people can do them! This highlights the relative nature of your identity, and the relative

nature of all the decisions you make. They ring true for you. They may seem exactly right for you but that only serves to isolate you from all the other people to whom they don't ring true.

So when you go into the clothes shop and you look along the rail, maybe at the row of shirts, it takes just two seconds to see, *'Oh, nothing on this rail.'* , then you turn your head, something seems to catch your eye, and you feel, *'Oh, that looks interesting.'* It's interesting to you, according to your disposition. So not only are you not drawn towards these other clothes, but they don't even really exist for you, because you don't have the energetic, or karmic, or dispositional key that would open the lock and bind you.

This of course is exactly, from the traditional buddhist point of view, our relation with different realms of existence. Due to our particular structure now, even say with the world of animals, there are many animals that we don't feel much connection with. In relation to say reptiles, or scorpions, most people's connection is one of fear and avoidance. It is probably not likely that we would spend much time wondering what it's like to be a scorpion. Our main concern is that they don't sting us. So a lot of the world is invisible to us, or we relate to it only in terms of self-interest.

But according to the tradition, the Buddhas with their wisdom eye are able to see these other dimensions of existence, and can see that indeed due to the energetic, the dynamic, the impermanent nature of our existence, we mutate and re-manifest in many different forms through time. If one takes the sense of this, it indicates that who we are now, is just a passing moment. And although we can say *'This is my body'*, the body has a life of its own. The body is always in a state of flux, things are coming and things are going. My fat stomach keeps coming and my hair keeps going! I don't want my stomach to keep coming out and I'd like my hair to stay back on, but these things are part of all sorts of complex processes in which our ego sense of self is not sitting in the driver's seat.

We are not in charge, but neither are we helpless

So, a key function of basic meditation, basic mindfulness practice, is to observe that our existences, our life, our body, our experiences that we participate in, are not processes that we direct. This process of energetic manifestation is endless, so suicide doesn't help. Spending your life to become rich, powerful and famous doesn't help either because the situation of manifestation cannot be secured. This field of manifestation that we participate in is emerging out of many, many, complex factors operating together. It's not in the palm of our hand.

That is, in some ways the basic quality of the buddhist notion of suffering. That much of our suffering arises from imagining that our life should be other than it is, as if we really have a choice, as if we can make our life on our own terms. But I think what we experience again and again, is that life is happening to us. The error we can fall into here is to create two extreme polarities – either *'I am in charge'* or *'I am just a puppet of fate.'* But the Buddha teaches the middle way, not too tight, not too loose. We are not in charge, but we are also not helpless.

Ignorance operates on the basis of plausible seductive assumptions

All the experiences that we have are *our* experiences, so who is the one who is having that experience? Our normal answer to that is, *'I am having it' – 'I', 'me', 'myself'*. Of course this is true. I am talking at the moment; I have a sense that I am talking, so on an ordinary level that statement is correct. But then we have a question, *'Well, where do my words come from?'* Is there somebody inside this head, putting these words out? If I say, *'I am speaking'* and you can

all hear I am speaking, we can make a contract of stupidity. We can say, 'Yes, that is a sufficient answer to the question "Who is speaking?" James is speaking. "Who is James?" "This is James.'" So we know where we are. This is the structure of ignorance.

Ignorance operates on the basis of creating very plausible, very seductive assumptions. Once we agree about something, we don't need to think. At the moment the British army is engaged in two great wars in Iraq and Afghanistan against 'terrorists'. We do not quite know why these wars are happening. However, luckily we do know that the soldiers are 'good' and the terrorists are 'bad'. So the soldiers have holy guns and bombs, and the terrorists have the devils guns and bombs. We too can be participating in George Bush's crusade against the axis of evil. This kind of thinking is very, very, seductive.

But of course when we look into the history of these situations it is much more complicated. The taliban, who are fighting the British and American soldiers in Afghanistan are fighting them with weapons given to them by the Americans. Due to the causes and conditions of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, the wild people of the mountains with beards were seen as 'good' warriors against the Russian threat. Now, some years later, as causes and conditions change, the same people carrying out the same activities are seen as very 'bad' people. That is to say, the definition as someone as a terrorist, is contingent on, many historical forces, and also on one's point of view.

Analysing and letting go of our assumptions

So an important part of buddhist practice is to analyse the assumptions that we take to be the basis of our existence. Many of the things in our experience which appear to be just given, appear to be just there, appear to be existing in themselves, are in fact, of course, constructs. They arise due to causes and conditions, and these causes and conditions are held in place for us by our own belief in them. So instead of these assumptions being a solid ground that we *stand* on, they are in fact something that we are *holding up*. And if we stop holding them, they will fall away.

In the tradition of zen buddhism, there are many descriptions of dropping the mind – and it means exactly that! It means to let go of all the assumptions out of which you create this conditioned sense of self, which seems so reliable and familiar and given. The more we let go of assumptions, and allow ourselves to look and see what is there, the more we are mindful to existence as it occurs. We see that what we have is a field of evolving experience, in which there is nothing truly reliable. In this way we can move from trying to rest on something, trying to find a stable ground, towards a participation in this evolving process.

All the different schools of buddhism in their own ways take this orientation. For example, in mainstream mahayana buddhism, the understanding of emptiness is used to free up attachment to the concept of self-existing entities. Running in parallel with that, there is the development of compassion. The force of compassion is to turn our attention out from self-preoccupation towards a sense of 'something is there in the world which is not me.'

These appearances in the world are not some optional extra, like deciding whether you should have cream on your hot chocolate or not. Other people, other beings, are always, already, part of your world. You may decide not to attend to them, but that doesn't remove them from the field of your experience. It simply increases your blindness. In tantra, visualisations of mandalas with rays of light moving through buddha realms to hell realms, are all ways of reminding us of the unavoidability of the linked or interwoven nature of the whole of emergent experience.

So really, what I've been saying so far is pointing to two things. The first is that suffering arises when we try to stabilise a secure world for ourselves as an isolated subject. But it doesn't mean that if we let go of that, then we have nothing at all. It is not nihilistic in its focus. Because by letting go of this encapsulation in a self-referential world, which is rather predatory in its relation to what is around it, we find ourselves participating in a movement amidst other movements.

This mind, which when we look at it, we cannot grasp as something substantial, reveals ourselves to ourselves moment-by-moment, as gesture, as speech, arising in a field connected with others. This is described technically as non-duality. It means you cannot separate subject from object; we are always participating. We can't take ourselves out of the world.

Even if you decided to do a long retreat on your own, you would still be breathing in and out. The walls in your retreat house would need to have gaps in them, so that some fresh air could come in. So you breathe out, and some little mouse outside breathes in the air you have been breathing. Then the next breath that comes into you has come out of the lungs of a bird. The very nature of our bodies, the way our senses are, the way our lungs are, our digestive tracts, our sweat glands, all of this is connected with the environment.

In this entire world around us, of which we are a part, there is not one thing which is truly self-existing. So our existence, as participatory, is always a cause of other moments and is also the effect of other moments. If you are sitting with a friend, you speak and they listen, and then they speak and you listen, and it pulsates between you. If somebody only wants to monologue, if they don't want to connect with you in some ways, it can feel like an attack, because our very nature is participatory.

We could see the entire realm of psychopathology as a problematic of participation. Phobias, anxieties, depression, personality disorders and so on, are all turns, or twists, or knots in the freedom of engagement with the world as it unfolds. Generally speaking they arise because the mind of the person experiencing them has contracted, has become solid and has become dependent on certain beliefs and ideas which are not providing accurate information about the world as it is. Which is why a lot of the meditation practice that exists in buddhism (and we will do some of them over the weekend) are concerned with emptying the mind, becoming more relaxed and spacious.

In a sort of brief way, we could say that the problem of the ego-mind is that it has a tendency to constipation. Thoughts and feelings pass through the mind in the way that our bowels should be in process all the time. Thoughts come to mind and then they go. But when we hang onto thoughts, when we have repetitive thoughts, obsessional thoughts, core beliefs, assumptions, predictions and so on, they take on a density like faeces trapped in the bowel. Just as with someone who is very constipated and has a dullness and difficulty in being present, we are constipated with these thoughts when we are clinging onto them. We should be letting them go. We have no freedom of movement.

This is a quality of attachment from a buddhist point of view. Don't confuse attachment with appreciation; it is not that this world is a dreadful place that we need to get out of. Rather it is that this is a wonderful world that we don't quite live in. We don't fully participate in it since we are not fully present, being caught up in this 'old stuff'.

[Teachings on impermanence help us relax and accept the flow](#)

So the Buddha's teaching on impermanence which is a very central notion, is designed to help us relax and accept that flow is what there is. If we can trust the flow of life, if we can allow ourselves to be flowing with others in the flow, we will find that what we need comes to hand, comes to mind. This involves learning to relax the body, so that we don't hold muscular tension and so on. It involves allowing speech to flow freely, not to over edit, not to block, but to stay present so that one can work interpersonally with the consequences of one's speech acts. And with our mind to trust that thoughts will arise.

If you try to do basic meditation and stop the amount of thought in your head, you always fail. There was recently some research published in Britain that was carried out at the University of Cambridge on one particular woman who was in a habitual, continuous, vegetative state. And they found through conducting brain scans, that actually a lot of mental activity was going on. Of course it is a bit speculative, but because of all the scans that they have done of people, doing experiments whilst they are in the scanning machine, they could have a sense that particular kinds of communication and ideation were going on inside her, which were not communicated out to the world. So movement is not just something that we do – movement is the very nature of our existence. And the function of meditation and understanding more about the view – the understanding of buddhism, is to free ourselves to get back in the flow of existence, which is infinite.

[Break] [Day 2]

So the emptiness, the actual existential emptiness of the subject, which the subject, in its ignorance, takes to be a lack: "I am lacking something, I'm not sure what it is, but this chocolate covered thought looks quite useful for filling the gap, so I will munch that." Then, "I am still feeling empty – any other thoughts? – Luckily there are always lots of thoughts." So, what you have is a subject ceaselessly feeding itself because it has misunderstood the nature of emptiness – it's a kind of bulimia.

We forget how to be ourselves. Relax

The path of practice is to stop being so identified, so attached to our current way of experiencing things, in order to be able to awaken to, or realise, or understand what is actually the case. The very business of keeping ourselves together, of maintaining our sense of self gives us no time and no space to realise the vastness of our own potential. Just as somebody who becomes very anxious, finds themselves preoccupied with fearful thoughts of the dangers that might occur – and in that experience forgets all the other things that they have done, all the other ways of being that they have experienced. In this way they have a forgetfulness of themselves, yet feeling very, very much that they *are* just this anxious experience.

What we can try to do then is help the person to, as it were, come back to themselves. For example, say a friend is going to have to give a talk some place or is going for a job interview, and they tell you, '*Oh I am thinking of doing it this way, but then I thought well, maybe I should put that in as well. What do you think?*' We might often find ourselves saying, '*Don't worry, just be yourself.*' That is to say, the turbulence of your mind trying to sort out these problems is in fact just generating more problems, whereas what is actually required is to relax and to trust that in the state of relaxation you will come into being, you will manifest in a way, which fits the situation.

The teachings of the Buddha are very, very similar to this simple event. When we are busy following our own karmic tendencies, busy developing our lives according to how we feel things impose on us and what we feel must be done, we forget how to be ourselves.

Let's go back to the example of someone going for an interview. They may reply, 'Ok. I will just be myself. So then what will I say?' They want to know in advance what they will do. But before you go into the room you don't know what the interview panel is going to be like, what the mood in the room is going to be. If you go in with too much of a packaged, pre-prepared sense, you miss the mood. However, it is a big thing to trust, 'Something will happen. It will be ok. I will find the right thing to say.' Usually we want to have some kind of security. By security we mean taking something we already have and bringing it into the future. This allows us to feel a sense of continuity between the past, the present and the future. But what was useful in the past is not necessarily going to be useful in the future. And in the very process of importing these set of beliefs, or ideas, or fixed knowledge, you may well find that you don't quite fit in the future as it reveals itself.

Refuge: Buddha establishes the possibility; dharma offers the methods; sangha offers allies

So in buddhism one of the first things we traditionally look at is the practice of taking refuge. And the ground or basis for taking refuge is to think, 'For so long I have been relying on knowledge and experience that I have, but it has not really brought me much happiness. So, so if I rely on myself as I am, as I take myself to be, and the knowledge and experience around me, I tend to create more of the same.' But buddhism says, 'Well instead of relying just on yourself, you can rely on the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha.'

When we rely on the Buddha, we rely on somebody who awakened from the dream, or the fantasy, or the habitual attachment to an ordinary sense of self. When we rely on the dharma, we rely on the teachings that the Buddha gave about what he experienced. This includes his explanations about the ways in which one can get lost on that path, the obstacles that can arise. It also includes his descriptions of what life is like when you become free of these limitations. The sangha is the association or the grouping of those who are engaged in this approach to awakening.

The Buddha establishes the possibility, because Buddha *did* awaken. The dharma offers the methods and the sangha offers allies.

Allies are very important because a lot of the time we live in a world that is quite lonely and quite isolated. We may feel that 'it is all up to me', whereas actually the process of awakening comes when we learn how to collaborate, when we collaborate with ourselves and with others. As we looked very briefly last night, a major obstacle to awakening is the strong identification of oneself as a truly self-existing separate entity.

Now, Buddha's teachings are very, very vast and we only touch on very little moments through these teachings, but basically there are four ways of grouping the many different views.

Hinayana: the path of renunciation

The first group are the teachings on renunciation, where we focus on: 'Clearly, some of the things I'm caught up in are not good; therefore, I need to let go of them. I need to recognise what is unhelpful in my life and stop doing it.' This refers to activity of our body, of our voice and of our mind. If your body is out of control, for example if you are a dangerous driver, then for the safety of others and yourself, it makes sense to control your body better and pay attention to what you're doing. There are many books now published that explain the traditional classifications of the ten major faults of behaviour and so on. The faults don't need much analysis; what you have to do is avoid them.

From our point of view, in being interested in meditation, the most important ones are the faults of the mind, since the limitations of body and of voice arise from the limitations of our mind.

The mind seems to fuse with arising thoughts

This is why in order to understand these problems we do the kind of meditation we did at the beginning this morning, which is to sit quietly and try to focus our attention on something simple such as the breath or an external object. We observe how we collapse into arising thoughts and get carried away by them for a while and then we come back to a simple attention, directed towards a simple object.

We see that the mind will take on and seem to fuse with a thought which is arising' and how in that immediate movement into fusion with the thought or the feeling that's arising, it is as if there is no choice.

Cigarette example

In some ways, it is easier to see these things from external examples. If someone smokes cigarettes, if they have enough money to buy enough cigarettes, they can smoke these cigarettes whenever they want. Cigarette smoking then becomes just a natural part of them. A feeling arises, 'I want to have a cigarette' and you light the cigarette. It is as if the initial urge to have a cigarette, the taking the packet, the taking the cigarette, the lighting the match, starting to smoke, enjoying the smoking, this is one seamless movement. But external and internal circumstances change. Nowadays health policies say smoking is not so good. You might work in a company that says you can't smoke inside. So every time you want to have a cigarette, you have to get up from your desk, go downstairs, stand in the rain like a criminal, and then go back in again. Or the government puts up the tax on cigarettes, so now you have to count your pennies every time you have a cigarette. Or you might decide for the sake of your own health that you want to stop. But the developed habit, the developed chain of impulses, the gesture of smoking has become something very habitual for you. It feels like 'you', it feels normal to smoke, and so interrupting this normality feels abnormal. And clearly, many people find it very difficult to stop smoking.

So now if I have an impulse to smoke and I have the cigarette, I then have to think, '*Do I want to smoke this or not?*' Well, the 'I' that I'm asking this question of, is not a single thing. The 'I' that is concerned with my health says, '*No I don't want to have this cigarette.*' While the 'I' which is used to smoking and enjoys smoking says, '*Yes, I do want to have this cigarette.*' So we have an intra-psychic struggle, between aspects of ourselves, or positions that we can take up. Some of these positions are more invested with identity, with libido; they *feel* more real, they *feel* more pressing. Others remain rather theoretical.

I know of a man who is smoking himself to death. He is getting to a stage where he can't walk upstairs to go to bed and has to sleep on the sofa. His wife and family of course are very upset about this. Many people ask this man why he is doing this. Of course the thing they really want to say, and sometimes they do say, but it is very difficult to say is, '*How can you love cigarettes more than us? How can you love cigarettes more than life?*' Even his doctor has said to him, '*There is nothing much to do. If you continue like this, you will die.*'

Something is happening in the mind of this person. Smoking cigarettes – with all the coughing and the blood, the pain in the body and the anger of the people around him – if you had some scales and you were weighing them up, the cigarette is more important. This is tragic.

Yet when we look in our own minds in meditation, we find something similar. We sit down and we think; *'Now I'm going to look at this simple object.'* But then a thought comes by, *'Come out and play,'* and we say, *'No I am doing my homework.'* Another thought says, *'Come out and play, I have got a new football,'* and we say, *'No, I am doing my homework.'* The third thought comes along and says, *'Come out and play, I have got some chocolate.'* Then the game is up, off we go chasing the chocolate. *[Laughter]*

Sooner or later our mind goes off on some kind of thought. Afterwards we might wonder, *'Where did my mind go?'* and often our response might be, *'That was nonsense. Instead of doing the meditation which could develop my discipline, my intentional span, my clarity of being, my capacity to make choices, I found myself chasing nonsense; daydreams and fears and hopes that don't bring any value into my life.'* So we are not so different from the cigarette smoker.

Developing the strength and clarity to renounce

So in this first general path, which in the Tibetan tradition they call the *hinayana* path, one is concerned with developing the strength and clarity to renounce, to say, 'No', to give up the habitual addiction to repetitive behaviour. In order to do that, we support ourselves by thinking, *'What are the consequences?'*

If we have the experience that life is just something going by and when it's gone, it's gone, and the main thing to do is to pass it in a pleasant way as possible, then it doesn't really matter. If that is what one really believes, then it's fine. You should take as many holidays as you want; indulge yourself; enjoy yourself...

But the Buddha's teaching is: life is not actually like that, there is a purpose to life. It's not a random phenomenon. There is a possibility of awakening to how things actually are. What appears real and important and definite to us, is just a dream. We can pass our whole life in a kind of fantasy. And these fantasies can appear to be the whole of existence.

I don't know about in Austria but England is full of little societies, where people meet together to enjoy special interests. Some people meet together to restore old steam engines and every weekend they are polishing, grinding and painting, so that in the summer time, for one week, they can take five hundred people up and down two miles of train track. They even have their own magazines. In the past they would go to India because India used to have steam trains. So you would have thousands of people making pilgrimages, to Mughul Serai, which is one of the biggest train junctions in the world, to look at steam trains.

Maybe we are not so different. Some of us here have dogs. We take the dog out for a walk, make sure it has a bath, maybe take the dog to a competition. Many, many different things we do. None of these things are particularly bad, but from the buddhist point of view they would say, *'Your potential, the nature of your mind, is vast, is infinite, and you are putting that all into one small activity. That small activity appears to you to be very important not because of its inherent qualities, but because of the shining nature of your mind.'*

We can think again of this man with the cigarettes. Cigarettes (although I used to smoke many of them) are rather disgusting. You just need to find a well used ashtray and have a good sniff and you will find it pretty disgusting. But for this man, this cigarette is not disgusting. It is shining, it is life itself. Now what is that? His life has become condensed into the cigarette. That is why it is real for him, because it becomes the site where his potential is revealed. Of course, we might think it's a very false mirror, that it's not a good place to see, to wake up, to recognise your potential.

Story of the dog's tooth

Linked to this there is a famous Tibetan story, that some of you may know, about a son and his mother. This son was a trader and every year he went from Tibet to India. At first when he was going, he would say to his mother, *'Mum, do you want me to bring anything back,'* and she says, *'No I'm fine, life is good here.'* But then she started to get older and her mind turned more to the thoughts of the dharma and she thought, *'I have spent my life in worldly activity, raising my family, now I should start to prepare for my next life.'* So she said to her son, *'When you go to India can you bring me back a relic of the Buddha?'* So he said, *'Yeah, sure! No problem!'* But he went to India and he was all the time busy making trade – maybe a little bit of kissing, a little bit of drinking... Then he is setting off home and coming into the valley and thinks, *'Oh, it is good, good to be home.'* He sees his mother and shows her all the various trade items and she asks, *'Did you get the relic?'* and he replies, *'Oh, no, sorry, next year.'*

So next year the same thing happens. He goes on his trip, he comes back and he's forgotten. The third year; this time he's determined he's going to find this relic. So he's looking around in India and he remembers from time-to-time, but he can't find it immediately. Then he's on his way home again. He is just going over the pass into the valley where his family home is and he remembers that he has forgotten again and says, *'Oh, what am I going to do?'* He is hitting himself and kicking the stones on the ground and he kicks this old bone and he sees, *'Oh... something's shining down there.'* He has kicked the dog's jaw bone and a tooth has fallen out. *'Oh that will do',* he says.

So he wraps it in some beautiful white silk cloth, what Tibetans call a *katak*. He walks down into the valley and sees some children playing, so he tells them, *'Go and tell my mother that the relic is coming.'* So the mother becomes very excited and she gets a big pack of butter and she sends it up to the monastery, *'Send some monks, with the horns – quickly!'* she says.

Now the son is riding into town on his horse holding the relic. The horns are sounding and they take this tooth into his home where the mother puts it on the shrine and starts to do her prostrations. The son is now not feeling too good about this and he is thinking, *'Next year I must find a real, authentic relic.'* But all winter long the mother is praying, getting up very early in the morning doing her devotions. Then one day the son goes in to bring his mother some tea and she is sitting praying in front of the shrine and there are rays of light coming out of the tooth. That is why the Tibetans say, *'With faith even a dog's tooth will give out light.'*

That is a helpful story for giving us some inspiration. But I think it also explains why this man is smoking himself to death, because with faith even a cigarette will give out light. We can turn anything in this world into something wonderful and shining.

We, as people with minds, are at the point of the emergence of something amazing. The mind can express so much creativity, so much energy, so much enthusiasm, so much force. This can be developed towards making new weapons that will destroy lives, or new drugs that will save lives. It is the same kind of energy. The energy itself is neutral.

Importance of being able to separate out from impulses

That is why in the dzogchen tradition they say there is one ground and two paths. Everything has the nature of emptiness. Out of emptiness, energy ceaselessly manifests. And that energy will be directed according to our intention and our capacity to focus. This is why learning to separate out from impulses is very important because otherwise moment-by-moment our energy moves through the pathways of our habit. And in that way *karma* continues – habitual

activity continues. We only really have a choice when we become the conscious traffic policeman directing the flow of energy toward the objects of value. So being able to focus one's attention is the beginning of being able to see the other possibilities. We should never doubt the power of habit.

Importance of curiosity

One of the most important qualities we can have is curiosity. When you look at these photos here of all these different lamas, they all have very shiny eyes. They are 'out-looking' at many different things. They are not inviting people into a close sect. But it is also important to take curiosity into the world without it falling into the object, collapsing into the object, so that you change one obsession for another and then another.

To be curious is, in its fresh form, to have the sense, '*Here is the object which is shimmering. Here is my awareness which is shimmering.*' The curiosity holds the movement between the two. We don't want to collapse into the object, we don't want to hold ourselves apart, but just to be open and fresh to the many different things which are occurring.

So it is very useful on a daily basis to look at your life, at your material possessions, at how you spend your time, at your relationships, at how you perform your work. Try to look at each item with fresh eyes. What function does this have? Does it function to connect me out, or to wrap me in? Does it reassure me about who 'I' am, or does it support me in being present in the world?

For example, you might have piles of old books you never read and trying to get rid of them may be hard. Many people find that very difficult. I find it very difficult. I look at this book and I think, '*I'm never going to read this again, I'll give it away,*' and then I put it back on the shelf because I think it is a very lovely book. But books only come into existence when someone reads them, they have no meaning otherwise. So actually the book has no function except to tell me, '*It's good to have things around me that I might need sometime.*' In some ways then it represents a lack of trust that good things will be there in the future. Because it may well be that things reveal themselves in their season. You read a book at a particular time in your life and it seems wonderful. If you read it later it may not be. This is because the value of the experience lay in the connection between the subject and the object not in the object itself.

So it is very useful to do an audit like that and see how much of yourself, of your identity you have put outside into objects in the world. Because often we can say, 'I wouldn't be me, if I lost this,' and we may particularly say this about a relationship: 'If I lose you I would die.' And of course something would die – a particular constellation of ourselves, a particular patterning of ourselves, a particular set of possibilities and experiences would cease to manifest. But our potential to keep manifesting, to be engaged with the world would not come to an end. Of course in a very romantic way, we can say, '*If I can't have you, then I will die*' and that romantic thing from Goethe's ***The Sorrows of young Werther***, is a very powerful force in many people's cultures. In English we say, 'you cut off your own nose to spite your face.' If I can't have you I will kill myself, I don't care

As we know there are these three basic poisons: stupidity, anger and desire. Due to stupidity we imagine that we live in a world of stable phenomena. Due to desire we want to have what we want and we think we *can* have what we want. When that is frustrated anger arises because these three poisons chase each other around.

So when we audit our existence – when we look at how we have invested ourselves in phenomena outside ourselves, and so are then vulnerable in terms of our sense of self to many changes – we can directly see that we have constructed a world on sand, a world which is fundamentally unstable.

An essential focus of the hinayana

In the hospital where I work, we are always very concerned when we have patients, especially males aged forty and over, who are still living at home with mum. Because when mum dies, usually there is a major breakdown because the person has not been able in late adolescence to take all the warmth and affection that they felt for the parents, particularly for the mother, back into themselves and think, *'This is my love that I give out and it remains my love.'* When you imagine you can protect your identity through fusing with an object, sooner or later the object will vanish and you will collapse, since what you thought was possible was actually impossible.

From this point of view, from the hinayana point of view, one is trying to be very alert. What is my relationship with the world? Why do I feel that this is necessary? Can I do with less? Essentially it is a path of monks and nuns. Although, we are probably not going to live in that way, we can still take the essential focus, as a way of saying to ourselves, *'relational energy belongs to the subject'* To imagine it is in the object is a madness. Take the energy back into your heart.

Soldiers unfortunately have to say, *'My country right or wrong.'* Unfortunate because many of these people are good hearted and brave, structurally, to be a soldier is to be very stupid. There are these beautiful young men, aged eighteen and nineteen out in Afghanistan being killed and destroyed because they are saluting Tony Blair. And Tony Blair is nothing but an arsehole, narcissistic, self obsessed, very stupid, very lazy in how he attends to the world. Yet these young men, with all their potential, all their life ahead of them are saying, *'My country, right or wrong, I go where I am sent.'* Their life blood, their libido, their energy, their *'Buddha nature'* is projected out into the regiment, the uniform, discipline, 'my buddies'.

When we look at this relationship we see, *'Oh, this beautiful shining quality is being turned towards death.'* Because the soldiers are being taught the language of honour, whilst fighting an illegal war, this is very sad. All over the world we see how these poisons, these confusions in the mind, take the very shiny, wonderful potential, of human beings and bring about disastrous consequences. That is why practicing mindfulness is very important, since it means, *'Be careful.'*

It is like when I was in India. Sometimes we would type things on this old mechanical type writer. You had to bash very hard, so that by the end of the day the tips of your fingers were bruised. And then we got an electric typewriter and you put your finger down hard and the whole page goes 'Aaaaaa.' Our mind is like that, we are just shooting off all this stuff all the time, so we have to be very subtle, very present, careful and aware – and be suspicious of our intentions. Who is really writing this script here? Who is making this decision? Is it the quality of our presence? Or is it a dull habit that has taken us over?

[Break]

Mahayana

Do we practice dharma to benefit everyone or to benefit people who are very close to us? My main teacher used to say there is no virtue in the family. By which he meant if you take care of your children, that is not a virtuous act because your children are an aspect of yourself –

they are your world. So taking care of your children is taking care of yourself, in some way. If you take care of someone else's children that's a different matter because duty, obligation and family identification are not present, and so you are having to step over the boundary of self-interest to be available to someone who is truly other.

So in the mahayana path, a lot of time is spent reflecting on how we can become more aware of other people, more thoughtful about them, more empathically attuned with them. Different approaches are used. For example, we might consider that we have been born many, many times. And in all these lifetimes, we have had parents – parents who have done something for us, who have fed us from their body in some way. We have been born so many times that all sentient beings in the whole universe have at one time been our own parents. And because they have taken care of us, we have an obligation of care to them.

That is to say, this approach uses the self-interest that is normal inside a family, and brings all beings into your family, so that your normal self-interest takes you towards altruism. You can then intensify the affect of that by thinking, *'When these beings were my mother, in order to protect me and feed me, maybe they had to do some bad things. Maybe they stole food, or prostituted themselves to get food for me. Maybe they killed other people to protect me.'* People do these things. So if we imagine that, then we take up the thought, *'All the bad karma that these beings now experience was generated through them protecting me; therefore, I have an immediate and direct obligation to help these beings. They are not strangers to me, they are my own mother.'*

Now that is a very strange and powerful thought: that it is not a matter of choice that I should help beings. It is just a given and therefore, there is nothing to think about. So if I go to help someone I don't need to think about, *'Will they repay me? Do I like them? Can they help me?'* So there is then space for my helping the other, to be based on their need. Which means: in order to know what they need, I have to attend to them. Compassion takes our attention out into the world, so that we are present with others and investigate, *'What do they need?'*

Two truths: relative truth and absolute truth

Now, in relation to this, there is in the mahayana tradition, the notion of two truths, or two levels of existence. There is the relative truth and the absolute truth.

The relative truth is based on how things appear when we experience ourselves in relation to other real objects: I am real; you are real; this room is real. So you see someone in the street, they look very unhappy, and you might go up to them and ask, *'What's the matter?'* They may say, *'I am hungry and I have no money.'* So you might give them some money. That would be to give them some respite from their difficulty for some hours but again they would become hungry and you wouldn't be there. So if you had the opportunity you might say, *'OK, come to my house, I will give you some work and you can have a room and live.'* The person now has some support, but for a little while. After some time you may have no more work for them, you may move, you may die and again they have no place to stay and no work.

Relative truth interventions are, therefore, ones that are limited by time, by circumstance and by resources. After a while, it would be lost.

The absolute truth is to recognise your own nature, is to awaken to your buddha nature. And the deepest form of compassion is to help other people awaken to their buddha nature. One aspect of this can be to be involved in the spreading of the buddhist teachings: teaching, translating, publishing, sponsoring and so on.

More generally, it means to live in a way in which you embody the integration of wisdom and compassion, so that when people meet you and interact with you something can be shifted

and moved inside them. So that the person has an experience of something, which then perhaps awakens a curiosity, which they then can pursue.

So part of our practice is to be as open and available as we can with whoever it is that we meet. And if we think about that in relation to what we looked at before the break, clearly the more defined our self-position, the more attached we are to a particular patterning or constellation of our personality, our activity and so on, the narrower our scope to be available to others.

Seeds and weeds

So the basic idea is that from the very beginning, all beings have a Buddha nature, a potential for awakening, but that potential is covered over. And that potential cannot start to come alive unless there are the right circumstances.

[James holds a grain of brown rice in his fingers] You can't really see it, but in my fingers, I have a grain of brown rice. So, this brown rice in order to sprout requires having the right circumstances. It needs some moisture. If it has some moisture at the right temperature, not drowning, but just the right degree of moisture, it will start to sprout. And the sprout needs some soil if it is to fully grow and become a proper plant. If these factors come into place then the rice will give rise to a full plant. In mahayana buddhism you will find a lot of use of language about seeds.

We need to create merit. Merit means to perform good virtuous actions: helping other people, that includes building hospitals, monasteries, stupas and so on; feeding the poor, doing the things that any religion, any ethical group of people would think is good. This merit becomes the soil, the nurturing resource that allows the seed of your buddha nature to start to come into fruition.

But of course, when any plant is starting to grow and is growing in soil that is fertile enough for the plant to grow in, it will also be fertile enough for weeds to grow in. As long as the seed is just a seed, weeds don't matter – weeds only become important once the sprouting has occurred. So when we start to engage in meditation and spiritual activity, we often encounter more problems in our life, not less. We become more sensitive to difficulties that surround us. We see more clearly how problematic our lived situation is. Change is also a provocation to the systemic balance. So in the Tibetan tradition they would describe that by describing how when people meditate, the local demons and spirits become interested and want to cause trouble. Every action has a reaction; the environment around us will respond.

For this reason, we need to develop the second accumulation, which is the accumulation of wisdom. Wisdom means the understanding of emptiness.

Emptiness

So what is emptiness? Emptiness is 'the absence of any substantial basis to any of the phenomena that we experience.' There is no sweet way to say this in ordinary language because it is not describing an experience, which is present in ordinary language.

Reflection on emptiness lets us clear the weeds from the path

It is the understanding of emptiness that lets us clear the weeds away from the path to enlightenment. Take anything that we encounter in the world, this building, for example. We are all sitting here with a roof on top of us and if we look up, we can see the roof. It is very useful. If it starts to rain, the rain doesn't come in, so it is very good that this room has a roof. In this building, it is also easy to see how this roof is made. We see the wooden struts going up, how they are locked in an A frame, with the crossbar, how they are resting on the horizontal bar, supported by this cement beam going right down to the ground. And how

there is packing on top of the beams, and then the tiles. These factors are present together. We call the co-presence of these factors, 'the roof'.

The roof is not anything other than: these various factors being present at the same time. There is no inherent *roof-ness* to the roof. But it is customary and habitual for us when we see a building to say, 'Oh that's got a roof on it.' And in that way, we take something that is composite, which is generated out of juxtaposition, out of a positioning together of various factors, to be self-existing. So emptiness is to recognise the constructed nature of all phenomena.

For example, we say, '*This is my body.*' To kill our body is very easy. You can take one reasonable length nail and one hammer and whack it in your head and you can die quite easily. You can take one sharp knife and cut your artery. I'm sure we have all seen a fish taken out of the sea and it lies on the beach twitching. If you take a knife and cut its artery, you are going to have a dying fish. That is to say, your life is dependent on the absence of a sharp knife in your arteries. If these two factors come together (not in an operating theatre), then probably death is coming.

Now usually we don't think of these potential threats to our life. However, our existence is very vulnerable. It is very easy to die. Today many people around the world will die. Some will drown, some will be burnt to death, some in car accidents, some will fall off the roof, some will be shot, bombed – these are causes of death external to the somatic system. Some will die from slow degenerative diseases that will have ripened to their full course. Some will die to the manifesting of internal forces, but of course, nowadays many of these internal forces are linked with the outside. For example, if you have a stroke and you can get to a hospital within maybe twenty minutes, then it's not so bad. However, if the ambulance is late, or there is a big traffic jam then maybe you have a very severe condition. So many, many different factors influence what is available.

This notion of emptiness is linked with the teaching of dependent co-origination. Dependent co-origination speaks to the causally linked interaction of many phenomena: on the basis of one thing something else arises. Because the sun is shining today that brings a certain mood to us. If it were very cold and wet, there would be another mood. That means that my mood, 'my' mood, how 'I' feel, is determined by whether the sun is shining or not – so 'I' is determined by the sunshine. At the same time, I have an idea of autonomy, that I am self-directed. '*I am an autonomous puppet: my name is Pinocchio.*' [Laughter]. This is how we live – we are always in reaction, in conversation with the environment. And yet we imagine that we are the determiners of our own existence.

So again, we have to remember the middle way. It is not that we are only puppets, but also in the other extreme, it is not that we are completely autonomous. We manifest according to the interaction between this system [*James points to his body*] and the environment around it. This way of manifesting is partly in our control and partly not in our control.

There is form and it is empty. There is emptiness which shows form

But the things that we try to control can only be controlled because they are empty. For example, if you have lunch and you feel full and somebody says to you, '*Do you want some more food?*' you say, '*No I am full.*' That experience feels 'true' – and in its truth, it seems to be 'true' in a big way. However, if at eight o'clock in the evening someone says, '*Oh James you won't want any food because you are full from lunch*' then it's 'not true' that I am full any more. The fullness was empty. It was empty of inherent self-existence. It was a contingent phenomenon. It was arising due to circumstances. But in the moment, I feel full, I say, '*No-no, I don't want any food, God I'm full. No I'm absolutely full, no, no...*'

So it is very necessary to practice analysing the interdependent, contingent nature of phenomena because according to our ordinary way of experiencing them, they appear just to be what they are, self-existing. When we take this analysis of emptiness into all the phenomena that we experience: our body, our clothes, our house, our friends, the hills, Austria, Europe – everything – and then we extend it further and further, there is nothing but emptiness. And yet there is still Europe, Austria, this village, this house, us sitting here, our own bodies. This is the understanding of the *Heart Sutra*.

There is form and it is empty; there is emptiness that shows form. These are not two separate things. It's not that it looks like form but really, it is empty, as if you had to keep dissolving everything into just nothing at all. But that the form is *itself* empty – it is an illusion – something that appears, which is available to us through our senses and yet doesn't exist in truth. That is to say, appearances exist in appearance, but they are not the appearance of themselves – they are the appearance of many other things.

So, for example one of the lines that run through us is our history. So I am here today, talking with you, because of my history. When Buddha Shakyamuni was born, he came onto the ground, he took seven steps and he made a proclamation. When I came out of my mother's body, I was crying and what I learnt about buddhism has been a long painful journey. It didn't come into me with my mother's milk, and it wasn't born in my bones. But due to causes and circumstances, all sorts of circumstances, I went to India at a time when Tibetan refugees had left Tibet and were available to teach. And due to the meeting of these circumstances, I was able to learn something and then due to other circumstances I was able to do practice for some time and so on. So although we could say, '*I am talking to you.*' really what is talking is my history. And my history involves interactions with many people, so in that way many, many different people are talking with you. It is very important to keep deconstructing the tendency to reify, to make entities, to make things solid and real and separate.

Loosening a strong sense of personal identity: who is this 'I'?

One of the most depressing things working for me as a therapist is the patient who arrives knowing what is wrong with them, the patient who announces, '*I am depressed.*' And that, '*I am depressed*' is not the fruit of some observation of what is happening to them, but is like a banner that they are carrying into battle. Because what they want then is that I should bend my knee and salute this holy banner and say, '*Together we go on a crusade – what troubles you is very important and very deep and very powerful.*' So in that situation there is not much room to manoeuvre.

The main thing that helps us to stay mentally healthy, I believe, is that we can move around, we can look at ourselves from different positions and look at the world from different positions. But when we have a strong sense of our personal identity, this positioning will fix the view that we have of the world around of us; we will see it through our karmic lens.

So one of the practices that is used in mahayana buddhism is the practice of exchanging one's own state for that of others. We can do that in different ways: we can imagine what it would be like to be the other and we can imagine what they would be like if they had our life. So that, perhaps if you are in a big city like Vienna and you see some very lost soul, maybe begging in the street, or drinking in the park. They are maybe dirty, they look a bit tired, they look also a bit angry and you would not really want to be touch with them.

What you could do is to imagine that they come home to your house, get in your bath, scrub off, go into the fridge and think, '*Oh, such nice food, what will I eat tonight?*' Nine o'clock that evening, maybe they are quite happy and relaxed, lying on your sofa watching the television.

Then imagine it is you now on a park bench. You are cold, you are hungry, and you think it is a long night ahead of you, '*What will I do? I know, I'll get pissed.*' And then you can see the logic

of their situation. If you were homeless in that way, being drunk seems quite a wise thing to do. Because very often when we see people, we de-contextualise them – we don't imagine what their history would be, what their living situation would be.

We can reflect on your own history, which has made you become the one you are today. What brings you here? Maybe in your family, you are the only one interested in buddhism. So if you have brothers and sisters, then you might think, *'Oh how come they are not interested in that? What turned me in that direction?'* See if you can get a felt sense of how your present identity is constructed out of the interaction of your karmic potential, the potential for manifesting that you had as an infant, and the environment around you.

OK, so I suggest we just sit like that for a few minutes.

[Reflection]

When I look back to the time after I left India, and came to London, I had no intention to live in London. But I had to earn some money for my children and I had to find some way of surviving if I was not going to be in India. That was my immediate focus. Dealing with that immediate focus, as it developed day-by-day, month-by-month, year-by-year, twenty years later I am still living in London. I don't particularly want to be in London but by now, I have a life that is plugged into London. So my experience of being there is, if you like existential. It arose out of responses into a situation; it is not part of a grand plan. I think we can often see that, that how our lives are, is determined by the needs of others, by whether there is high unemployment, or low unemployment, what doors open and what doors don't. If you think back to school and maybe the ideas you had then of how your life would be, and what kind of job you would have, maybe it is very different now? What happened to all these plans?

This is where the understanding of karma is very important. Due to actions we have performed in previous lives, we find ourselves experiencing particular environments now and responding to them out of particular impulses. Again, this is helping us to see our life is not caused or managed by the conscious ego. And so the conscious ego's claims to power need to be put in to question. The conscious ego itself needs to be put into question. Who is this I?

The more we see that our conscious sense of self is a construct, that it exists like a crystal vase which seems to transparently show whatever is poured into it – so I'm happy when I'm happy, I'm sad when I'm sad – we can observe that the 'I' is claiming the current content of the mind as its self. The 'I' is a free-floating signifier. It is an empty sign, which takes on the colouration, the shape, the form, of the factors that are around it at any moment. So our self, has no inherent definition, no inherent true existence, and yet it exists as many, many different things.

The absence of a fixed self means more creativity. If we relax, we shine out

The absence of a defined self is the door to freedom to have multiple experiences of the world. Instead of anxiously controlling the situation, we can relax into allowing the ways in which experiences manifest according to circumstances.

The absence of a fixed self means more creativity. But that creativity is not self indulgent because in seeing that there is no fixed self, the focus for our attention doesn't need to be reflexive. Therefore, our attention goes out to others, out into the world, which is compassion. So the emptiness of the self is itself compassion.

Because if I come into existence moment-by-moment through my interaction with the world, I'm not going from 'me' to 'you' – but the 'me' of each moment is forming with 'you'. *'No fixed self' means 'I am always with you, and through being with you, I come into being.'* This is true

for all of us. It happens all the time. This is how it is. You don't have to try hard to do it. You just look at a baby, the baby looks at you, you smile. It is very difficult not to smile at a baby – it just comes out. If we relax, we shine out.

Karmic furniture limits us

So what limits us is an internal world packed full of karmic furniture. And not only is it full of furniture but the light is off – so we stumble about bumping into things. The dharma teaching puts the light on and we start to examine our lives, we start to see all the furniture that we have. Then you can walk more carefully around the furniture. And when you see the furniture, you can sit in the chair, rather than on the table. You don't have to eat your dinner in the fireplace; you can use the table [Laughter]. So seeing things as they are, makes you quite efficient; it does not make you crazy. The Buddha said, *'All beings want to be happy, but everywhere they use their energy to make themselves unhappy.'* It is not that people have the wrong motive; they have the wrong method and they have the wrong method because they don't see what the situation is.

So after lunch we can do some meditation connected with this view. But if we go to eat, whether you eat quietly, or you go to a restaurant and are with other people, you can use that opportunity for practice, you can observe the constructed nature of things.

If you go to a restaurant, you look at the menu. So what you can eat is being determined by the menu, not by your desire. But you look down the menu and you decide, *'Oh, I will eat that.'* So due to the meeting together of some aspect of your desire and the possibility of the menu, a choice comes into being. But if you are sitting here before you go out to eat and you think, *'Oh, what would I really like to eat?'* You might not find that on the menu. So in that way again and again we can see how life is situational. And how adaptable we can be, how we find a way of fitting it. That has good qualities, it leads to social adaptation; not causing too much trouble. But it can also have the quality of ignorance, of stupidity because there is a sort of dullness in succumbing to the fantasies that are available.

Again, the Buddha said, *'You should see the world as an illusion, like the reflection of the moon on water.'* So as you are walking, as you are sitting, as you are eating, try to see the interaction between your body and the environment, between your voice and the environment, between your thoughts and the environment. In that way, we start to see how merit and wisdom, or emptiness and compassion, become the soil and the environment out of which the seed of the buddha nature can flourish.

[Break for lunch]

My ability to be many different things is based on the fact that I'm not anything in particular

When we look in a situation, for example, like saying, *"I go for lunch"*, we can think, *"Oh, yes in the process of going for lunch I encounter many different things, and these different things are changing, yes I accept that. These are all experiences that I have."* But it's at that point that we need to look more carefully, because again, who is the one who is having the experience? Is the person who says, *"I have had lunch,"* the same person who said, *"I am going for lunch"*? How you inhabit your body when you are hungry may be different in feeling, from having eaten food. So in this moment, directly, what we experience is different, and the one whom we take to be the experiencer is different.

The fantasy is that there is a continuous self, an entity that can be known. But one might respond, *"You are just being ridiculous, James. Clearly, I am the same person who went for lunch and who has now had my lunch, because I remember that it was me who was going for lunch. I remember eating the lunch and now I know that I'm still me."* However, to this we would reply,

“This is the position taken through identification with abstraction and not attending to how things are.” Because, you can get history books that say, *“England throughout the ages: let us compare England two hundred years ago with England today”*, which assumes that there is this abstraction called ‘England’ which is unchanging, whilst various things are happening. This is precisely the point we need to be very suspicious about.

Clearly, we can remember before lunch, then eating the food and how we are now. We may say, *“I am the same person.”* but this is only conventionally true. That is to say, it’s true according to the convention in which we use, ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘myself’, as an abstract signifier which will have many different signs associated with it – an empty signifier which can take on many different sign allocations.

But what is this ‘I’? It can only be different things (like “I am hot,” “I am cold,” “I am hungry,” “I am tired”), if it itself has no content. So, the continuity of *me*, is based on my ability to be many different things, which is again based on the fact that I am not anything in particular. This is not abstract theory, this is our real lived experience.

Once upon a time, I was five. Now I am over fifty. If, when I was five I was *really* five, I couldn’t now be over fifty. I was five, in the way that this glass could be filled with apple juice, orange juice, beer, vodka yet be the same glass. The possibility is only there because the glass has a hole in the middle of it. If a glass was full of glass, you wouldn’t get anything else in it. So, *‘I am five’* is possible because *‘I am’* is like an empty space, which we fill with *‘five’*.

That is why it is really important to observe how this space, the immediate space of experience, is constantly being filled with contents which arise and pass... arise and pass... arise and pass...

That is to say, ‘I’ indicates the space of experience. ‘I’ indicates something like a market square, a space where stalls come, vegetables are sold, stalls go down, cows and pigs are brought in, are sold, and so on. Many, many things change in the market place. It is the emptiness of the market square that makes it useful. If you go to a mart where cows are sold, you will see metal bars penning the cows into lines where they wait before they go in the ring. This works for cows, but if you want to sell vegetables, then it’s very difficult. That is to say, the more the space is defined, the less flexibility there is.

It is the wonderful emptiness of yourself that allows you to be all the things that you are.

Two kinds of emptiness

There are two kinds of emptiness. It is one kind of emptiness (that is to say, the absence of substantial entities) which allows the possibility of another emptiness which is like a theatre stage on which many different dramas are manifested. It is very important not to be frightened or confused by the buddhist word emptiness. It is not something negative. Rather, it opens up the possibility of movement in space. The more the space, the greater the movement.

If you try doing yoga exercises in your bedroom, it’s quite difficult. Because, maybe there’s a bed and a chair and a table, and you are bending your body in terms of the furniture, not in terms of the posture. So, taking the time really to analyse the furniture in your mind, and the way that furniture is projected into the world, is very important.

We have been looking at how, if we look *inside*, we don't find any fixed substantial self. And when we look *outside* at other people, we can see that they are changing too. We see how the world changes, the seasons change, the economic situation changes... everything is turning and moving. Each time the world moves, there is a new possibility.

When we are trying to hang onto a particular situation, the movement of the world can induce fear and anxiety. But this is usually because we have developed a sense of ourselves that says, *"Changes in the world make a demand on me as 'I am', but I just want to be 'me.'"* But this is usually based, firstly on stupidity – in the sense of solidifying something – and, secondly, on laziness. Laziness is the sense of, *'Why should I put my energy into this? Why should I waste my energy on that?'* Now, if you look in your bag, or your pocket, you find your purse, and if you look in your purse, you find some money. We don't have infinite money, we often have quite finite money, and we can't print our own money. Is energy the same as money? If we say, *"I don't want to put my energy into that. I don't want to waste my energy."* I would suggest *that* experience arises because we **don't** know how to be fascinated by the situation.

For example, in the hospital where I work, we have a new computer system for entering all the information about the patients. As is usual with these systems, they have many problems, and it takes quite a long time for them to work properly. I trained how to use this system about a year ago, but I haven't really had to use it yet. Now I don't really want to use it, because I like writing with my hand. Writing by hand feels like 'me'. Typing feels quite alien, when I do that, it feels like 'someone else' – so I don't really want to do this. But some of the people who work with me are much younger than me, and for them doing this is very normal, so they are interested in this. Now there are two possibilities for me. I can think, *"Well, I'm more experienced than them,"* and my great wisdom tells me, *"The whole thing is nonsense even if they like it"*. On the other hand, I can think, *"Oh, they find a way to be interested in it; therefore, the lack of interest for me, cannot be in the object. It is in the subject. I am resisting allowing my energy to connect with this system."* When what is there in front of me feels like something coming at me, it feels like a burden, like a demand. And so of course, I put up a resistance.

So, the exit from this is to shift the balance and feel that one is moving towards the object – moving into the space, moving into the connection, and *then* generate an interested and arising energy. The key thing is for our energy always to be connected. If I say, *"This is useless and stupid."* this is the energy of hatred, which uses up my energy, just as much as saying, *"This is very interesting."* So, the relationship with the world is always dynamic, always connected. We can *choose how* to situate ourselves towards this energy. We cannot **not** be an energy. Do you hear the aeroplane passing overhead just now? Its energy is coming into the room. We are constantly being linked in with the environment.

Emptiness allows us to think, *"There is no safe, stable place to stand."* Our life is movement through space. Everything we experience is moving through space. So when we see other people as separate and real and ourselves as separate and real, this is a place of misconstruing, of misunderstanding how things are.

Tonglen practice

A practice we do to refine this is called **tonglen**. **Tong wa** means, to give, to send out; and **len pa** means, to take in, to receive.

Let's sit very quietly and allow ourselves to become in touch with the good things in our lives, our positive qualities, the store of merit and good karma, which we have, that makes more good things likely. You can imagine that in your heart as something warm and expanding.

Then you can imagine this is now spreading out to all beings, giving them all the good things that you have – more and more and more...

Imagine in front of you are your enemies, people you don't like. It could be people in your family, it could be colleagues at work, it could be politicians, anyone. They are the first to receive all your good qualities. Imagine it going to all beings without any differentiation. Then you imagine coming from them are all their limitations, all their worries, all their problems, all their sickness, all their despair... This is coming into you, into the centre of your heart. What is the centre of your heart? Emptiness. So, this negativity dissolves into emptiness, like snowflakes dissolving on a pond.

If you start to feel a bit anxious, *“What am I going to do with all this negativity?”* it is a sign that you are getting back into your ordinary sense of self, where you think, *“I am a limited person, I will be overwhelmed. I can't cope.”* If this happens, simply relax that sense of self into emptiness, *“There is no substantial self, my presence is empty and open.”*

So we'll try this for a while. Try to do it for as long as you can, but if it gets difficult then just relax and look around the room and then try to go into it again.

*[Practice of **tonglen**]*

So, you can do this practice when you walk down the street. You can look at all the people coming towards you, and you can simply receive from them all their worries, all their pains and all their difficulties. Look at their faces as they go by, and give them the happiness out from your heart.

[Tonglen practice with movement and sounding 'Aa'](#)

We can also do this practice with some movement, along with making the sound 'Aa'. Maybe some of you have done this before. 'Aa' is seen, generally in the Tibetan tradition, as being like the primordial sound which arises from emptiness, *A*. All manifestation arises from 'A' – so 'Aa' is the sound of emptiness.

We do this whole practice with this sound of 'Aa' ceaselessly flowing, one long 'Aa' after the other. So we make this sound 'Aa', and as we do that, *[James gets up to demonstrate]* we begin with our hands coming up by our heart into a *namaste* gesture, and then moving out into an offering gesture with the palms upwards, then opening out into spreading circle and returning to ones side. We are extending out positivity, so all the good things are rising and going out, blessing and purifying all beings.

Do this for a while, and then you reverse it; with your arms outstretched on either side of your shoulders. Continuing to say 'Aa', you pull all the negativity into your heart, as you bring your arms round in a circle in front of you then pulling your palms into your heart. Imagine all the pain and suffering of the world is melting into the open empty spaciousness of your heart. You open yourself completely to it, no resistance. The key thing is to rest in emptiness, beyond hope and fear. If you lose this open state and collapse back into your ego identification you will completely feel overwhelmed. Use the sound of Aa to dissolve solidification and grasping.

Ok, so we can try that together.

[Practice of tonglen with movement and sounding 'Aa']

When you are working with yourself you can do that for long periods of time; you can also do it for a short time, early in the morning. I've also found it quite useful in the course of the day, if I've been in meetings, or places where I get irritated with people, and it is all becoming a bit 'real'. Doing this practice, especially the movement, and the breath, and the opening of the chest, opens up the *prana* in the body. It allows one to shift one's position, to change gear; moving perhaps from feeling angry, or irritated, or misunderstood, to merge, or enter again, into this open infinite field of ongoing interconnection between all beings. Remember, you should start with extending positive things and also end with extending positive things. Don't end it with the negative coming into you.

Moving with the movement

From the mahayana point of view, all beings have the nature of emptiness. We cannot then *have* real friends or real enemies. What we have is situational friends, or situational enemies. *Due to causes and circumstances, at this moment, this person seems to help me and I like being with them. Due to circumstances, someone else may feel to be an enemy.* That's due to the changing patterns of the world. It doesn't mean that you just have to give in to whatever anyone else wants of you. However, usually, when we feel someone is an enemy, we feel their energy is impacting us in a way that we don't like. The key thing then to do is to try to relax *into* the openness, the emptiness of oneself. See the openness and the emptiness of the other, and then try to experience what's happening as just a flow of energy.

In martial arts, you would be trying to find the point of balance. By staying balanced yourself, you keep what is coming at you off balance, so it is not then going to impact you. We have to be careful not to frighten ourselves by the fantasy that we create about the other. Because if we become frightened, we give more meaning, more reality, more substantiality to the thing that is frightening us.

Whatever is arising is indeed arising. It is moving. Sickness and diseases are moving; different states of being in the world, being on your own, being in relationships, being rich, being poor – these are all dynamic situations. So by allowing things to move, by remaining spacious, you'll be able to work with the energy because you will be able to see it. As soon as you hold a position, it makes you blind to what is actually happening. For example, if you strongly develop a reading of the other person, *"They want to hurt me,"* then you will freeze yourself. However, if you experience the other as movement, then you can move with the movement.

It is exactly the same issue when we do meditation with our own mind. The more calm you can keep your mind, the more you see the movement of the thought. If you experience *'yourself'* as moving, then you'll experience yourself as rather similar to your thought. So for example, if we say, *"I'm in a hurry, I've got to get this done, I'm under a lot of pressure today,"* then we are identifying with a situational movement. The busyness of attending to the tasks now becomes a *core* busyness, *"I am busy, can't you see I'm busy – back off give me some space!"* But what we want to do is to try to see our movement as arising from space. Very rapid, busy, complex movements can arise from space, move through space, and release themselves into space. When we experience ourselves as more spacious and we are more calm, then we can experience what is coming towards us.

I think in previous years, I have maybe mentioned that one of the films I like best is ***The Seven Samurai*** by Akira Kurosawa. In this film, some villagers are being persecuted every year by bandits who come at the time of the harvest and take most of the crop. As the time of harvest approaches, instead of being happy bringing in the wheat and grain, they are very worried that the bandits are going to come. Really, they don't need to worry because the bandits come

every year. By the time the bandits do come, they are all very anxious. Then once the bandits do start to come, they ask each other, "What shall we do!? What shall we do!? What shall we do!?" They are running around, here there and everywhere, trying to think of something to do, and of course, that doesn't work because by now it is too late.

So the essence of the film is how to stand and *look*, and look until you *see*. When you *see* something *then act*. If you act before you see, you will be acting from your own existing matrix. If that matrix is full of anxiety and confusion, you will act in an anxious and confused way. What that film shows happening externally, is what happens in our mind. What we take to be 'our self', the kind of subject side of our experience, is very busy, it's turning around and around. Then the object starts to arrive, and they are both going round and round and round. When that interaction stops, the pattern restarts with a new object and so there is no end to samsara.

So we try to do the practice and then we go off into a thought [*James clicks his fingers*], then we come back – then we go off into a thought – then we come back – like that...

Getting to know emptiness is to trust that emptiness won't let you down

To do the mahayana practice of entering into an understanding of emptiness, it is very helpful to have as a basis, the *hinayana* practice of letting go of identification with objects. The heart of the path of renunciation is not external things; it's not that you become a good monk because you only eat one meal a day. Rather, when a thought arises in your mind, you can say, "*I don't need to eat that. It's a tasty thought, it's an interesting thought, a real Swiss chocolate thought, but I don't need to eat it. I can renounce that. I can make a decision that I don't go for it.*"

So emptiness, the actual existential emptiness of the subject, which the subject in its ignorance takes to be a lack, is a subject ceaselessly feeding itself, because it has misunderstood the nature of emptiness. '*I am lacking something, I'm not sure what it is, but this chocolate-covered thought looks quite useful for filling the gap. Let's munch that... Oh, I am still feeling empty. Any other thoughts to munch? Luckily there are always lots of thought.*' It's a kind of bulimia, in which an emotional hunger becomes fused with a somatic hunger. The person feels they need to eat food, when actually they need to communicate with someone. But in this case we try to consume the whole world.

It's even more strange than that, because emptiness, the radical emptiness, is an open spaciousness that automatically fills itself. Moment-by-moment something is always happening, so we don't *have* to fill it. Imagine up on the hill here, there is a little spring bubbling out of the rock. The water's very fresh, forming in a beautiful pool in the rock. And every day you observe an old man going with a bucket up the hill. All morning he's going up and down, and all evening he's going up and down, taking his bucket to fill at the spring. That's what we are doing. We are grasping at something which is already here. We cannot *keep* a thought in our mind. It's in the nature of thoughts to move, like how spring water bubbles up, it's just flowing. As Heraclitus said, "*No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man.*" The water is always changing. We grasp at a thought, as if we could make it ours and hold onto it, but it's like trying to get a handful of water; it just pours through our fingers.

So, getting to know emptiness is to trust that emptiness won't let you down. It's very paradoxical. Emptiness will give you everything because everything comes from emptiness, but if you try to take what you want, you end up with problems. From this mahayana point of view, it's very important to see everything as moving and changing.

For example, many of you have been here in Guttstein before. When we arrive in this room here, we can think, "Oh, it's very familiar." But we have to really look to see what is familiar. We might remember, "Oh that was in the same place last year. That was on the wall." But what is it? Can you ever really know an object? The object reveals itself to you through your relationship. If you were here last year, your mood is probably not the same exactly as this year. So what we see in the moment, in its given-ness to us, is *this* unique particular moment. To recognise it as the same as a moment a year ago, is to delude yourself. You are imagining that objects are self-existing and you, as 'a continuing stable subject', are perceiving 'an object which hasn't changed in one year.' From the point of view of buddhist practice, this is a great delusion. Of course, you don't lose the cognitive information you have about the room; you still know where the toilet is; you can recognise the different images and thangkas and so on. But that is rather abstract; that's like a resource which is available to you. Our experience is when that resource comes into play, in the immediacy of a direct contact. And *that* is something which manifests freshly out of emptiness each time it happens.

So within that, *the basis of compassion* is to recognise how we and all beings collapse in on ourselves. We don't recognise our own nature, and we create problems for ourselves and others by misunderstanding how to live. *The practice of compassion* is to remain integrated in the experience of emptiness, whilst allowing one's responses to move into a world with others, whose own nature is also empty.

When we see each other, the greatest gift we can give to another person is to not take them seriously. We are fantasies in each other's minds, appearing, and yet without any internal truth. By attending to how other people are, we will find yourself responding without any need to plan or think. The more relaxed we are, the more relaxed other people can be. If we are upset and full of worries, other people are not going to feel easy with us. According to the tradition, the best way to relax is to enter the awareness of emptiness, and through that state, you communicate to others and allow them to relax.

[Break]

Tantra: the path of transformation

Each of us has a body that is more or less symmetrical, so we have a right hand and we have a left hand. Now, these two hands are very similar and yet they are very different because if you put them out in front of you and you move your right hand where your left hand is, it is not looking the same way. If you try to turn it round it is very difficult, so your hands are similar but opposite. A great deal of how we understand the world is on the basis of these oppositions; we can say binary oppositions.

So for example, we know that something is high because it's not low. We know that something is fat because it's not thin. A word like *high* can mean many, many things. In itself, it perhaps doesn't mean very much. But one of the things that we know *high* doesn't mean, is *low*. So the meaning of *high* depends on the exclusion of *low* from its field of operation – and that point of exclusion will depend on circumstances. There will be particular lines which seem to bring a clarity of separation, but which are perhaps not the case.

So I would imagine that as a foreigner, I get a sense that there is some common way of speaking, some common language that people who live in Austria and people who live in Germany have. When people who are called Austrian speak, people who are called Germans more or less can understand what they say. Yet in some circumstances, the differences will become very important.

Some of the time we are focusing on what is common and what is the same, and sometimes we focus on the difference. So if we say, 'May all sentient beings be happy' there is not much differentiation. But we can say, 'There are men and there are women.' So if we say, 'May all women wear pretty dresses.', some women may think, 'Piss off' but anyway others might agree! [Laughter] However, if we say, 'May all sentient beings wear pretty dresses.' that is more difficult. So in that way our meaning and our sense identity is built up by category identification. And these categories set up two different things: high, low; self, other; me, you. So it is important really to understand what the meaning of these categories is.

Example of water and non-duality

[James fills two glasses of water.] Now, here we have the left hand glass of water, and here we have the right hand glass of water. Now, the qualities of the left, we need to be a little suspicious about. Because the left is the 'sinistra', it is a little sinister, and the right is much more straightforward. Do you want to take the right way in life? [Laughter] Of course you do. So do we want to drink the right water, or the left water? Mmm? Good question – because they cannot be the same, one is on the right and one is on the left.

From the point of view of tantra, this is how our mind is operating. Subject and object are seen to operate in different ways and to have different functions. When we look at the subject we see some things, when we look at the object, we see other things. But the subject and the object can be poured into the same water [James pours the two glasses of water back into the jar.]

This water is the ground nature; the water is like the emptiness. When you put subject and object into the water, when you dissolve in the meditation, afterwards, when you take up your little pot of self and you dip it in the great bucket of possibilities [James takes the glass and dips it into the water, so that it fills up], do you come out with the same self? Each time you go into emptiness and you come out, you come out with whatever you come out with. If you imagine what you come out with is the same as what you went in with, then tantra would be a waste of time.

[James takes empty glass and jar of water.] So, here is the subject (glass) and here is the object (jar of water). The subject says, 'Object, great Padmasambhava, please give me your blessing' and Padmasambhava pours himself into the subject. [James pours the water from the jar into the glass.] Now Padmasambhava is inside the subject, mixed together. Now together Padmasambhava and yourself mix and flow into the great pond [James pours the water from the glass, back into the vase.] No differentiation, no difference.

Then gradually the mind moves and you arise out of the meditation. Who is in your cup? If you follow the teaching, it says, 'Now everything I see is the body of Padmasambhava, all sound is the speech of Padmasambhava, all thought is the movement of the mind of Padmasambhava.'

For those who are not familiar with Padmasambhava, he is one of the main meditation deities, in the Tibetan system, but any of the other deities would have the same function. You pray to the god; the god sends you blessing; then the god dissolves in you; you dissolve in the god; you both dissolve into the real nature. Then out of this same nature, you manifest. You do not get your own nature back, because now your nature is mixed with the god. The duality of the divine and yourself, the sacred and the profane, has been collapsed. There is only this state of non-duality. The god and yourself are not separate.

That doesn't mean that there is only the one thing. Because in your mind you can again visualise Padmasambhava and you can again pray to him. So, from the state of non-duality, you do a dualistic visualisation and again use the dualistic visualisation to dissolve duality into the state of non-duality. Then arising from the state of non-duality, you can again develop dualistic thoughts.

If from the state of non-duality, you develop a thought of non-duality, that thought can be very clear and strong. But you know where it came from; you know that its real nature is non-dual. Nevertheless, if in the state of duality, you develop the thought of non-duality, you cannot even blow your nose with it – it is just an empty thought. This is why meditation is essential!

The big state of mind, the open, infinite state of mind can integrate any kind of thought, but the conceptual mind, which works on the basis of thoughts, can only work with thoughts; it cannot transcend itself. This is why the method of tantra was developed.

In this room, there are pictures of many different buddhas. Some of these beings, who are depicted as gods started their lives as human beings, but most appeared out of a realm (we could say,) of transcendent manifestation, to human beings who were doing meditation practice. From the point of view of tantric practice, these are not just some kind of fantasy daydream; not a product of our imagination, but they are a quality of energy which is revealed to us when we become ripe. And due to the kindness of the great yogis in the past, when they had these experiences, they created lineages of practice, whereby we can come in contact with these teachings and practices and through them come to recognise that the separateness of ourselves is an illusion. Moreover, this awakening is not just an abstract theory, it is not a concept but it is something that you can live.

Dzogchen: the path of self-liberation

Now earlier, when we were looking at the first bit of the mahayana teaching, we were looking at the grain of rice, very small, with the idea that we have inside us a potential, a buddha nature which, given the right conditions, can come sprouting to fruition. But this potential requires factors outside itself. Without the earth, the sun and the rain, the rice will not grow. The rice cannot grow out of itself.

Potential. Rice and mirror used as contrasting examples

But in tantra and in dzogchen we understand potential in a different way. The potential to have experience is present with us already. When you don't restrict yourself, when you don't limit yourself, your potential can reveal itself in many different ways.

So, the seed of the rice moves to reach its potential. If you plant this rice seed, and then when the rice is growing to a certain height, you dig it up, will you find the seed? No, it will be gone. The seed is destroyed in the process of manifestation.

Here we have a mirror. [*James shows a mirror.*] As soon as the mirror is exposed to the light, it is showing something. As the mirror is turned, it is immediately, without effort, showing many different things. The openness of the mirror, the fact that when you look in a mirror you don't see the mirror, you see something else, is the basis of the mirror being able to show many different things.

As we looked earlier, when we say, 'I' – it is like a mirror. It is empty and through its emptiness, it allows the display of many different things. The potentiality, all the reflections that are in the mirror, what it is showing out, depends on its own ground. So here, if I hold the mirror very still you can see one picture, and if I now move it what you see inside shifts. The reflection changes. Does the nature of the mirror change? No. So, this is a different way of understanding, from the rice seed.

Using rice seed as an example of your buddha nature as a potential, you have to become something else to realise your potential. This shows you a path of transformation and growth. In contrast, with the mirror example, the nature of the mirror, its capacity to show many

different images, is there always, and it is never damaged by no matter how many kinds of images it shows.

At the moment, the mirror of your mind is mainly showing the bullshit of your existence: your anxieties, your phobias, your self-concern, all the familiar stuff that runs around inside you. All of this stuff is like the reflection in the mirror. But watch the mirror moving, [*James moves the mirror*] the reflections change and the mirror is still there.

If you let go of the reflections you are attached to, you won't die. The real nature is revealed through letting go of the false identification of illusion as being your real nature. This is very important. So, when we do the meditation practice in tantra and in dzogchen, we are concerned to recognise the mirror-like nature of the mind. The mirror is always empty and it is always full. Reflection is always present in the mirror, but as soon as the mirror moves the reflection changes. The mirror fills itself up and empties itself instantaneously – this is the nature of the mind.

If you let go of something, something else will arise. If you try to hold on to something, it will still go. If you try to push out the reflection, something else will come. You tilt your mirror-like mind one way, and then you think, '*I can't bear this anymore*' so you turn it another way and you get a different reflection. This is not unusual to us. This is what we do all day long. You feel a bit tired, so you put on the television. After a while you think, '*God, this is rubbish*' and you switch it off. You change the object in order to have a new experience. The difference is, that the one who is watching the television, when it is 'yourself', has something in it (as in the '*karmic furniture*', we were talking of earlier). So when we watch the television we say, '*What is on the television doesn't fit the furniture in my mind.*' In that moment we are not like the mirror. We are not open to what is there. We are looking for what we want and when we don't get what we want, we feel disappointed.

The one who is looking for what she wants and who is disappointed, is a reflection in the mirror of her own mind. All your limitations are not essential. They are contingent and they have the same nature as a reflection in a mirror – arising and passing.

Non-duality: subject and object arise together from the ground of mind's empty mirror-like nature

So, non-duality means, that in this empty mirror of the mind, subject and object arise together. Each of us is here in the room; is anybody here not aware that they are sitting in a room with other people? That means that for each of us, two things are present: ourselves and the environment. Which one is there first? Both – they are there at the same time. Subject is always with object. It's not like the light that is coming from some distant planet and it takes five years to arrive here on earth. Whenever you are here, your world is here with you.

Some systems of meditation try to bring about a state of a pure subject, like cutting off the senses to go into some pseudo inner world, where only I, myself exist. If you do this your consciousness will become more and more subtle until there is almost no object in it, and you move up and up into these purest and most ethereal levels of meditation. That kind of state, in terms of samsara is seen as the quality of the very highest formless god realm. But because it arises from the cause of purifying the mind of a subject trying to let go of object, it will exist only as long as its causal conditions. Then eventually the mind starts to experience content again and the sentient being is reborn in one of the lower realms.

This is because subject and object always go together. You cannot have a subject without an object, without being in a kind of spaced-out state. And our subjectivity (as a subject, as a felt experiencer of our experience) is not something more stable or higher, or superior, to the

phenomena which we experience in the environment around us. So subject and object arise together. The ground of subject and object is the empty mirror-like nature of the mind.

When you look around the room – and we can do that now – just look around at people. Where are these people? Are they outside your mind or inside your mind? If they are outside your mind, how far are they from your mind? You can measure how far they are from your nose. That's quite easy. Because we are empirical scientists, we can raise our right hand and take hold of our nose and then squeeze it, until you have a feedback loop operating – and then you are absolutely sure where your nose is. And then very politely you can reach out towards the other person... [Laughter]. Having successfully accomplished this, you again raise your right hand and take hold of your mind [Laughter]. And you squeeze it very hard and get that feedback loop going. And I will see you next year to find your research progress! [Laughter]

You cannot grasp your mind, because the one who is trying to grasp the mind is already being grasped by the mind. So to talk of inside and outside with your mind is an illusion. The brain, the nose, the head, the anus, the penis – everything is arising inside the mind. All beings are arising inside our mind.

Inside this co-emergence of subject and object, the awareness that perceives subject and object is inseparable from emptiness – this is our experience as being like the mirror. And this mirror, in being empty, offers its potential to reveal subject and object arising together. So as soon as you look around the room you are in touch with what is there. And not only are you in touch with what is there, but you are being touched by what is there. So in this room we can see strong patches of red colour, patches of yellow colour, blue colour and so on. Each time we engage with these, some impact occurs for us.

Clarity: rang zhin

In the dzogchen tradition, this quality is called clarity, or *rang zhin*. It means without effort, everything is immediately there. You do not have to make things. They just reveal themselves.

Now, if we take some face cream and we rub it on the mirror, then the surface of the mirror will become more opaque – so we would say that it is less clear. It's the same with us when the mirror of our mind is obscured due to our habitual attachment to pre-figured positions. But if we look at the mirror, if we imagine that there is some cream on this, in an ordinary way we could say, 'Oh, the mirror has lost its clarity.' But then we take a cloth and we rub off the cream, and the clarity of the mirror is there. If the mirror has lost its clarity, where did it go to? Maybe it's frightened that winter is coming and it has gone to Tenerife?

This is very, very important because one big question people have is, 'Well, if my mind has always been clear, how come I'm a bit stupid?'

So you go to see a lama and he tells you that 'Ah, that is because your "real mind" is very clear. Unfortunately, you don't have your real mind – you've only got a "false mind".' And you politely respond, 'Oh, that is very helpful. Thank you, Rinpoche.' [Laughter]

So then you go to this buddha swap shop, you hand in your old mind, and they give you out a new mind. But it is not enough, your old mind; you need your old mind **plus** merit, then you exchange, and you get your new mind [Laughter].

But the view of dzogchen is not this. If the mirror becomes dirty and obscured, if we just breathe on it for a moment it becomes opaque. The clarity is there, but the secondary condition necessary for the revelation of the clarity, is not present. The clarity is not created or destroyed; it is not improved or reduced in any way. But if the secondary condition is not there, you will not see the clarity. This is not the same as with the grain of rice since when you plant the grain of rice, the seed is destroyed by the growing seedling.

This is essential to this understanding. And this is not abstract theory. This is not philosophy. This is a chance to understand your own nature. You do not have to become anything else, in order to be fully yourself.

In order to become a buddha you don't have to stop being a human being. Because on the level at which you become a buddha you have never been a human being. All gods and demons, all our possibilities, are illusory manifestations inside the mirror. What you identify with as being 'yourself' is a *reflection* in the mirror. Your real nature is the **mirror**! The reflection, which you are, is the quality of the arising of the mirror. You don't have to destroy, or change the reflection in the mirror. The task is simple: to relax and experience the non-duality of the mirror and the reflection. The reflection is both the clarity of its immediacy and the dynamism of its moment-by-moment revelation.

When we move in the world, we act and are acted on. All of this is occurring in the state of the mirror. That is why the Buddha said life is like a dream. Everything is there very precisely – but it is not solid. This building isn't solid. Our bodies aren't solid. This whole valley isn't solid. It's appearing and disappearing. Later you can stand outside and look at the setting sun over the valley. The valley will show itself as many different faces. Each of these faces is what the valley is showing. So which of these faces is the real one? You cannot know this valley – because you cannot catch the valley – because you live in time with the valley. You are moving, and the valley is moving, in a ceaseless unfolding.

So, from this point of view, what is really important is to build on what we've been looking at – letting go of our attachments, opening to our connection with others and starting to settle into the natural spaciousness of our being.

So we take a break now, meet at nine o'clock tomorrow, do some teaching, and practice until one o'clock. Then we will do a shared ganacakra. When we do our practice and study together, it's important to keep it close to you, but also to bring it out. We do this by dedicating the merit. We believe that study and practice of the dharma creates a quality of virtue, which is precious to us and involves respecting the value of what we do. We share this out with all sentient beings. We can do this by imagining rays of light move out from our heart, to all beings, so that we that hope that they get the benefit of all that we benefit from. And we bring them into our meditation when we practice. So we imagine that happening just now – all virtue and merit going out to all beings.

[Dedicating Merit]

The Three Points of Garab Dorje

As many of you know, the dzogchen teachings came into our world through Garab Dorje. Garab Dorje gave the key instruction for dzogchen from which all the different systems and methods have evolved. He expressed this in terms of three points, sometimes translated as **'three statements'**

The first point: pure from the very beginning

The first point is to be present in your own existence. One does this by waking up into one's own being. We do that through seeing the mind as it is. Not by seeing something as if it was far away, something other than ourselves, something distant, but rather as something that manifests directly.

So, the mind is described as being pure from the very beginning, as untouched, unconditioned by any manifestation. Our ordinary sense of self is always being touched and affected by manifestations. Somebody says, 'I like you' and we feel happy; somebody says, 'I hate you' and

we feel sad. That is to say, that when we enter into the world in our ordinary daily life, we enter it as someone with a particular character, a particular shape – and that this shape is constantly in reaction with other phenomena. But the mind itself is not this felt sense of self, which is continuously in reaction.

‘Pure from the beginning’, means awareness itself – the awareness of the situation in which one finds oneself – being happy, when praised and so on. Yesterday, we were looking at the metaphor of the mirror; the mirror itself is pure because no matter what the reflection is, the mirror’s capacity to be itself is not affected by that reflection. So when we say the mind is pure from the beginning, the key thing is, do not rest on whatever is arising

Usually our mind, our ordinary mind, is like a refugee. It has no visa, no passport, so it is looking for little places to hide. It can hide in a bus shelter, in a cave, in anything. This is how we come to fuse into the various things, which arise in our mind.

Working as a therapist, I meet people who hide the whole of their infinite potential in the identity of being useless, stupid and a waste of space. Why do people do that? Because we want to find a place where we can be safe, where there can be something definitive. But whatever conditioned state you identify with, sooner or later it shows itself to be impermanent, unreliable. And so once again, you have to find something to chase and to merge with. That is to say, in terms of our identity, we are always moving out towards manifestation; we think that we will find ourselves by merging with what is there.

As we have seen before, there are these two basic principles of stillness and movement. So the heart of the meditation practice in dzogchen is just to gently ease back into stillness, into spaciousness. Movement, or manifestation, is an aspect of our existence, but it is not the whole of it. If you try to find the whole in a part, you will get lost.

Story of Mullah Nasrudin

It’s very tempting to continue to do the kind of things that we do – because we know how to do them. There is a famous story of Mullah Nasrudin who loses his keys one evening on his way home. And he starts to look where the keys might be under the light that is coming out of somebody’s window. And one of his friends comes along and says, *‘Ah, Nasrudin, what are you doing here?’* He says, *‘Oh, I have lost my keys.’* So his friend says, *‘Oh, I will help you.’* Then they get down on the ground and they are searching everywhere. After a while the friend says, *‘This is very strange, if you lost your keys here, how come we can’t find them?’* And Nasrudin says, *‘Oh, well I didn’t lose them here, but this is where the light is.’* In the same way, ‘ourselves’ is spaciousness, but we look for it in terms of manifestation.

So when we say the mind is pure from the very beginning, it is an encouragement to let go of our obsession with the different values and qualities of manifestation and attend to the ground of that.

Fresh and naked

The mind is described as being fresh. Fresh means newly formed, not covered over. That is to say, the mind itself, its qualities, or awareness and wisdom, are not accumulations of experience. Rather, the clarity of the mind is available immediately out of its own radiant freshness. So one doesn’t need to build up knowledge in order to work out how one’s mind functions. It’s not like a psychological analysis or a psychotherapy, where gradually you build up a nuanced picture of somebody’s way of operating and how this has been developed. But rather, when we enter the practice, we do it by allowing habit and association and knowledge just to fall away, like taking the skin off an orange. When you do that, you get these little drops of orange juice shining into the air.

The mind is also described as naked – it's not covered by anything. Naked means essentially, there is no duality. We are very used to having a notion that we have a mind – although this grammatical formulation is rather dangerous. Because we know how to have hands, we know how to have a job, we know how to have a house, if we apply the same grammatical formulation as, 'I have a mind', it is as if the mind is the same kind of thing as a house, or a hand, or a job. But the mind is not a thing. It can't be located some place. It doesn't have a shape or a colour, and yet it is the basis for the manifestation of all shapes and colours. So when we try to find our mind as if it was a thing, we have to wrap it in something. And that wrapping in itself obscures the mind.

In the teaching of dzogchen, the mind is not like anything else. This is a general understanding in the other buddhist schools as well. In the *Prajnaparamita* literature, there is a verse of praise to Prajnaparamita, the transcendental wisdom. It begins MA SAM JO ME SHE RAB PA ROL CHIN, which translates as, '*Transcendental wisdom is beyond speech, thought, and expression.*' It is not an object of thought. We can think about politics, economics, we can think about pretty well everything we encounter, because the one who is thinking stands in a relation to that which is thought about. But who is the one who is thinking? That is the mind itself. When we turn to try to find the mind, we don't find a thing – that is a completely unusual kind of experience. So we tend to easily slip away from that and return to the confection, the elaboration of the mind as being 'some thing'.

In another famous verse, a prayer to the three modes of Guru Padmasambhava, it begins MA CHOE TROE DRAL LA MA CHOE KYI KU. MA CHOE means *un-contrived*, not made, not put together in any way. TROE DRAL means *free of limitation and* indicates that it's not some kind of structure, or juxtaposition of phenomena, which exist in the world.

Now many of the things, which in dzogchen would be regarded as being limitations, we regard as very useful functions. Because when we encounter something new, we try to make sense of it and we usually do that by trying to fit this new thing into our existing categories. Is it one thing? Is it many different things? This is what you see in all these science fiction movies, like *Alien* for example. There is an encounter with a radical other, it appears to be one thing, and people think, '*Ah, I know what it is.*' And then it transforms into something different and people become all very frightened again. This is just what we do; we want to get a map, we want to be able to make sense. We, as the subject, want to have power over the object.

But the mind itself is not an object you can have power over. The emptiness of the mind is not the emptiness that Africa used to be seen as, Africa, as a continent 'ripe' for colonial exploitation, where the masterful European people could make a German bit of Africa and a French bit and a Belgium bit and a British bit... But of course, Africa was there before the Europeans arrived. The Europeans were not very interested in Africa as it was then functioning. They were interested in gold and elephant horns and so on, and imposing their identity on the place they went to.

This highlights a very big problem in meditation: that we act like a colonialist. We want to take this open potential and put it into our frame of reference. The mind itself as naked is quite happy to be naked, but we become, in a way, like the anxious catholic, Savonarola. We want to go to these statues and put little coverings over their genitals – because naked is too scary. So when we say, '*the mind is naked*', it means not to take the energy of the mind itself (which we experience as the energy of our intelligence; our creativity) and try to turn it back on its own source, to cover the source.

When we relax into this open state of mind, it's free of guilt, it's free of shame, it's free of history – it's very fresh. Then from this state, many, many possibilities arise. All of samsara, all of nirvana, all the things that could possibly occur, are arising from this state of openness – as forms that are arising and passing. This is like the flow of reflections in a mirror. Then

from this flow of interactions, gestures occur. This is the energy through which we find ourselves in the world with others.

As we were looking yesterday, in this room at this moment when we look around, everything that we experience, all the other people, are reflections in the mirror of our mind. I am appearing in the mirror of your mind. You are appearing in the mirror of my mind. If you want to have a headache, you can think about whether there is only one mind, or many different minds. But really, we can see that immediately everything arises very fresh. And in being present with the reflection as it arises, gesture moves forward.

The reflection of someone appears in front of you. They may look a bit sad, and you ask, '*Oh, what is the matter?*' If they look quite happy you say, '*Oh you look so well today.*' These words, this flow of energy towards the other, is arising not from something inside a 'self' which is sealed off – but this is the gesturing, the compassionate connectedness of the ground itself.

So our nature is open, spontaneous, creative, and very precisely communicative. When we are not present in this state, we collapse into an individual self, which is not relaxed and open, but rather is a bit tight and self-defensive. It is not in touch with the open potential of the situation but instead it is protecting its own patch. Neither is it freely responsive, since it is moving between a habitual reactivity and an attempt at mastery and control. But all of these patterns of limitation are arising from the same ground nature. They don't come from anywhere else. It is not that there is one source for samsara and one source for nirvana. But rather we have a process of *miss*-taking what is actually there. And we *miss*-take it by over-focusing on particular aspects of manifestation.

Of course, this operates on a continuum. As human beings, sometimes we are relatively relaxed and open, we feel happy, we feel able to be easily with others, but I'm sure we're not always in that place. Sometimes we feel anxious, maybe socially anxious and we are not so at ease in ourselves when we meet other people. Sometimes we feel a bit depressed, a bit hopeless and not able to be in touch with much of what is going on.

These sort of situations can show us how the focus of our world can become smaller and smaller. These conditionings manifest through the body: if somebody is in an 'up', manic state, their body is likely to be moving differently to when they are in a depressed state. Their breathing will be different too. It's very rare for people to have a deep balanced diaphragm breath. A lot of the time people have quite shallow breath, quite a lot of rigidity in the abdomen, with a tendency either to hold the breath in or to hold the breath out. This affects the sort of gestures the body can make. It affects how the spine is held, which affects how the head is held, so affecting how the senses are available to the world. When people are very depressed, their eyes get a bit glazed over.

In these and many, many ways, moment-by-moment as our energy is changing, because we are not able to refresh ourselves in the openness of our ground nature, we are simply moving from one state to another, trying to find the remedy, or the medication, through a new kind of connection in the world of phenomena. Then when things go wrong we often feel we should try harder, that we should do more. People want to push themselves.

However, from the point of view of dzogchen this is not a helpful idea, because when we really understand our own nature, there is 'no-body' doing more and 'no-body' doing less. The nature of the mind, in being naked and fresh, is not an active participant. It is not a thing among things. When activity, when manifestation arises, this activity doesn't belong to anyone.

So I am talking just now and the words come out of me – but from where do they come into me, if they are going to go out of me? If I want to have a piss then I have to drink something first. If I stop drinking, after a while I won't be able to produce any piss. We can see there is a

simple cause and effect situation there. But is the mind operating like that? Is my mind some kind of bladder? *[Laughter]*

Things arise out of emptiness, we speak out of emptiness. We don't need to think. I say something, and then Sylvester is translating. When Sylvester is talking, I don't have any thoughts in my head. If I try to think what I'm going to say, then I'll forget what I've just said. So it is just coming – the body is just moving – we have to trust emptiness.

If I think, *'Oh, it is all up to me, what will I do?'* then I would become anxious because I wouldn't know what I am going to do. How could I know what I am going to do in advance of meeting you? Because the words arise fresh according to the situation. My words come to me through your face. Without your face, I wouldn't have the words; they don't come from a little storehouse inside. This is to live with the openness of our existence. Out of the many possible things that could be said, something arises...

Some of these things I am saying are more helpful for some people than for others – maybe some things are not very helpful for anyone, but life is always like that. You can't make it perfect because it is a dynamic interaction. The fantasy that you can control interaction and contact with others, as if it was the same as working in a laboratory where you can control the preparation of a specimen, is a very big error.

Because, for each of us to be awake, we can only be awake as ourselves – and inside that you have liking, not liking, hopes, fears, interest, not-interest and so on. So your active aliveness and my active aliveness meet together, and the possibility is that by having more space in ourselves and trusting the spaciousness of others, we can all be alive together.

Which means to be with others, is to attend to how they manifest. But that attention is again following the middle way. We are not attending to others as if they were radically other and had no connection with us. Nor are we attending to others as if they were really aspects of ourselves. When we experience ourselves and others as reflections in the mirror, we are both completely the same in having the same ground nature of emptiness, and each uniquely different in the precise mode of our manifestation, gesturing, beliefs, bodily capacity and so on.

So in dzogchen we are concerned with relaxing, opening and staying fresh. Generally speaking, people like to relax in an armchair or on the sofa, but here we relax on the meditation cushion, because we want relaxation to be linked with clarity. Often people have to pull up, or push up, a lot of clarity in their working day. They have to stay 'on the job' but then when they go home, *'Aah, I'm so tired, I'm wrecked, I don't want to do anything'*; and they relax – but they relax without clarity. So, we want to practice bringing clarity into relaxation.

[Question about emptiness and psychotherapy](#)

Question: Working out of emptiness, how does it affect a therapist's work? Does it make it different?

James: I think it can happen on many different levels. Let's take a general psychotherapy view. Developmentally, babies need to be really welcomed into the world. What gets in the way of that welcome is if the parents – particularly the mother who is usually the main caregiver – is preoccupied in some way. So in a sense, the optimal condition for a small baby, is an empty and yet present spaciousness in the mother. If the mother is too much in emptiness, then she won't be there for the baby. If she is too busy, if she is too anxiously involved, that is not going to help the baby either. So in terms of the reparative function of psychotherapy, if the therapist can be relaxed and present and open, I think that helps to give the patient, perhaps for the first time in their life, a sense that there is really an open space for them to move inside.

Many kinds of therapy would say that one should be non-judgemental in one's approach to the patient – and yet of course, responses are happening all the time. So if there is an understanding of the emptiness of one's own mental experience or processes, instead of blocking one's thoughts, feelings, counter-transference reactions and so on, one just gives space to them, so that they are coming and going, whilst one's focused attention is with the presence of the patient.

In the dzogchen teachings, they describe three meditation experiences that can arise. One of these is non-thought. It doesn't mean that you have no thoughts in your head; it means that thoughts have lost their sticky quality, which causes you to be deflected and moved in your opinion.

Freud talked of the analyst having a free-floating attention; however, I notice that when we try to meditate we find that it is very difficult to have this free-floating attention. Our attention tends to be selective; we tend to get hooked on to particular aspects of what is going on in the process. So emptiness is a very good way of developing the capacity for free-floating attention.

Again, the idea of the patient free-associating is difficult when they feel persecuted by internal or external critics. So the more we can see the real emptiness of whatever is arising in ourselves and in others, the more tension, friction, demand and conflict will subside and there will be a possibility of more collaboration.

This question is essentially asking, *'What does it mean to respect the potential of a patient?'* Because, from a buddhist point of view, all of us, including patients *and* their therapists, are deluded. We believe that we are who we are not. We don't recognise that we are who we are. So many patients are trying to convince us to take their neuroses, their psychoses seriously. They say, *'This is who I really am.'* Through an understanding of emptiness, one can open to an appreciation of the unlimited nature of the person we are with, and at the same time have an empathic attunement that allows us to get a real sense of the limiting structures that they are caught up in.

It is a bit like with a small child, who becomes very insistent on saying, *'I'm not going to bed.'* The child is tired and the energy of their resisting going to bed is the energy of their tiredness, and so they have sort of lost themselves. They have misunderstood their own situation. You could just pick them up and take them into the bedroom, but that will often make the child even more angry and agitated because it feels shamed. So one has to find a way to allow the child, with dignity, to let go of the position that it has got itself trapped in.

It is the same in therapy. One of the difficulties I find in my practice is when patients who have been caught up in something for a long time, come to realise the historically contingent, circumstantial nature of the neurotic world they have been living in – when the door to some more freedom is there, open in front of them – they feel stupid and ashamed that they could never find this door before.

So I think, for me, working with emptiness means working with expansion and contraction. The way our attention in the world is moving is like the waves of the ocean; we invest things with value and then we divest them of value. But because we are very addicted to manifestation, the tilt of our energy is out towards investment and we often don't know how to step back. It is as if retreat is failure, rather than retreat being a creative gesture that then allows one to move into something else. And that is especially true if one thinks, *'I really believed in that! How could I have been so wrong?'* So if one can have a sense of emptiness as we listen to the story, we hear the intensity of the energy, the investment, the libido, the narrative, whilst at the same time hearing it as an empty fantasy.

All the mistakes people have made, all the bad things they have done, the bad things that other people have done to them, have already gone, but we are marked because we exist in a

plastic form. Yesterday the children here were making little elephants out of clay. And as long as the clay is moist, you can move it and change it into something else. But if you keep the clay for a while, it will dry out. If you fire it with the heat of your attachment, your anger, your desire and so on, then it is also very difficult to change.

So, part of what we are trying to do is to use emptiness to cool the therapeutic session. This is not to say that what is being told is irrelevant, because we cannot change the past – but to try to keep the event and the intensity of the investment as two separate streams. The event that seemed to be ‘you’, either something you did, or something that happened to you, is gone. Yet the *investment* you put into it is yours – it will always be yours.

If you fall in love with a bastard, somebody who really messes up your life, if you feel that your love is left with that person, then it can become something poisonous. You might feel stupid and destroyed inside. However, one can learn to take that energy back into oneself.

The energy of our nature is like a ball of rainbow light, it has no cracks or corners. It does not get caught; it doesn’t break. But when we are operating from attachment, it is as if we become fragmented; we get broken up and bits of us get located in various places. People say, ‘*I give you my heart.*’ Why? [*Laughter*] Because the heart goes out and the heart comes back in. It’s going ‘bub bum, bub bum’ all the time – systolic, diastolic, systolic, diastolic...

So the energy that appears to be out in the world, is actually always available to take back into ourselves. If we are made up of things, like a watch, and we give it to someone else, ‘*Please have my watch*’ now the watch belongs to the other person. This happens very visibly at divorce proceedings. But the energy of the heart, our life energy, is not a thing. So when we have a very solid, alienated, neurotic, sense of life energy, of love, of jealousy and so on, we feel broken into pieces. But because emptiness is infinite, it gives us the space to collect together all of the parts of ourselves.

This is why in the meditation, when we do the three ‘Aa’ practice we release all the blockages, interruptions, internal object relations and so on, just to have an open space. The we integrate our energy with something that is complete.

And I think that is mainly what patients are coming for. They want to be *re-* remembered: to be brought together, so that they become intact again. They want to become virgin again. This idea of the nature of the mind as pure, fresh, naked, this is a virginal quality. The therapist is holding for the person the truth that ‘*No matter what has happened to you, no matter what has been done, your nature remains pure, remains fresh.*’ These bad things that have occurred, these are energetic disturbances that the patient can learn to balance and manage; but they don’t define their real nature, or their potential. So briefly, I think that’s what emptiness brings for me into the practice.

Of course, that can be applied to working in a shop, working in a bank, being a schoolteacher and so on, because all of our work involves communication with others. The central thing is to be able to distinguish clearly between description, reification and judgement. So in whatever occupation we do, if we are a parent, or looking after small children, whatever it is, we can practice trying to give simple clear descriptions of what is occurring. Because what occurs is an occurrence, it is something dynamic and moving in time. If we reify it, if we add an internal essence to what we are describing, it becomes much more heavy. And then once you have that solid sense of ‘that person is like that’, or ‘that restaurant is like that’, or ‘that colleague is like that’, it becomes very easy to pile judgements on top of it.

So, are there any other questions?

Question: About the meditation: subject and the object arise simultaneously. Does it mean that as long as there is an object, there is also a subject? So, just being with whatever arises – this is my object, and am I then in the subject position?

James: Right. Sylvester and I shall now demonstrate this. [*Sylvester is the translator and they both now stand up and have the following conversation*].

James: ‘Ah, hello Sylvester, how are you?’

Sylvester: ‘Hello James, I am quite fine, thank you.’

James: ‘Mmm, good to meet you.’

So subject is meeting object – yes? But I know I am meeting the object, and I know I am here – so I have an awareness of the subject and I have an awareness of the object. But I might be a little bit unaware and the conversation might be off-key. We are talking about something but I am not aware of the whole situation.

For example, I think probably in Austria and Germany people are more polite, but in London – particularly in the financial part of the city where people make a lot of money very quickly – you can see how people drink a lot of champagne and the talk keeps getting louder and louder. So there may be four people talking and it is as though the other people in the bar are not there. So here, the subjects have no awareness of the total field. There is consciousness which is enmeshed with the object, so that the subject and the object are now fused together, but there is no over-arching awareness. So awareness always includes the environment that you are in.

Another example is a ballet school where one wall is usually made of mirror, since the first thing that the dancer has to learn is that their proprioception, their internal felt sense of the line of the body, is not reliable. You have the same thing if you go to a yoga class. You may think that you are in the posture correctly, but then the teacher comes and points out that actually you are not aligned; and they adjust your posture. So in that way, the subjectivity is locking onto the object, whether it’s an external object, or taking our own body as the object. Doing that means you can’t really see what’s going on. It takes a long time for a dancer to, at the same time, be fully in their movement whilst also being aware of the stage.

When actors talk about each other, they will describe some other actors as being ‘generous’. A generous actor is one who sees the whole stage, who sees what their colleagues in the play are doing; so that if one of their colleagues is not doing too well they may well pull back and give them a bit more space, or come in to support them more. They do this because they want the success of the play. However, another actor, who is more narcissistic, will think that the collapse of the other actor, gives him or her more space to show themselves.

It is the same with our practice: we try to hold the living quality of the environment, and of ourselves, and value both. Our awareness is the space that welcomes ourselves and others equally – in the mahamudra tradition this is called *ro chik* [Tib. ro gcig], or *one taste* – and at the same time, we attend to imbalances in what is going on in the situation.

So the key thing is to let go of attachment to ourselves as the central figure, and re-centre ourselves in emptiness; and out of emptiness, which is our infinite real nature, we show this particular form in relation to the other forms which are there. Awareness is personal in the sense, ‘*it’s my presence*’, but it is not personal in the sense that, ‘*it doesn’t belong to me and I can’t catch it.*’ Out of this, our individual subjectivity in relation to other people’s subjectivity, or other objects in the world, manifests a particular energetic intention.

Although this subjectivity is not an identity, it is a way of communicating. Because as we looked at early this weekend, how we come into being is determined by our relation with the experiential field. From the point of view of being an individual subject, the experiential field

is something in front of one that one moves toward. But from the point of view of the real nature, from the integration of awareness and emptiness, the experiential field is infinite in all directions. It is behind one, through one, including one and all beings. So you cannot go towards or away from the experiential field because you are always already within it. We cannot choose to participate or not. We are always participating.

I used to do quite a lot of drama therapy and we would always say to the patients, *'Oh, if you don't feel like engaging today, you can just sit on the side.'* Of course, when they do sit on the side looking at what is happening, they get a lot of feelings from what is going on. Even if they say, *'I don't want to be in the room.'* and storm out, when they go out they are still thinking of what was going on in the room; and the people in the room are thinking of them. So the sphere of participation has just widened.

This is such an essential point, because it's the point where we so often lose any clarity we may have. We should try not to lean forward into our subjectivity, but remain centred so that we participate in the world, without falling into it. We do not have to change our subjectivity; we don't have to alter our personality, to become another kind of person. Just not be over-identified with our personality as if it defines who we really are.

In lots of different ways we have been looking at how our personality is not ours. It is not some innate possession; it is developed historically due to causes and circumstances, our family and so on, and it will change and develop through the course of our life.

Student: I had an experience – I went to a zen temple some years ago and I had a very hard and strong meditation, it was really too much for me, this one experience I had. Two years ago, after doing several other practices, I started again to meditate. I started with three minutes, five minutes, then seven minutes, but as I understand it, this is too much laziness, and now I have to do more. But I don't want to come to this situation again where I do too much. Some peace would be nice.

James: There are various ways of doing this. The way we approach a practice can, in some systems of buddhist practice, be determined by the practice itself, not by the practitioner. There are other systems in which it is determined primarily by the state of the practitioner.

Say for example, you are doing mindfulness practice, or shamata, just observing the breath, generally people work up to sitting for quite long periods. When they start to feel this is too much, or this is too difficult, they take their attention back onto the focus of meditation. This is what you were experiencing in the zen way of sitting. In these systems, they say: here is your buddha nature, here is the meditation situation, and in-between there is the obscuration. In your heart, there is this gold but it is surrounded by thick rock. The Buddha is a mining engineer and the meditation is a diamond bit, so keep drilling. But of course, it is drilling into *you*. The structure of these practices is like that and it suits some people's personality but not other's.

Generally, these are in the sort of heroic style, like for example when Bodhidharma crossed the sea to China. He is sitting meditating but he gets tired and his eyes start closing, so he takes a knife and he cuts off his eyelids. He is now really, really, determined. And then this student comes to see him and is waiting respectfully behind the teacher. The teacher is looking at the wall as if, *'You are so unimportant I prefer to look at the wall.'* The student makes a little coughing sound, rattles some little gold coins, but nothing works. So the student recognises, *'Ah ha, now I too need to get a knife.'* and he cuts off his arm and gives it Bodhidharma. Then Bodhidharma starts to teach him.

But here we do not do like that! *[Laughter]*.

We have to work with our feelings at the same time as not being trustful of our feelings. Our capacity to cheat ourselves is very great. The simplest way of trying to deal with this is to institute some rules, some laws – a discipline. If we decide that is not the best path because it's too crude, then we need to practice awareness. I would suggest, however, that it cannot be a naive awareness.

If you are going to practice when it feels appropriate, and practice different kinds of practice according to your felt capacity, I think it would very helpful first of all to write an essay entitled ***How I cheat myself***. You could think about all the different situations in your life, with other people, with yourself; how you might cheat them; what funny business you can do; how you can pretend, and so on.

It is not a case of thinking, *'Oh, this is a very bad situation, I should do some purification and try to get rid of this.'* Rather we should think that these are the 'tricksy' ways my own intelligence tries to find a quick way home. So whenever you notice you are avoiding doing practice for a long time, you have to think, what is the function of this? Is it that, *'Actually, to balance the five elements, to increase the strength of the muscles around my spine, to open myself, it is much better to go walking in the mountains and after I have refreshed myself in that way, then I will do the meditation'*? But if I have a history of avoidance, I may have to think, *'Mmm, this is probably not the case.'* Because having had my holiday, I come home, and now there are so many letters to write and so many things I have to do. So if I do these first, then I can do the meditation... Then and then and then... there is always something.

Generally speaking, we should try to have a meditation that has something for the body, something for the mind, and something for the voice. And I think if you have a clear sense of how the different practices work with these, then rather than posing the question, *'Should I do practice, or not?'* we should think, *'Which kind of practice will I do?'*

If, for example you have been doing a lot of intellectual work and then do some subtle meditation, like sitting and doing the three 'Aa's followed by examining, *'Where does the mind come from? Where does the mind rest?'* that is probably not a good idea, because you have been overusing the cognitive aspect of yourself. It would be better to do some prostrations. But if you have been painting in the house, or gardening, or doing a lot of cooking, then that activity can be energising. Even though it is tiring, it's not deeply exhausting. At a time like that it can be good to do the three 'Aa's followed by examining the mind.

So I think each of us needs to examine our situation and explore the practices that we know to decide what the best practice is for us at a particular time.

The second point: to not remain in doubt

Now I will say a little bit more about the other two points of Garab Dorje, to bring that to a completion. Then we will do some meditation and bring the teaching part of our time together to an end. After that, for those who like, we will have some food, in a ritual way together.

So the second point of Garab Dorje is: ***to not remain in doubt***. This means to go deeply into the practice, to take all your doubts into the practice and not to hold them apart from the practice. Talking about practice, especially talking to yourself about it, often doesn't help. This is because, especially with dzogchen practice, it takes it into a cognitive domain – and it is not cognitive.

So not remaining in doubt means whatever situation arises, apply relaxed open presence. Whenever you come to a conclusion, *'This kind of practice doesn't work for me, it is too difficult, I can never get enlightened.'* and so on, don't take this conclusion too seriously. Stay present with it. Even though it appears to be the absolute truth of your existence, if you stay present

with it, it will vanish and your presence will be there – maybe in a very weak form – maybe immediately mixed up and covered over with something else. You then apply that again and again and again.

Buddha Shakyamuni said that all arising things are passing things. Whatever has a beginning has an end. Thoughts come into manifestation; they have a beginning, and so they will pass out of manifestation. They will vanish from your mind.

Consciousness, as it is directly experienced, has a beginning. If we are sitting here quietly, and then the farmer next door starts to spread pig shit on the field, our sense of smell will suddenly become very active. The smelling consciousness will come into presence. If that didn't happen, it would be as if there were no nasal consciousness. So, consciousness arises and passes, arises and passes. But awareness itself has no content. It's not a *thing*, it doesn't come into existence.

This is the litmus test – this is the touchstone for seeing what is happening in your mind. Whatever is occurring with your experience, if it is vanishing, it is not your real nature. This is why we have these questions: *'What is the nature of the mind? Does it have a colour? Does it have a shape? Where does it come from? Where does it stay? Where does it go?'* Then we find that there is no solid thing that you can grasp on to. Because, for example, you might have a solution, *'Oh, my mind is in my head.'* But then that thought goes by, and you are still here, and what appeared to be the perfect solution has now dissolved. In that way, it functions similarly to the zen way of working with koans.

So, do not build your house on sand. Don't try to make your true identity on the basis of impermanent phenomena. But don't try to push away these impermanent phenomena as if they were a demon or something bad; because these impermanent phenomena are all manifestations of your own mind. If you stay close to the manifestation, you are not far from their mother.

These manifestations are the fruit of emptiness and they are operating in emptiness. So in the very moment you are doing the practice, when you find yourself thinking, *'I can't do this, this is stupid.'* this thought is arising in emptiness. It passes. You were aware of it being present and passing, but your awareness was tilted towards it and mixed with some passion, some emotional feeling. When that happens, just gently relax; tilt back a little, just a little bit more space. Don't try to change the thought. It will go by itself.

The one who is aware of the thought, is not a thought. It is there, but not there as a thing. That's what we want to recognise, but we have to let go of our frame of reference. We have to drop the mind. So don't remain in doubt, just keep doing the practice.

[The third point: to continue in this way](#)

The third statement of Garab Dorje says: **to continue in this way**. This means, don't imagine that there is anything better than this. Our world is full of wonderful bright shiny things, but these bright shiny things are not necessarily helpful. One of the functions of our existence is boredom. To stay with the same thing going on, going on, that can feel quite tedious. The excitement of a new kind of meditation practice, or something that will be different and exciting, that is very powerful. But these things that we encounter, these are objects, which are arising and passing.

In dzogchen we integrate the ground of manifestation – the clarity of the mirror which reveals the potentiality of manifestation – and the ceaseless flow of gestures, which is the interactive communication of manifestation.

You can look everywhere, but I don't think you will find anything more than this. The texts always say: ***In all the teachings of all the Buddhas, you won't find anything, which is outside of this.***

OK, so maybe now we do the 'Three Aa' practice to bring this teaching to an end.

Transcribed by Sarah Allen
Edited by Barbara Terris