
At Home in Emptiness

JAMES LOW

Teaching at Drzewo Życia Centre, Szczecin, Poland, 7-8 May 2009

Translated and transcribed by Bartek Czajkowski

Edited by Sarah Allen and James Low

Excerpts

“...The Buddha’s teachings are radical, disturbing—they turn our world upside-down and shift the basis of who we think we are. Everything that we know, everything that we’re connected with is still here, but we start to see it differently. If we focus on the difference we will feel disturbed, which is why reflecting on impermanence is an important preparatory practice, for the more we see impermanence as the natural state of affairs, the more we see that relying on phenomena to provide a true refuge is not wise...”



“...There is continuity, but it is a continuity of change. Since we were children everything has changed in our lives. Our thoughts and feelings have changed so often, the shapes of our bodies have changed, the kinds of activities we do have changed. So what is the continuity of our identity? It is some sort of felt sense of ‘here-I-am’, but here I am as what? As this in the morning, and as that in the afternoon ... The content of ‘what I am’ and ‘how I am’ is changing, changing, and changing...”



*“...Recognising the empty nature of everything including ourselves is **wisdom**, for it frees us from false attribution and allows us to experience what is occurring without involvement, attachment or bias. Experiencing form as inseparable from emptiness is **compassion** for we see how sentient beings **mis-take** illusory forms to be substantial entities and through this generate great suffering for themselves.*



“... We don’t look at the world the way a camera takes an impression. We look at the world through our values, our beliefs and assumptions, our likes and dislikes. Something may be very attractive to some people and not very attractive to others. We don’t simply say “I like this cheese” which would indicate our relationship to it, but we say “This is a really good cheese”. In this way the ‘goodness’ seems to be inherent in the object. However for someone else it might be a very ‘bad’ cheese. Our ‘truth’ is only an opinion, is only the view from here...”



*“...The root of who we are is awareness inseparable from emptiness, and this is the basis for the flow of our experience all the time. If we can settle into this awareness, we will find that it is more reliable than any friend. Whenever you look for your mind, it will be there. But you won’t find it as any-**thing**. All the friends whom you find as some-**thing** will come and go. As the Buddha said, “Friends become enemies, and enemies become friends”. We can go through life telling ourselves stories about how the world is in order to make our world feel safe but this is merely to fall asleep in illusion. The only unchanging refuge is our own nature...”*



Relax into your own ground, the natural perfection of your own presence. Experience its limitless infinity and see directly that it is the ground, source and field of all experience. This is your home territory... this is where you belong... so why not relax and enjoy it?

Contents

Dependent co-origination	1
Exploring how things are empty of inherent self-nature	2
Distinguishing opinions from facts	3
Exploring tantra	6
Being willing to let go of all our constructs	6
Dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya.....	7
A tantric meditation practice	9
Ending your love affair with your own thoughts.....	10
Questions and answers	12
Guruyoga helps us develop a sense of the open spaciousness of mind.....	14
<i>Kadag and lhundrup</i> –indestructible and unceasing.....	17
Three qualities of energy: <i>dang</i> [crystal ball], <i>rolpa</i> [mirror] and <i>tsal</i> [rock crystal]	18

Dependent co-origination

On the path to awakening key questions are: “*Who am I?*” and “*Who are you?*” As long as we rest in the certainty of knowing the answer is “*This is me*” and “*This is you,*” then we won’t enquire further. We happily become sealed into the limited world of our assumptions. It then becomes very difficult to remain open and connected to the world in its continual unfolding. For example, in India there are many street dogs, often very thin and unhealthy. Also in India there are not so many toilets and so people often shit at the side of the road. When a street dog sees some of this nice, hot, fresh shit it becomes very excited, wags its tail and eats it very quickly. We call it ‘shit’ but the dog knows that it is ‘lunch’. That is to say, if you sit in the box of your own beliefs then you will know the meaning of everything according to your own point of view. When you look outside this box you can see that there are many different points of view, many different ways of seeing what is there. Everything is relative. What we experience depends on our way of viewing, our perception.

Seeing that this is the case. we start to relax the dogmatism embedded in our fixed beliefs. Thus we come to see the contingent nature of events, their interdependent origination. When an event occurs, it arises on the basis of the interaction of many different causal factors. When we are in a situation it seems as though it exists in itself, that it is just itself. It appears to be complete in itself just as it is. We tend to be taken in by this, captivated, seduced into the seeming givenness of the moment. However, each moment rests on and is generated by many threads of causation which link in all directions. If you follow these threads you start to see that this whole world is connected and that the idea of there being individual entities, separate people, separate countries, activities, and so on, is a delusion.

For example, we had a walk in the city this morning and looked at the buildings. We could see that during the communist period many of the ornamentalations on the front of the buildings had been taken off. This occurred due to certain notions of architecture needing to be simple, since functionalism was deemed to guarantee equal benefit to all people. Bourgeois ornamentation was seen as an attack on the entitlement of all the people to a reasonable way of life, yet these ornaments had been previously put on the buildings by people who had thought that such ornamentation was very nice. Nowadays, after the communist period, people are again putting bourgeois ornamentation back onto the buildings. In this way, when you walk down the street the history of the city shows how different visions, different belief systems make certain aspects manifest, grow up, and then fall down. In this way our world is created by a connection between belief, mobilisation of resources, and action, all of which operate in time. When you see a building that has survived from the past, this is a building which up until now, has not manifested the causes of its destruction. Yet sooner or later it will come down. When we look at a building it seems to be there. It is there, and yet it is only there due to the fact that the factors which keep it standing are still in place. It is a very helpful practice to keep looking at the causes and conditions operating in the world around us. Then, again and again, we can see that what we take to be solid and real is mere appearance, an illusion conjured up by many different factors.

Exploring how things are empty of inherent self-nature

The co-emergence of all the aspects of the field of experience leads us into the Buddha's teaching on emptiness. Emptiness means empty of inherent self-nature. Appearances are neither truly real nor nothing at all, but are aspects of the field devoid of their own individual essence. Emptiness is not explored in order to obtain intellectual knowledge. Rather we seek to have direct experience of emptiness in order to free ourselves from delusion and all that proceeds from it.

The different buddhist vehicles or methods are presented in terms of four factors: the view, the meditation, the activity and the result. The view is a reading of how the world and we ourselves are structured. The view we hold determines the dynamic of the meditation—the actual practice which brings about change. There are many different views within the buddhist tradition. In the nyingmapa tradition they are organised as nine vehicles, each of which is like a paradigm. When we experience the world and ourselves from within these particular views, we are introduced to different ways of being in the world. The contingency of experience is revealed, helping to loosen our fixation on being just this particular person.

For example, the first, most outer level of buddhist views, indicates that our world is rather dangerous, that distraction is rather dangerous, and therefore we should practice focusing our attention and avoid being distracted. There is a lot at stake, and so we strive to be in control and therefore seek to avoid or renounce the outer and inner events that could catch us. However from the view of emptiness there is nothing solid that we can grasp, and even the one who might do the grasping is viewed as insubstantial. With this view, meditation is a method to enable us to see everything as if it were an illusion. The Buddha gave many examples to illustrate this, saying that our lives are like the morning mist, like the reflection of the moon on water, like a mirage. That is to say, whatever appears to be the case has no substance underlying it, is mere appearance.

For example, here we have a cushion. We understand how cushions are made: we have cloth on the outside and some kind of packing in the middle. If we carefully took out the thread we would have some long lines of thread, some pieces of cloth, and some padding – but we wouldn't have a

cushion. Then if we threaded a needle and sewed the parts back together, we would have a cushion again. When we had the thread, the filling, and the cloth, where was the cushion? When you take these three factors and put them together, who adds ‘the cushion’? What is the cushion-ness of the cushion? What is this mystically added ingredient? By simply having these three things together in a particular order, it creates a cushion, or at least the illusion of a cushion that we are ready to believe in. If you want the cushion you say *“Please give me the cushion”*. You don’t say *“Please give me this amazing construction of thread, cloth and filling”*. Everybody knows it’s a cushion! But what is the cushion? Cushion is a name. Cushion is a concept. So although we say ‘cushion’, there is no cushion-ness in the cushion. The cushion is produced by the meeting together of what is in my hand and what is in my mind. Without the concept of cushion, what would this be? It could be a very clumsy frisbee for throwing in the park. It could be a hat. It could be whatever you like. But we call it a cushion. In this way the name and the shape fit together, and when they fit together, they create something seamless. It is as if the word dissolves into the object and becomes identical with it. But, of course, there are different words for ‘cushion’.

In Poland you have a different word dissolving into the object. Therefore, if this was really a ‘cushion’, you wouldn’t have to have a Polish word for it; you would just automatically know that it is a ‘cushion’. The use of language itself develops due to causes and conditions—the sophistication of the family, the quality of teaching in the school, and so on. But once we are able to speak our language easily we take it for granted that when we use a word to describe something, the word and the object described by the word are somehow the same.

The Buddha is pointing out that whatever appears is an illusion, and that usually we don’t see what is going on. We have fallen asleep into our language so that we see the object as existing in itself. However, without our mind applying the identification ‘this is a cushion’, and displaying our particular reaction to it—either neutral, positive or negative—this object wouldn’t be how it is for you now. It would not be the object you experience. As soon as there is an object—be it a cushion or a cup or whatever—we also have a relation with it, a reaction to it.

Distinguishing opinions from facts

We don’t look at the world the way a camera takes an impression. We look at the world through our values, through our beliefs and assumptions, our likes and dislikes. Therefore the shape of this object, the cushion, may be very attractive to some people and not be very attractive to others. That is to say, the qualities of our own past associations, our experiences of life, are projected—are put into the object—so that we don’t simply say *“I like this cushion”* which would indicate our relationship to the cushion, but rather we say *“This is a really good cushion”*. In this way the ‘goodness’ of this cushion seems to be in the cushion, to be inherent in it. However for someone else it might be a very ‘bad’ cushion. Our ‘truth’ is only an opinion, is only the view from here. This is how our mind usually works.

“If I know that something is good, then I know that the goodness is a property of the object. And because that is true, if you don’t agree with me, then you are wrong. The thing about me is that all my opinions are true”. This is the ego speaking. It sits on its throne and says, *“I speak the truth. I see the truth. I know the truth. How fortunate a person I am!”* But, of course, this itself is only an opinion, and the holder of that opinion is itself just an opinion. Yet this mere opinion when projected into the object, seals it as a truly self-existing entity. *“This is a good cushion, anyone can see that, and if you don’t agree that is because you don’t know anything about cushions!”* This

creates even more sense of separation between object and subject, since it is taken to be a fact and not an opinion that the cushion is good. In this way, subject and object *appear* to be separate domains.

However, if we step back a little, and say *"I like this cushion, to me it seems good"*, we are beginning to describe the relationship aspect of our being in the world with objects. We can begin to see that subject and object are dynamically linked together, and that we cannot separate who we are from our felt experience of the cushion. We could take this further and say *"OK, I accept that the cushion as not good in itself because I can see that some people don't like it"*. In respecting their opinion I come to see that my 'truth' is also only an opinion. This starts to put the ego's bid for certainty into question.

If I am the owner of the cushion, I might say, *'This is my cushion,'* yet it wasn't mine before I bought it, and when I die it will belong to someone else. It is only mine temporarily and due to certain circumstances. I can say it is dark blue, and this is an identification of a colour. Yet what that blue means to me depends on my history, and also, I can never really know what this object looks like to you. We might all agree that it is blue but our own visual consciousness, and our own associations to blue will give rise to our uniquely different experiences. Blue is actually a relationship for it will appear to change if we take the object outside into the bright sunlight. In fact we experience ourselves and the object arising together, and this is influenced by many, many factors, both internal and external.

No phenomena are self-existing. Everything we encounter, including ourselves, arises due to causes and circumstances. Many people, when they are grown up, forget that they were ever children. When I work in the hospital seeing patients for psychotherapy, they often raise this question *"Why do you ask me all these questions about my childhood? My problems relate to my life now! I am just me, as I am. I am what I am and this is my life"*. However if we are truly as we are now, then there is nothing to be done—nothing can change or get better. If you are depressed and that is what you truly are then you can be nothing other than depressed. But actually you are depressed due to causes and conditions. If you understand the causes and conditions of being depressed, and you change them, then you'll be less depressed. So when somebody says *"I'm depressed"*, this is only half a sentence. The full sentence could be *"I am depressed because in my childhood nobody loved me, nobody cared for me and I felt lonely and sad. And because of this I have made many unhelpful choices in my life that have led to me being isolated and confused, and so I remain depressed"*. However, often the person is so accustomed to their experience that each time a new uprising of depression comes, the person identifies with it and thinks *"Yeah, this is just me, it's always been like that for me"*. This experience which is arising now appears to tell me the eternal truth about who I am: *"I am depressed, just that!"* And so it feels as if there is nothing to be done!

Understanding causality is a vital first step to freedom since it reveals the dynamic nature of all experience and frees us from the prison of reification. The function of therapy is to help the patient get a sense of the causal forces operating on their situation, and by this to have a broader perspective so they can see more of the world. Take for example a person experiencing depression. Once they begin to see how it manifests, and observe how they support it internally, by keeping hold of negative thoughts, and support it externally, through a very limited selective attention to the environment, then the state that appears to be fixed is revealed to be dynamic.

The same view can be applied to the cup I have here in front of me. The cup-ness of the cup is dynamic. That is to say, the cup is an experience and not a thing that exists due to some fixed essence itself. The notion of such an essence is a construct of our own mind. The immediacy of perceiving the cup is an experience; it is the fruit of the relation between subject and object. The cup is not a thing out there that we see but is an experience revealed through the participation of our mind in the field of becoming.

When we stop seeing fixed, separate, definite entities, we start to experience the world moment-by-moment as very dynamic, very alive, very connected, for 'we' are participants in this movement of change. We start to experience that subject and object are dynamic and moving together. Our life is a constant flow of experience. But we make sense of it to ourselves by telling ourselves another kind of story, one based on reification and the ascribing of seemingly fixed attributes to all we encounter.

This is something you can start to explore for yourselves. For example, here I have a bottle of water. As I turn it around, I can see different things as the various labels are revealed. You might say "*Ah, it's always the same bottle of water however you turn it. It only looks different because it has different labels stuck around it*". This indicates our habit of not trusting our *per*-ception but rather we trust our *con*-ception. We know that this is a bottle of water and we take each perception as the bottle turns, to be showing us the same bottle of water. The bottle is an idea, a concept in our mind. We don't see a bottle of water, we see shape and colour. We invent a water bottle when we look at the shape and colour and organise it into a familiar object by applying names and concepts.

This is what is meant by the emptiness of the water bottle. If you understand this, you will see that your own mind is constructing abstract forms and then taking the abstract to be the actual. It is not that there is nothing there, but rather that what is there is created moment-by-moment by our participation, a participation that does not even register in our everyday consciousness. The object doesn't exist because everything that you see is just that moment of appearance—there is no *real* water bottle. And yet it does exist because it manifests within the web of our interpretation. That is, we feel its weight, we know or infer there is water in it, and we can open it and drink the water. The tangibility and the ungraspability of the water bottle are present simultaneously. In the buddhist tradition this is referred to as the non-duality of form and emptiness.

Recognising the empty nature of everything including ourselves is *wisdom* for it frees us from false attribution and allows us to experience what is occurring without involvement, attachment or bias. Experiencing form as inseparable from emptiness is *compassion* for we see how sentient beings *mis*-take illusory forms to be substantial entities and through this generate great suffering for themselves. All this unnecessary pain and suffering touches us more and more as we recognise the inseparability of self and others. Truly others are our world and what affects them affects us.

You can explore this by imagining meeting someone for the first time, and thinking about how you would introduce yourself. What would you say? Probably you would say something that was true, but is it meaningful? You might say "*I live in this town*". What does that mean for you? Again, it is only half-a-sentence. "*I live in this town and I hate it*". That too is only half-a-sentence. "*I live in this town, and I hate it, but sometimes it's not so bad...*" That is to say, when we start to describe our experience and go into the details we find that our narrative doesn't go in a straight line. It goes this way and that way, for language is part of the unfolding movement of our experience. Although it appears to do so, language cannot establish anything existing in truth.

The term 'emptiness' indicates that there is no real ground or solid basis to anything that we say or do. Moreover when I say that I am empty, it doesn't mean that I don't exist at all. Rather it means that when I look at myself, I cannot find anything fixed and enduring. If we think of our body, it is very dynamic. We have to drink, and because we drink we have to piss. We breathe in, and then we breathe out; and because we breathe out, we have to breathe in. The heart is pumping blood all the time. The endocrine system is sending messages throughout the body, harmonising the production of various chemicals. Medical research shows that everything in the body is very active and communicative. With this understanding we can say that the nature of our body is empty of inherent self-nature as a series of processes dynamically unfolding in space and time. It is not a fixed thing.

To be alive is to be part of this ever-changing world. The reassuring stories we tell about ourselves and our world are mere social conventions. The ego's story—the narrative of who I am and the importance of what I do—is just another form of illusion, like clouds in the sky. Observing ourselves, we see how causes and conditions operate together giving rise to thoughts and feelings, which then vanish. What we take to be 'my existence' is an interpretation. If we relax that interpretation we will directly see the ceaseless movement of cause and effect. There are no fixed substantial entities but rather a very dynamic, vibrant, alive, interconnected system. This is our existence.

The function of understanding emptiness is to loosen the screws that hold together the very tight, limited sense of self that we have. We are all alive, and yet our aliveness is often hidden from us by the very stories we tell ourselves. We ourselves make everything very solid and real. Emptiness is both an analytical critique of that solidity and also a direct method for experiencing the illusory nature of all seemingly solid phenomena. Without a direct experience of emptiness our tendency to keep grasping at phenomena as if they were real in themselves is likely to remain.

Emptiness reveals the interconnectedness of all illusory forms. In awakening to the illusory nature of seemingly separate entities we have the basis of a natural compassion. Since self and other are not truly separate why would we privilege one over the other? Since all life is part of the same field of experience there is no basis left for abandoning sentient beings or remaining indifferent to them. When all limits are seen to be mere conventions the hospitality of the heart is infinite. No matter how hard life becomes we do not fall back into the prison of 'poor me'.

Exploring tantra

Being willing to let go of all our constructs

The reason for looking at these different views is to try to weaken our faith in language, especially our hope that someone can tell us the truth. When I speak to you, I am not giving you the truth; what I am giving you is words. The truth cannot be put into words. There is a famous praise verse to the goddess Prajnaparamita, the embodiment of the wisdom of emptiness, that says *"This goddess of supreme wisdom is beyond speech, thought and expression"*.

Thus, I can show you this cup, and I can tell you about the emptiness of this cup but only you can see the emptiness of this cup. It cannot be indicated because it is not a thing. Emptiness is a direct experience that changes everything without changing anything. Tantra is a method for quickly

realising the truth of the inseparability of form and emptiness set out in the Prajnaparamita literature. Prajnaparamita means transcendental wisdom, the wisdom of emptiness.

In tantric practice we begin by imagining a clear blue sky. This represents infinity, infinity not as a mathematical abstraction but as a very concrete experience of something ungraspable. As we know the sky has no limit; it has no front nor back, top nor bottom. In the practice we imagine that out of the blue sky there arises rainbow-light which transforms into a seed letter, and then the letter transforms into the god. In some methods of tantra the god arises instantly out of the space. The key point is that the basis, or the home, or the site of the god is space, the openness of emptiness.

In the tantric system the view is that our own nature—who we really are—is buddha. This buddha nature has become hidden from us by the power of our own busy mental activity. In order for you to drop your intoxication with the transient so you can recognize that your own nature is infinite emptiness, there are the methods of tantric meditation. Through being connected with the Buddha we move towards dissolving ourself—experiencing the falling away of the ego—whereby we are reborn, not from the womb of our flesh mother, but from the womb of the goddess Prajnaparamita. This goddess, Prajnaparamita, the wisdom of emptiness, is described as being the Mother of All the Buddhas, because we have to be reborn through her in order to be enlightened. The essence of the practice is to dissolve all the constructs that we take to be the basis of our existence, to dissolve them into light, and then for the light to dissolve into space.

For this to happen, you have to be willing to let go of all your constructs. This is why we have just been looking at the nature of construction. When you take something that occurs to be strongly real, and you don't see it as a temporary manifestation arising due to causes and conditions, it has a lot of power to catch you because it just seems to be whatever you take it to be. The more you see everything as a process, as changing and developing—seeing how it arises and how it passes—the more the practice of tantra is facilitated.

We have to realise that when we pray to Padmasambhava we are linking ourselves to a profound method. The real nature of Padmasambhava is emptiness. He arises out of emptiness to show beings the path back to emptiness. Then, once you understand emptiness, you also can arise in many different forms in order to help other people. But at the moment, if you have a strong idea that you are who you think you are, then this belief will limit what you can do.

Dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya

To experience that we arise out of emptiness is to be freed from conditioning and limits. What is without limitation? Our nature. Our nature is like the sky. For that reason, when we do tantra, we begin with a clear blue sky.

In tantra the buddhas are seen as having three aspects: dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya. The dharmakaya is the mind of the Buddha. *Kaya* means 'body' or 'dimension', or 'quality of existence', and *dharma* here means natural or unchanging quality, which means emptiness itself. This emptiness is not something you can grasp, and thus dharmakaya is not an object for the mind to discover. *You will never find it, but it has already found you.*

From this state arises a buddha's capacity to manifest forms, which is called sambhogakaya. *Sambhog* means 'to enjoy'. The sambhogakaya is a body of enjoyment. That is to say it is the

immediate gratification of direct experience of the radiance of the dharmakaya. Traditionally it is seen as manifesting in the pure lands like Dewachen in the west, the paradise of Amitabha, or in Zangdopalri, the paradise of Padmasambhava.

In this dimension everything is always the same and so is described as having five features or certainties. Thus the teacher is always the Buddha, the teachings are always the highest tantric teachings, the audience is always the great bodhisattvas and meditators, the time is always the unchanging present, and the place is always the dharmadhatu itself. They don't have seasons, the temperature is always the same, the climate is always the same, and the dharma activity is always the same.

Then from within the sambhogakaya, the Buddha manifests as nirmanakaya. Nirmanakaya is linked with manifestation. Etymologically, nirmanakaya is linked to a word that means 'a spark from the fire', 'an emanation'. Just as sparks shoot out from a fire when you poke the burning wood, so radiant forms of the buddhas manifest in the world according to the specific needs of beings. They can manifest as teachers, as bridges, as boats, as lamps, as anything that is useful. Without moving from the dharmakaya and the sambhogakaya, these compassionate forms manifest for the benefit of all.

By fully engaging with the tantric practice we enter the same domain of the inseparability of these three aspects. For example you might visualise Padmasambhava and merge with him to dissolve into emptiness. Then abiding in the empty open dharmakaya, there is the richness of the unfolding of the sambhogakaya domain which appears without effort. Then without losing that infinite plenty there is the moment-by-moment experience of the arising of nirmanakaya as you experience your responsiveness to situations.

You are not coming out of one state in order to manifest in another. Manifestation is the showing or display of the energy of awakening. Nothing is created, for these are the illusory forms of emptiness.

When people meet us they greet us by name and they imagine that we are the same as when they last saw us. In that way they seek to weave us into the texture of samsara, the endless turning of repetition. However, from the point of view of emptiness each moment is just 'this' – completely fresh and free of repetition. Of course, it carries with it information and so on from the previous moments, but the ground of each moment is emptiness and so nothing is constructed or accumulated.

Tantra is said to be a practice of transformation. This means to transform the ground of our existence from the sense of the predictable continuity of a sequencing of events, to the immediacy of manifesting out of the relaxed open state of the dharmadhatu or unborn space. In the practice, Padmasambhava comes out of the clear blue sky. Out of infinite space he can arise anywhere. He is not coming from A to B; that is to say, manifestation is not linked to moving from one place to another, but is instant presence. He is directly showing us how to be. Because we have forgotten this, we use him as our method, and go through the sadhana practice in order to acquaint ourselves with this experience.

A tantric meditation practice

We will now do a very simple form of practice. Some people find visualisation very easy and some people don't. However, this is not so important, for the essence of the practice is to get the feeling tone, the felt sense that something is there which is powerful and focused on your welfare.

You can do this kind of practice with your eyes opened or closed so experiment to find out what works best for you. We start by imagining that in front of us is the infinity of the open clear blue sky. In its centre arises a ball of rainbow-coloured light about 5cm in diameter, almost like the kind of bubbles that children blow with soapy water. It is empty on the inside and is translucent. If you like you can transform this ball into the Tibetan letter *HUNG* or Padmasambhava, or whichever deity you like. The bodies of all the deities have this same nature; you can look right through them because they are bodies of light, as if made of crystal. This ball has no corners and no hooks to it; it is not relative to anything else. This single ball or thigle represents the potentiality that generates the whole infinite universe. It is the basis out of which everything appears, and is the very presence of Samantabhadra, the primordial Buddha.

We then recite the mantra: *OM AA HUNG*. *OM AA HUNG* is said to be the root of all mantras. Often when people have initiations they learn many different mantras, and sometimes don't have the time to say all of them. However, saying *OM AA HUNG* three times condenses the power of all mantras. *OM* represents the body of the Buddha, *AA* represents the voice of the Buddha, and *HUNG* represents the mind of the Buddha. We imagine the letters white *OM*, red *AA*, and blue *HUNG* inside the ball of light. If you visualise Padmasambhava, imagine *OM* in his forehead, *AA* at his throat, and *HUNG* in his heart. In the tantric transmission there are many different kinds of initiations, but their basis is the four main initiations: the purification of body, of voice, and of mind, and then of all three together. Therefore, when we say this mantra and do the visualisation, all the qualities of the body, speech, and mind of all the Buddhas, flows into us. The whole process of the transmission is condensed down into the direct simplicity of *OM AA HUNG*.

C. R. Lama always used to say that if you have a tree that you want to get rid of, you can start by cutting off the leaves but since it takes a long time to cut off each leaf, by the time you have finished cutting the leaves on one side they start to grow back again on the other. It's much better to cut the root. You cut the root and the tree dies. *OM AA HUNG* is the basis for cutting the root. If you start thinking "*Well, I have to purify this bit of me, and then I have to purify that bit of me*", you will come up with a very long shopping list. If you think of all your many faults, all the many things you have done wrong, there is always some new bit to scrub and clean. However the root of our being trapped or lost, or caught, is the belief that we are solid, substantial, separate entities grounded in our personal history.

So in the practice we sit here in our ordinary body saying the mantra and imagining rays of light flowing into us from the letters *OM AA HUNG*. You can imagine this as pulsations of white, red and blue light or as these three lights coming together, or as rainbow-light – whatever is easiest for you. The central point is to experience your whole body, including your skin, being filled with light so that you feel completely transparent. In doing this, not only have all your faults and limitations dissolved, but so have all the organs of your body, the entire material basis of your existence. Keep reciting until you have a clear sense that your body is entirely made of light.

We keep reciting *OM AA HUNG* to gain the felt sense that all our limitations are purified. When we stop reciting, we imagine the ball of rainbow-light, or Padmasambhava, coming to the top of our head. His body dissolves into a ball of light. It then it descends down through the top of our head and comes to rest in our heart. In that way, the light which is the body and the presence of all the buddhas is now at the heart of our body of light. Then the light of our body merges into this ball so that the only thing in existence is the ball of light. This is all there is. Our attention is not focused on anything else, nor are we looking 'at it', because there is nowhere to look at it from since we are this ball of light. Then the ball of light gets smaller and smaller and smaller so that the whole of your existence is shrinking into just one point. This is all there is...and then that point dissolves...and there is only space.

Stay relaxed and open. Thoughts, feelings, and sensations and so on will manifest again. Everything has dissolved into space, so when these thoughts and feelings arise they only have one source, the natural space of your mind. This is the central point. Out of, or into this open spaciousness of your awareness, you arise as the experience of many different appearances coming and going. Then you come into more awareness of your body, of being in this room – all of which is occurring out of and within space. Through this practice you experience the birth of the universe out of space. When you see the walls, and you see other people, this is the manifestation of space itself. You see everything quite precisely, but as the play of light. In this way, one rests easily with all appearances for they have the same nature as the body of all the Buddhas, Padmasambhava.

As you become aware of sounds, you experience that all sounds have exactly the same nature of sound and emptiness, the sound of mantra. When thoughts, feelings and sensations arise, each of them could tell us a story about who we are, where we are, and what is going on. For example, thoughts could arise that say *"Oh, we are back in this room again, nothing has changed, that was just some kind of daydream"*. However, these thoughts themselves are the mind of the Buddha. So rather than falling under the power of the manifest content of the words, observe them as the rising and passing of the radiant energy of the Buddha's mind. Stay relaxed, don't let the thought catch you; don't let the thought define the situation. If you stay relaxed, thoughts will come and go by themselves. The thought and feeling is just the movement of the Buddha's mind. Whatever is arising has no other source than this infinite emptiness, the home of all the Buddhas. Entering this state of on-going awareness we find that the practice never ends as it has become inseparable from daily life.

Ending your love affair with your own thoughts

The key thing about tantric practice is that its meaning is revealed when we experience the world as energy. Energy here doesn't mean something esoteric like an aura around a person. It includes everything, motorcars, icecreams, dogs, ourselves and so on. These 'things' don't *have* energy, rather everything is the energy of the dharmakaya. There are no truly existing things, rather energy appears in forms which we take to be indicative of 'things'.

From the point of view of tantra, to live is to be in on-going connection with the world, a world which is energy, which is alive. Everything is continually moving and changing, and we are participants in this process. Tantric practice provides methods to keep us open to the possibilities of interacting with experience, with energy, as it arises. This means that we have to be respectful of the situation and also powerful in our manifestation, displaying the power that arises out of the emptiness of the source of our own being. We directly experience our own spaciousness, the

radiant luminosity of our mind, and with this dignity we respectfully experience all that we meet as having the same nature.

However self-doubt can be a big obstacle. For example, we might think: *“Well, I don’t experience that. I just have my thoughts going on and on”*. So where do these thoughts come from? *“They come from me”*. Do you like your thoughts? *“No”*. So why don’t you stop having them? *“I can’t”*. Why do we keep calling them ‘my’ thoughts if we can’t make them do what we want? Thoughts have a life of their own; the energy of the world arises inside us. That is to say, we the subject, are the energy of the world and so is all that we experience. The energy of the world is the energy of the dharmadhatu, the infinite vital spaciousness within which everything occurs.

The thoughts that come, where do they come from? In the practice of tantra we come to see that all our thoughts arise from the mind of the Buddha. *“But why would the Buddha have such terrible thoughts? Surely, the Buddha must have better thoughts than this”*. This is the voice of the ego that feels in charge of everything: *“This is good, this is bad, this is right, this is wrong”*. *“I know what is this, I know what is that is”*. But where do these thoughts come from? They also are the thoughts in the mind of the Buddha.

Everything that arises is empty of inherent self-nature. Sometimes appearances look like samsara, and sometimes they look like nirvana. At the centre of samsara and nirvana there is only emptiness, the source of all that arises. The mind’s nature is empty. From the very beginning it has been completely pure, and has never been altered by or mixed with any of our thoughts or experiences. Our personality, however, is certainly influenced by our thoughts and experiences. When we have difficult thoughts, perhaps jealous or full of lonely longing, we feel bad and wish that we didn’t have such thoughts. But what is this thought? It is just another thought, a thought which is saying *“I don’t like these thoughts”*. This sounds just like children in a classroom: *“John! Why did you push David?”* *“Ah, he pushed me first!”* *“You are children in this class, sit quiet!”* *“Yeah, but he pushed me!”* In this way, thoughts push each other, chase each other around. Some of these thoughts we take to be our thoughts about the world, and some of them seem to be coming at us, determining who we are.

An exit from this problem is to go back to visualising the ball of light and to recite the mantra *OM AA HUNG*. Then dissolve and rest in that open state. With practice you can do the whole cycle in a few minutes. The more you relax into the infinity of that state the more you will see that there is no other place where thoughts could come from. Whatever thoughts come – good or bad, victim thoughts or judging thoughts, ‘voice of truth’ thoughts – you will experience that they come only from emptiness.

There are two things happening here at the same time. There is a thought following a thought, a thought which states *“I am the thinker of the thoughts”*. This is the structure of samsara, the structure of limitation and repeated rebirth. And, at the same time, all of these thoughts are arising out of emptiness, without any inherent self-nature. Like flowers in the sky, all thoughts are like rainbows.

When we see this, we see that samsara and nirvana are inseparable. If you fall into the thought and believe it tells the truth, immediately you are limited and then there is so much work to do. However, if you relax back into the open space and experience the co-emergence of subject and object arising together, then there is an automatic liberation of these thoughts. By doing the

practice again and again we will gain more confidence, as we experience that although thoughts and feelings are always changing, their ground is always the same. The main thing is not to stay identified with the limitation.

Ignorance is the veil, the limitation, that keeps us from recognising our own buddha nature. Ignorance is not like the Christian notion of original sin. It's not that some bad thing was done long ago for which we are punished now. Rather, it is as if, whilst walking in the forest, we took the wrong road and kept walking, and walking, and walking, and forgot our way back. We learnt to live on wild berries and herbs and became very skilled in making houses out of leaves, and we thought that was all pretty good. It is not because we were bad that we made that mistake, but like little children, we forgot what we were doing and then just kept going and with every step we take, something new happens. This is how our life is; we go on from one thing to another. You can perhaps remember how you were when you were five years of age. How did you end up like this? Day after day, day after day, one step...one step...one step, and here we are now – further on in the forest but not any clearer.

It is as if we are having a love affair with our own thoughts; we are mesmerised and trust that they tell the truth. However, thoughts only tell the truth about the domain of thoughts; they don't tell the truth about the domain of buddha nature. We go to the thought and we say "*Thought, tell me who I am?*" The thought says "*Hey, how long have you got? I have so many stories to tell you about yourself*". Thoughts will never show you your buddha nature. Thoughts have always been empty, simply the play of energy. However, if we are attached to our thoughts, our ideas, feelings, and so on, it is very hard to end the love affair with them.

Little children easily believe in Father Christmas. When they get a bit older their big brother or sister says "*Oh, there isn't really any Father Christmas, it is just your dad who comes down in the night and puts the presents under the tree*". Children are often very sad to hear this because they want the illusion. But they can't grow up and also hang on to the illusion. We too need to choose between growing up, awakening, and hanging onto the familiar comfort of illusion. As long as we are asleep inside the dream of there being truly existing entities, including ourselves, suffering will arise.

Questions and answers

Participant: Is awareness the same as emptiness?

James: Awareness is inseparable from emptiness. In fact it is the presence of emptiness. Consciousness is also inseparable from emptiness yet it manifests as a forgetfulness of emptiness. This shows itself as a fixation on objects, for when I am conscious I am conscious of something. This carries a feedback loop affirming that this is happening to me. The event and our experience of it seem to be truly separate, each having their own existence. Whereas awareness is self-aware of its inseparability from space. When you rest in the openness of awareness there is no reification, no sense of being a thing among things.

Most people have had some kind of experience of awareness – though usually with no sense of its significance or how to open to it. For example, maybe as a young child you were running along the beach in the summertime, or just sitting watching a sunset without effort or intention, and you found yourself to be empty and spacious, completely aware and yet not separate from that which

you were aware of. You didn't feel that you were inside looking out at something. The whole experience was very open and you were a seamless part of what was happening. In that moment you cannot say what it's like. It is very direct, very clear, but impossible to capture in language.

Participant: What is the quality of awareness?

James: We are in this room just now. We can have many thoughts about what is happening, telling the room what it is, but we can also relax and let the room present itself to us. Awareness is free of interpretation. It has two simultaneous aspects; there is a passive openness which registers everything, and there is also the aspect of energy, of manifestation, of experience. At the moment this energy of awareness manifests as 'me talking with you', for it arises as both 'subject' side and 'object' side. Yet awareness itself is not subject or object. The traditional example for awareness, or *rigpa*, is a mirror. A mirror has no intention, it does not select.

Whereas when we look around this room our attention is caught by some things and not by others. This is due to our own karmic traits, the habits, tendencies and range of experiences that arise for us as a result conditioning of the patterning of subject-object interaction created by our own past actions. Here we are a few people meeting together for a short while, and yet some people here will register with you very strongly and others not so much. Our world is revealed to us through our own habitual and unconscious editing which shadows or highlights according to our dispositions. However, awareness sees everything just as it is; it has no prejudice at all and it sees very clearly.

Therefore we should try not to limit ourselves by relying on habits and assumptions. C.R. Lama described how as a boy he trained with one of his uncles who was a doctor. They would go out from the monastery to collect various herbs and different kinds of earth and stones. Then one day his uncle sent him out to bring back all the things that could *not* be used for medicine. After hours of walking C.R. Lama returned and said that he could not find anything that was not medicine. His uncle said "*Now you can be a doctor*". That is to say, everything has the potential to be a medicine.

In the same way if we want to help others we need to open to the world, to learn many things, and have many different kind of experiences. Acting in that way we find out how the man aspects of the world function. As a bodhisattva one should not limit oneself by avoiding things that seem strange, but rather try to understand how they arise and what impact they have. For example, you might read the newspaper of a political party you don't like, and through that you could understand the function of their dogma. Rather than thinking "*Oh, these people are stupid*" or "*These people are bad*", you might see "*Oh, these people are anxious, and in order to stop being anxious they become controlling and dogmatic*". We can understand this sort of attitude. It is a samsaric method which is not very effective, but quite popular. In that way, the more you make exploration, the more you see how the Buddha's teaching can illuminate what is going on. The Buddha pointed out that all beings desire happiness yet chose methods to achieve it which bring only the opposite.

Participant: Previously I meditated on emptiness for a long time and I experienced that emptiness is truly empty, that it is not filled with anything. It was a terrifying experience because it wasn't possible to hold onto anything. I felt as if I started to disappear, something like dying or the annihilation of myself, and it terrified me so much that I stopped meditating for a long time. What went wrong?

James: It sounds as if you dived in the deep end, suddenly realised you couldn't swim and then became very anxious. You have to go a little bit slowly, and get used to the experience, to the sense that although I'm spacious, I'm still here. Form and emptiness is also emptiness and form. It's not only going in one direction. Emptiness is vast, infinite and has no limit yet even though the experience was scary for you, you were still there present in it. It didn't kill you, and you didn't go mad.

The Buddha's teachings are radical, disturbing – they turn our world upside-down and shift the basis of who we think we are. We start to see that we are the shining movement of energy manifesting as the ceaseless present of our experience. Everything that we know, everything that we're connected with is still here, but we start to see it differently. If we focus on the difference we will feel disturbed – yet we are still here as an open presence. This is why reflecting on impermanence is a very important preparatory practice, for the more we see impermanence as the natural state of affairs, the more we see that relying on phenomena to provide a true refuge is not wise.

There is continuity, but it is a continuity of change. Since we were children everything has changed in our lives. Our thoughts and feelings have changed so often, the shapes of our bodies have changed, the kinds of activities we do have changed. So what is the continuity of our identity? It is some sort of felt sense of 'here-I-am' but here I am as what? As this in the morning, and as that in the afternoon, and so on ... The content of 'what I am' and 'how I am' is changing, changing, and changing.

Thus, the real continuity lies in the quality of presence, which links to the previous question about rigpa, or awareness. The root of who we are is awareness inseparable from emptiness, and this is the basis for the flow of our experience all the time. If we can settle into this awareness, we will find that it is more reliable than having friends to telephone. Whenever you look for your mind, it will be there. But you won't find it as *any-thing*. All the people whom you find as something will come and go. As the Buddha said "*Friends become enemies, and enemies become friends*". We can go through life telling ourselves stories, fairy tales, about how the world is in order to make our world feel safer than it is, but this is merely to fall asleep in illusion. The only unchanging refuge is our own nature.

Guruyoga helps us develop a sense of the open spaciousness of mind

Perhaps, we have all had the experience of feeling frustrated when we talk to someone, even if they are a close friend, because we feel they don't quite understand us. When they listen to what we are trying to tell them about our life, they listen through their own conditioning, their own patterns; they are taking our ideas and putting them into their categories.

However, when we come to do guru yoga we enter into a relation with one who is not full of conditioning, who is not conditioned. The main thing is to have the sense that the mind, the state of being of the guru, is the dharmakaya, not limited in any way. With this we develop the sense of their infinite openness and receptivity to us, however we are.

We practice as follows: we sit upright with our skeleton supporting our weight. Our gaze is slightly raised, resting in the space in front of us at about two arm's lengths distance. In this practice our gaze remains open. We are not looking at the wall nor focusing on the people, but letting the gaze

relax and open to see space. In the space we imagine a white Tibetan letter Aa. If you are not familiar with this, you can imagine a capital letter 'A'. In the Sanskrit and Tibetan alphabet Aa is the basis for all other sounds, because all consonants in these languages take Aa as their vowel sound. Aa is also the first sound that babies make and so it is seen as the root sound out of which arise all the complex forms of our language. When we make this sound Aa we imagine that all the forms of experience arising from language collapse back into this root sound.

The white letter Aa is surrounded by a ball of rainbow-light. This is the living presence of all the teachers of the lineages of transmission. Then we make the sound of Aa in a long, relaxed way, three times releasing our habitual fixations. Through this we integrate our nature with the nature of the teacher. We are not transforming ourselves into something else, nor are we purifying ourselves. We are just allowing the clothing of habitual assumption to fall off revealing the natural spaciousness of our heart as inseparable from the spaciousness of the mind of the guru.

All day long we wear clothes, and our clothes function on various levels. They keep us warm, they communicate to the world what kind of person we are, they perhaps show something about our beliefs, how much money we have and so on. But at night we take our clothes off and we realise that they are not essential to our identity. The clothes express something about us but they don't define who we are. In the same way, all the beliefs that you have about yourself—all the ideas about who you are, about what's wrong with you, what you need to do in order to develop yourself and so on—these are just like clothes. When we wear them they position us in the world for our interactions with other people. They are a form of communication but they don't define who we are. Similarly, when we relax with Aa it is like letting all our clothing fall off, and then our naked awareness rests in the open spaciousness. This open state integrates everything as it arises without discriminating between self and other, inside and outside. Without interference our open awareness allows appearance to show itself however it is.

Your nature is pure from the very beginning.
 Your mind itself has no obscuration at all.
 Like the shining surface of a mirror it is empty of any content of its own.
 The mind is open, ungraspable and unobstructed.
 It has no limit, neither top nor bottom.
 It has neither colour nor shape.
 In being empty, it offers hospitality to everything.

The natural state is not created by anything.
 It is not created by your effort, so
 Making effort is not necessary.
 You are not who you think you are;
 Thinking will never show you your nature.
 Just relax and be present in effortless openness
 Which is not a thought,
 Not a feeling,
 Not a sensation,
 But is full of thoughts, and feelings, and sensations.

Perfect from the very beginning,
 The natural purity of the mind

Is the sole ground and source of all samsara and nirvana.
 From it all kinds of thoughts and experiences arise.
 You don't have to block them,
 You don't have to encourage them.
 Everything that arises will go free by itself.
 So relax in this open state, which is your own true nature.

If in the practice you find yourself being caught up in thoughts, gently attend to the one having this experience. For example, if you find yourself thinking *"Oh, I'm sitting here in this room, it's Sunday morning, what am I doing here?"* as soon as you are aware that you have become fused into the thought, rest your presence with the experience of the thought. Don't pull back and observe the thought from afar and don't merge in it. Remember, thoughts can only tell you about thoughts, they cannot show you your true nature. Stay with the one who is having this thought and see where the thought is arising. If you don't follow after the thought, it will go free by itself. Then remain present in the state of openness.

Your mind is like a mirror, and a mirror is always full of reflections. If you wait for the reflections to end so that you see the mirror itself, you will never find the mirror. That is to say, the presence of the mirror is shown by the reflections, but the reflections don't define the mirror. Just allow whatever occurs to occur; whatever comes comes, and whatever goes goes – just remain relaxed and open. Don't hold your awareness apart from what is arising, and don't seek to merge with anything that is arising. Just as the mirror is not harmed by being shown ugly images, and is not improved by being shown beautiful images, let your mind stay open to whatever occurs, and you will find that everything is self-liberating. This is the basic view of dzogchen.

The practice is to maintain this view, to rest in the natural state, and to remain present, relaxed and open with the continuous stream of impermanent phenomena. This is not a practice based on effort, so at first we practice for short periods of time to stay fresh and open. Relax into the practice, and whenever you find yourself caught up in thoughts, feelings, memories, habitual interpretations and so on, just relax and release, let everything go. When you let everything go you might be afraid that nothing will remain, but there is no evidence that thoughts will stop. When this thought vanishes something else will surely come.

This is the nature of the mind, unborn and unceasing. The mind is unborn: when you look for it, you can't find it. It doesn't exist as a thing. It is not located anywhere, and yet it ceaselessly gives rise to infinite thoughts, feelings, sensations and so on. These thoughts all arise and pass away. You can try to impose some order on them, you can identify patterns, but if you do that you are likely to draw yourself into engagement with them. The danger then is that you shift from the experience of open awareness to being merged with the sense of being a subjective agency determined to influence what is going on. You have then lost contact with the open ground and are identified with an impermanent arising form, which is chasing other impermanent arising forms.

You try to think your way to an understanding of what is happening, but this can provide no answer because there is not a conceptual problem to be solved. Relying on concepts and identifying with them is itself the problem. And this 'problem' can only be 'solved' by relaxing and releasing one's involvement.

Buddha Shakyamuni is reputed to have said that all arising things are ceasing things: everything that comes into existence will pass out of existence. When you create something its constructed nature means it can be destroyed; a statue can be destroyed, our body can be destroyed... However, our buddha nature is not a thing, its nature is like the sky. When the wind blows and the clouds fill the whole sky, the space above us may look small, grey and oppressive but then another wind blows and the clouds go away. The sky may have been subjected to an invasion by clouds but its spacious openness remains unconditioned by what is occurring. Our nature, like the sky, is vajra, indestructible.

When your sense of yourself develops based on circumstances, events can happen that change it. Partners can leave you or die, your children can develop in such ways that you hardly recognize them, you can lose your job... When things like that occur we feel very upset. We may even think *"What's the point? I have spent all these years developing this situation which I thought would be my life, and now it's gone!"*

What has occurred is not a punishment; unfortunately it is just the nature of manifestation. Each manifestation is always vulnerable because it's connected with other manifestations. However, the mind itself, in being like the sky, is not resting on anything. Nothing that happens is going to change its nature. This is illustrated with the traditional example of the mirror. If something ugly or horrible occurs in front of a mirror the reflection of that will arise. When the object is taken away, the reflection vanishes. It doesn't leave any trace in the mirror and the mirror immediately shows the next object placed in front of it. This symbolises both the indestructibility of our nature and the mutability of our experience.

Kadag and lhundrup –indestructible and unceasing

Dzogchen points to two basic aspects of existence: *kadag*, or primordial purity, and *lhundrup*, immediate experience or spontaneous display. *Kadag* is like the mirror itself, and *lhundrup* is like the reflections in the mirror. Reflection indicates that there is a very precise appearance which is ungraspable.

The Tibetan word *lhundrup* is composed of two parts. *Lhun* means a heap or a hill, and *drup* means to be made or be accomplished. It indicates that manifestation occurs spontaneously. If you hold a banana in front of a mirror, you see a banana in the mirror. The mirror doesn't need to stop and think *"Do I want to show the banana or not?"* In the same way, we turn our head around this room and immediately different views and images appear for us. Each view is our momentary experience, our universe. This is all we have, moment-by-moment experience as it is. It is all we have and it is ungraspable, unpossessable. The past has gone, we don't know what the future will be, and moment-by-moment this is it. We have a choice, either we can be here, absolutely present, or we can split off from the seamless actuality and try to work out what we should do.

As John Lennon said *"Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans"*. This is true. Life happens. We plan this and that, we have all sorts of ideas in our mind about what will be the case or not, but then life, actuality, happens. This is the quality of *lhundrup*. Before you think about it, life is here, and we are in it. If you sit in your ego-self and rely on your thoughts to make sense of what is going on, you will always be running after life because life has already happened.

Dzogchen, however, points to instant presence, to open awareness which is naked, fresh, and raw. Trusting our connection with the world, the non-duality of the field of manifestation, from our relaxed openness movement occurs free of the limitation of a personalised subjectivity.

Some people have a tendency to laziness, some to jealousy, some to anger, pride and so on. These will continue to function, but the question for us in the practice is *“Who is the one who is jealous? Who is the one who is proud?”* When you are in a situation, perhaps at work or in a relationship, where you are feeling irritated by someone, who is the one who is angry? *“I’m angry”*. But who is ‘I’? Our nature is open awareness, which is not touched by anything which arises. Anger is arising, the anger is ‘my’ anger, and yet, it does not define who I am. It is just a quality of relatedness, an impermanent aspect of the flow of manifestation.

The more we can relax and be freshly in touch with the situation, these moments of anger and so on can come and go without ripening into hatred. Hatred is different from anger. Anger is responsive, quickly arising and short lasting but hatred is cooked over time, compacted and intensified. It becomes a story, as you remember all the bad things the person has done. You come to feel that they truly exist as a bad and dangerous person. It is the same with all our troublesome feelings: if you allow yourself to feel them very simply and directly, they can illuminate your own structure but if you grasp at them they will never let you go.

Although this constructed ‘self’ is not our real nature we cannot just say *“Oh, this ordinary self has nothing to do with me since I’m aiming for transcendental liberation. A great bridge made of rainbows will come to the top of my head and I will transcend into a higher realm”*... We have to work with our own situation if we are to experience true freedom.

Three qualities of energy: *dang* [crystal ball], *rolpa* [mirror] and *tsal* [rock crystal]

In order to understand the relation between our ordinary being-in-the-world and our true nature, it helps if we understand the three modes of energy. The first mode of energy is called *dang* in Tibetan, and it refers to translucency. The traditional example for this is a crystal ball. If you place a crystal ball on red cloth it will look red. If you place it on blue cloth it will look blue. The ball itself is never red nor blue, but it can *look* red or blue according to the circumstances. It allows whatever is arising to suffuse it and pass through it. As soon as you take the crystal ball off the red cloth it stops being red. In the same way, we are sitting in this room just now and this room arises as our experience.

From our ordinary point of view we are living inside the bone box of our head, looking out of our water-bubble eyes, seeing all that is outside us. But when we relax into the open state, we and the room arise together. The mind has no limit; it is not inside or outside, it is not up or down. The room and ourselves arise together in the openness of awareness. When we go out of the room, instantly something else is there—the street, the trees, and so on, instantly filling our realm of experience. It is not that we, as a stable subject, are having different experiences. Rather wherever ‘we’ go, ‘we’ are part of the field of experience. In this way, moment-by-moment, each situation is complete—just this—and then it’s gone. As the next new moment arises, we are part of it, fresh and new.

The second quality of energy is called *rolpa*, which means ‘play’ or ‘movement’. It is represented by the image of the mirror. As we have seen, the mirror shows whatever is there. If you go to a

theatre, there is a stage. The usefulness of the stage depends on its emptiness. Because the stage is empty you can bring any kind of props on to it and present any kind of play. The more the stage is filled with props, with items from a previous play, the less possible it is to do something new.

Rolpa, play, is about not having much furniture, not being over-prepared, but trusting the completeness and sufficiency of each moment. However, we know what it's like to be tired, when we have had enough, and feel filled up with the world and don't want anymore. Who is full up? "I am full up... Who am I? I am infinite. How can I be both infinite and full up?" If you stay with the infinite, Mr. Full Up will go away. Patrul Rinpoche says that the yogi develops his meditation by destroying it. This means that when we try to hang on to what we've got, we will become burdened and weighed down. And this is not the same as experiencing the freshness of the moment.

Engagement with this aspect of play encourages us to like a dancer, ceaselessly making gestures that leave no trace. Each moment is unique and sufficient unto itself. Whatever is occurring is unborn play so just be present with it. Awareness, the nature of the mind, is empty and clear. It is not touched by anything that occurs so don't interfere with the flow of appearances.

The third quality of energy is called *tsal*, and it means 'force' or 'impactful movement'. The traditional image used to indicate it is light shining into a rock crystal. The light enters the crystal and is refracted into rainbow colours. This indicates our potential which, on encountering various environments, shows many different forms. Padmasambhava showed many different manifestations in response to different experiences throughout India and Tibet. We also, all of us, show many different forms: we show happy forms, sad forms, sexual forms, business forms...

These different forms are not aspects of some essential fixed identity, they are not forms that we 'have' in the way that we 'have' several pairs of shoes. The ground of manifestation is open and empty. If somebody wants us to be predictable, we are sure to disappoint them, which is not a sign that something is wrong with us but indicates that our manifestation is a field factor rather than a personal possession which can be controlled.

Understanding *tsal* allows us to experience our potential arising flexibly in each situation. For example, if you are a schoolteacher and have thirty children in your class, each of these children is unique and so will need a slightly different approach. You have to find fresh responses with your gaze, with your tone of voice, to control and to encourage, and so on. Rather than trying to be a fixed entity, by relaxing in the open ground of being—a state free of prejudice, of selfish bias—our energy is free to manifest as required.

How I am today is different from yesterday. Not only are we unique in terms of our differences from each other, but also each moment of our manifestation is unique. If you are over-prepared, you are likely to bring something from somewhere else into this moment. That could be a neurotic pattern from the past, or it could be a very well prepared and beautiful contribution. In group therapy, anxious people are often sitting anxiously waiting, trying to think of the right thing to say. When they've prepared exactly what they want to say, they then have to find the right moment to say it. But by this time the conversation has already changed and the topic has moved on. If you want to be part of the conversation, you just have to feel the rhythm of the group in your body and let the words flow from your mouth. This involves trust, the sense that we belong, that we are part of this world, and that the people we meet are not our enemies. If we are relaxed and easy, why would

they not be open to us? In this way, we can be naked and present, feel the quality of the experiential field, and manifest as part of it.

In terms of being in the world with others, the main thing is to remain connected. Sometimes this is described in terms of non-duality. That is to say, the mirror and the reflection are not two separate things. Our manifestation in the world and our pure, open nature are not two separate things; they are inseparable as ungraspable, undeniable experience. For example, when we come to the end of our three Aa practice we very gently start to move and get up. Our movement arises within the open spaciousness. We are not leaving that state and entering another. When it's time to go to work, you put on your shoes and walk to the door. You put your right foot on the ground, the next thing just happens; your left foot is in the air. It's not so very complicated! Life flows with you as part of it.

In the practice, after you have sounded the three Aa, just let whatever occurs come and go. If you find yourself getting locked into a particular position, this is because the attention has slipped from the state of the mirror into identification with the reflection. When you get lost, you're lost where you are. Where should you go to find where you are? You don't need to go anywhere. Wherever you go, you are in the right place, because every reflection has the same ground, which is the infinite dharmadhatu. So no matter how lost you seem to get, even if you become very despairing and think *"I can't meditate, this never works for me"*, these confused, self-hating thoughts are themselves inseparable from the state of the mirror.

Relax into your own ground, the natural perfection of your own presence. Experience its limitless infinity and through this see directly that it is the ground, source and field of all experience. This is your home territory, this is where you belong – so why not relax and enjoy it.