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# *Natural freedom*

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## Extracts

*The basic point is that samsara is the attempt to stabilize that which can never be stabilized and so there is no end to it. While we are struggling to do the impossible, we are not attending to the one thing which is stable, the door to nirvana.*



*Buddhism offers ways of awakening from this dream of solidity. This doesn't mean that we leave the sense of things being strongly real and enter nothing at all, but rather that we stop over-investing the fleeting moment and remain open and present. Then moment-by-moment, we can experience the world directly.*



*The more we privilege relaxation over arousal the more the felt sense of openness becomes our residence. This is the basis of hospitality to all things since the more we experience our own nature as empty, the more generous and welcoming we can be to whatever is arising. We see that there is nothing in the object which can harm us and nothing in ourselves which can be damaged.*



*It's like in martial arts, we are using the energy of the other person, not our own energy, to defeat them. Since all phenomena are impermanent, they will go anyway, so there is no need to push them away. Since all phenomena are impermanent, they will go anyway, so there's no point trying to hang onto them. This is the essence of the dzogchen practice.*



*If you think "I have understood", you put the Buddha in your pocket, but later when you look in your pocket you only find some tofu! Whatever is turned into a thing will change and rot. The way to use dharma is to not take it so seriously but to actively use it to soften your rigid belief.*



*I would imagine that for all of us, in the course of our lives, many doors have appeared in front of us, many new opportunities and new possibilities but because of doubts and confusions, and feelings of anxiety, we didn't go through these doors. It's very helpful to reflect on that and see the power that our identification with a thought has to determine our operational identity. Thus, the impermanent thought, in claiming to define a situation as finite and permanent, obscures the sole permanent situation, which is the unchanging openness of our awareness.*



*Each of us has to decide whether to continue to build our identity on limited concepts, or to open to the teachings and explore directly who we are. Limiting concepts can be comforting in their familiarity yet they diminish our availability to the ceaseless hospitality of our own unborn nature. Observe how many small worlds you have already invested your time and energy in. Recollect how they vanish. Your true friend and ally is not far away. In fact, if you stop being so busy, and stop looking so hard you will find that they are already here.*

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## Introduction: focused meditation

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Hello, very nice to be here. We have a little time together this weekend to do some practice and explore the view of dzogchen. Let’s begin with quiet sitting, finding a simple focus for our attention, either on the movement of the breath in and out, or on some simple external form like a mark on the floor. Maintain the simple intention “This is what I'm going to focus on”, and return to it again and again whatever happens.

There are many functions operating in this kind of simple sitting. One relates to the fact that various tensions get built up, when we move around in the complex situations that constitute our lives. These tensions arise from encountering things which we don't want, that we'd like to push away but can't. They also arise from things that we would like to have closer to us, but which we can't make happen. The tensions embedded in the push and pull of that positive and negative polarity get locked into the pattern of our breathing and our hormonal and muscular systems. When we sit in practice, we can feel our bodies starting to unlock, our breathing relaxes and opens, our muscles twitch a little bit, and then we settle down.

The practice has two aspects: to remain focused and to relax. If you try too hard, if you really push yourself, you will become tense. In meditation we may experience that we become distracted again and again. That is both important and not important. When we make mistakes, they're just mistakes. It is important to recognise them and work with their consequences. This

honest acknowledgement is made easier when we see that such mistakes don't make us bad people.

Yesterday I was walking in a park in London, and there was a mother with a small child and a dog. The little child kept going in one direction while the dog went the other. The mother wanted to take them both the way she was going, so she kept saying, "Bad dog! Bad dog!" Yet the dog was not being bad, it was enjoying being in the park. It was simply excited to be out in the fresh air, so rich in smells.

This kind of response can easily arise for us. We come to a particular conclusion about how we are and then give it a moral value, as if making a mistake, or experiencing things not going the way we want, is a sign of some inner wrongness or badness. What actually happens is that an event occurs and then is gone. One of the Buddha's main teachings was on impermanence: the fact that every phenomena arises and passes away. When instead of attending to the impermanence of phenomena we take life too seriously and seize on phenomena as being truly real, then they are distilled into mental representations. We may then think, "That shouldn't have happened. How could I have let that happen? I must be stupid to have let that happen." Each of these thoughts increases both the emotional intensity we feel and the seeming validity, the seeming power, of the event which now exists only as a mental representation. Although each thought is just an abstraction moving impermanently in space and time, it can create for us a sense of something very solid, very real, and truly definitive of who we are.

Another function of this kind of meditation is to give us the opportunity to start to examine our mind's activity, to observe how we come into existence moment-by-moment. That is to say, if we are not being captured by the semantic content of the thought, we can start to experience the gesture or movement of cognitions, affects, sensations and so on. By 'gesture' I mean that each of these phenomena is a movement of communication, a linking, a joining of aspects of the field of experience and is also just a moment arising in time.

If you are in a relationship, you might say to your friend, "I was really upset at how you spoke to me yesterday." Something did happen, it happened yesterday. Where is yesterday? "Safe inside me, because I remember everything: how you looked at me, how you spoke to me... I remember very well... And I can keep telling you about your terrible crime, because you are not yet guilty enough." That is to say, I need you to take my memory seriously, which is the same as, "I need you to take *me* seriously". An event occurs, we have our own particular interpretation or reading of it, and this response takes on a particular kind of solidity. It's reified; it's turned into something that seems to exist entirely in itself as a fact. So, whatever happened in the argument yesterday now seems to have two forms. One form is ungraspable like an echo, for the actual event is gone. And both I and the person I was concerned with have also gone, for we are no longer precisely who we were yesterday. From that moment yesterday up until now, many other things have been happening which have impacted and changed us. But if we fall into a strong recollection of what we remember as happening yesterday, we pull our construction of the vanished event into this moment. We each then feel we are speaking the truth of the event. We want to speak to the other person as if they are the same as they were yesterday. These two versions occur at the same time. The fact is, the event is gone and the people have changed, but it is also possible to re-stage it, to recreate it, so that it seems to be of enduring importance. This kind of attachment, this kind of intense identification with events is the force which creates suffering.

One function of meditation is to enable us to observe more precisely how our very subtle thoughts, which are ungraspable like soft clouds in the sky, can seem to be so solid, so real. Their seeming reality linked together moment-by-moment leads to the construction of our world which seems so strongly real. Buddhism offers ways of awakening from this dream of solidity. This doesn't mean that we leave the sense of things being strongly real and enter nothing at all, but rather that we stop over-investing the fleeting moment and remain open and present. Then moment-by-moment, we can experience the world directly. We can open to each moment, however it is, because we start to develop the confidence that whatever moment we are in is not going to last forever. Moreover, the very fact of impermanence means that we start to experience ourselves as something not fixed. We start to directly see ourselves coming into being, arising and passing moment-by-moment, and see that the quality of each moment is different. This reveals one of the most important fruits of the practice: that we directly experience the immediacy of our being without having to rest on a fixed sense of being this or that. The basic quality of our existence, of our being, now less defended and less defined, starts to offer more hospitality to whatever is arising in the moment. This allows more spontaneity and flexibility. This very simple practice of sitting and observing the flow of the breath provides the basis for the laboratory in which we can examine our existence.

In Buddhism, liberation means liberation from the power of our past conditioning. There are various aspects of conditioning. There is the outer form of conditioning arising from the traces of our childhood. The particular patterning and contouring of the family which we grow up in has an enormous impact on us when we are young. Babies have no protection against the environment. Not only can they not use language to mediate experience, but they don't have the physical power to keep bad things away. In this state of optimal absorption the baby has to take in huge amounts of information in order to supply its rapidly developing brain. Thus in childhood we all become conditioned by the particular flavours that are present in our environment. We become so used to our conditioning that it becomes invisible to us, as us. Then later, we have to face a painful awakening to the limiting nature of the patterns which constitute us. We have to see how we actually are before we can start to change our situation.

More subtly there is the conditioning which manifests as a primary identification with our body as the true and sufficient basis of our experience. With that comes a sense that our mind is something existing inside the body, with a material basis which is essentially finite. If we believe that then it will seem that our existence is simply a construct which will vanish when death comes. There is a bleak pointlessness to such a materialistic view. The infinite radiance of our own nature is obscured by such limiting beliefs.

What is this mind? Is it a thing? If it is a thing, where is it? Is it perhaps up your nose, in the squishy stuff in the little bone-box of your head? If you take that route then the biological basis which supports you determines your beginning and end. However from the point of view of many schools of Buddhism, and in particular dzogchen, the unconditioned mind is not resting on anything. It is not created out of anything. It is not a substance. Rather it is the sphere or a site of awareness within which all phenomena are moving. Because the mind has no physical form, it has no limits. It is not something which can be located somewhere, and that makes it difficult to encounter. We are so used to experiencing the world through the five senses, senses which seem to reveal a world of things. We see entities outside and imagine that we are a similar sort of entity inside.

This time of the year when the trees are in blossom, everything seems so alive and wonderful. It is very delightful to walk out in the fields and see how many shades of green occur in nature.

That is to say, our life, our vitality moves out through the sense organs and receives the world back through the sense organs, and this confirms our existence. We are used to seeing 'things': walls, houses, cars, people, dogs. We're also used to experiencing memories. If we sit and think about it, we can remember the journey we made to come here today. That journey doesn't exist anymore but its subtle traces are present as something we can think about. We can also think about the future, which is even less real than past. At least the past did 'exist' but we have no idea if the future will come at all. We can think that we will finish here on Sunday, and that on Monday morning we will go back to work; we can imagine what that will be like. There is something not yet in existence, something that is just an idea, and yet when you think about it, it can cause all sorts of movements: hope, fear, joy, sadness, terror and so on. Thus, we can experience very subtle phenomena which our ordinary consciousness works with to further develop our sense of truly existing in a truly existing world.

However, the mind itself is not an object. It is not something we can encounter as a 'thing' in the world. We encounter it by its traces. For example, outside we have the spaciousness of the sky, yet we cannot see space itself. We see space in terms of things moving in space. For example, we see a bird flying across the sky but we don't see what it is flying through. The space it is moving through is right in front of us; it is not hidden – yet we cannot see it. We can see that the bird is making progress. If it's a hot day, the warm thermal wind starts to rise and then big birds like eagles start to soar. Thus on the basis of seeing the bird and applying concepts we can infer the presence of subtle phenomena like the wind and imagine that they exist as something in themselves. However space itself cannot be seen.

In the Buddhist tradition the mind is often compared to space. Space facilitates the manifestation of all things, yet it is not a thing itself. The mind, similarly, facilitates or provides the space for all the experiences which we have, and yet it is not something we can experience as an object. The function of meditation is to support us to relax back into, and integrate with, the open dimension of our being. This allows the free movement of all our energy, our potential and capacity for manifestation. With this, we can begin to experience ourselves as a movement within space, along with all the other forms which are moving in space. That is to say: here I am and I am in this room. Whenever I am aware of my existence it is always located somewhere. The body is always in the world, the body is part of the world. This is enormously important, for the mind simultaneously reveals both what we take to be "I, me, myself" and the world we are experiencing. Of course most of the time our experience is mediated by our sense that "I'm inside looking out through my senses" so we live like a spider in a web, picking up signs of what is important for us. All the threads somehow lead back to us, and this creates a very small frame of reference: "What is important about this world is what it means to me and if it doesn't mean anything to me, I don't care." But that is off-balance. That way of ignoring our actual context can only result in chaos. We can see this nowadays in the many ecological disasters that are occurring. When a forest is seen as being only a source of timber, huge tropical forests are cut down so very quickly. This will have enormous consequences for our lives, but to stay in touch with it, our minds have to be very big; we have to think a hundred years ahead. We have to think about the welfare of other people, rather than just about our own immediate concerns.

The sense of the centrality of myself, that I am the centre of the world, that everything is about me, creates a very imbalanced view of our existence. This is especially so when we think, "Life is short, I have so many things to get before I die." Then the immediacy of the moment becomes not a site of lively, vital spontaneity, but rather an almost vanished opportunity to have more.

From the Buddhist point of view this is a kind of blindness because when we look back at our lives, we can see that we have always been seeking more...and more and more... yet whatever we get, goes. As soon as we get something it is transformed, whether it is new shoes, or a new job, or a new boyfriend. As soon as the object is gained, it starts to transform itself and reveal itself to be not what we thought it was. When things remain on the level of longing, we can project our fantasies onto them but when we get the actual object, it is never quite what we had imagined. And so there is a gap out of which arises some new fancy, something more to wait for. The disappointment that arises in the moment of actual encounter is very significant. Because in some ways it is a sign of the mistake of taking the imagination as being a true guide to what is going to arrive as our actual experience. Just as language has a very inexact relationship with the phenomenological world, so do our hopes and fears.

There are many psychological disorders where people anxiously imagine difficult situations that never arise. The fact that they don't really occur doesn't stop the person imagining them. And the fact that there is no solid basis for the imagining doesn't diminish the intensity of the pain and fear which arises from the anxious thought. When we start to see that the play of our imagination creates our world, the door opens to seeing the illusory nature of all phenomena including ourselves. This releases us from the trap of believing in the substantial reality of our own imaginings.

We'll take a break now, so see if you can find a place where only you exist! Perhaps you can or perhaps wherever you go, you will find something else.. Subject and object occur together but in our dualistic interpretation we take them to be separate domains. We imagine the primacy of the subject: "I exist as me inside this body. I am stable and reliable, while all other things come and go". This is something you can start to observe and examine to see if it is really true. What is the stability and reliability of the body? Is the body a fixed thing or a ceaseless flow of sensation and experiences related to our five senses? Does our mind have a fixed and stable content?

In simple sitting practice we merely observe the flow of the breath without distraction. In life we often see thought as a kind of enemy, as something which comes and disturbs us and leads us away from what we are doing. In that case we would want to develop more capacity to maintain a clear focus of attention. There is some benefit in that, but actually our thoughts are not the enemy, for without thoughts many aspects of our lives would be impossible. So our task is to find the way to be with whatever is arising as our experience, moment-by-moment, be they thoughts, feelings, or sensations, and to observe what is the nature of that arising.

In many ways we are made stupid by knowledge. We develop many ways of knowing about the world and we come to trust what we know and then we live inside the bubble of our assumptions without truly looking at what is there. All our experiences are mediated by the traces of what has already occurred and by the interpretive stories we have elaborated. Then life becomes a little stale. Can we experience the world without having our thoughts seal us inside pre-existing knowledge? Can our thoughts support us like an arising wave, letting us go further, and more immediately, into the experience? Paradoxically, when we don't know, there are many possibilities, and as soon as we start to know something definite, there are fewer possibilities. It is not the fact that there are thoughts that cause the problem but the way we use thoughts. When we merge with them and take them at face value we can easily get lost in a mental world that seems actual and reliable. One of the functions of meditation is to help us to become aware of the nature of thought itself. Thought is what we take for granted; we just have thoughts. Yet what are they? How do they exist in the mind? How long do they stay

there? Where do they stay? Some thoughts seem to be in front of us, some thoughts seem to come from behind; there are all sorts of possibilities.

When we focus on the breath it provides a kind of stability due to its regularity. This allows us to observe what is occurring. Just as if we were carrying out an experiment in a science laboratory, we want to limit the number of variable factors so that we can see the structure of the occurrence we are focussing on. We can then examine the sequence of cause and effect. Our ordinary lives are incredibly complicated even if we are only sitting and chatting. So much is happening at once! If you go outside and turn your head, you will see so many shapes, and colours, and forms! It is almost as if in our daily life we were in a state of ceaseless crisis management. It may not feel like a real crisis yet there is always the risk of sensory overload; a great deal of editing goes on all the time to give shape and orientation to experience. When we meditate we relax and just let whatever is arising come and go.

In the basic calming meditation we decide to sit quietly, not moving our bodies very much while focusing on a simple visual point and observing the simple flow of breath. This means there is less work for our mental consciousness to do. By restricting the range of sensory input and by slowing down the amount of mental effort, we can start to see how we come into existence thought by thought.

## Observing our thoughts

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In some ways thought is like a kind of virus. It invades us and takes us over, and tries to adapt the environment it is in for its own purposes. As living beings we have many, many thoughts. We can use meditation practice to sort out the difference between intentional thinking, and habitual enmeshment when thoughts seem to come and take us over.

There are not so many occasions when thinking is really necessary. Many of the things we do don't require a cascade of thoughts to accompany them. Through the practice of meditation we can bring a lessening of the rapidity, the intensity and the seductiveness of thoughts. This opens up a space in which we can receive more of the world as it is.

With this we can start to see that we have many different selves. We have the self that is largely embedded in assumptions, meaning that when a thought arises we fall into it, and move within it as if it was all there was. We assume that the experience is real, yet it has no substantial reality at all. A lot of our life is spent in this sort of state.

Then there is our interpretive self, which consciously tries to make sense of what is going on. We develop one thought with more thoughts and try to come to some conclusion. This capacity underpins our communication with others. Even saying something as simple as "It's lovely weather", brings a particular interpretation of events. By highlighting certain features of our complex experience we bring forth a resonance from the other person. This in turn validates our sense that "I can make sense of the world"; interpretation is an amazing thing to be able to do. It can give quite a sense of power, the feeling that "I know what is going on". It also validates the sense there is somebody *in here*, "I, me, myself", *who knows* something important about what is going on *out there*.

When our mental busyness calms down, we enter a world of revelation. We experience colours, shapes, and appearances, in a way that is more fresh, raw, direct and vital. There is less need to do anything with it, as each moment seems more complete, more full and rounded in itself.

When you have free time you can walk out in the fields or open spaces and sit and do a little practice. Explore opening yourself to the world, just walking and looking. Observe what happens when you become preoccupied by thoughts. Then settle and focus on your breath for a bit, relax and open and observe the world from that state. What is the difference between these two ways of experiencing? We spend a lot of time telling the world what it means, having lots of opinions about things. "This is good, this is bad, I like this, this is well made, this is not the right thing," and so on. This flow of judgement generates a sense of mastery, and of the centrality of ourselves. Although this gives a certain sense of power and competence, it is also quite lonely since I am the one who is having to work out what is going on. The world is busy and full of stuff so sometimes the burden of being in charge feels just too much. Then life can be a bit meaningless, and aspects of depression and anxiety can start to spread into our experience of ourselves and the world. The more we can relax and open and feel the co-emergent non-duality of subject and object, the more we can have direct experience that the world is doing itself. We start to trust that we are a part of what is going on. It's not all up to us. We are not so important, and yet we are vital. We are not so important, because life is going on whether we are busy or not, and yet we are vital, for our presence, aliveness, is always shimmering in the ceaseless flow of experience.

All the Buddhist traditions assert that suffering arises from attachment. An aspect of this is our attachment to the stories we tell about ourselves in order to confirm our sense of who we are. This binds us to the processes by which we make sense of things. The structures that are created through our education, through our psychological insight and self-knowledge – structures which seem to support us and protect us and give a sense of power and meaning to our lives – also act as a kind of prison. What we come to believe in and know, restricts our capacity to be open to the freshness of the moment. In order to return to the freshness, we have to let go of our identification with our conditioning. But of course we have come to believe that our conditioning is the very thing that keeps us safe and makes us who we are. This is similar to the function of worrying. When we worry, we feel a necessity to keep thinking about something. We feel a direct and internal necessity to return again and again to the object of our concern. The act of worrying feels to be an important part of keeping ourselves safe. Many people feel that if they don't worry about something they have to do, they won't do it well. Yet worrying involves the habitual preoccupations which blind us to all the other possibilities of the situation. We can say that worrying is generally a waste of time. It is a non-productive activity which presents itself as being productive. In the same way a lot of our general thinking and conditioning seems to be enormously important. But is it? This is something for us to examine again and again.

Our sense of self has been built up on the basis of certain building blocks, certain assumptions about who we are. If we let go of these, will we cease to exist? This is an absolutely central question in Buddhism. Will I still be alive if I cut off my head? If all this mental stuff that is going round and round and round was to end, what would be left? Would I be condemned to a hospital's back ward, unable to do anything? Or would more possibilities of life arise? Are we better off maintaining the confidence of trusting in the ideas and habits that support who we believe we are, or should we question them, make experiments in dropping them so that they are not active, and then see what is there? If we are a construct and only a construct, then

survival as a person means getting as much glue as possible to keep the elements of the construct together.

But if the view of buddha nature is true, then from the very beginning there has been a radiant fulfilled aspect of ourselves which is not dependent on conditioning. If this is the case then all our assumptions and conditioning are far from keeping us safe. Rather they are the screen that stops us seeing who we actually are. In dzogchen the practices we do are designed to help us relax our fixation on our assumptions, beliefs and conditioning. With that, we start to see the self-existing quality of our nature, not as some kind of eternal substance, but as a radiant spaciousness which, although ungraspable, is indestructible.

### The guru is a means for awakening to our own nature

My main teacher is the late Chimed Rigdzin Lama. He was a married lama who lived with his family, and when I knew him well in India, he taught in the university. He was a great scholar and very powerful person, and he was not at all holy. He was very ordinary in his way of life. That is an important part of how we can bring the practice into our daily experience. In the lineages of Tibetan Buddhism there are many different styles of practice. Some lineages are very pure and holy. That is to say they set themselves in the domain of the sacred and create a mood which is separate from ordinary life. When you encounter that kind of setting, you have the opportunity to experience something which is not like ordinary existence. But our teacher, C.R. Lama, was very much in ordinary life. He was very fond of university politics, supporting his friends and attacking his enemies. This is not holy activity. But very pleasurable! For many years I was his secretary, so I had to write, on the basis of his special English, very insulting letters. In order to enter his world I had to let go of many of the assumptions I had about how to live in a proper way. In the end, in order to practice, we have to find a style or way which is in harmony with our potential, which is not the same thing as being in harmony with our personality. Being in the mandala or environment Rinpoche created was very disturbing, and yet also liberating. It opened the space to see that our world, relative truth, is indeed a construct.

The guru is a means for awakening to one's own nature. Our true nature or *rigpa* is inseparable from space. The elements which manifest our world, wind, fire, water and earth all arise from space. Everything we see in the world, everything that seems substantial and separate, is itself the radiance of unborn space. In contrast, from the point of view of samsara, everything is built up from the earth element. In many cultures they say the earth is the mother. In the creation myths of many tribes, god or the first ancestor, or a spirit, picks up some mud, breathes into it and so creates living beings. Darwinian evolutionary theories have much the same idea, that matter coming into motion gives rise to many different forms of life. But in the view of dzogchen and the higher tantras, everything arises from space. The practice of tantra allows us to replant ourselves in our true ground, which is space. The sequence of visualisations in a tantric meditation offers many occasions when we dissolve into emptiness space and taste the infinite openness that is inseparable from manifestation. We experience that there is nothing at all, and then we flow back into form. Through continuing in that practice, we come to see that moment-by-moment we are manifesting into forms out of the unborn potential. The space out of which we manifest is pure from the very beginning, being completely empty of any substantial essence. And so as we take on these different shapes and forms moment-by-moment, each of them is completely perfect and pure. They are what they are, and they are nothing at all – radiant illusion, like a rainbow in the sky. Our own awareness, our presence, is there whether there is manifestation or not. This is the indestructibility of being.

You may think that some of the things you do are not so good. Perhaps you sometimes tell lies. How could that be pure? The individual ego with all its complex tendencies is operating in a field of complex variables and struggling to maintain its sense of identity. Finding yourself in difficult circumstances, the easy thing to do is to tell a lie. This is called the skilful means of the ego. This is not the skilful means of the Dharma! So we tell a lie... Who told that lie? I told that lie. Who am I? This is a central point of Dharma practice. If the one who tells the lie is the ego and the ego is confirmed as being limited and stupid because of the fact of doing something bad, then limited identity and limited action just follow one another. However, if you can look directly and see where the lie arises from, you see that moment-by-moment you have no other ground than emptiness. Then the naked purity of the lie is revealed. This is the dimension of wisdom: all lies are pure. However in terms of compassion, the self-serving lie is not useful. On the level of form, troubles arise when people play games. On the level of emptiness, it doesn't matter at all. But wisdom and compassion are born together, you can't have one without the other. In the Tibetan tradition they say that if you use wisdom to justify bad behaviour, you will turn into a demon.

When Buddha said "All conditioned things are suffering", he meant "Keep get your eyes open, wake up and see what is actually happening". Life may seem all very fine, but suffering is waiting just over the hill. The reason suffering is waiting ahead is not to punish you for being happy but when we are happy and everything seems fine, we fall asleep and dream of the reality of self and other. It is from this dualistic basis that all suffering arises. In our existence we act on the world and the world acts on us. Our ego, our individual sense of self, tries to stabilize the environment in order to maintain the sense of continuity of who we think we are. This is an impossible task. For a brief period of time things may go well but then the shit factory starts again. This is how it is.

It is important to recognize when you act badly and then try to change. But doing bad things doesn't make you a bad person or indicate that you have an impure essence or are evil. Why is this? This is because people don't exist. We are all composed of the five heaps or *skandhas*, the basic building blocks of relative existence. Everything in our usual experience arises from the interplay of form, feeling, perception, association and consciousness. These five skandhas themselves are empty. What we call a 'person' is like a rainbow in the sky. The seeming integrity of their personhood is a conventional construct. If you see a mirage on the road when you're driving on a hot day, you might believe there really is water there, but as you keep driving towards it, it vanishes. Similarly, all our words: "I like it, I don't like it", have nothing substantial to stick to. All the signifiers of samsara and nirvana don't find even one true sign to fix on. What we take to be the sign of a true entity is just another signifier running on the spot.

The practice of tantra helps us not to take our lives too seriously. At first it is quite hard work to see the world as an illusion; it's much easier to see it as solidly real which is what we are used to doing. Yet, it's a great gift to someone if you hear what they say as being sound and emptiness because that means that when they speak you don't fall into a corroborative belief. When we hear other people with spaciousness, that supports them in being able to speak from spaciousness.

Tantra and dzogchen point to a different way of living: of taking the familiar territory that we rely on, seeing its emptiness and insubstantiality, seeing its dynamic nature, and recognizing that this dynamic, impermanent, empty nature is simply energy. We then continue the moment-by-moment work of integrating energy and its ground. This makes life very spacious and easy, for this is a practice that can continue under all circumstances. It doesn't mean that our ordinary

identity ceases. You can continue with your particular likes and dislikes, but with no reliance on these phenomena as the basis of your true identity. You can immediately see the ground out of which thought arises. So if you like football, you can be very passionate about your football team, you can be happy when they win and sad when they lose. All of that experience is inseparable from space. It's not that in order to understand emptiness, you have to have a pure life. Holy has nothing to do with this. If you want to be a monk or a nun, you can be a monk or a nun. Some monks and nuns awaken, some don't. If you want to drink a lot, you can drink a lot, some people who drink a lot awaken, and some don't. You can be vegetarian or you can eat raw liver! You can get enlightenment in any place. Why is this? Because enlightenment is not based on objects or on the qualities of the individual subject. Enlightenment is your own nature which has been there from the very beginning. If you think that being a good person will make you enlightened, then this is not Buddhism. Enlightenment is always present from the beginning, but it seems to be covered up. By what? Primarily by your own theory about how to get enlightened! So rather than thinking about enlightenment, we need to find the practice that opens the door. There are many such practices in tantra, in dzogchen, in zen, and many of the other Buddhist traditions. The main thing is to understand how to do them and then to do them.

## Two aspects of impermanence

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Impermanence is probably the most important of all the Buddha's teachings for it helps to illustrate how we build our house on sand by creating for ourselves the sense that something is reliable when it's not. A key implication of doing this is that we are going to be disappointed because when we attempt to stabilize a situation, we find that life doesn't follow our plan.

The second aspect of impermanence is that denial of it means that we don't see directly how things are. For while we try to maintain the illusory structure of permanence, continuity, and prediction; change reveals itself either as something threatening the world that we are building up or as a series of possibilities that can be exploited. The resultant fear and desire disguise the fact that the world is luminous. That is to say, the unchanging radiance of phenomena which we encounter moment-by-moment, the vibrant quality of our existence, is hidden by our own activity. Ignorance is the dynamic obscuring of that which is always there. There are two main views about how this operates.

In the first aspect our obscurations are taken to be veils and tendencies built up over time, in many, many lives. For example, if you don't clean your windows they will build up an accumulation of dirt, and then you will have to scrub them. The dust comes piece by tiny piece, and builds up into a thick film. According to the traditional view of karma, we have all accumulated tendencies habits and impulses which are revealed to us through the kind of situations we find ourselves in. That is to say, our world is constellated out of the moment-by-moment fitting together or co-emergence of patterns of self and field experience. These patterns of subject and object are determined by the current manifesting of certain of our stored up tendencies. We never get to see the whole store at once and while items generally arise in sequence, specific situations can constellate impulses that are intense and recently developed. Karma generally operates like a long train. Each new event we enact generates a karmic or energetic charge, a potential towards activity, and each new charge joins the end of the queue. So the oldest tendencies, accumulated in past lives, are at the front of the queue and are likely to manifest first. This is one reason why we are often surprised by our own behaviour and by the strange situations we find ourselves in.

From this point of view each of us has many obscurations which can arise at any moment. Therefore we have to be vigilant in the moment not to activate the limiting factors in the situation and not to generate any new limitations for the future. Not activating limitations and obscurations involves the skill of a bomb disposal expert: patience, courage, attention to detail, a general mindfulness and precise knowledge about how obscurations operate. Knowledge of obscurations comes from studying buddhist texts, especially the abhidharma literature which identifies the many types of snares and pitfalls that can arise. But more importantly such knowledge arises from observing our minds as they operate, seeing again and again how we lose our clarity and fuse with whatever is emerging.

A second view regarding obscurations is that they are like clouds in the sky or reflections in a mirror. As long as we focus on them and take them seriously they operate as facts in our world but when we see them in context, as transient and contingent, then we notice that their field of operation, which is like the sky or a mirror, is untouched by them even as it offers them hospitality. The ground of our being is untouched by any obscuration and so no effort is required to remove them – they simply have to be recognised for what they are. When we blow up a balloon it fills with the air we breathe into it. If we stop blowing it will empty by itself. Similarly if we stop identifying with and investing in transient thoughts, feelings, sensations and moments of experience then they will go free by themselves without any accumulation of tendency, habit, emotion or energetic charge.

The basis for the identification and investment which cause us so much trouble is our core negative beliefs, the basic assumptions which generate and govern life in samsara. These are the beliefs, experienced as truths, that 1) we exist as autonomous individuals intrinsically separate from our environment, 2) we have our own individual essence or inherent nature that makes us the person we are – a core, irreducible personality or soul or personal spirit, 3) the world truly is at it appears to us. These beliefs create the limit of our possibilities. Relying on them, the best that we can do is to make a go of getting the most out of the situations we find ourselves in. Once we are inhabiting this frame of reference pre-occupation with the many tasks of life-maintenance keeps us busy and away from the alternative work of examining our beliefs and investigating who we actually are. Living within the bubble of our beliefs, which seem so fundamental, there appears to be little that can be changed and so we often lose heart and lose hope.

When we merge with a thought, it becomes the limit of our existence. The thought itself is impermanent. It doesn't stay in our attention very long. But it presents itself as if it is the eternal truth. Falling for this, we fuse with the limitation, gaining a sense of containment, a shaping of our experience. Yet underlying this is perhaps a sense of frustration and hopelessness at the reductive definition of ourselves we are subscribing to. This is more apparent to us when the thought or other arising is experienced as being negative. I would imagine that for all of us, in the course of our lives, many doors have appeared in front of us, new opportunities and possibilities. But because of doubts and confusions, and feelings of anxiety, we didn't go through these doors. It's very helpful to reflect on that and see the power that our identification with a thought has to determine our operational identity. Thus, the impermanent thought, in claiming to define a situation as finite and permanent, obscures the sole permanent situation, which is the unchanging openness of our awareness.

It is vital to observe the nature of thought, to see how thoughts arise, how they remain, how they go, and with that, to ask 'Who is the one who is aware of the thought?'. As long as we immediately merge with the thought – with whatever is arising – then that transient moment

becomes our habitation and in that moment we act from that particular position as if it were a reliable basis for our wellbeing. Even if we don't fuse with what is arising but try to stand back and observe it, we are still adopting a limited position in which 'we' are located 'somewhere'. Due to identification with such limited positions we miss the radical awakening that comes from seeing what such a positioning actually is and does. Paradoxically this identification is based on abstraction, on extrapolating our identity out of the radiant field of self-liberating illusory appearance.

When you walk in a park you pass many trees. Every step you take shifts how your body is standing in relation to the trees, so a new vista, a new immediate experience is opened up. Each step is your new world, an experience you have never had before. Yet our mind is often full of thoughts like "Oh, the trees look nice this year". Such commentary takes us out of, extrapolates us from, the immediacy of the situation and puts us into a kind of overview. We become the one who is telling the world what the world is. This diminishes the possibility of the freshness, the radiance, of the situation calling us out of our habitual enclosure in narrative, and welcoming us into direct engagement. In order to interrupt this tendency, we can focus on the impermanence of both outer and mental phenomena. When we see the actual impermanence or dynamic flow of all phenomena we can start to observe how we use our beliefs to take that which is changing and unreliable and utilise it to create the illusion of a reliable, fixed field of experience.

When we see the ungrounded nature of our experience we might feel a bit alarmed. In the tradition it is said that when the Buddha first taught the view of emptiness the five hundred Brahmins who were there all fell unconscious. He was shaking the foundations of the conceptual elaborations that gave meaning and structure to their lives. But of course, nothing was destroyed but illusion. If someone were to kill Mickey Mouse, should they be arrested? So, when the Buddha teaches emptiness, he kills samsara. He kills all sentient beings, yet nobody dies.

*The Diamond Cutter Sutra* points to the fact that the bodhisattva who wants to save sentient beings has already broken his vow since there are no truly existent sentient beings needing to be saved. That doesn't mean that there is no work to be done. Rather that the illusory bodhisattva saves illusory beings in the manner of the dream. When we drop the delusion of self-existing entities, life is better. We are not going to enter the realm of Kafka's Trial. We are not falling into some destabilized world where we can't make sense of what is going on. In fact there is a relief from the sense that we are under attack for we are now experiencing the immediacy of experience unmediated by our habitual interpretations. Our search for security rests on an ever-present sense of danger and within this we cannot relax. There is a lot of financial profit to be made from providing a sense of security. Due to the actions of a few terrorists, many business people have become rich making little cameras to go everywhere, and checking-machines for airports, and many other methods of control. Security becomes important because there is something precious and fragile to protect. The ego, our ego, feels both precious and vulnerable.

The Buddhist response to this is "Our own true nature is indestructible Vajra. It has never been a thing, an object, and so can never be destroyed by any object". As we develop confidence in our indestructible nature we become less dependent on our conditioned structures and less identified with them. Then we can use the meditation to blow apart these obsolete fragile, illusory constructions. In the past when trees were felled in the mountains, they were floated down-river. Often the logs jammed together and blocked the river. Brave loggers would climb on the revolving logs and push them apart, back into the flow. The logs were in the river, they

were tumbling around due to the force of the water, but they were not going anywhere. In the same way we are always, all the time, in the river of life. Moment-by-moment new experience is arising, our life is a flowing stream. Because of this there is no separation between ourselves and others. We flow together, bumping into each other, and getting stuck in complex attachments since what you do affects me, and what I do affects you. In this situation you cannot achieve stability. That is a false goal that leads to endless wasted effort and frustration. It is vital to return to the immediacy of ceaseless flow. We have to be in our lives, present as movement among movements.

The basic point is that samsara is the attempt to stabilize that which can never be stabilized and so there is no end to it. While we are struggling to do the impossible, we are not attending to the one thing which *is* stable, the door to nirvana. Thus awakening to the fact of impermanence is very, very important. Seeing all outer phenomena as impermanent and all inner phenomena as impermanent, we still long for a place to rest. What then shall we take refuge in? If you take refuge in things which are impermanent, they will always disappoint you. Not because they are 'bad' but because that's just how it is.

We, however are brave and courageous and stupid, so we keep on trying! Try to observe how much time you spend, how much effort you make trying to stabilize situations rather than enjoying them. Both tantra and dzogchen are very concerned with enjoyment. Joy arises from the interaction of complementary factors. Where the two energetic streams of self and other meet in a way that brings no harm to either, there is an enrichment of the sense of our aliveness. The purest form of non-harm is the absence of reified beings who feel themselves to be vulnerable. Sometimes this is called synergy. This is indicated by the paintings in the tantric tradition depicting two deities in sexual embrace. Clearly sex itself can create a sense of openness and connection, and here it represents the infinite openness of our sense organs to the field of experience. Nothing is blocked and by not identifying with the anxious self that wants to maintain a particular pattern more and more experiences become available for enjoyment.

That doesn't mean that we can just say "Oh, I like everything", because that is a narrative, a position. What we are describing here is the direct immediacy of not being blocked in the co-arising of subject and object. Firstly we have to put into question and directly deconstruct the interpretive matrix out of which we attribute value. The ego function is always construing the world in terms of its own conditioning: what I like, what I don't like. At its heart is a selective attention grounded in the desire for sustenance and the fear of annihilation. This selective attention stops or interrupts the experience of the panoramic vision of being open to everything as it arises.

Co-operation, collaboration and integration are the heart of dzogchen practice. There is no enemy, there are no obstacles; all that we lack is the skill of knowing how to work with circumstances. So whatever experiences arise, don't judge them harshly, just rest in undefended openness. If you find yourself distracted – having wandered into identification with thoughts – then very gently bring yourself back into presence. These distractions have no inherent meaning. For example, a small baby has very little capacity to self-soothe and can become distressed because of some gas in its stomach or a sudden noise. There is no real danger, so the mother very gently rocks the baby, and speaks softly to it, so that the baby can come back to itself. This is the way we meditate. Our mind, like a restless baby, becomes agitated when there is no real danger. When we see that there is nothing to worry about, we settle down, open and relax. Then all the unnecessary activity, which is samsara, goes free by itself.

One way to develop the capacity to maintain focused attention is by not interfering with our experience of our body as it presents itself. We have many different kinds of body. We have an anatomical body which is mainly revealed to us when we have to go to the doctor. We have a neurotic body which is revealed when we look at ourselves in a mirror and enter into judgement. We have the body of our memories and imagination. And we also have the body which reveals itself moment-by-moment, the body of revelation, the body of energy.

### *Lhagthong / vipassana practice. "Don't do any cooking"*

So in the practice of 'looking clearly' (*vipassana, lhagthong*) we simply scan through the body attending to what reveals itself, registering whatever is occurring in the most basic and precise way possible. Usually our immediate body of revelation is hidden by our identification with the body of interpretation. For example we don't usually sit cross-legged on the floor, so it's likely that our knees will become sore. If I say "My knees are sore", anyone can understand that. It's immediately meaningful, yet it's an interpretation for what is the basis of the statement "My knees are sore"? Something is occurring – what is it? This is what we investigate in the practice of 'looking clearly'. We sit quietly and focus our attention at the top of our body. Then we gently direct our attention down through each part of our body to our feet, and then slowly back up to our head. When the attention comes to what we call 'our knees', we are aware that something is going on. What is there? Maybe a stabbing sensation, maybe grinding, tearing, hot, cold. This is what is revealed – something very immediate, very primitive. Usually we gather these ingredients and cook them into an interpretation such as "My knees are sore". The problem with this kind of cooking is that it abstracts us from what is actually there, and so we come to rest inside a conclusion – for example, that something is wrong with me.

The main instruction for this practice is not to do any cooking. Leave the ingredients just as they are, and see what happens. If there is grinding, just name it in the simplest way. We are not trying to resist language or step outside it, but rather to use it in its simplest form so that there are as few hooks as possible for the elaboration of interpretation. Then you continue scanning, and when you come back down and pass this place we call the knee, look and see what is occurring. You may find that now there is tearing. Tearing is not the same as grinding. If we make an interpretation and identify that both sensations are types of pain, we might say "Oh, it's still sore". If we avoid doing that, we just stay with whatever is occurring. Through this we gain direct experience of our body as a flow of dynamic impermanence.

Scanning reveals the momentary arising of different kinds of sensation. When these sensations are glued together by our assumptions and our conditioning, we fuel the familiar narratives we have about ourselves. This keeps us turning in familiar places. But if we stay with the most simple, precise description moment-by-moment, we become aware that all that presents is changing, and then see that there is no particular knee-ness to the "knee". Usually, we rely on organizing abstractions such as 'my body': this is a chin, these are my fingers, this is my nose and so on. Through this we gain a sense of mastery over the world of phenomena. We do this with small children; we show them a picture in a book and say "This is a cow. Moooo!" Then the baby learns to say "cow" while pointing at the picture and through this they are cheated! For this is not a cow, it is a picture in a book! In this way we teach children that a representation is the same as the thing itself (which is not a thing).

As we grow up we get used to seeing all that we experience in terms of abstractions, of ideas, of representations but in this meditation practice we seek to turn towards the phenomenology of

the actual, of what is here. Through this we experience that our body is a ceaseless dynamic display of ever-changing moments, tiny gestures, evanescent events. The fact that we are able to organize this revelation through language in terms of concepts is very useful and indeed necessary for our social living with others. But it doesn't create any true existence in these phenomena. It's just a way of speaking. And speaking is a gesture, a movement of energy. You can speak for a million of years, but you won't create one truly, inherently existing thing.

This movement of revelation, of energy, is difficult to describe because it is beyond the limit of language. When we experience it directly we see how the practice of tantra is possible. Tantric visualization begins with the infinite clear blue sky within which appears the deity through whom we also arise as a deity. However, if our body made of bone, and meat, and blood, is a real thing, how can I become something made of light? For example, we have our daily life, we go to work, work is not always so nice, but we save our money, and then we have a *holiday*, and on a holiday we have a *good time!* And we feel great! And then the money is finished, the time is finished and we go back to our *ordinary* life. If you believe that your usual sense of your meat body is your actual body, then your meditation will only be a holiday. You will sit for a while, you imagine all sorts of things, and then you come back to 'real life'. This is not the practice of tantra, for tantra is based on transformation. We can only transform one 'thing' into another if it's possible for the first form to be dissolved by our letting go of the seemingly innate structure we have ascribed to it so that we see that it is not truly defined by what we habitually take it to be.

If you take a piece of ice from the freezer and put it in the sun, it will transform into liquid water. That is to say, the causes and conditions that kept the water in the form of ice have been altered, releasing its potential to manifest in another form. If you develop an obsessive-compulsive attitude, you might become anxious that the freezer is not working properly, and so decide to look into the freezer every hour just to make sure that there really was ice. As long as you didn't leave the door open, you would indeed find the ice, because as long as the maintaining factors are there, it would show itself to be ice. Then we might think "Oh, this ice is reliably ice! I've checked it now 10,000 times; it's still ice, and I hope, when I am released from psychiatric hospital, it's still ice."

Our conditioning operates in the same way. We tend to keep ourselves in the freezer of reification, of objectification, maintaining those factors which solidify our experience. Every time we check we find that "I'm still me, here I am, nothing has changed. Research has proved that I am myself." But this is because of the continuity of the factors maintaining the patterns I call myself. Vipassana or clearly looking is a helpful practice for putting these constructions into question. Instead of looking at our experience in a way that maintains the familiar organizing categories, we focus on the immediacy of arisings, scratching, stubbing, and so on, using simple terms which illuminate the moment, but don't bind it into any pre-existing construction. Through this we start to see that the body is a flow rather than a fixed thing. There is no reliable point to come back to. Instead we experience embodiment as being alive to the changing nature of the flow of selfing. This is essential for the practice of tantra, since instead of thinking "I have a fixed bone and flesh body" we experience directly the ever-changing moments of the potential, the basis of all manifestation. At its most basic, this is the level of *tigle*, the emergent points of sound and light which are the vibrancy of all we experience. By not solidifying all that is familiar we see the inseparability of all the forms of samsara and nirvana where everything has the nature of Padmasambhava.

Similarly, in dzogchen we experience the integrated, non-dual field of arising, the spontaneous perfection revealed when we are not holding on to our own concepts as the test and proof of true substantial reality. In order to experience the direct revelation of everything within the infinite space of dharmadhatu – the openness where subject and object arise together, instantly and effortlessly – we have to relax our reliance on habitual conceptual interpretation. These seemingly reassuring concepts merely limit the range of appearances, editing and organizing them according to our prejudices and desires, and confirming the essential reality of ourselves as someone living inside our skin-bag. This belief and experience is the limit to our awakening. What we call ‘our body’, what we call ‘this room’ and ‘the world’ is revealed through practice to be the luminous nature of the mind. But this will remain an abstract theory as long as we are strongly attached to a felt sense that “I am my body”.

So, to help us explore the nature of our embodiment. we can practice as follows. Start with the usual focus on your breath or on external object, and do that for a few moments to settle. Then when you have a sense of your focused attention, bring it to the top of your head and very gently start to move your attention down through your body to your feet and then back up again. You can experiment for yourself, doing it at different speeds to see what works best for you. Whenever you encounter a sensation of any kind, or an emotion that seems to be embedded in the body, make the simplest and most precise description of it. It takes some time to get used to using language in this way. Let's say, for example, around your heart you have a sort of sad feeling. The notion of “sad” is already an interpretation. Perhaps the actual experience is of ‘heavy’, ‘sinking’, ‘empty’. We are working to avoid interpretation and conceptual elaboration, to stay as close to raw experience as possible. Then we can start to see how our own habitual interpretations are a karmic force which binds us into our personal world. If we are to open to infinite wisdom and manifest the capacity to relate to others as they are, we will need to step out of our familiar sense of how things are.

## Who is going to get enlightenment?

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Dzogchen is sometimes described as being an instant path, for where we want to go to is not far away. This view is grounded in a particular understanding of our condition. If somebody is living in a village near here, they could travel and visit many different places in this country, but one place they could never go to is Poland – because they are already in Poland. This is the simplicity of the dzogchen tradition. We are already in the natural state, the natural condition. However, by imagining that it is somewhere else, by developing some elaborate conceptualization of it, we create many paths and practices to help us to get to where we think we want to go, but they can't actually take us there, for ‘we’ will never be enlightened, because *we, I, me, myself* doesn't ‘get’ enlightened.

Often we think of enlightenment as being similar to the European Enlightenment. That is to say, a rational light is shone on existing structures illuminating the lived condition of the individual as a person. The European enlightenment project was concerned to free people from the bondage of religious and inherited control, leading to a sense of individual fulfilment. In this view we can improve our experience by liberating ourselves from constraints imposed by others. The view in dzogchen is very different, for it points to unlimited natural liberation, primordial freedom. According to the teachings coming from the lineage of Kuntu Zangpo, Dorje Sempa, Garab Dorje, Padmasambhava and so on, from the very beginning our nature has been completely pure. ‘Pure’ means ‘never contaminated’, never defiled nor brought into contact with anything else. Our true nature, the nature of our awareness, the nature of our presence, is luminosity which

has no limit. It illuminates everything. To give a sense of this we can do something very simple. Please turn your head to the right, and now turn it slowly to the left. When you were looking to the right, something was revealed. By the time your head was turned to the left, something quite different was revealed. What you see to the right is there, when you opened to the right. As you move your head to the left, what was there on the right vanishes. This is used to indicate how the mind as an awareness is constantly filling and emptying. If you stop thinking about your experience and creating structures out of concepts, and stay simply present with the openness itself; the mind just fills and empties.

In the tradition we use the symbol of a mirror to illustrate this. If I had a mirror in my hand and turned it this way and then turned it that way, at each stage the mirror is always filled with reflections. As the mirror turns and a new set of reflections arise, the reflections that were there before don't get squeezed very flat and put into storage. They were there, and are now gone. As one reflection is going, another is arising. None of these reflections leaves any trace in the mirror. In the same way, when we are relaxed and opened, experience doesn't mark our condition. Awareness itself, the basic capacity to be present – which has always been the basis of our existence – is not a thing, and it is not altered by anything else. Unchanging, it can't be lost, it can't be found, you can't buy it or sell it. Awareness is indestructible. Our own nature is indestructible. As a person, our moment-by-moment experience is always changing. Within that realm of changing experience we build up a composite picture of who we are; habits, memories, hopes and fears, create a particular patterning which we take to be ourselves. But when we look back, we see that many of the senses of self that we had, that were very, very real at one time, are now gone. Behaviours, feelings, intentions, which at one time seemed to define us completely, have no meaning now. How can this be? We were so sure "This is me, this is how my life is!" Then that particular fixation vanished. However, what is not gone is the capacity of our awareness to show more reflections, more images, more trees, cars, people, dogs...

To say that our nature is pure from the very beginning means that it is free of the confusion of identifying with a reflection as if it was a stable identity. When we look in a mirror, we only see a reflection, we don't see the mirror. Everything you encounter is like a reflection. Every moment brings change; every step you take opens a new experience as you fill up with new images of self and other. This is the very nature of the emptiness of the mirror. There is no end for your capacity to experience everything. This is obscured only by the desire to have a particular kind of something, wanting to encounter a particular, specific item. Our own wish for something specific blinds us to the fact that we are already moving in the realm of infinite riches.

Natural purity is simply the openness of the mind to reveal whatever is there. The basis of the revealing of phenomena is the openness of the source. Because our awareness or our nature has no fixed content, it can show everything. As we are sitting here just now, people's bodies move around, we speak, we listen, thoughts arise, feelings come and go – this is life. Experience is coming and going. Who is having this experience? Is it something I have to work out? Something is happening to me? What are they talking about? Or is the experience already fully there? It is there as it is, but if we have a preconception about how it should be then we will have difficulties. For example, if you walk in a forest in the autumn in the early morning there is often a lot of mist. You might think "Oh, this mist is terrible, because I can't see the trees." You can't see the trees, but you can see the mist. The mist is what you've got. Can you be with it? The same happens with our mind. Sometimes the mind is very misty. We feel tired, sleepy, but imagine that we should be experiencing something different. Then instead of being open to how we are, we imagine that what we have is sub-standard.

All phenomena are self-liberating; they naturally go free by themselves. If you don't discriminate, if you don't privilege some things as good, and some things as bad, then, with a relaxed opened presence that does nothing artificial, all that arises comes and goes freely. Among the phenomena that come and go are qualities like insight. You may feel very clear about dharma in the morning yet by the afternoon it's not so clear. Does that matter? No. It is simply the impermanence of all phenomena. If you understand impermanence, everything that occurs is teaching you dharma. However, if you try to get dharma as some possession for yourself, it will fall through your fingers.

Sometimes we have a lot of faith, we have a lot of energy, and we do a lot of practice. Maybe other people know this and think "Oh, a good Buddhist." Then something happens.... Not so much faith, not so much energy, not so much practice, and we enter the category of "bad Buddhist". Usually we are happy with the former and sad with the latter, yet being a Buddhist has no direct impact on your buddha nature. Buddha nature is not created out of Buddhist practice. Buddhism is a cultural form. It came into the world in a particular time, and according to the tradition, it will vanish too. And then it will come back again. When it vanishes as a cultural form, what it describes won't vanish, because the dharma nature never changes. So, does that mean that all realization is impermanent? No. When we have a moment of understanding, it is most important not to be attached to it. Who is the one who has understood? It is the empty nature of the mind. If you think "I have understood", you put the Buddha in your pocket, but later when you look again you only find some tofu. Whatever is turned into a thing will change and rot. The way to use dharma is to not take it so seriously but to actively use it to soften your rigid beliefs.

The state of the mirror, natural openness, is communicated through joint meditation practice. Why do we need to have a transmission? Because everything is linked together. It is not that we have a buddha nature inside us that is our private possession. The nature of our presence is not outside, nor inside. You will never *have* it, but you've always got it. It is not a thing. But we are so addicted to things, that we will always mistake it by taking it to be a thing. When we practice with others, we open ourselves to the support that comes from the relaxed spaciousness. This is a paradox: nobody can give you your own nature, but without the presence of others it is very difficult to awaken to it. The resolution of the paradox is the nature of non-duality. Self and other arise together.

Milarepa said "When I realized my inseparability from Marpa (his teacher) I realized my own nature." Many of you will know the story of Milarepa. When he met his teacher he was in a state of despair, because he had done many bad things. He believed that Marpa had the key, the solution that would set him free. Marpa set him many, many tasks to do, and Milarepa kept doing these tasks, because he was convinced that Marpa had something for him. And then, at the end he recognized Marpa had nothing for him. Marpa was his world, he was living in the mandala of Marpa. There was no particular thing that Marpa would give him but by stopping trying to control and manipulate Marpa into giving him what he thought he wanted, he found himself being emptied out so that he could truly receive what Marpa had to give. T

his is the co-emergence of subject and object, of self and other. We have to drop the idea of the other as a means to an end, stop thinking that they have something we need and that we have to get it from them. Rather it is about opening to the experience of being with the other. This is the meaning of faith. It is just to be open, loving, and connected, for that experience itself diminishes the gap between subject and object.

In this state we can recognise that that which I take to be 'me' and that which I take to be 'you' are mere reflections. You are unreliable, I am unreliable; so what do we take refuge in? We take refuge in our own nature. How do we do that? By not running away from it all the time. When thoughts arise, and feelings arise, we go with them. They are waves which take us somewhere else, somewhere else, somewhere else... So without blocking the flow of experience, we need to stop asking reflections to do something they can't do. The ground nature, our basic presence, is not a reflection.

The ego cannot achieve enlightenment. It can't do it so why ask it to? The ego can't have it. If we recognize that, life is very easy. So, who will get enlightenment? Enlightenment will get enlightenment. And enlightenment doesn't need to get enlightenment, because it is already enlightenment. As it says in the tradition, if you wash a piece of coal a hundred times, it won't become chalk. Coal doesn't have the nature of chalk. Coal has the nature of coal. The ego has its own nature. In a lot of Buddhists' writings the ego gets a very bad deal. It is blamed for causing many troubles. "If only I didn't have an ego, I would be enlightened." But the one who says that *is* the ego. This is a problem.

Recognizing manifestation for what it is, feeling for what it is, sensation for what it is, we can just allow them to be what they are. Who is the one who is having this experience? Who is the one I call "I"? This is at the heart of the practice. This is the enquiry that frees us from immersion in the dream world of reflections.

## As it is

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We need to directly see the difference between the nature of the mind and the contents of the mind. Our mind itself is pure from the very beginning. It is naked. It is not covered by any thought or by any kind of experience. We can see this for ourselves: moment-by-moment experience is going by. Yet out of that experience we pull back memories; we create constructions which we wrap around ourselves like clothes. This is conditioning, this is the limitation that comes from knowing oneself as an entity. Actually we don't directly know who we are; we only have ideas about who we are. So in order to see clearly we do the practice, we take off all our clothes: hopes, fears, memories, and so on. Many experiences arise, but we don't need to put them on, because we are living in a nudist colony. We have wardrobes, and wardrobes, and wardrobes of completely useless clothing. The sun is shining, we can relax, happy thoughts come "Oh, nice!"; sad thoughts come "Oh, yeah!" These thoughts are going to go by themselves and we, the open awareness, don't need them anyway.

The mind is also described as being raw. That is to say, it doesn't need anything done to it, it's fine as it is. When you meditate and you are open and relaxed, it's very much like the fresh white ricotta cheese that we have on this retreat. It has no particular taste. You can use it with anything. This cheese is like ricotta, and there are so many recipes for ricotta. In the same way this raw potential of the mind is able to work with everything that arises. It is the invisible ingredient in every dish. It is so subtle that you don't taste it, yet without it, nothing would be in existence. So, 'raw' means allowing yourself not to elaborate, not to improve, because the desire to improve comes from a lack of contentment. When the grasping energy of the mind relaxes, and the energy of diversification goes into the central channel, there is no impulse to do anything in particular. Then you can do anything. In the morning you get up and go to work. Going to work does not alter awareness. It might impact your personality and your mood but

empty open awareness – which reveals the experience of going to work – doesn't change. This is the essential point. We need to be clear about what changes and what does not.

We can now do a very simple practice, relaxing into the open state. Now, because the state is like ricotta, don't expect caviar. It's not very exciting. If you want caviar, you will get it! It will come in a form of thoughts, feelings and sensations. So if you want something tasty, be prepared to get lost. The first step is experiencing what it is like to be open, empty, relaxed, empty-handed. This is radical, for it requires no improvement. Nothing can help you, nothing can harm you. So if you experience having 'bad' meditation, being confused, sleepy, unclear about what you are, just relax into the out breath and stay present with the experience. If you fall into it, if you identify with it, it will catch you. If you try to push it away, it will simply bring out another thought.

So stay very gently, open to whatever is there. A simple way to relax in the state is to use the sound of A. A is the sound of emptiness, it releases the knots of fixation. We sit up with our gaze slightly raised towards the space in front of us. You imagine a small ball of rainbow coloured light and inside it a white letter A. If you know what the Tibetan letter A is, you can use that, or you can just use a capital A. The Tibetan letter is not inherently better than the English letter. A as emptiness and as potential represents the buddha mind, the enlightened nature of all the masters of the lineage from Kuntu Zangpo down to us. Connection with the lineage protects us from dissolving into nihilistic emptiness. The letting go of all our constructs brings us into the radiant presence of the divine forms. After saying A three times, we hold the presence of A for a short period of time; then it dissolves into space, and we just sit. At that time there is no particular object of meditation. That is to say, you cannot know in advance what to be present with; we are present with whatever reveals itself. If the sound of a car arises or a dog barking, we're open with that, and then it goes. The main point is to avoid trying to block thoughts because thoughts and feelings are always arising. If you stay very gently with the one who is experiencing whatever is arising, that is the state of the mirror itself. It is not something you can describe. You won't be able to hang onto it as a memory, but it is the root basis of our experience. We can relax into it whenever we want, because it doesn't go anywhere else and is always available. The more we privilege relaxation over arousal, the more the felt sense of openness becomes our residence. This is the basis of hospitality to all things, because the more we experience our own nature as empty, the more generous and welcoming we can be to whatever is arising. For we see that there is nothing in the object which can harm us and nothing in ourselves which can be damaged.

There is no substance to any arising, whether it appears as subject or object. We divide our world up into 'you' and 'me'. When we were children we used to play cowboys and Indians. "I am going to be a cowboy, and you have to be an Indian. We can't both be cowboys, for then we won't have a game." Similarly, in order for the game of samsara to progress, we have to have two sides, self and other. But it is a funny kind of game because everybody who plays, says "I am self and you are the other." That is why we never agree with each other. Yet, it's just a game. What we call self is something which is arising and passing, and what we call other is something arising and passing. The more the energy of the mind relaxes, we experience the mind itself offering hospitality to both. In fact they have one taste, the taste of emptiness.

The purpose of doing practice is to keep relaxing all the points of identification with transitory arisings, so that they are not appropriated as proofs of our existence. When we really relax we experience the openness of primordial purity, *kadag*. This gives rise to the experience that everything arises immediately together. This is called *lhundrup*, which means *immediately there*

or *effortlessly arising*. All the various divisions and distinctions that we make, such as subject and object, inside and outside, just dissolve. Everything is there just as it is, immediately present. There is no need to control or organise what is happening – so the mind rests easy.

## **Two practices using movement and sensation**

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I'll describe two simple practices you can do outside. Both are ways of loosening the habit of relying on thoughts. In the first method you go out into nature, choose a place to start then relax into the out-breath and simply follow the line of your gaze wherever it goes. Then, whatever shape catches your eye, without thinking about it allow your body to move into that shape. And when you find yourself in that new shape, your body will be reoriented, so your gaze will go in another direction. Just follow the gaze and let your body again take on the shape of whatever you see. And again that will shift your head so you will see something different, and move into that shape. If you keep this flowing for half an hour, you will find your mind is very relaxed without any thoughts at all.

The function of this practice is to let you experience the movement of the body as an aspect of the world. Most of what we do is determined by the environment. Even how you hold a cup of tea is determined by the shape of the cup and the nature of its contents. For example if the cup has no handle and it contains tea your hand will start to feel very hot so you won't want to hold it for long. We are actually always in movement with, in conversation with, the shapes of the world. In this practice we don't have to rely on any internal idea for we are not trying to express ourselves. Nor do we have to remember any particular form or rule or instruction, because the shape you see shows you how to move your body. You can explore doing this quickly or slowly. You can also observe for yourself how there are certain habitual moves that your body makes, and so become aware of how this obstructs the simple flow of seeing the shape and then copying it. Just keep to the shape of the blade of grass, of the cloud, of the building, whatever it is, and you allow the whole of your body to move in that way and release your conditioning. It will also exercise all the muscles of the body.

The second practice involves finding a nice place to sit quietly and settle. Do the three A practice or just relax with the out-breath. And then in that state of openness move into the world, looking at the shapes and colours, touching, tasting, smelling everything, opening to every sensory experience without thinking about it, without interpreting. If you find yourself getting caught up in thoughts and interpretation, just relax again into the out-breath. Then, open and empty, welcome the rich precision of the world.

## **Three Statements of Garab Dorje**

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In the three statements of Garab Dorje, the first statement encourages us to experience direct introduction to or direct awakening as our own nature. Essentially this means relaxing back into our own nature. It's not about creating something, it's not about seeing something as if it was an object, but relaxing into a state that is always there. This is what we have been exploring together.

The second statement of Garab Dorje is to be clear about your nature, not to remain in doubt or uncertainty. The Bön master, Tenzin Namdak, often says "The essential point is not to do

anything at all.” The thoughts that arise in our mind are not ‘our’ thoughts. They are just thoughts arising and passing through. They become ‘our’ thoughts by identification and the one who does the identification is itself just a transient mental event. When we speak our mother tongue, that language, our language, is actually a public phenomenon. It was present in the world before we were born. We were born into language, it washed over us when we were a small baby, and gradually we internalized the patterns of the sounds, and then, bit-by-bit, we were speaking. We are speaking from the feeling, *this is what I have to say*. But everything that *I have to say* is in shared language. So public words are coming out of my mouth as *what I have to say*. In this way, between the public and the private, between the seemingly individual and the actually shared, there is some confusion. If we can recognize this in relation to language, it can help us to see that the same structure operates in the world and with thoughts. As soon as we sit on a seat in a bus it becomes ‘my’ seat. The public has become private, and starts to feel like a personal possession. All the kinds of thoughts you have in your head are not so different from the kinds of thoughts other people have in their heads. Yet, the mere fact that a thought is arising inside what I take to be ‘me’, makes it ‘my’ thought. It seems certain and obvious that these thoughts must have something to do with me.

However, in meditation when thoughts, feelings and so on arise, we remain open to them without appropriation. It is the mind's own movement that binds the thought and tries to milk some particular meaning or value from it. When the thought is experienced as a movement of energy simply arising and passing, you don't lose any clarity about its content and yet you are not caught by it. That is to say, what we take to be our activity, our thoughts, speaking, walking, talking and so on, is revealed as the movement of energy in the world. We can take the arising as proof that we exist, and see the semantic content of a thought as an affirmation that it is ‘my’ thought, that it has something to do with ‘me’. But if we stop this self-referential movement of interpretation, all that constitutes our individual identity is just stuff coming and going.

So in the practice the main thing we have to do is to remain indifferent to whatever is arising; not caring too much about what's occurring. Not being happy when our thoughts are the way we want them to be, nor unhappy when they are not the way we want them to be for the one who judges that this is a bad thought or this is a good thought is itself a momentary constellation of sensations, feelings and thoughts.

However, the sense that self and other are two meaningful categories is very powerful for most of us. We split the world and then edit and project beliefs and attitudes to create our sense of how we are in relation to others. We identify some thoughts as being suitable to be parts of ‘me’, and other thoughts as being unsuitable to be parts of ‘me’. If the basic thoughts that I think are suitable for me are “I'm lazy, I'm stupid, I'm not very good” then the qualities of being energetic, and intelligent and good still need to be located somewhere. So we can put them out of ourselves, onto an actual person, or onto a symbol. For example, we might believe that we are not very good but Padmasambhava is good. So all that we think is good, we put into Padmasambhava, and then we feel that all that is good is already in Padmasambhava.

This second statement of Garab Dorje points to the importance of not splitting and projecting. It is about seeing clearly and not engaging in the activity which creates the illusory sense of the separation of the ground and its manifestation. Thoughts arise and pass, but when a thought arises that says “I can't meditate” and we settle into that, it creates a gap between us and the immediacy of our experience. For example when people develop agoraphobia even the thought of going outside makes them anxious. Then they say to themselves, and tell other people, “Oh, it was terrible! I really don't like going out, I don't think I should have to go out; I'm not going to go

out! Can you go out for me?" Then if somebody is unhelpfully helpful enough to do the shopping for them, they can safely sit inside all day. There is a movement from 'this is a bit difficult' to 'I shouldn't have to do it'. Thus, the quality of a temporary experience is installed as something which has definite and enduring meaning, a meaning so powerful that there is nothing to be done about it. Each step into the avoidance makes the thought of going out more and more dangerous. The thought creates more and more anxiety. But what's the point of it all? Nothing really. It's just one of the meaningless ways of passing time in samsara, a painful part of the social games of interaction. Here, for us, it illustrates how any behaviour can be overvalued, and come to appear inevitable, fixed, and absolutely full of value. The treatment for conditions like agoraphobia is to gradually bring the person to face the anxiety and learn to relax so that eventually they are released from it.

When thoughts become invested with a great deal of meaning, they become like a planet which has a gravitational force field. This sucks other thoughts into orbit around it. So for meditators the central point is to avoid putting interest, value, and attention into a thought as if it was something important in itself. Thoughts can tell you what time the shops close; they can tell you roughly how long your journey home will be; they can also give you false information but what they cannot do is open your true nature to you. Thoughts illuminates other thoughts, they do not illuminate their own source.

Having simply relaxed in the state of openness, maintain that state of openness. In this context, maintaining doesn't mean some direct active thing you have to do. It simply means not moving out of relaxation. Activity, in terms of something that I am doing, arises from an identification with the thought that says "I do". We can examine this for ourselves. We can decide that "I will follow all the thoughts that arise", and then we can see how busy we become. Then we can practice not following thoughts to see how different life is then. By not being so identified with thoughts, there is more space to be connected with the senses. Then when a situation calls us forth we find that whatever needs to be said or done arises. So, the less we do from the point of view of the ego, the more spontaneous activity occurs.

The third statement of Garab Dorje is simply to continue in this way. Through this we come to be at home in openness without limit and directly taste that all experience is naturally integrated with the space of natural hospitality. Within this there is the aspect of spontaneous participative energy, which is an offering, a way of finding a fit with any given situation, and there is also the self-referential story "I did this". The one ground opens up two paths: either we are present as awareness of non-duality or we forget the ground and become caught up in the ceaseless flow of movement.

For example, if we go for a walk, afterwards I might say, "I had a walk." Who did the walking? As soon as you stand up, walking is going on. Who is walking? It seems to be me, but is that something I know after the fact? There is a storyline about walking which is added on to the fact that walking is already occurring. For this reason we examine again and again how this storyline of the attribution of individual agency confuses the effortless of manifestation. Then we can start to see that the thought that "I do something" is simply a familiar way of talking. It is an appearance that hides its own nature.

**Question:** If we notice that we don't want to do meditation, and yet we decide to do meditation, who is deciding?

**Answer:** It may be your superego! This is a set of internalised messages that tells 'us' what 'we' should do. The superego gets the 'good girl' to do meditation, but we already know that we don't get enlightened just by being good. You can make yourself do some forms of meditation, for example you can make yourself do prostrations or offer prayers. But you can't make yourself relax – rather you put yourself in the way of a state that is already there. Relaxation occurs when you cease activating your mobilising orientation. So you can't force yourself to do this kind of practice. What you *can* do is observe the status of the thought "I don't want to do it". If you just let that thought be, it will go away. But if you react to it, either for it or struggling against it, the thought gets invested with energy. So don't pull experience towards you and don't push it away either. Don't try to get rid of thoughts you *don't* want, don't try to hang onto thoughts you *do* like. Both of these activities potentiate the thought; they give it more energy. By simply accepting that thought is there, without going under its power, it goes free by itself.

### Gentleness and tenderness

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This is why in this kind of meditation gentleness and tenderness is very important. We are using the very minimum of energy. It's like in martial arts, we are using the energy of the other person, not our own energy, to defeat them. Since all phenomena are impermanent, they will go anyway, so there is no need to push them away. Since all phenomena are impermanent, they will go anyway, so there's no point trying to hang onto them. This is the essence of the dzogchen practice. So if you find yourself very lost or confused, be aware that it is very habitual and tempting to think "Oh, this is not right, this is not how it should be." When that thought arises, we just recognize that it is a thought. Of course, these thoughts often come with a kind of superego quality, informing us that they speak the truth and so we should conform. Recognising the empty nature of thoughts brings freedom. Empty thoughts in an empty world – this is the ceaseless play of illusion. The more we see the illusion, the more our energy can arise as required rather than as driven by habits, impulses, longings, demands and so on.

The thought shows itself – we are not in it, but, in forgetfulness of our own ground, it is as if we were in it. The thought is what is happening in the moment; this is our experience, this is it for us at this moment. Each thought, feeling, and sensation establishes its own little world. Each world is inseparable from its ground, the infinite openness of the inseparability of awareness and space. The thought is the momentary play of that space; it demonstrates the rich creativity of space. Each moment is always already passing away. So there is no need to struggle to get or not get – it cannot be got and it will definitely go. The felt sense of being caught up in a thought, of having fallen into something, of being carried away, is itself a temporary arising. Our personal subjective experience is part of the flow. It is also inseparable from the ground and it also is an illusion that cannot establish anything as truly existing. There is no 'I' to get caught and no 'I' to be freed – the 'I' is always already part of the flow of the theatre of illusion. When we think or say that, 'I got lost in a thought', or 'thoughts obscure my true nature', it helps to see that these are empty statements. They create a momentary illusion through the storyline they present but they do not refer to or define truly existing entities. There is no fixed, limited self that is trapped; there is no one to be freed. There is merely the play of images on the always already open stage of the dharmadhatu. All thoughts have this nature so just stay open to the arising and passing of thoughts. There is no need to develop different techniques to deal with 'different' kinds of thoughts, feelings, sensations etc. Different techniques are another kind of busyness.

Abide in simplicity 'inside' and 'outside'. Breathing, eating, walking, talking, thinking are all movements of energy, ungraspable gestures of the radiance of being. But if you place yourself apart from them and try to control manifestation, then you bind yourself to endless work. As we experience the ceaseless arising and passing of moments of self-identity we can see that we don't exist, and yet we ceaselessly manifest. For that reason making effort to try to get enlightened is a waste of time. The one who wants to get enlightened is a thought. Thoughts don't get enlightened. Identification with thoughts is the pre-occupation or fold of mental energy that is not open to the ever-present *fact* of enlightenment.

However, we are all prone to the idea that, "It's all up to me. If I don't keep busy and stay in charge, something bad will happen. I will fall apart." But the 'I' that we fear will fall apart is itself just a thought. We have been falling apart since we were children. We have lost so much of ourselves. Once upon a time we were five years old. We've lost that experience; we can't go back. Then we were ten. We've lost that too. In fact we've been very careless with ourselves all through our life. Bits of us have been falling off all over the place and yet we are still here! Perhaps that indicates that we are lost in a fantasy that we're more in control of ourselves than we really are. Our anxious looking, planning and checking is a way of keeping busy, yet if we relax, I don't think we will fall into something terrible. Rather, what will open up is the possibility of a new kind of clarity. The clarity that comes with effort is a cognitive clarity. It's a clarity of knowing about things, knowing what has to be done, and how to go about it. However, there is another aspect of clarity, which is not reliant on dualistic effort. This is the clarity of simply being present with things as they are themselves. When that is present elegant responses manifest as naturally as breathing. The sense of having to hold our lives together is not necessary. We still have to put food in our mouth but the added sense that "If I don't do this something terrible will happen", can be let go off. Life can be easier. We don't have to be anxious and try so hard. There is space for everything and we are that indestructible space.

### **The difference between focused consciousness and open awareness**

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The practices of calming focus and open awareness are different in several ways. In the former we have a clear object to focus on and a controlled consciousness to do the focusing. The sense consciousnesses that link us to the object of attention are connected to the mental consciousness which notices when attention drifts off, and brings it back to the focus. The more our attention settles onto the object, the more subtle the various consciousnesses become. However, in the practice of open awareness, the focus is on whatever is occurring. And because what is occurring is impermanent and changing, we don't have a stable point of focus to return to. Rather, if we feel lost in the turbulence we relax into the always-available state of awareness and integrate whatever is arising. We are not relying on the stability of an object nor on the stability of our focus as methods of stabilising our mind. Rather by relaxing into open presence we experience our natural inseparability from the ground of all manifestation. Unchanging awareness is our 'stability' – a stability free of effort and intention.

Here it is important to see the distinction between what is called consciousness and what is called awareness. Different systems use these words in different ways; in many Hindu books the term 'consciousness' is used to describe the highest state attainable. Practicing in the view of dzogchen, we come to recognise that what is called 'consciousness' is an aspect of energy. That is to say, consciousness arises in relation to an object, it's not self-existing; it has a beginning, middle and end, and so is a momentary phenomena. This is perhaps different from the way you've seen the term used in Western thought. In Tibetan the word for consciousness has two

parts, one which indicates knowing, and the other which indicates form or shape. Consciousness is seen as being a way of knowing *particular* things. When we look around the room we see particular phenomena – we hear a bird singing outside and so on. These experiences arise and pass all the time. They are arising from the interplay of object, sense organ and specific consciousness. As long as we are cut off from the actual ground of these aspects we are prone to reification and the solidity of experience that results from it.

However, when we enter the three A practice and relax, we release our investment in all the particular forms of energy, thereby revealing appearance as the radiance of presence. In the practice we experience again and again how we slip away from the state of presence and merge with specific experiences, for we are habituated to the dualistic concern of distinguishing ‘mine’ and ‘not mine’. But in the state of presence whatever is ordinarily deemed ‘mine’ and ‘not mine’ is seen to be the radiance of awareness. Our presence is both ‘mine’ and ‘not mine’. It’s ‘mine’ in the sense that ‘I’ am alive and present as this undeniable vitality, and it’s ‘not mine’ because it is devoid of any particular or personal content. Consciousness, on the other hand, always has a particular content and our states of consciousness are unreliable because they come and go. We might notice how we have more or less energy in the morning or in the evening, and how some things heighten our capacity for conscious attention, and other things reduce that capacity. The mind can be more clear or less clear but *rigpa*, the basic natural clarity of our mind, is unchanging. So this is a little litmus test: whenever you find yourself caught up in something, where the self-referential nature of the experience is strong, take this as a sign that it is *not* rigpa or open awareness. Because rigpa is not created by thought; it doesn’t exist as a thought, and you can’t find it through thinking. But consciousness, mental consciousness, is a site of thinking.

When we do the three A practice we release control. Not encouraging or inhibiting but just letting the mind be however it is. This means not being at all busy. The one who is busy is consciousness. Rigpa itself is never busy, nor is it limited by the busyness of consciousness. When we’re relaxed and open, all the ordinary functions are still operating. Thinking is going on. There can be particular thoughts about what we have to do tomorrow and so on. There is no need to block these thoughts, because otherwise the fruit of the meditation would be unattainable. This fruit is the capacity to integrate all experience into the ground open nature. But in order to be able *to have* a thought – to *direct* a thought without *identifying* with the thought – this takes some experience.

### **Don’t rest inside a thought**

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In dzogchen there are teachings on the various kinds of mistakes that can arise during meditation. A common mistake is to rest inside a thought, for example “My mind is not clear”. When we take refuge in a thought like that, the thought seems to tell us something about ourselves, and this can lead to feelings of despondency, hopelessness and so on. Patrul Rinpoche, for example, says “Some great meditators spend many years practising, but find that they cannot meditate. They cry and weep saying: I cannot do this.” He says, “There is no need for tears, just stay on the one who cannot meditate.” The use of the word *on* here makes a specific point. When you wake up in the morning, you wake up in the place where you went to sleep the night before. So, you can say that you wake up *in* the room. But in a way you wake up *on* the room, for it is on the basis of the recognition of the familiarity of the room that we think “I am awake”. So *on* indicates that for whatever is arising, we are just with it; we not *in* it in the sense of being merged into it, and we not looking *at* it as an observer.

For example, when you came here, you might have seen someone walking in the distance and recognized them as someone you know. You know them on the basis of their posture and way of moving. You don't have to think about it, as soon as you see the body moving in that way, there is the recognition. Having recognised them you might start thinking about them and be filled with memories of past meetings. This second stage is similar to merging with a thought and identifying with it, so that it becomes the vehicle you travel in. But if you recognise the thought immediately for what it is, if you allow it to show itself without binding it into your hopes and fears; it will offer its value and move on. Just as if you were sitting by a pond, and suddenly a trout leaps out of the water, and then goes back in. There is no time to think about what it is, because it is there and then it's gone, and yet it has revealed itself. This quality of immediate revelation is referred to as clarity. It's not developed by thinking, by building up an interpretation or a picture, but is immediate in the way a mirror immediately shows a reflection. We can say that the reflection is in the mirror, but it is not really *in* the mirror. When we look at the big mirror on the wall and we can see the room behind us. There is no actual room inside the mirror but it looks like that. It's *on* the mirror's capacity to reflect, that the reflection arises. The mirror does not exert any effort in doing this. The more at ease we are the less we do, and then activity arises by itself. This is the natural state of self-arising self-liberating phenomena.

Now we will do the three A practice and very gently take up the question "What shape is my mind?" When we take up a question like this, we are not strongly investigating it, since that would hook many other thoughts. We are not concerned with thinking about the situation, but just directing our attention so that we can notice whenever we feel we've come to the limit of the mind. For example you might have a sensation in your head and you think "This is where my mind is". When this occurs just stay gently with the answer, with the solution that is arising. See if it remains. Whatever seems to be your decision about the shape of your mind, don't push it away, don't lock into it, just stay with it and see what it reveals of itself.

Whenever you have a solution just stay with it. You will find that it vanishes, for it is merely a thought. If you keep doing the practice you come to experience the infinity of your own nature. All that arises is finite, it has a beginning and end, and a particular shape, but the mirror-like quality of awareness has no shape, no dimension, no end to it, no edge. Because it has no edge, there is nothing outside of it, which means that everything that occurs, occurs within it. This is why it is referred to as the ground or source. When we see this, everything changes. We will have no fear of death. Normally in this life when we experience phenomena arising and passing we feel ourselves to be vulnerable to change and death. But if we experience the ground out of which these experiences arise and into which they pass, we start to see the non-duality of life and death. The shifting energy of manifestation relaxes back into its own ground. Losing everything you have is easy if you know that you've never really had it. By experiencing, moment-by-moment, the self-liberation of phenomena, we can see that the notion of having possessions is an illusion. They arise due to causes and conditions, all of which are the natural radiance of our mind.

**Question:** I noticed that my consciousness tends to concentrate very strongly on parts of my body and I get caught up in that. What could help with this?

**James:** The vipassana practice I described earlier is a good way of questioning our experience of our body as something composed of fixed entities. It reveals the body as part of the ongoing field of our experience. If you attend carefully to the body as a site of sensation, as the experience passes away, it reveals an open spaciousness. The transience of the sensation illuminates its gossamer, ungraspable quality, like fine mist vanishing with the heat of the sun.

The most important thing is to use the sensation as a means to recognize who is the one who is having it. Sensation is very wonderful. For example, if you put your arm out just now, and run one finger down your arm, just very gently, you feel sensation. As the sensation arises, it passes. As the texts say, it's like writing on water. The sensation is there, but you can't grasp it. So you can work with sensation in many ways – through food, through exercise, through sex - but the main thing is to use its ungraspable quality to recognize the one who is having the experience.

We shouldn't insult our body; we shouldn't treat it badly. If the body becomes sick, the sickness is also very helpful for meditators because when we are sick, we don't feel like ourselves. That is very interesting: "I don't feel like myself; I feel sick." "I shouldn't be sick; I should be myself." This helps us to see the intensity of self-definition. If we release our fixation on our ideas of how we think we should be, the current state of the body can be integrated in the flow of experience as there, yet ungraspable. When you eat food, something from the outside gets chewed up and digested so that it becomes you. And then after some time you go to the toilet, and something that was you, goes out. The breath comes in and goes out. We can soften the self-referential sense that 'this is happening to me' so that we see something more simple and impartial – 'this is happening'. Open that still further and we see that there is simply the state of awareness which is always the one for whom everything is happening. So when we eat food, we can say "I am eating this food; I hope it's good for me; I hope to be healthy." Or you can stay with the ungraspable sensation in the mouth. The central point is to not make your body a thing. The mind's energy is always moving, and part of that movement is the body.

**Question:** How can we continue in the natural state outside of the formal sessions?

**James:** The main thing is – just as we've been looking – that you don't *have* the natural state. The natural state is the natural state. Who you think you are is not the owner of the natural state. It is by relaxing self-preoccupation that the natural state is revealed. You cannot maintain the natural state. The natural state maintains itself. What you *can* do, is to recognize when you are caught up in thoughts and feelings and release your preoccupation from them. The ego, the conscious sense of self, is a necessary and in many ways, a useful function, but it is a function that easily gets out of control.

If you work to stop maintaining your fixation on the centrality of the ego, then the natural state will be revealed more and more. The natural state is shared among all beings equally. The more we are at home in that dimension, the easier it becomes to relate to other people, and the less we reinforce their narrow definitions of themselves. Nobody can give you what you already have, but the kindness of others can help us to cease deluding ourselves.

## **Being present rather than absent, in the natural state**

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**Question:** Is the natural state the same as rigpa? If a sitting cat or a running dog is in a natural state, are they in a state of rigpa?

**James:** You can say that the cat is in the state of its cat nature, but it is not in a state of rigpa, because rigpa is *presence* in the natural state. Fish swim about in the water but we don't know if they know what water is. Everything is in the infinite spaciousness which is called dharmadhatu. *Dhatu* means a field, and *dharma*, in this context, means phenomena, so it's the open field which includes all phenomena. This has two aspects. The first is the aspect of emptiness; this

state is like the clear open sky, it has no content of its own at all. But it is also pervaded by the radiance of presence, that is to say, our capacity to be present, to be aware, to be awake, is inseparable from space. When we do the three A practice and release our preoccupations, this is a way of being the integration of presence and spaciousness. Within that state a thought arises about what you'll do tomorrow. That thought has no other source than natural openness, so you can say it is inseparable from it, but it is not the *same* as it.

If you have a lot of thoughts, their meaning won't show you your own nature, because although the thoughts come out of our nature, and go back into our nature, the semantic content of the thought refers to a dimension which is functioning within the mirror, yet oblivious of it. If you spend a lot of time with your thoughts while believing them to be strongly real, it won't help your practice. But once you are clear that the mind has no limit, if you observe the arising of thoughts and the vanishing of thoughts, you will remain present in the open state. The ordinary mind is the buddha mind, in that it has the same nature, but as it is not *present* to its own nature; that nature is absent from our ordinary experience. The word *rigpa* is the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit term *vidya*. *Vidya* means knowledge, for example many schools are called *vidya-pith*, *places of knowledge*. There are also five traditional categories of learning such as arts, medicine, language and grammar and these are also called *vidya*. But in the dzogchen tradition and in the higher tantras, *rigpa* means 'an awareness which is not created'. This is a difficult concept to translate. We have *ma rigpa* which means the opposite of *rigpa* and which we normally translate as ignorance. But you can also have *rigpa* and *ma rigpa* as presence and absence. When we say we live in a state of absence, it doesn't mean that we have lost something, but we're absent from being present in what is here. Say you are a schoolteacher and one of the children is looking out of the window, you can see from their gaze that they are daydreaming, that they have gone off somewhere. They are present in the classroom but they are absent as a student. This is what being absent refers to – you haven't gone anywhere else, but yet you have! In the same way we are always in this natural state, but we've gone somewhere else, without going anywhere.

**Question:** But still I would like to get some practical instructions how to take care of our *rigpa* between meditation sessions, in a practical way.

**James:** No.

**Question:** Why?

**Answer:** Because I've just explained, that you cannot take care of your *rigpa*. You don't need to do anything with the *rigpa* or for the *rigpa*. *Rigpa* takes care for itself. What you *can* do is be less distracted. Stopping being distracted doesn't develop or increase *rigpa*, otherwise *rigpa* would be a kind construct. And since everything which is created is destroyed, our project of awakening would lead nowhere. If you think "I am going to take care of my *rigpa*" then this is the tail wagging the dog; it is the wrong way round. If the dog is happy, the tail wags itself. So focus on not limiting yourself, avoid distraction and any sense of being the ultimate site of agency

If we go back to the example of the classroom: the teacher says to the student "Where are you?" The student replies "I'm here!" They weren't here, yet they always were here. But now, being asked where they are, they are more here. They haven't really become *more here*, because they were always here, but they were absenting themselves from the direct experience of being here.

So that is the essential work for you to do: use the teaching of the dharma to keep bringing yourself back to where you are. But we are not going anywhere else when we come back.

When I was studying with Chatral Rinpoche in India, he told me that the relation between the guru and the student is like two brothers in the same bed. One is awake and the other is asleep. The one who is awake tries to help the one who is sleeping to waken up. When the sleeper wakes up, it is in the same bed, in the same place where he has always been. This is why we study the view again and again from many different angles. Because if you grasp at this view, if you take it the wrong way, it won't be helpful. When we do the practice, we are working to help the ego resume its proper size. And when it's in its proper size, it doesn't cause any trouble. When we sit in practice and get caught up in thoughts, and start planning all kind of things, this is a sign of being dispersed and distracted. We are all over the place because the ego is busy asserting and defending itself.

The ego is being invited to give up some of its power but, as with all dictators, it is rather reluctant to do this. Why *would* it give up power? Just to become part of the energy of the dharmakaya, when at the moment it is the centre of your world? So this is your work: the ego has to become small. You *can* get enlightened with a very big ego but it is more difficult, because then you have to be able to see the emptiness of strong thought and emotion, the raging of anger, jealousy, pride, lust and so on.

Each of us has to decide whether to continue to build our identity on limited concepts, or to open to the teachings and explore directly who we are. Limiting concepts can be comforting in their familiarity yet they diminish our availability to the ceaseless hospitality of our own unborn nature. Observe how many small worlds you have already invested your time and energy in. Recollect how they vanish. Your true friend and ally is not far away. In fact, if you stop being so busy, and stop looking so hard you will find that they are already here.