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# *Meditation Practices and Developing Clarity*

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*Developing clarity through meditation.*

*The retreat was organized around meditation explanations and instructions together with their background view, followed by periods of practice and questions. The focus was on experiencing kadag, the primordial purity of the mind.*

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## Excerpts

Response to a question about what practice to do when. *For example, we have potato peelers and their function is to remove potato skin. But if you have beautiful small, new potatoes you wouldn't want to peel them. No matter how beautiful your potato peeler is, it is useless in relation to new potatoes. In the Tibetan tradition they have very many 'potato peelers'.*

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*Practice is a means to an end. It is not an end in itself since whatever is established with effort will succumb to the force of change.*

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*Ego is concerned with mastery and one of the functions of practice is to examine the paradigm of control. In dzogchen we are moving from a vision of control towards a vision of collaboration and integration.*

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*To recognise and exist within and as one's own buddha-nature involves leaving the matrix of control and awakening into relaxed spaciousness, within which one can directly see the nature of whatever is occurring.*

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*Emptiness is right on the edge of language. When we speak, we are always creating partial truths – little gestures or hints – but we have to act as if they were the whole story. And so we find ourselves in a kind of theatre, the theatre of 'as if'. The theatre begins with suspending disbelief. When you go to the theatre you know at one level that the people who appear on the stage are actors and are paid money to pretend to be somebody else. When they come onto the stage we are happy to believe that they are whoever they tell us they are. We want to be taken in; we want to get lost. This is very profound.*

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*This is exactly the heart of meditation: not tilting away from things, not tilting towards them, but just staying present with everything as it occurs.*

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*The more we see how all phenomena are arising and passing, then the immediacy of presentation and the immediacy of self-liberation start to come together. From this we see how the quality of the mirror is present even in the midst of multiple reflections.*

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*In the meditation, the more we can let go the better it is, whereas in the world the more we can accumulate the better. This doesn't mean that you have to practise renunciation of external phenomena. Rather, by relaxing into this open state again and again, you come to see the dynamic, impermanent nature of illusory forms – both subject and object – and that lets us freely participate in the unfolding matrix of the world without too many hopes and fears.'*

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*We say the mind is like a mirror and that it's the emptiness of the mirror that allows everything to be revealed, 'I, me, myself' is like the doppelgänger of the mirror. It's like the mirror's public relations department! Instead of just being relaxed and fully present moment by moment it feels the need to issue a press release: "This is to announce I am happy!"... All day long these little statements are being issued. Who is the one who is issuing the statements? This empty nature of the mind itself.*

<b>Day One:</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Shamatha, shiné or ‘staying peacefully’</b> .....	<b>1</b>
Learning to breathe properly .....	3
Finding your breath when you are agitated.....	4
<b>Vipassana meditation: lessening the power of projection</b> .....	<b>5</b>
Exploring embodied existence.....	6
Vipassana is like abstract art – no representation .....	8
<b>Establishing emptiness through analysis</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Emptiness is on the edge of language .....	10
Letting go of maps and assumptions.....	12
Emptiness and compassion.....	13
Suffering and samsara .....	14
The point of balance is always emptiness.....	16
<b>Tonglen practice</b> .....	<b>16</b>
Why we practice tonglen.....	18
<b>Day Two:</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>Pure from the very beginning: kadag</b> .....	<b>19</b>
An empty screen, a mirror and a painting .....	21
<b>Establishing emptiness through direct experience</b> .....	<b>22</b>
Can we trust ourselves? .....	23
Conditioning and identification.....	24
Our lived experience moment by moment is also impermanence.....	25
<b>Sounding Three Aa s</b> .....	<b>26</b>
Being absent and being present.....	27
Responsivity and relationship .....	28
Nature of mind is fresh and naked .....	29
<b>Meditation practices for when you are distracted</b> .....	<b>31</b>
Visualising the letter ‘A’ .....	31
Sounding <i>Phat!</i> .....	32
Sounding Ha .....	33
Practicing the struggle of the asuras .....	33
Sounding Hung.....	34
<b>Day Three:</b> .....	<b>34</b>
<b>Purity free of stain</b> .....	<b>34</b>
Compassion means extending our repertoire of responses.....	35
Hospitality puts the guest first.....	36
We want things on our own terms.....	37
<b>Day Four</b> .....	<b>39</b>
<b>Purity inseparable from manifestation: more on kadag</b> .....	<b>39</b>
We are too intelligent for our own good.....	39
<b>Visualising Aa with rainbow light</b> .....	<b>40</b>
Why these enquiries are fundamental.....	41
<b>Questions and Responses</b> .....	<b>43</b>
The reflection of the mirror, or the mirror itself? .....	43
Integration is not homogenisation.....	44
Potato peelers.....	45
<b>Don’t slump back into the Realm of Sleep</b> .....	<b>46</b>

## Day One:

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From the point of view of dzogchen, it is important to understand what we use different meditation practices for, so today we are going to focus on the function of some basic meditation practices. The basis of dzogchen is that there is a natural state of perfection, so it might seem that there is a potential contradiction.

Practices, in being artificial, create a structure, which exists only as long as they are maintained, so they are methods for establishing certain conditions that enable us to look more clearly. If you imagine a theatre, you can sit in the front stalls close to the stage or you can sit at the back. You can go up to the first level, and if it's a big theatre you will have further levels. Wherever you are sitting some things about the performance will be revealed and some will be concealed. If you are in the front stalls you will see the performers' faces more clearly, and if you are right in the back row at the top of the theatre looking down, you will see the patterns of movement more clearly.

The practice is a method of creating a particular view – a particular positioning – and then one has to look from that position and recognise what is revealed. The practice is a means to an end; it is not an end in itself, because whatever is established with effort will succumb to the force of change. To imagine that the practice is itself a house that one rests in, is to forget that houses are quite vulnerable structures. Earthquakes, floods, fires, collapsing foundations, leaking roofs; many things make a house vulnerable.

## Shamatha, shiné or 'staying peacefully'

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The most basic practice, which is shared with other traditions, is called *shamatha* or *shiné* and it means 'staying peacefully'. Who is the one who is going to stay peacefully? I am. The 'I' in this case is our ordinary ego self. That is to say, in our ordinary life we are very easily distracted by the many things that hook our attention, things that may well be important for the maintenance of our life. As soon as we involve ourselves in particular kinds of activity like work, family and so on, these activities require constant attention and rectification to be maintained, since they are unstable. This kind of alert attention, the readiness to identify changes in the environment that are essential for the maintenance of life, creates a state of vigilance. This state usually has a quality of anxiety running through it, because we invest aspects of ourselves in our life situation and don't want our situation to become vulnerable.

This basic meditation practice of 'staying peacefully' is one in which we relax the movement out of consciousness towards any object which is arising, and we do this by focusing our attention on a very simple object. We can focus our attention through the breath, and the object can be the movement of the breath just at the end of the nostrils, where there are many nerve endings.

We can also focus our attention through the gaze, on an external object. It can be an object that has no symbolic value, a simple thing with the fewest hooks towards conceptualization. In some traditions they use a round pebble, or a painted disc of clay with concentric circles. Or you can use an object is invested with value for you, such as a statue of the Buddha, so that the feeling of devotion and faith acts as an extra bonding on to that object.

Then sit in a relaxed way letting our skeleton carry our weight, so that the muscles relax and in particular the diaphragm can move easily with a slow deep breath as the belly moves in and out. The traditional description is that the shoulders should be back. The hands are placed in the lap with the left hand on top of the right, with the tips of the thumbs just touching. The tongue is placed on the hard palate behind the teeth. The head is tilted slightly down and the gaze is running just along the line of the nose. The focus of the gaze is either on an external object that you've placed there, or you can focus on a mark on the floor in front of you.

Traditionally they say that it is best to put your legs in the lotus position. This is for several reasons, mainly to bind the position of the spine so that it is less likely to collapse. However, since we sit in chairs most of the time that kind of posture is often not easy. The key thing is to feel how your head is resting down through the vertebrae, and that you are not straining yourself in any way.

In some systems they would say that it is very important not to move your body. But according to the traditions I've trained in if you need to move your body, then move your body. If your knees become sore then move your leg, and then don't stay concerned with your knee, since the focus of attention is not the knee. The focus of attention is the breath. If your knee gets very sore but you are trying to keep your attention on your breath, you have two competing foci for your attention. You may wish to be a dharma hero and push right through, but it is also possible to cripple yourself by not listening to the body.

In some practices they say you should keep your eyes open without blinking; this is very unkind to the eyeball. The eyeball is wet and it needs to blink to spread the water over the surface. We are not blinking because we have bad eyes; we are blinking because we have clever eyes that are able to say what they want.

When you try to control your body this is the domain of the ego, because the ego is concerned with mastery. Maybe we try to control our children and find that a bit difficult. We try to control our body, and that's difficult too. When we try to control our mind we discover that is also pretty difficult. One of the functions of practice is to really examine the paradigm of control. In dzogchen we are moving from that vision of existence towards a vision of collaboration and integration.

But in this first practice, sitting comfortably, we adopt this intention: I am going to keep my attention on the flow of breath, or on the simple visual object in front of me. Whenever other thoughts or feelings arise, without being caught up in them, I will simply return to the focus. As soon as we find the mind wandering in whatever way, we just gently bring it back. If your back gets sore and you need to bend it a little, then just bend it while keeping the focus on the breath or the visual object.

It is absolutely certain that you will get distracted since being distracted is what we normally do. There is no point in blaming ourselves, or getting angry or upset that we are distracted. Just in the most simple neutral way, recognise when you have gone off on a journey, and very gently come back to the focus you have decided on. Wherever you go is not a bad place; it is simply not what you should be doing at this time.

It's the same when children have been running around in the playground, and then come into the classroom. The teacher says, *'OK, now you have to be quiet. In the playground you run around and make lots of noise, and in the classroom you are quiet and try to learn something. It's not that running around and making a noise is bad; we just don't do it in the classroom.'* It's the same with the meditation. Thoughts are not the enemies. These are not bad thoughts which are attacking you, these are just thoughts doing what thoughts do. Thoughts don't know the difference between the playground and the classroom so just be very nice with them. Back to class!

OK, shall we try this?

### **[Shiné practice]**

The traditional function of this practice is to achieve a state of absorption in which the sense consciousnesses are absorbed into the basic mental consciousness, so that consciousness then remains focused on the simple object. With that absorption the possibilities of distraction start to recede. We know this state from ordinary existence. If you find a good novel and you really get immersed in it, even if somebody speaks to you, you may hardly hear them because you are so completely caught up in the story.

Of course, when you are reading a novel or watching a film, the object of absorption is changing all the time so you have both focused attention and fascination. When you are watching your breath, it is not fascinating. This means that instead of the power of the practice holding you and making the absorption possible, you are having to rely much more on the intention; the movement as a conscious subject of *'I will do this'*. It's a pulling together of yourself.

This is a very useful preparatory practice for meditations that we will do later, because it allows us to create a situation in which there are few variables. This helps us make a start to examine what we want to examine. It's as if you were working in a scientific laboratory and you did an experiment using many beakers, jars, and tubes, and then you did another experiment using the same instruments but without cleaning them. You would never be confident in the result in the second experiment because there would be a contamination of the trace chemicals left in the containers from the first experiment.

So this practice is a kind of basic cleansing which allows us to have some confidence that when the various thoughts and feelings come, they don't catch us, they don't mark us, they don't contaminate us and leave any traces. They are just coming and going and we maintain a simple clarity.

The difference between this state of undisturbed consciousness and what is referred to as 'awareness' is that it is manifesting itself in relation to a particular object. Awareness, in contrast, is a more panoramic state that is not resting on, nor arising in relation to, any particular object.

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### Learning to breathe properly

One important factor is the nature of the breath. If we want to help ourselves generally in life, but also in meditation, the first thing to learn is how to breathe properly. When our

organism is relaxed the breath is deep and slow. You can see this if you watch a cat when it is relaxed. The cat has a fantastic ability to relax its muscles and the breath is just deep and slow. This is not a cut-off state because immediately there is a sound or a disturbance the cat is alert.

Similarly for us, the more we can rest down into the diaphragm, loosening the tension contained in this muscular wall, the more the breath can deepen. This provides a massaging of the internal organs and in particular the area we call the solar plexus. The term 'solar plexus' clearly implies a centre of energy, and this is a concept you will find in most Asian cultures as well. The centre of the energy of the body is two-and-a-half fingers below the navel. When the breath is slow and deep this centre of energy is massaged and opened, which provides a receptivity to the external environment as well as helping the bowel to relax. Modern anatomy shows that the bowel is incredibly rich in nerve endings, and so the communication between the bowel and the brain becomes relaxed and easy. The sympathetic nervous system, an automatic nervous system, is also relaxed. The sympathetic nervous system is the way in which the body responds to a call for alertness. A message is sent up to the frontal lobes of the brain via the neuro-endocrine system to alert us that something is going on, and that then activates the familiar responses of fight and flight, or freeze and flop.

### Finding your breath when you are agitated

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Modern life is full of agitation and for most of us these systems are cooking on a slow burner all the time. In London, the cult of the mobile phone is intense. When you walk down the street at least a third of people seem to be somewhere else; they are not in their bodies, and they are not connected with the environment. You have to constantly think about what the person in front of you is going to do. The person who is looking at their text message or talking on their phone while walking along the road is not attentive to the fact that other people are coming towards them. They have handed over to other people their responsibility for security. I find now that when I am walking down the street, I am having to think about whether this person in front of me is suddenly going to stop dead in their tracks. These environmental provocations create a state of mild agitation or hyper-alertness.

Therefore, if we develop the habit of just checking our breath and noticing how we are breathing, this will help us be aware of how much tension we are carrying inside ourselves. We can then return to diaphragm breathing and relax more. This is important, not just so that we feel more at ease in the world, but when the movement of the hormones like adrenaline and cortisol are in the frontal lobes, the capacity for reflective thought is reduced. This can explain why people sometimes don't do well in examinations since anxiety makes you stupid.

Anxiety can also keep you safe. If you are thinking about the meaning of life and a lion comes to eat you, then it is very important that you are able to drop your profound thought and run very quickly! However, if you are in a school exam there is nowhere to run, so the function of the anxiety knocks out the capacity to be fully there in relation to your own learning and the topic.

Anxiety also brings a particular tilt to how we embody our senses. A capacity to register dangerous situations is important, but that is a selective attention: it means that the broadest, panoramic sense of the lived environment is not being revealed because we are now pro-actively looking for something. This means that we depriving ourselves of a lot of other information that might actually reassure us that it is okay, so again, it is very important to be able to find your breath.

The easiest way to do this is to lie on the ground, loosen anything that is tight around your waist, and breathe slowly and deeply. Imagine that the air is like a bottle of water that you are pouring and it's going into you and filling you from the bottom up. Don't focus your attention on the upper chest, which is where we often feel the breath; feel it instead in the depth of the lungs pushing down on the diaphragm. When you do that, the pressure of the downward movement of the diaphragm will force your stomach out.

As you lie quietly on the ground, just put your hand on your stomach and you should feel it going up and down. When you exhale, you breathe out from the lower abdomen so that the final part of the exhalation comes from the upper chest. The more you are able to do that, the more you will be able to recognise when you are moving away from it. In this way, it is similar to the *shiné* meditation practice that we were doing.

Once you have a basic confidence in that, what is also very useful is to run around until you get out of breath, and then sit down when you are gasping for breath. You then relax back into the breath and bring it back slowly to abdominal breathing. You can gradually begin to build the confidence that no matter how disturbed and agitated your breath is you can re-centre yourself in it.

This is the best antidote to panic attacks, but it is also vital for the practice of dzogchen because we need to have a basic calmness in the midst of all states. The more you can experience the movement of the breath from calm and deep, to light and agitated, the more you can start to be relaxed and open in the midst of states of agitation because you won't be feeling overwhelmed by them.

In my experience, the main problem that patients bring to psychotherapy is being overwhelmed by states of disappointment, anxiety, depression and so on, the incapacity to inhabit one's existence as it is. The felt sense is that *'This shouldn't be happening'*, and *'I can't cope with this'*; *'the object or situation is wrong'* and *'I don't have the resources to deal with it'* which show that a bad object and crappy subject create a lot of grief.

If you have the capacity to rest easily in your breath you come back to the optimal sense of your own resources. You resource yourself by *re-sourcing*, by going back to the very source of your embodied being. Therefore, finding a way to inhabit your breath and to be at home with it and experience how it moves is very helpful.

Shall we take a break here?

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### **Vipassana meditation: lessening the power of projection**

Now we will look at the practice called *vipassana*, called *lhag-tong* in Tibetan. *Lhag* means good or best, and *tong* means looking. The best kind of looking is the looking that lets you see what is there, so in a sense it is an attempt to lessen the power of projection.

The focus of attention is the body. We all have a body. This seems like a reasonable thing to say but it also a ridiculous thing to say because we don't exist apart from our body. I don't 'have' a body in the way that I can have a watch. Clearly, I inhabit a body but I am also inhabited by my body.

The nature of the self and subjectivity is not something that we can avoid once we start to examine our embodied existence. The body is a field of experience producing pleasure and pain. The body supports and is the basis for our activity, and it also limits our activity since we can imagine doing things that our body is not capable of. If we get sick or we become older there are many things that we used to do which we can no longer do; so the mental body and the physical body are not the same. As children grow up, if you ask them to play a game they used to play a few years earlier they will feel embarrassed and insulted. Four year olds say, '*I'm not a baby any more!*' Eight year olds say, '*I'm not an infant!*' Teenagers say, '*I'm not a child!*' Because of that they deprive themselves the pleasure of doing these things.

In that way, we can see how mental constructions exist in an ongoing dialogue with the potential of this embodied existence. However, we often approach our body in terms of concepts and abstractions. We think about our body in terms of some kind of frame of reference; this could be images seen in a fashion magazine, or memories of how we used to be. We have thoughts about our body but perhaps little sense of directly experiencing the dynamic nature of embodiment.

### Exploring embodied existence

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In vipassana meditation we want to explore the body as it reveals itself directly, to try to see simply and clearly what is there without covering it up with our normal interpretive categories. Often our categories of interpretation have been learnt in early childhood, or taken in from the culture and don't fit us very well.

We begin this practice in the same way as the *shiné*; sitting comfortably in the same posture and taking up a focused attention on the breath. When you have the sense of focused attention, move that attention from the nostrils, this previous point of attention, to the top of your head. You are not trying to look at the top of your head, you are just feeling what is there; you are taking an imprint or a mark of what is there. You then take that attention moving it right down your body to your feet and then back up again.

Allow sensations to register in their most raw, direct form. For example, let's say there is some tension in your shoulder, what we normally might call 'pain'. As soon as you have the concept of pain, categories of like and dislike are immediately applied. '*I have a pain in my shoulder and I don't like it*', leads us very easily into '*What will I do about it?*' '*Maybe a friend can massage my shoulder*'... Lots of thoughts are likely to arise.

What we want to put into question is this notion of pain. Pain is an interpretation. What is the raw data – the raw information – underlying what has been interpreted as being pain? Instead of your mind actively going towards what is occurring and making sense of it, we stay open to what is presenting itself and just try to name it in the simplest words we have. You might have a feeling of tearing, or burning, or dullness. Register a simple description and then continue moving down, so that the body is allowed to reveal itself as it presents itself without you organising the information into your familiar categories. Continue to your feet and back up again.

Of course if you have already developed a sense that your shoulder is sore, when you come back up to your shoulder you are going to be looking to see how the pain is, as it has already hooked a kind of selective attention. One of the advantages of not creating this composite image is that when you come back to your shoulder, if all you had was 'scratching,' there is not much to build on and you can be more open to what is there. Bringing a fresh attention moment by moment is very important for meditation.

Our lives are woven along this vector of time and it is as if you are weaving one thread across another thread. The vertical warp thread is time and across it goes the horizontal woof thread of movement of events. Our weaving is not just on two dimensions but becomes multidimensional and when we double back the present moment gets linked with the past and with the future. What we want to do is to avoid this weaving, this building up of pictures of what is going on.

Rather than have the ego as the king – the one who is in charge – the one who is telling the story of what is going on – our attention is now more like the servant just doing an inventory of possessions in the royal palace. These are not our possessions; we are not allowed to touch them or change them. We just have our checklist ticking off what is there as it is. That is our only function, a very simplified attention to what reveals itself.

So now we will do the practice. If you find yourselves getting caught up in thoughts just go back to the breath and re-establish a clarity of focus, and return to slowly scanning up and down through the body. Of course, we are not all the same and each of us has our own unique capacity and experience of being ourselves, so you need to explore for yourself what is a good speed to move at, working out what is too fast or too slow until you find a way of doing it that suits you.

Any questions before we begin?

**Question:** Is it important to begin the screening from the top of the body first?

**James:** Whatever takes your fancy.

**Question:** With this practice are we only examining physical sensation, not mental processes?

**James:** You might find that a mental affliction is located in the body. You might, for example, find in your belly some anxiety or agitation or in your heart some worry. The same principle would apply in naming it with the simplest possible term, the one that has the fewest hooks for elaboration and interpretation.

**Question:** Is this practice also useful for blocking out pain like at the dentist or through torture?

**James:** It wouldn't be the best method. If you were going to the dentist then staying present with the pain and exploring it would be good if you have a lot of capacity. But it would be much better to relax into the belly chakra and keep the energy there relaxed and open. If you are likely to be tortured we can discuss a better way.

OK, let's do the practice.

### **[Vipassana practice]**

#### Vipassana is like abstract art – no representation

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I think it's a very helpful practice because so much of our world is caught up in representations. In the history of western art, until about 1850 art was mostly caught up in attempts at direct representation. Of course there were formalistic, naturalistic, and other schools, but nonetheless in the period prior to photography the attempt was to show something of what is there. Then with the impressionists the artists is depicting the impression, the impact of the environment on them. I think when we really get into a practice like vipassana it is like living a quality of abstract expressionism.

That is to say, you have a canvas with colours, and there is nothing in particular that the colours are saying except the painterly quality of being the colour. Of course you can project all sorts of interpretations onto that but the colour itself starts to sing and resonate if you spend time with it. You come to experience the implicit order of that which has not been artificially ordered. It's not coming into a gestalt. It's not creating a shape whereby one knows that there is a kind of definition of something. Rather, there is the immediacy of an impact that is just itself; it doesn't imply anything else. One doesn't need to go anywhere with it or find some meaning in it, so it offers the possibility of relaxing or deconstructing the whole incredibly interpretive mechanism that we have spent so many years building up.

In the same way, the more we do this practice, the more we can see that there is nothing to do with the body except perhaps to inhabit it or offer hospitality to it as an ungraspable, ceaseless movement of impact. We come to see that there is a natural okayness in this; life goes on, even though you are not in charge. If I don't hold it together everything is still okay. So maybe *'I could have a holiday from my job as world emperor'*! From that nice position of a holiday, life is somehow more vibrant and responsive.

OK, we will have a break for lunch now.

### **[Break]**

#### Establishing emptiness through analysis

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We will look now at emptiness. There are now many discussions and descriptions of emptiness in translations available in all the European languages. There are two main styles, or aspects, of exploration of emptiness. One is analytic, the other is through direct experience revealed in meditation practice.

In the former we might, for example, take a phenomenon like a glass and through examination establish that the glass has no inherent self-nature. We see that the glass stands hovering in the midst of a complex situation. There is the causal matrix out of which the glass arose, meaning not just the specific ingredients of the glass I am holding, but that the glass only came into existence because somebody wanted it to be made. There is the desire of the owner of the glass factory, which is linked to the possibilities of the market. You can see how each of these points can spread out into many, many other lines of connection and dependence. It can embody the history of glass-making; it is held in place by the fact that the supportive factors that stop it being broken are more powerful than the factors that could lead to it being broken.

The absence of destructive factors is often taken for granted. Recently, there was a big earthquake in Italy where all of a sudden the earth shook and buildings fell down. Buildings are maintained by certain qualities of their structure such as how the walls are in relation to the line of gravity, the nature of the foundations, the quality of cement and so on. Under ordinary conditions these factors of maintenance are powerful enough to resist small disturbances. However, when an earthquake occurs – the vibration – the factor of destruction – is greater than the factors of maintenance.

We tend to understand destruction by thinking that something terrible has happened. These good people going about their ordinary lives, or asleep in bed, have had this terrible accident happen to them... Part of that is because we want to believe that buildings are stable. We want to believe that things stay where we put them so that we can make accurate predictions about how the future will be.

But what emptiness illustrates is that what appears to be a separate entity and therefore self-defined, is in fact something at the mercy of many other forces. These forces are invisible most of the time, but they are always in operation. The glass looks static because of the repetition of certain rhythmic patterns. The fundamental quality of the molecules, the atoms, the sub-nuclear particles, are themselves simply vibration. By the operation of these factors coming together, the form of a stable glass is created and will endure for a while. When we look at this thing in my hand, we see a glass. If we weren't able to do that people would say, *'Oh, this person is a bit stupid.'*

Normally, we think it is a sign of intelligence to identify an object, but from the buddhist point of view it's a kind of stupidity. It is the stupidity of not seeing the dynamic event and this is the same for everything. How this room feels depends on the amount of clouds in the sky, on the heating... People went out of the room for lunch so the temperature dropped. Now that we are all back, our bodies act as little heaters; after some time the temperature will go up again. Although we say it's cold, essentially this is only half a sentence; it's cold at the moment, given the temperature of my body and my expectation about the temperature of the room.

### A dynamic interrelatedness

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The buddhist concept of emptiness is saying that the entire universe is relational. There are no fixed things; there are no true self-existing entities; everything is inter-related, not in a static way, but in a dynamic way. It is impossible to really talk about this because everything

is related. Using a term like 'everything' somehow conjures up the idea that there are things. What there are, are moments of experience and these moments of experience come together to create patterns.

When I hold this glass up, part of the moment of experience is a perception. The visual perception of this is influenced by the direction of light in the room and by the nature of your own vision. Maybe you need glasses? In which case when you look at the glass you don't see it very clearly. When I had to get glasses for reading it was a very helpful reminder that everything is dependent co-origination because I always had good eyesight and then I had not-so-good eyesight. Saying my eyes are 'good' is again half a sentence; my eyes are good for a while depending on certain circumstances.

When we have the idea of *my* eyes they seem to belong to me, and not only that but to somehow be an expression of myself. The thing in my eyes that is not so good is the muscle, and the relaxing of this muscle with age means that I need glasses to read. Knowing that it is my muscle doesn't do much good because it is not the kind of muscle that you can do anything about.

In that moment of perception, you have the light in the room, the quality of the eye, and what is perceived. But as we were doing in the vipassana practice, we can see that glass itself is a concept: to see the glass means to have a concept of 'glass' ready to project onto whatever this thing that is in my hand. The glass-ness of the glass is not entirely in this thing in my hand, nor is it entirely just in my head, but it is the coming together of these different factors. It is the same with everything we see; it is not in the object. We never see objects themselves; what we experience is an aspect of relatedness.

Sylvester and I are sitting here and we have some relationship. I speak in English and then Sylvester translates that into German. We can say that there are two people in relationship, and as we have established, that is both simple and stupid because Sylvester is a name and James is a name. The two names make life easy because both 'James' and 'Sylvester' are changing all the time. The naming gives us a sense of something stable and enduring.

### Emptiness is on the edge of language

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This is one of the reasons why emptiness is difficult to really understand as an experience because it is right on the edge of language. Language deals with the construction of things that can be referred to across time. "*Yesterday morning I was working in London.*" If we understand that sentence it creates an image of something. There is a place called London, and there is a person called James, who yesterday was in London. But, of course, London is a very big city and I was only in a very little part of London. Most of London I don't even know although I have lived there a very long time.

In that way, when we speak, we are always creating partial truths – little gestures or hints – but we have to act as if they were the whole story and so we find ourselves in a kind of theatre: the theatre of '*as if*'. The theatre begins with suspending disbelief. When you go to the theatre you know at one level that the people who appear on the stage are actors and they are paid money to pretend to be somebody else. When they come onto the stage we

are happy to believe that they are whoever they tell us they are. We want to be taken in; we want to get lost. This is very profound.

Children understand this very well. Sometimes, in the morning, I see children on their way to a local school. I see a little girl aged about six and she has a lovely little dress with lots of chiffon underlayers, a little tiara, and a wand. For herself, she is a magical princess going to school, but she is not really a princess. We could say that she is a little girl pretending to be a princess, or we can say she is really a princess who has been captured by an evil witch, her mother, who keeps telling her that she is just a little girl! Since this person was born people have said she is a little girl, and all the cultural readings about gender have been massaged into her so that she comes to believe that she is a girl and she should be the way girls are. The girl-ness of the girl is not in the girl; it is in the relation between the culture and the girl. The form that the girl is able to manifest in depends on the environment in which she is. Even when we say, 'in which she is,' we imagine that there is a girl who could be dipped into the culture the way she can be popped into the bath at the end of the day. However, we don't get into culture the way we get into our pyjamas. We become ourselves through the interaction with the culture. There is not 'a girl' that you can separate from the culture. Even with the rise of feminism and women trying to take patriarchy out of themselves, they are simultaneously putting a new kind of culture into themselves by developing themselves in relation to new ideas, possibilities, consciousness raising groups, and so on.

This is the nature of emptiness. Our existence provides nothing to clearly grasp such as '*this is who I am*' or '*this is what I am*'. Rather, we exist as this movement of energy within a field of energy, in which we have contact with people who cause in some cases expansion and in other cases contraction. We can talk about that in terms of '*I like this person*', or '*I don't like that person*'. But generally these reactions are prior to language, being energetic resonances that are dependent on the particular constellations of our karma or history as it manifests moment by moment.

When we attend to the immediacy of the experience of being with our body, and also being with others, we find pulsations. These pulsations don't last very long; they arise and pass. They are impermanent and they are also self-liberating; they go by themselves. A moment is there and then that moment is over. If conditions are right, the moment can be repeated, but we never know if a moment can be repeated because we, as an ego self, are not the creator of the conditions. However, on top of that, another intersecting line of emergence is our linguistic level on which we can say '*I like that therefore I want more of it*', or '*I don't like that therefore I want less of it*'.

When we see something that we like we say '*It is good*'. This is a really important linguistic move that we make, because if I were to say, '*I like this glass*,' I would be speaking of a relationship where there is something immediate, direct, and connected between me and the glass. I would be talking then about me, so the status of my statement relates just to me and the glass, '*I like this glass*'. From that there is no basis for saying, '*...and so you should like it too*'. But if I say, '*This is a good glass*', the feeling-tone that was inside me is now put into the glass and seems to be sitting there by itself. Since I have established that this is a '*good*' glass there must be something wrong with you if you don't agree! This is because the goodness of the glass is now de-contextualised and exists outside of time and space, so this is a '*good*' glass for ever and ever... Nobody can doubt its goodness.

This is the difference between samsara and nirvana. Samsara is the state in which we cut off the dynamic, energetic, ongoing relatedness of what we call 'all phenomena'. We find ourselves in a world of separate things, internally defined, and seemingly enduring in that way. Clearly this is not what we experience. Even if we don't spend much time deeply observing our experience we know that this is not how the world is.

### Letting go of maps and assumptions

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The city I lived in as a schoolboy was attacked by a demon force of architects in the 1960s. These were a particularly terrible kind of architects who make houses for other people that they would never ever live in themselves! Whole vast areas of the city built of beautiful old sandstone were demolished, and the people were moved from their homes to new housing estates made of cement on the outskirts of the city. These rapidly became very terrible.

My mother always used to say, *'Oh, they've spoilt the city. They've ruined Glasgow.'* This was true from an emotional point of view, but where is the city they have destroyed? She had a mental image in her head of the city that she knew from her childhood and that city remained her basic map. Although all kinds of one-way systems, flyovers, and roundabouts were built, my mother continued to give people directions in terms of the bus routes as they had operated forty years earlier, because that was her city!

This is a problem in taking things as strongly real. As soon as we establish something, the impermanent nature of all phenomena is immediately automatically operating. We live in this constant disjunctive dialogue between the world that we experience through our senses and the maps we formulate in our head. The more we can come out of the map and be with the world as it presents itself moment by moment, the more we have the possibility of being more alive and more responsive.

However, this comes at some cost. The cost is that you can't rely on your automatic pilot – that map of assumptions and predictions that will allow you to operate without really attending to what's going on.

When I was a young man I used to walk a lot in the hills of Scotland. There was often mist coming down over the hills. If you have a detailed contour map, when the mist clears, you can work out where you are. If you don't have a map it can be quite difficult since all the hills look the same and if the mist is thick it is difficult to work out your direction.

In the same way, we use the maps that we have inside ourselves to make sense of the situation. All of us have a range of maps. We have maps from our mother, our father, from television, from school, and from friends. Once you start giving up these maps, how will you behave? What will you do?

When we start to drop our assumptions, anxiety arises, because one of the functions of maps is to tell you in advance what you can expect. When you meet someone for the first time you don't know what to do. If you start to get closer to them it's even more difficult because you think, *'How will I behave? What do I want? What do they want?'* It is difficult to know. Usually we have some maps that tell us, some interpretive matrix we have in our head. If the situation is intense we might redraw our map a little bit so it will fit. If the

situation is less certain we may go back to our map and say, 'Eh, what is the point of this? It doesn't fit my map.'

A lot of meditation practice is about dissolving, de-constructing, and letting go of maps. Because of that new kinds of anxiety can arise especially around the topic of 'How will I know if what I do is right or wrong?' Generally speaking, the world will tell us. If you drive down a street and you are going the wrong way somebody is going to toot their horn. The truth of a situation doesn't lie in either polarity, but lies in the meeting point of the polarity.

Imagine an infinity symbol like a figure of eight on its side  $\infty$ ; each end point is like Sylvester and me and where we meet is this crossing over, this hooking in the middle. We actually only meet in this middle point. Whatever kind of connection we can have arises by the moving together of this quality of energy that opens and closes according to different factors. The quality of that is determined by the openness in the two polar points.

For example, if I am talking with Sylvester and enjoying the conversation then if the phone rings and Sylvester goes to answer it, I may feel very wounded. I may think he doesn't like me much or that someone else is more important than me. This kind of narcissistic wounding is very popular in love stories: 'I thought I was the whole world to you . . . If you really loved me, you would never leave me'. In this way, the closing down – the fixation around the self-referential, self-reassuring need of one ego point – collapses the possibility of open communication.

### Emptiness and compassion

Tantra describes this as the inseparability of emptiness and compassion: the more we experience the lack of a fixed, sustainable, defined identity in both ourselves and the other, the more we can move away from trying to control the other person into confirming who we think we are. We can then become free to respond into the situation as it actually is.

When we say we want to take the Bodhisattva Vow, saying 'I want to devote this life and all my future lives to the benefit of all sentient beings', is very easy to do as a general statement. Saving **all** sentient beings is very easy. Trying to save the **one** person that is in front of you is much more difficult because **all** sentient beings want to be saved.

We sit in meditation and send out rays of light, and these rays of light dissolve into all sentient beings; all their sins and limitations are removed and they feel happy, relaxed, and smiling. Like a flock of birds they fly up into the pure buddhaland. This is called practice. However, when you finish your practice and you come out and meet a real person who doesn't fly away or doesn't want to absorb your beautiful words, rather even wants to point out your mistakes, then you have the real basis of compassion.

### The three circles: emptiness of self, of other, and of the relationship between

From a dharma point of view the thing we then have to do is to activate what are called the three circles, which is the emptiness of self, other, and of the relationship between.

This is a central part of practice. There are two levels to knowing your limitations. There is knowing your limitations in private in which you might sit in your practice or be in therapy... Therapy is a kind of private situation where you might talk about what is wrong with you and how you are limited and you can be quite honest and open about who you actually are.

Then there is the second level in which other people tell you what is wrong with you, especially when they are angry. This is much more difficult to accept, because in the moment when someone tells you that you are being lazy or selfish what is being presented is a description of your behaviour. You might know that they are describing your behaviour accurately but somehow the description seems to go right into your heart and you feel an ontological attack: 'My very being in the world is being pinned'.

This is where we can understand how far we are from integrating emptiness and compassion. This is why, particularly in dzogchen, the focus is not so much on doing long retreats under stable circumstances but is about doing a reasonable amount of practice and taking it into the world, because the environment will always be pushing you on the points where you react.

We can take a few minutes to reflect on what are the points around which we most quickly close down, or get knotted or defensive, and then try to talk a bit about that with the person sitting next to you.

That might seem like a very intimate thing to do since these may be things that you feel a bit embarrassed or ashamed about. But the Buddha has explained that all beings have the five poisons: stupidity, mental dullness, assumptive thinking; desire, attachment, longing; aversion; anger; pride, narcissism, habitual self-reference; jealousy, and the habit of comparing and contrasting. It is most likely that whatever you find out about yourself will fit into one of these five points. Whatever feels most personal, most private, most shameful about ourselves is probably shared with everyone else. Because we all keep it hidden it looks like we are the only one that has it and therefore we would never want to show it!

We have to remember that the entry ticket into this world is, to be pretty fucked up. We are all here, so I guess we all had the ticket!

We will do this for about fifteen minutes.

### **[Reflective sharing]**

#### Suffering and samsara

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One of the real gifts of dharma is that it begins with the truth of suffering. No need to get lost in fantasies about how your life is; if you really look you start to feel the anxiety that is at the heart of it. The root of all suffering, and the attachment with which we try to protect ourselves against anxiety, is ignorance. We forget our own ground, we forget our own nature, and in not knowing who we are, we become anxious.

There are two aspects: the personal and the structural. It is personal because it is happening to you and is your story, but the structure is not personal. The structure is the structure of samsara. Because of ignorance there is attachment, because of attachment there is

confused behaviour, and because of confused behaviour you have suffering. Your suffering is not a punishment, neither is it a sign that you are a bad person.

If you stick your finger in a candle flame it will burn and pain will arise from that. Just as we see the poor moth trying again and again to burn itself to death, so the Buddha looks down and sees human beings flying with attachment towards the things that burn them up. The more we can be aware of the impersonal nature of the causal matrix, the more we can take responsibility for our part, which is to remove ourselves from the entrapment –being wrapped into the consequences of the causal matrix.

This structure is recognized, on a smaller scale in psychotherapy. People often enter therapy thinking, *'I am a terrible person. I make mistakes all the time, and I seem to upset other people.'* By hearing about the structure of their childhood we can understand how patterns became established. The fact that these patterns have become established is not the person's fault, because at the time when they were very small and living in that family system which put such a pressure on them, they had no choice. That was the limit of their whole world. We use this description of the development of neurosis through time to free the person from the belief that they are truly and intrinsically bad. At the same time, they may have a lot of habits which cause trouble for themselves and others and they have to work on these patterns.

It is the same in relation to samsara. Due to the functioning of ignorance, attachment, and a long accumulation of karma – karma generated in rebirth after rebirth in which we moulded and adapted ourselves to the environment we came out into – we find ourselves having all these tendencies: selfishness, pride, confusion and so on. The cause of this is simply the structural movement of what happens when ignorance arises. In that sense it is not our fault, because at the very beginning there wasn't an 'us' to be responsible.

However, where we *are* responsible, is that we are now in a situation where we have access to many dharma methods that we can learn and apply. We have this chance and it is up to us to use it or not. This is very important.

What we want to do is to develop a very delicate curiosity about how we function. **How** do I come into existence in this particular way? The more we understand **how** we function, the more we can make delicate adjustments in order to be less identified with these patterns of arising, since it is the identification with whatever is arising that leads us into the situation.

For example, you could spend all day in a big train station looking at the trains; trains come and go but you are still in the station. That's pretty good and is even the goal of meditation – not to travel around so much! It also helps global warming. You cut your karmic footprint and your carbon footprint at the same time! Every time thoughts, feelings, and habits arise in us and we are in it, they add a libidinal injection or an energetic reinforcement to the status of the habitual thought.

If you smoke cigarettes, every cigarette you smoke reinforces the tendency to smoke and also the identity of 'I am a smoker'. If you eventually stop smoking that won't stop other people smoking. You might be sitting outside in a café and somebody lights a cigarette next to you. The smoke floats by and inside this smoke are little hooks that are clawing at your

brain. You remind myself that you are not a smoker and it goes by, but if you still want to smoke, then you might have a cigarette.

This is the problem with trying to renounce the world by saying you won't do this or that. Even if we are not doing it, someone will do something similar close to us, and that vibration can easily set off the tendency in ourselves again.

### The point of balance is always emptiness

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The practice is not about getting rid of things or of fusing into them but of staying very close so that you can see how things are, and then moving towards them out of a free gesture of response. It's about experiencing in the meditation practice how to be as close as possible to whatever is arising and to develop perfect balance.

Some years ago there was a documentary about a Frenchman who set up a high wire between the Twin Towers in New York. These towers were quite far apart and he was tightrope walking from the top of one tower to the other. He was completely unprotected, having no safety net, but he did have an exquisite sense of balance. This is exactly the heart of meditation: not tilting away from things, not tilting towards them, but just staying present with everything as it occurs. When he was walking across this little wire between these two high buildings the wind was also moving and the wire was responsive to each step, so he was walking in a dynamic world.

I think this is a very helpful example for not blaming circumstances. In England, in the autumn, the trains are often delayed and the railways announce that it is due to the wrong kinds of leaves on the track! This mentality, to always blame something else, is also what we bring into meditation. We can blame ourselves, we can blame the thoughts, we can blame the practice and we can blame the teacher. Blaming is a waste of time, a meaningless mental agitation.

The key thing is to develop a clear phenomenological attention to see precisely how your own tendency is and to return again and again to the point of balance. In the higher tantric teachings and in dzogchen, the point of balance is always emptiness. This emptiness or openness means a state that is ungraspable.

Imagine you are climbing a tree and then want to walk along a branch; you can see there are other branches above you so if you start to wobble, you can reach up and hold onto another branch. But when you are walking along this high wire, there are no branches, and so the central thing is not to go to one side to hold on to something to push you back. That is to say, not to take refuge in the object. Not thinking that more thinking about something is going to help you, but finding a way to rest in space itself – to awaken to the infinite spaciousness of one's own nature. Whenever you feel you are going out of balance, immediately relax back into that spaciousness and then you are present just where you need to be.

### Tonglen practice

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We will do a practice now which some of you know as a version of *tonglen*. 'Tong' means to give out, and 'len' means to take in or to hold. This is a general mahayana practice in which

we offer all the good things, all our merit, wisdom, virtue, and so on to others, and we take in from all sentient beings all that is difficult and problematic in their existence.

Imagine all sentient beings – frogs, dogs, people, any kinds of beings – and out of your heart imagine rays of light spreading out and taking all your merit and virtue into these beings and removing all their impediments. Then imagine that from these beings come all their limitations, problems, confusions, and all that binds them in samsara. This melts into our heart in the form of clouds of darkness, poison, sharp weapons and so on.

Fortunately before we do this, we have a look at the state of our heart. From the very beginning the heart is pure, open, and empty. If we imagine the heart as the centre of our being – the site of I, me, myself – then who is this self? There is a very beautiful song from ***The Sound of Music*** connected with the hills not far from where we are here in Austria. When Maria is teaching the children about musical scales, she sings, *'Me, a name I call myself.'* This is pure dharma. Who would have thought Julie Andrews was capable of that?! Because what is 'me'? A word. The word sits as a kind of stick around which many things can be gathered. However, beneath it –because in the course of our lives we have called ourselves so many different things –there is no deep, essential, defined point of I, me, myself.

We have been able to be so many people because we have never been just one thing; that is to say, the heart is an open potential. It's the very emptiness of our personal identity that allows us to be so creative and adaptive and to become whatever is required.

When we imagine all this negativity coming and dissolving into us, it is not coming into the narrow pot of the ego; otherwise we would rapidly feel overwhelmed. Rather, it's the infinite emptiness of the mind itself. Although we experience our centre as here in the middle of our being, its nature is inseparable from the sky. As we gather together all the misery of all beings and it melts again and again into us, it just dissolves out into nothing.

We support ourselves in doing this by making the continuous sound of *Aa*. *Aa* is the sound of emptiness, and it relates to the basic vowel that runs through all the consonants in the Sanskrit and Tibetan alphabets. *Aa* is just absolute potential. All sounds arise from *Aa*, from some variation of the open-throated noise. When we recite *Aa* it means we can dissolve all the basis of semantic elaboration whereby we reify the evanescent, ungraspable forms into this and that. Because this *Aa* is the underlying potential of all things, it deconstructs them back into the open, empty ground and so the semiotic web which fixes each thing in its own place, dissolves into natural spaciousness. That is why everything can dissolve into emptiness. By resting in the state of emptiness everything can dissolve without leaving any traces.

Let's do this practice standing up. We start at first by offering the light out to all beings. You can do it with your eyes open or closed. You just bring your hands out like this [*James demonstrates*] and make the sound of *Aa*. It is very open and expansive and you feel the chest moving while completely offering everything. And then, after some time, you can turn it around to pull all the negativity of all beings into you continuing with the sound of *Aa*. If you find yourself becoming agitated by this second stage, then simply do the positive

sharing. It is important to end on the positive sharing. Then just stand quietly for a short while.

So stand up and find enough space, so you don't hit your neighbour while saving all beings!

### [Tonglen practice]

Tonglen practice is used in all the schools of Tibetan Buddhism and is done in slightly different ways, and is understood in different ways.

#### Why we practice tonglen

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On a general level, we say *tonglen* is done to reduce the sense of separation of self and other and that by putting other people first we antidote our tendency to have our ego-selves as the centre of our concern. On a deeper level it expresses the non-duality – the inseparability – of subject and object: that we do not exist apart from the world, which means apart from other beings. The welfare of others **is** our welfare, because other people are what we encounter.

Around here there are dogs, chickens, horses... and how they are affects us. If we see a horse limping we have a concern. We don't usually have to think about that, we are just concerned. That is because the horse is us; it is our existence. Our existence is not contained inside this skin structure. Our existence is turning around the point of space between us and beings.

The meeting point between self and others is ungraspable; we can never find nor control it but it is always there and always moving. The more we open to others, the more they will impact us, and the more they impact us, the more our life is moved off the path we thought it would go on. We then find ourselves inhabiting our existence as it presents itself rather than trying to protect what we have already established as ourselves and our concerns.

If we were truly a fixed entity, to be affected by others would be a tragedy. Because our existence is not a thing – it is not something already fixed but is a ceaseless potential that moves into manifestation in accordance with circumstances – then the movements that we have in response to others become movements which help us to loosen up more and more, so that the constraints of prediction, definition, blame, hunger, emptiness and so on can start to fall off. These qualities of desire hunger, longing, and prediction, which have been giving us a sense of definition and purpose in our life start to loosen and fall away. The meaning of our life is not then something inside us, not some secret self that needs to be uncovered, but is *revealed* to us in the infinite diverse ways in which we manifest.

Or to put that in another language, the mind's nature from the very beginning has been open and empty. It is not a thing that can be measured or quantified in any way and so one will never *know* oneself. You can *be* yourself by relaxing into the state of openness, but you can't know it as a thing because it is not a thing. From this open state, moment by moment, our energy manifests as part of the world because the ground of oneself is the ground of the world.

This is not a mad, narcissistic inflation. We are not saying that everything is simply a fantasy in our mind, but rather the relaxed open state of awareness reveals self and other arising together. What I call, I, me, myself, is the energy of the natural condition. That energy will flow more easily and connectively in all situations if, instead of trying to secure its territory, which as we've seen is an impossible task because it *has* no territory, it recognises and relaxes into its own ground. We start to see, that '*I am empty energy*', and the energy takes the form of the situation.

In regard to the still, open nature, less is more. There is nothing to be busy about. We don't have to try to improve it, to correct it, or make it function properly. It is naturally perfect, and the rest is energy.

Since you were born you've been changing moment by moment and the changes you made were not coming out of you. Remember your first day at school. Perhaps your mother left you at the gate and, like me, you had little tears coming out of your eyes? But that is what mothers have to do and life goes on. You find yourself at school and you become who you become through that interaction.

So, the essential points from today's teaching are really to see the moment-by-moment dynamic nature of what we take to be our ordinary identity. We are not a thing but an infinite responsiveness whose main support is to rest in the open state. When we forget this open state we still need support, but then we have to look to objects, to other people, and to circumstances to try to support us. However because they also are simply forms of energy, they have no fixed definition to help us maintain what we are trying to maintain.

The heart of this is: don't try to change the unchanging nature. That is a waste of time. And don't try to stabilise your energy because that is a waste of time too. Energy is always moving. Our life is always moving. We are at the mercy of circumstances.

Sitting in the restaurant at lunchtime today, I was at a small table where the food came very, very slowly. After a while I was looking at my watch and, of course, many thoughts and feelings arose with this. It's not that I shouldn't have these thoughts. It's not, '*Oh, my mind should be so peaceful. I shouldn't be disturbed by anything,*' but energy is moving. The people in the kitchen were working hard. The waitress was on her own and rather tired, so the food comes as it comes, and that has consequences. This is how our life is: energy is moving with energy. Our fate, our capacity to direct things, is always at the mercy of others.

Now we are at the mercy of the end of the day! For those who like, tomorrow morning at nine o'clock we will have some quiet sitting for forty-five minutes, and then we start the main programme at ten o'clock.

See you tomorrow, or not? Who knows?

## **Day Two:**

### **Pure from the very beginning: kadag**

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Here we are – another day – still alive! The focus for today is on this topic of *kadag*, which is a Tibetan word meaning pure from the very beginning. This refers to our own nature and to

the nature of all things. We can approach this from various points of view including different meditations.

Seeing how lost and confused we can become, a central question for us is about the relation between our potential and our obscuration? Sometimes we seem to be mainly obscuration. We may find little room for maneuver and feel as if we *are* the obscuration. That sort of experience can make the thought of any form of clarity seem simply tantalising, because if I am so messed up and confused how could I go from here to there?

In the general buddhist tradition, there are many methods of purification based on the principle that unless we get rid of this obscuration we won't be able to see clearly. That is described as a view, a view being what arises from a particular viewpoint: if I am caught up in a lot of mental turbulence and emotional impulsivity, then the arisings that I identify with stand between me and the possibility of openness, so they have to be removed. That seems fairly straightforward.

You may want to eat but you've been a bit lazy and all the plates are dirty, so if you want a clean plate you have to clean the dirt off. When the dirt is off you will have a clean plate, but if you don't take the dirt off you will have a dirty plate. It is obvious that a dirty plate and a clean plate are not the same thing. You put your food on the plate and you think, *'Oh, this is dirty,'* however because of some action of the hand and some water, the dirt can come off the plate.

The nature of this plate is always clean no matter how much dirt there is on it. If the plate were really dirty, for example, if it was a paper plate and you put something with a lot of oil on it and the oil soaked into the paper, then it would be impossible to clean. So although we are concerned with the dirt on the plate, the possibility of the plate being clean is present even when it is covered in dirt.

There are two things happening at the same time: the natural purity or cleanliness of the plate, and the contingent or adventitious dirt that has come onto it. The dirt was not always there. It arose due to causes and conditions and because of that, because it came into existence, it can also pass out of existence.

When the Buddha gave his first teaching he said there is suffering: there is a cause of suffering; there is the way out of suffering, and there is a method, which is the eightfold noble path. The eightfold noble path is eight different kinds of detergent with which you can wash your plate.

What is important in that will depend in many ways on our own character. Sometimes we resonate with the idea of the dirt, the obscuration, and the confusion, and we might become very interested in how the mind gets tied in knots. That fascination can take us closer and closer to the dirt as a definition of ourselves. Then when we hear about the good qualities of the Buddha, the Buddha seems further and further away from us.

However we can also be interested in the idea of the path; of the things that we can do to create the purity. We can learn all kinds of methods and prepare for a very long journey. Or, we can listen to the fact that basically the plate is clean: the reason that suffering can end is because it is not the real nature.

In the tradition of dzogchen we are concerned with primordial purity – the natural purity that is there from the very beginning. Of course, food comes and goes on plates; the plate is empty, the plate has something on it, then the plate has the dried up remains of the meal... This is like our mind. Something arises and we become caught up in it. It starts to move away but we are left with some kind of trace, and then the trace is gone. But if we become caught up in the trace and then look for the next thought, feeling, or sensation that comes, then we never see the plate itself.

For most of us our mind is like a very busy restaurant; there is always something on our plate. As soon as you wake up in the morning – plop! You spend the whole day eating and cleaning then you fall asleep tired and wake up the next morning – plop! We don't actually experience the plate itself. We may imagine, *'Oh, if only my mind was clear from thoughts. If only I didn't have all this agitation then I would be able to see what it is.'*

### An empty screen, a mirror and a painting

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If you go to the cinema they have a big white screen and the movie is projected on to that screen. While the movie is running you don't see the white screen. When the movie finishes you can see the screen but you don't have a movie. You wouldn't pay money and go out on a Friday night to sit and look at a white screen! In the same way, although the mind is empty it is also always full. You could develop a fantasy that you could turn off the movie. You could make everything stop and then you would just have this white screen, but this happens very rarely.

However, in the cinema, when the film is running, the film that we see and we become so involved in, is inseparable from the white screen. Without the white screen we wouldn't have the film. If we understand that, without switching off the film, we can know that the white screen is there. The white screen is the basis for the manifesting of the potential of the film. If this background wasn't clear, for example if a film was already being projected on to a big television screen that was showing something else, the image wouldn't be clear.

What we see in our minds moment by moment is that new situations arise and these situations can only reveal themselves because of the open potential of the site of the manifesting. That potential is our own nature. The traditional example for this is a mirror. The mirror shows reflections and whatever is held in front of it, it will give a reflection of; the basis for this capacity is that the mirror is itself devoid of any content.

If you look at a painting, and there are many around here, you won't see your own reflection because paintings don't reflect. The painting is full of the painting. But because the mirror has no content it shows what is in front of it. The mirror is always pure, or uncontaminated, or open; it doesn't carry the trace of a previous reflection.

We often don't experience our minds in this way. When we don't have a direct experience of this open quality of the mirror, we try to make sense of what is going on and are very busy with all the thoughts that we have. We ask our thoughts, feelings, and sensations to explain the meaning of our life. We ask questions like: *'Why did this happen to me?' 'Why can't I do that?' 'Why is this sort of thing so difficult for me?'* We think like this about our past experiences and our present situation and then we think about how we could try to make it different in the future. This requires a lot of activity.

## Establishing emptiness through direct experience

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Returning to the example of the mirror, this means that we look for the meaning of our existence in terms of the pattern of the reflection. But reflections are very unreliable. The dzogchen view is to directly experience the state of the mirror. You can experience it through relaxation, and then, with the confidence that accompanies that, you can experience it through the nature of manifestation.

For example, in the story of Prince Siddhartha who became the Buddha of our time, he grew up as a very protected young man in a small palace of a small North Indian state. When he went outside the palace he saw a sick person, an old person, and a corpse. He came to reflect that although his own life was very easy, protected, and surrounded by only beautiful healthy people; it wasn't the whole story, and old age and death would come to him.

One night at a party he saw people in the palace being drunk, falling asleep, and lying around in states of disarray. The idea of a good time doesn't change much in two thousand five hundred years! He thought, *'What is this? They don't look so pretty now'*, so he decided to leave the palace. For six years he practised with yogis and meditators learning and applying many different kinds of meditation techniques and ascetic rituals but, after a point, he realised it wasn't getting him anywhere.

He stopped doing these practices and sitting under a tree, he stopped doing anything. He said, *'I'll just sit here'*. In that state, by not developing new ideas about how he could go from here to there, by not being distracted into further thought constructions or emotional responses, according to the tradition various kinds of demons both frightening and erotic came to disturb him and without trying to block them he allowed them to be as they are.

In traditional Tibetan paintings some of the demons are throwing spears and firing arrows, and as these get close to the Buddha they turn into flowers. This symbolises that when we are in meditation and find ourselves persecuted by difficult thoughts and feelings, by not trying to push these away or defending ourselves against them, they reveal themselves as not as dangerous as they appeared. That is to say, it is the resistance, the sense of *'This is intolerable'*, or *'I can't bear this'*, or *'This is very dangerous'* that creates most of the problems. In that way, the Buddha recognised that his mind itself was separate from everything that was arising, and yet ***also inseparable*** from all that was arising.

Just as with a mirror: the reflection is in the mirror – it's intimately part of the mirror when we look at it – and yet the mirror is not conditioned by the reflection. Most of the time we don't experience ourselves to be like this. We feel more like a lump of clay, and that whatever touches us leaves a mark and shapes us so we become conditioned by our environment. Some conditions we experience as pleasant and some we take to be unpleasant, so we want more of the pleasant and less of the unpleasant.

However we are not in charge of the supply chain and so we have to react all the time to different situations. From the point of view of dzogchen, it is important to stay with our own experience. We can think, *'OK, I feel myself to be conditioned by events. I have a hope or a plan and when the plan is not fulfilled, or when the situation doesn't manifest the way I want it to, I feel frustrated, and from that sadness and anger can arise.'* What is the nature of this

thought? What is the basis for me believing that my own thought is an accurate guide to what is actually happening?

For example, we have a hope to eat outside in the garden this evening, so we have to keep checking the sky! We hear different weather reports. In that way, as soon as we have an idea or an imagination we are hostage to fortune. Clearly, there is nothing wrong with the idea of sitting outside together in the lovely evening light drinking wine and eating together. But we don't personally have the power to ensure that the idea can land on this earth, and so the conflict between what we can imagine and what actually manifests gives rise to grief.

Our habitual conditioning gives us particular shapings so that we view the world according to our own private agenda. Inside our private world, we develop understandings of how things are and we take that to be an accurate description of the world outside.

That is the basic structure of what is called a neurosis: something is arising in ourselves and it seems to tell us about how things are. Somebody who develops a condition like agoraphobia has a great anxiety about leaving their house. This anxiety feels like an accurate predictor that if they go out of their house something terrible will happen to them. A part of them might even know that this feeling is ridiculous, and yet in the moment of going towards the door the anxiety arises and it feels impossible.

In that way, we can easily identify with a state that seems to tell the truth but, in fact, is quite deluded and misrepresents the potential of the situation. I am sure we all know this in ourselves: we have believed things that are not true, and we thought that if we believed them strongly enough then they would become true. But the intensity of the belief doesn't make it the case.

### Can we trust ourselves?

Part of awakening, whether it is in psychotherapy or in buddhism, is to recognise that we can't trust ourselves. The thoughts that arise inside us – thoughts that seem to tell the truth – are often quite deceptive. This is quite scary. What will I trust if I can't trust my thoughts?

Children are sent to school year, after year, after year. They learn reading, writing, arithmetic, history and geography, but what they are never taught is that they are quite mad! The school syllabus is based on rational principles. If you learn this then you will get through your exam, so you learn to write an essay and organise your thoughts in a coherent pattern. Essentially, what this does is to create a persona; a false self, in which we feel in charge of the world and that we know what we are doing. Two and two equals four. I really exist. Tonight I am going to eat pizza in the garden! ... This kind of thinking all links together.

Actually, real life is experienced more in the playground, where you encounter the bullies, where you find out that your best friend isn't your best friend anymore, where you are not allowed to play football, or you never get to use the skipping-rope. That is to say, you encounter the discrepancy between your desire and what you get. However, what we teach children is that they just have to learn to survive that; that what they need is some ego strength to help them become resilient and robust.

That's how we miss a great opportunity to recognise how mad everything is; that the constructs that we develop, and what actually arises, are so often not in contact. In fact, if we attended more to the actuality of situations, and less to the development of refined concepts, our lives might move in a better fashion.

### Conditioning and identification

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Conditioning is not that some bad person is doing something terrible to you. From a buddhist point of view, conditioning is also an aspect of the European enlightenment project. We believe there are human rights and that there should be equality between women and men and so on, but this is also a kind of condition; this is a set of cultural concepts. We come to believe that it is true, and now with great generosity and kindness we are extending this to the people of Afghanistan. We have Rousseau bombs and Voltaire machine guns to show them the superiority of our intellectual understanding! This is enormously important to understand because in Europe and in America people are so convinced the rational, democratic, humanistic focus is the real truth.

As a first step in coming to understand the dzogchen nature of the mind, it's important to look at the cultural concepts that we are identified with. Because they are so familiar to us and we have been so educated in them, we take them to be true and self-existing but of course they have arisen historically due to causes and circumstances, and they also arise on the basis of propositions.

For example, in America there was a civil war, and terrible slaughter occurred. At the end of the civil war there was a big banner saying '*Justice has prevailed*'. In Britain we refer to '*our glorious dead*'. Britain is fighting in Afghanistan and every week some soldiers come back dead. '*Our brave soldiers. They died for freedom and democracy*', we say.

I say this not a sociology critique but to help us look at how we believe all these stories that are not true. If we can see externally and interpersonally how easily we fall into illusion, then that provides a basis for starting to see in our meditation how easily we are caught by illusions. We say the mind is pure from the very beginning. That means our awareness is open –not resting on anything – and yet we find ourselves identifying with the thoughts that arise.

It is that quality of identification which creates the seeming truth and validity of the things we believe in. Clearly, when we look around in the world there are many different cultures. Some people put tattoos on their body; others put little silver rings through their genitals. People find all sorts of ways of saying, '*Here I am! This is me!*' We could then think, '*Oh, we are all human. Why should I believe that my way is any better than theirs?*'

Traditionally, this is what is called 'the understanding of relative or conventional truth'. All the things that we believe in are social conventions. Even the side of the road that you drive on is a convention.

This is the buddhist teaching of dependent co-origination: everything arises in a matrix of causes and conditions. No manifestation is strongly real. The beliefs that we have are valid as beliefs, but they don't tell us the truth about anything except the fact that we believe them.

Think on the kinds of conflict you have in your life, or the things that annoy you. I suggest that they are often based on beliefs. Although we may find it hard to believe that other people can believe what they believe, that doesn't make us question our own belief. Our beliefs give us control over a circle drawn around our feet; it doesn't expand any further than that. Other people have different beliefs, conditioning, and patterns.

Moreover, we are also unreliable, because we don't have a fixed set of beliefs but rather we have a wide repertoire of them. These beliefs are pulled out of the repertoire and manifest according to situations. Sometimes that feels like a proactive, intentional thing, and sometimes it's just constellated by the state of the other.

For instance, someone might make some remark about politics and you suddenly think, *'Oh, that can't be right'*. You might have had no conscious awareness that you believed what you now suddenly know you believe; it has been brought into momentary manifestation by the particular shaping of the conversation. The point of this is to see that in terms of our ego self although we often feel we have a panoramic clarity and understand things very clearly, actually, all we ever have is the view from here, and 'here' is changing moment by moment.

What we are looking at is also changing moment by moment. As we discussed yesterday, this is the quality of energy, manifesting for us as temporary constellations and temporary patterns which in the moment of their manifesting appear to be the truth.

We may feel tired and say, *'I am tired'*. If you really identify with that feeling as you say it, it seems to define who you are. It is true, but it's like a reflection in the mirror; it has no inherent status. We are tired due to causes and conditions. If we get some rest then we will cease to be tired. Part of the practice is to start listening to ourselves as we speak and to be suspicious of the intensity and commitment that we bring to our statements, because all we can say is *'This is what is happening for me now'*. We don't know if this will be the case a few minutes later.

When we start to observe ourselves in a more phenomenological manner, not resting on assumption but just observing how we come into being, we find it's more and more difficult to make definite statements because our existence is a complex system. For any system to stay alive it has to have communication outside itself, and the porous membrane around ourselves has to be quite open in order to allow the world in and ourselves out.

### Our lived experience moment by moment is also impermanence

The key point to extract from our discussion is firstly impermanence, one of the most basic teachings in Buddhism and which you find in all the schools. Impermanence describes not only the general features like changes in the seasons, changes in age and so on, but it describes very precisely our lived experience moment by moment.

We have examined the co-emergence of two domains: the immediacy of the ever-changing matrix that we are part of; and the heuristic interpretive narrative that weaves across it. Yesterday, after vipassana meditation people reported examples of direct experiences. Moments which were just there and then gone but which can be organised into for example, 'a pain in my shoulder'. You might tell someone about the pain in your shoulder.

Later on they might ask, 'How is your pain?' and you reply, 'Oh yes, it's still there,' but you hadn't been aware of it for an hour maybe.

The concept itself seems to have taken on an independent validity. The continuity of our ego identity is based on patternings of such abstract concepts. They are not false: they have been abstracted from a particular situation, but then they take on a life of their own. For example, farmers grow grain in the fields. When the grain is growing it is directly linked to the soil. At harvest time they cut the grain and thresh the heads of grain from the stalk. The grain is taken to the store and then it goes to the baker who would mill it down and then start to bake.

Once the harvest is taken in, the grain has a life of its own. When the grain was growing it was stuck in the field and it couldn't move but once you cut it from its root you de-contextualise it. It travels everywhere and ends up as bread in the bakery. Where does bread come from? The baker's shop. For many children in the city that is the absolute truth; they don't know about the field. That is a practical example of the nature of an abstraction.

There is nothing wrong in any of these stages, but if we lose the memory of the first stage of things growing from the ground, then they seem to move around and take on a life of their own. In dzogchen, the ground or the source, which is the unborn nature of the mind is very important. All thoughts, feelings, and sensations arise from the same ground, as we will see.

However, when we don't recognise that, then words and concepts seem to be existing in themselves and we rely on them to make sense of our world. This means that we are conditioning the environment by our use of these abstractions and we, in turn, are being conditioned by all the messages coming to us from the environment.

We will take a break now and come back and do some meditation, which will hopefully illuminate this.

**[Break]**

### **Sounding Three Aa s**

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This is a practice of relaxing into the natural state. Many meditation practices aim to construct something. However this practice is about relaxing the energetic tendency to be active and to relax into a state of open awareness which, like the mirror, offers hospitality to whatever is presented, but is not actively seeking anything in particular, nor is fearful of anything in particular.

In terms of our earlier analogy of the plate with all the conditioning on top – all the old, dried-up food – in this practice we relax through the conditioning down to the plate itself. It doesn't matter how much rubbish is on the plate nor what thoughts and feelings you have; the key thing is to know the difference between the mirror and the reflection.

Although thoughts often convey the impression that they are permanent and refer to things that are permanent, look for yourself and see if this is actually true. The more we see how all phenomena are arising and passing, then the immediacy of presentation and the

immediacy of self-liberation start to come together, and from this the quality of the mirror is present even in the midst of multiple reflections.

We simply sit in a relaxed, erect place. The chin is slightly raised, and the eyes are open resting in the space about an arm-and-a-half's length in front. We are aware of what is in the room but we are not looking at it in terms of the specific item. Together, we make the sound *Aa* three times. *Aa* is the sound of emptiness and the mother sound of all phenomena. As such, all the manifestations, all the various processes that give rise to our experience of this room being like this or that or ourselves being like this or that, can just dissolve back into the open spaciousness.

There are different permutations of this method, but now we will do it in its simplest form. As we say *Aa*, there is just this feeling of releasing into space any identification with the body, with the path, and with thoughts; and then we rest integrated in the space in front of us. Whatever comes, we just let it come; whatever goes, just let it go, and remain relaxed.

If you find yourself getting caught up in thoughts, just bring your attention briefly to a long exhalation and relax back into the space.

### [Three *Aa* practice]

If you are practising this on your own there is no clearly defined end to the meditation, there is just increasingly complex phenomena to keep integrating. By staying with the momentary flow of experience and experiencing that abstract concepts as they manifest are part of the momentary flow, all the outer forms of life can continue just as before. What we call 'subject' and what we call 'object' are increasingly allowed to arise together, and so we approach our experience not by thinking about it, but by being with it.

### Being absent and being present

Clearly, in ordinary life there is a tendency to get lost in habitual projections, so the advice often is to take some time and to think about it and then go back to the situation. That's not a bad solution; it is just a bit slow and it does rely on one abstracting oneself from the situation.

However, in dzogchen, what we want to do is to find directly **how** we are not there – to get to know how we cheat ourselves and cheat others by being absent in some way. When we are fully present in the moment with the other, without a pre-formed agenda and in a relaxed state, then whatever needs to arise can come through us.

Resting in this state of non-duality and feeling fully in contact with the situation, we trust that whatever is required will arise because in this view, self and other, self and environment, are not two separate things. I am not having to sit in my separate ego bubble thinking about what I will say to you. By actually feeling the energetic connection with other people, the words arise in a co-emergence in the centre of the field and I find myself speaking.

If you are sitting in a café with a friend having an interesting conversation, you don't have to think about what you will say. You find yourself speaking and responding. The conversation

is co-created by both parties actual presence together. What is it that makes that quality of conversation not possible in other situations?

### Responsivity and relationship

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Traditionally it can be explained in terms of chakras, which are centres of communication; they communicate between each other and also out into the world. In some ways they are similar to the more modern concept of multiple intelligence. Nowadays we don't just have a cognitive intelligence, we can have an emotional intelligence, a kinesthetic intelligence and so on. If we are grounded in ourselves we feel things in our belly about who we meet. We feel things in our genitals, our throats, and our heads, and very often we don't listen to what these different centres are saying. In childhood we often learn to override this field experience in the name of to being a 'good person', or of pleasing other people.

When we come out of the Three *Aa* practice and relax our focus in the space, we come more in contact with the wider environment. We are called into a responsivity; the world will tell us what we need to do. Part of the world is your body, and your body might say it is time to move, time for a pee, time for a cup of tea... Your ego intellect doesn't tell you that you are going to have a cup of tea, but the body tells you. Sensation arises; we are aware of the sensation; we mobilise; we move to activity and contact in the familiar gestalt cycle. The world as outside and the world as inside create a movement, which is revealed to awareness. Awareness is not inside, it's not outside; you cannot locate it.

When we say the mind is pure from the very beginning it means it is empty in nature, like the sky. The clouds that fill the sky will disperse, and the sky will be revealed without the clouds. The sky has not been changed in itself by the presence of the clouds. The sky is not spoiled by clouds, and it's not improved by the absence of clouds. We, with our ego concerns, might think we want the sunshine and not the rain, but the sky itself, when it offers hospitality to the clouds, is not contorted, not conditioned, nor altered in any way. This image or analogy is very important.

When we sit and do the Three *Aa* practice various forms arise; sometimes they seem like dark clouds, sometimes light and radiant. One is not better than the other. If you feel very tired, if you feel depressed, if you feel bored, if you feel stupid and feel you can't meditate, these states are not worse than feeling happy, light, and full of confidence. All these states are arising and passing.

When a happy moment arises you feel radiant, and you think, '*Oh, now I am getting somewhere*', but that will not last so it's not so important. When you feel dull and stupid that won't last either. By remaining relaxed and offering hospitality, maintain a state of equanimity, of indifference. This natural state requires nothing from any of these arisings.

Who requires something from these arisings? 'I, me, myself'. 'I' want to have a happy mind. 'I' want to be a good boy. Who is the one who is wanting this? What is the status of the self? When a thought arises like '*I am bored*', who is the one who is having this thought? If you fall into the thought, the thought seems to be self-proving. '*Who is bored?*' '*I am bored.*' '*Who am I?*' '*The one who is bored.*' In that way you go round, and round, and round.

This notion of an individual subjectivity is like mistletoe, which has a symbiotic relationship with the tree it grows from. The 'I' relates to whatever is coming. 'I' will say anything about itself: I am happy, I am sad, I am going to London, I am going to have lunch. 'I' can say anything at all about itself, and the reason it can say this is because it doesn't exist as some thing. This is really the central point.

### 'I, me, myself' is like the doppelgänger of the mirror

When we say the mind is like a mirror and that it's the emptiness of the mirror that allows everything to be revealed, 'I, me, myself' is like the doppelgänger of the mirror. It's like the mirror's public relations department! Instead of just being relaxed and being fully present moment by moment it feels the need to issue a press release: this is to announce I am happy! And so all day long these little statements are being issued. Who is the one who is issuing the statements? This empty nature of the mind itself.

The 'I' is like the mask of Janus: one side smiling, one side sad. One side looks to openness in itself so it is smiling all the time, and the other side looks sad because it is constantly trying to be the boss of what is occurring. Thoughts, feelings, sensations arise, and they are 'me' and they are 'not me'. They are 'me' because I experience them, but they are 'not me' because the ego is not the source of them, and as soon as I become aware of them they are already vanishing. Seeing the emptiness of 'I', integrate 'I' into the state of the mirror. '

OK, we will do the Three Aa practice again.

### **[Three Aa practice]**

#### Nature of mind is fresh and naked

That is a practice you can do again and again. It is best not to do it for very long at first because the key points are not straining to achieve something and allowing yourself to see the coming and going of everything which arises and passes.

The nature of the mind is described as being fresh. Although in the tradition they say we have been born many, many thousands of lifetimes, the mind itself never gets tired; it is always fresh. Fresh means it's made exactly, as it were, in this moment since it is not existing in the chain of past, present, and future. Every time you enter into that state it is just there – open. It is not built on anything; it is not dependent on an accumulation of knowledge and experience nor is it bound into time.

The nature of mind is also described as being naked. In many of the paintings you see deities in a state of nakedness and this represents 'not requiring any clothing'. The ego always needs clothes because the ego has no self-substance and so it is always pretending that its clothes are itself. We say, 'I am tired.' 'I am cold.' 'I am hungry.' 'I am happy.' Each of these statements is like a garment that the ego wraps around itself. If we take the clothes off we are just left with, 'I am.' "Yes, but what are you" "I am." "Oh." As soon as you start to say something you are into clothes; you are into a proposition, a philosophical view, and so on.

#### Good thoughts do not improve it; bad thoughts do not damage it

When we say this nature is naked, this refers to the experience that when these manifestations, evanescences, thoughts, and feelings arise, we don't need to grab on to

them as if they are going to give us something we need. None of these thoughts will improve us. Of course, from the level of the ego, it is very nice to learn little stories and these improve our social value. Being in the world with others is a quality of manifestation and therefore knowledge, information, skills, all of these accumulations are useful, but they don't improve or harm the natural state.

This is one of the shifts that makes the meditation difficult. We are so used to constructing ourselves out of thoughts, that when a good thought goes by during the meditation it's very difficult not to grab it because we feel a need to have it. The one who feels a need for the thought is not the nature itself; it is another thought, the thought of 'I, me, myself'. But this 'I, me, myself', doesn't want to be a thought, it wants to be the owner, the master, the source of thoughts: 'I am the thinker of thoughts'. That itself is a thought, so the thought is always in this false consciousness; this bad faith relationship with itself.

Becoming naked in the meditation is just to trust relaxing again and again, to trust that awareness itself is sufficient. We should allow whatever is arising to be like a waterfall. When you look at a waterfall the water is plunging over and it somehow seems to have patterns, but it has no real pattern as it moves around.

### Three aspects: open, immediate and participating

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There are three aspects of mind. One is the open spacious aspect, the second aspect is the immediacy of things just in this moment, and the third aspect is our participation in the flow.

From the first aspect – the open spaciousness – how things are arising in the mind is irrelevant. This is the heart of the practice: not trying to improve our mind, not being upset if long patches of disturbed thinking or depression arise, but just remaining relaxed and open.

The second aspect is to be completely present with the panoramic nature of the immediacy of what arrives. That is to say, not to be concerned with figure-ground contrast. By selecting a particular focus for attention this puts the rest into the background, so instead give equal value to everything on the basis that it is all just reflection, a manifestation which is immediately present in this moment. In Tibetan this is called *lhun drup*, which means not looking at historical chains of construction but experiencing the givenness, moment by moment.

The third aspect is the participation in which we experience ourselves being in the world with others. It is just this moment, like in the manner of a dream. The participation arises but it is inseparable from the second level of the reflection, and the reflection is inseparable from the mirror. So the open ground, the immediacy, and the participation are integrated together.

### Being present in the moment

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We do meditation and then we are talking to people; in that state we try to hold the whole field at the same time. If someone speaks to us we respond, but by being present in the moment you can experience the arising and then the passing of this, and then there is something else, and something else... None of these moments are strongly real. None of

these moments define who you are. If you are doing something and it goes badly, then you may recognise what you can do to make a difference, but blaming, shaming, objectification, and reification are completely unhelpful, nevertheless being themselves only moments of arising.

This is the central point in the view of non-duality: nothing is coming from anywhere else. There is no devil pumping bad thoughts into your head. Everything which arises is empty by nature, even shaming and blaming. If you see their ground as empty this can be a skilful means of relating in certain moments. Nothing is poisonous, but things can become quite poisonous if they become a positioning which is imposed on a situation without regard to its actual dynamic nature.

We are going to take a break now and during the break just observe yourself walking, talking, stretching, and eating. Don't observe yourself as a policeman would; you are not investigating yourself, but rather just being curious about yourself in the way a small child of three years or so would be curious. The more we can observe how we operate, the easier it becomes to relax back into the flow.

**[Break]**

### Meditation practices for when you are distracted

We will do some different meditations now designed to deal with distraction. Distraction occurs when our capacity for awareness gets caught up in the intensity of what is arising, and it seems that energy is speaking to energy.

#### Visualising the letter 'A'

These practices are in a group called *sem-dzin* in Tibetan, which means a way of holding or focusing the mind. We use an object of fixation in order to cut through the movement of distraction, and then when we stop doing the practice, we just relax and are open.

In the first of these practices we imagine that on the tip of our nose is a small, white letter 'A'. You can use the Tibetan letter if you know what that looks like, or you can just imagine a capital 'A'. As you breathe out you imagine that this letter is going away from you, and as you breathe in it is coming back towards the tip of your nose. You co-ordinate this with your breathing, and you focus on this going in and out for about five minutes or as it suits you. Then just sit and observe what impact this has on you.

We don't make any sound while we do this, we just have our movement, and the breath we are focusing on is the breath coming out of the nostrils.

When you end this kind of practice you just want to sit quietly and observe if there is any impact on your own state. This is a practice you can do anywhere really. If you are at work and you feel stuck in a boring meeting, or if you are waiting at an airport and the flight is delayed, it can give you a meaningful focus.

One of the functions of learning different practices is so that you will never be in a situation where you are just stuck waiting for something to happen. There is a big difference between

being at the mercy of circumstances and being open to whatever arises. In the former case we are likely to become conditioned by what occurs, so it is much better to apply a meditation method.

### *Sounding Phat!*

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The second of these practices is to make the sound of *Phat!*

We use this practice if we are feeling caught up in thoughts or emotions. It is particularly useful for moods, because when you have an emotion it has a kind of shape to it. You might feel angry, or you might feel jealous, and these emotions tend to have a particular focus. However a mood like sadness or depression is very pervasive, like a mist, and this practice is very good for cutting through that.

The sound should be short and sharp. You want to imagine it coming up from the centre of energy below the diaphragm, two-and-a-half fingers below the navel, and coming straight out the top of your head so that it cuts connection between subject and object and creates a state of disorientation.

Our tendency is always to re-orient ourselves: to find our identity and our direction by comparing and contrasting, by locating ourselves in relation to objects. In this practice we keep making this sound *Phat!* again and again until we don't know where we are, and then we stop and just rest in that state. You will still be somewhere. Where will you be? If you can see that directly, that is already the beginning of the state of calmness and clarity.

In making the sound *Phat!* you want it to come straight up and out of the top of your head. At first it may be better to do it with your eyes closed so that you can just get into this state. If the sounds that other people make start to make you feel agitated or amused, just keep saying it and go back into the sound again and again. When I say OK, just sit quietly and observe your own state.

If your own state feels particularly fragile then it may be better not to do it since this is a practice for dis-orienting,. As with all these practices you have to be aware of your own particular condition. The end result is to be open and aware – not lost.

We will start now and do this for some time.

#### **[*Phat!* practice]**

You can also do this practice outside on your own rather than all together in this room. You will be able to get into it more deeply if you are not hearing other people. At the end when you stop making the sound, you open into a state in which there is no connection with thought.

When you first do this practice you might be more aware of the absence of something, because thoughts have been our constant friends for a long time. But if you just stay without agitation – relaxed and open – you become aware of the presence of a quality of clarity. You are present, but not present as a thought or as a construction, there is just the clarity of a non-conceptual existence. Just this.

## Sounding Ha

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We will now do another practice and this involves the sound *Ha*. Once again, we make this sound short, sharp, and quite quickly. This is another method for dealing with distraction because making these sounds themselves are a form of movement. It is as if all the aspects of movement that could be taking us here and there in our discursive meanderings are concentrated into this sound. There is nothing to think about, to elaborate on or to consider; we just fully focus into the sound itself. Then when I say OK, we will just sit in the after-effect.

Make the sound sharp and hard, and with as much energy as possible. Sometimes you can feel a little embarrassed or self-conscious in making noise, but noise is an important thing because it helps to hold our focused attention. By fixing on a sound, it is something that is very strongly there and yet completely ungraspable. Making some volume is helpful because it is also blocking all the other senses, so you feel yourself just in this world of sound, and then when we end there is open silence.

### **[Ha Practice]**

This is also a practice that is good to do on your own for as long as you can. The most important part of it is what happens when you stop making the sound; that you find yourself existing in a state with fewer thoughts, a state which in many ways you can't say anything about. The more you become familiar with this state, the more its quality starts to reveal itself.

As we were looking at before it is open; nothing is closing it. It has no limit in space or time, and it's not covered up or resting on any thoughts. In some way it looks like nothing at all, and yet there you are in the midst of it. You are present but not present as your ordinary self, not based on memories, thoughts, hopes, fears, and so on. For that reason, it is a very useful practice.

## Practicing the struggle of the asuras

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The next practice does not involve any sound. We sit with our feet flat on the ground and our arms around our knees, pulling our knees in as tightly as possible. Dropping our head we roll it very, very slowly and gently round to the left and then to the right.

This practice is called the struggle of the asuras. The asuras are jealous gods who are always fighting with other gods and who always lose. Often when they lose they get tied up but they still remain very angry, so they are struggling to get free. When the head goes around you can move your body a little bit.

We focus our attention fully into the physical sensation. You have got the attention of holding your legs, and this very slow and gentle movement of the head. It's a kind of hopeless struggle because you are not going to get free, so there is no need to do it in a hurry but you are too proud to stop struggling!

You can do it for a very long time. All the focus is just upon this sensation as it arises until there is nothing but the arising and passing of sensation, and that is the fixation. We stop after some time.

Please remember that the neck is a very vulnerable area of the body, and if you have any neck or back problems take a great deal of care. We are not acting against the body in any of these practices. We are always collaborating with our own condition and our own nature.

### **[Struggle of the asuras practice]**

Maybe you can see a difference between these practices and the one we used at the beginning of the day.

When we use the general *shamatha* calming practice, we keep the attention focused on an external point or on the breath and we are observing what is happening. However, because in these other practices the movement is one of participation in the action – we are not standing outside it – it means that we have a fixation into one point, which is an alignment with the activity as it occurs. For many people that is more powerful and useful.

The main thing with all these practices is to do them and find your own relationship with yourself; what works and what doesn't work for you.

### **Sounding Hung**

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This is a more relaxed practice. We make the sound of *Hung* quite gently through the mouth and the nose, so it has a slight nasal quality taking the sound out on the full breath. *Hung*. Here again, the fixation is into the sound, letting your whole attention go into the sound until there is nothing but the sound, and staying with that until we stop.

### **[Hung practice]**

#### **Day Three:**

#### **Purity free of stain**

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Linked with this primordial purity there is another aspect called *dri-med dag-pa* in Tibetan which means purity free of stains. This purity is revealed when we recognise that our own nature cannot be stained.

As many of you will know, Padmasambhava was a great saint and yogi from Odiyana, who went to Tibet to help secure the development of tantric buddhism. It is said that one of the first things he did was to control all the local gods and demons. He did this by forcing them to show their own seed syllable. Many of them took the form of old soldiers with a kind of breastplate which was like a big, brass disc-like mirror. With the power of his meditation, he forced them to show this basic seed syllable on their breastplates. He then created a mantra incorporating the seed syllable so that anybody who recited the mantra would have control over that local god or demon.

### **Seed syllables as vibration with resonance in the world**

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All the deities have a particular seed syllable: a particular sound out of which their mandala and their form arise. We have been looking at *Aa* as the basic mother-sound out of which everything arises. There is the idea that the universe is based on resonance and a particular

energetic quality that is present in all things and all beings. We don't have one simple seed syllable, we have very many because we are very fragmented.

Perhaps, when you were young, you had brothers or sisters who would tease you. Usually, when you are young someone works out what your buttons are and delights in pressing them. In English, we would say that they have 'got your number', because all of us are doing a number. We have particular patterns and procedures that we repeat, and if somebody understands that, they can use it to their advantage or to our advantage.

The Russian thinker, Mikhail Bakhtin was a literary critic and wrote a lot about how human beings are constructed out of voices: that when we speak we always have a dialogic intention; we are speaking *to someone*. The person we are speaking to may not be the one in front of us; in psychoanalytic language that is called transference.

The key thing regarding Bakhtin's notion is that we are constituted out of these voices; that when we are small we hear people speaking, and we internalise these sites or positions of speech and emulate their voice. These voices tend to take on particularly structured patterns, so some people present themselves as the joker, some people present as the quiet intellectual, some people present primarily as the nice, friendly person and so on. Each of these positions is a way of evoking a kind of response from the other person.

When it is coming from us, and we seem to be setting up the environment to resonate according to our wish, and that can make us feel quite powerful. But that dialogic structure also means that other people can position themselves, which evokes something in us prior to our conceptual awareness of it. This is quite a helpful way of thinking about conditioning.

In Tibetan, conditioning is described in Tibetan as *du-je*, which means to gather together or assemble, and it also means to do. It refers to the fact that positions get constructed out of the available resources. When a pattern is set up it seeks to find a resonance in the environment because we can only fully manifest our particular resonances or patterns with people who know how to make the counter-move. People who have particular interests need to be able to quickly identify other people who have these interests. We identify people who will bring the corresponding aspect of our position.

When Padmasambhava came to these demons he called their energy into one place, and he fixed it and gave them a clear task. Through bringing out this *bija* they came into a particular form. However if you think of yourself in the course of a day you have many, many different ways you manifest. Perhaps traveling on public transport, going into shops, going into work, being with friends, being with family, and in each of these situations you are constituted slightly differently.

### Compassion means extending our repertoire of responses

We often observe other people behaving in ways that we couldn't imagine doing ourselves. Somehow they find a way to speak and act in ways we couldn't. They have two arms, two legs, and one head and so do we, but we accept somehow that they are fundamentally different. We don't think, '*Oh, if they're human and I'm human, I could also do what they do*'. It is at this point that we can see the restriction of the repertoire of our resonances,

voices, or moves, and this is very important if we want to develop a capacity for compassion.

Compassion means that we have to manifest what the other needs or what the situation needs, which means we have to be bigger, broader, and deeper than we would be ordinarily. In buddhism, part of the basis of respect is to see that all beings have buddha-nature and, if that is the case, then whatever pattern or habit they have is not the core definition of them and, similarly, it is not the definition of us.

### Hospitality puts the guest first

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Some people become vegetarian or vegan, and if someone came to their house they wouldn't want to cook any meat for them. Although inviting someone to their house they ensure that the other person understands it is **their** house. This is the hospitality of entering **my** world on **my** terms.

I have spoken elsewhere about the story of the old Greek, Procrustes, who lived in a little house out in the middle of a broad plain. Every evening he would look out for travelers, and if he met someone he would invite them to his home and offer them a bed. He would give them some food, and they would talk and laugh, and then he would show them to the bed. His rule was that they had to fit his bed exactly. If their body were too long he would cut off a bit, and if their body was too short he would rack them out so that they could stretch to fit the bed properly.

This is a very good symbol of a lot of what we call 'hospitality'. A real hospitality puts the guest first; the host is the servant of the guest. This means that if you take the bodhisattva vow and all beings are your guests, you have to learn many different ways of being in order to make each of these feel at home.

This relates to the sense of having a repertoire of moves and voices that confirm to ourselves and to others that we are who we think and feel we are. If you want to be really hospitable it's not helpful to know who **you** are; it's more important to know who the guest is. The more you know who you are, the more you define your position and your possibilities, and the space of welcome is already foreclosed.

This comes back to purity free of stains; the stain is a mark, and the mark limits the potential. If you have a blank piece of paper anything is possible. You can write a letter; you can do a charcoal sketch; you can work with acrylics, but as soon as you make a mark on the paper the infinite potential of the blank space is now limited. And so in order to remain blank, therefore, of infinite potential, we have to observe and track the various ways in which we are marked.

All sorts of marks are on us: marks of fear, anxiety, pride, a need to control, a need to be controlled, shyness, avoidance, narcissism, and the imposition of oneself on situations... When we go about our daily business it is important to observe how we are positioned in situations and how our position constrains other people in their freedom to be themselves. This can be difficult to do.

When Freud was developing his method, he established the rule of abstinence. He said the analyst should reveal as little as possible about themselves and should not, as far as possible, engage in the ordinary signifiers of social convention. That is to say, they should do nothing that could be taken to confirm that what is going to happen is an ego-to-ego transaction. The non-confirmation of this generates an anxiety, and the anxiety opens a path to unconscious or hidden phenomena. Many people do not want to work in this way. They feel that it is cold and that the analyst is not interested in them as a person. It's true; the analyst is *not* very interested in them as a person. The fact that people have been interested in them as a person is the basis of all their troubles!

This is too difficult for most people. They prefer a mother's love and the confirmation that they are actually good people trying hard under difficult circumstances. That is to say, the patient demands the one thing the analyst shouldn't give them, which is reassurance. If the patient can accept the hard fact that they are completely alone in a realm they don't understand, then there is the possibility of awakening to a profound existential understanding – a de-centring of the ego.

It is similar in buddhism. The Buddha says everything is empty. The Buddha says everything is an illusion. That is not very polite because people try their best. Somebody went to the market and bought flowers to give. They are an illusion You could then ask, 'Well, why bother?' It is difficult to find a balance. The Buddha's teaching is the middle way, between the extremes. Emptiness is not nihilism. The fact that the flowers are impermanent and illusory offers us a chance to enjoy them before they vanish. This also offers us a chance to enjoy and meet each other here today. Tomorrow, we vanish, and whether or not we will meet again, we don't know. While we are here, are we really in contact with each other or not? Being open to the illusory and ungraspable nature of things is very hard.

**Question:** Why should I be open to someone if they are going to leave me?

**James:** Why not? Everyone is going to leave us sooner or later . . . maybe in fifty years. . . maybe in ten years. . . maybe in one day.

**Question:** But I only want to invest myself in a place that I know is secure.

**James:** This is the logic of the marketplace: fair exchange is no robbery. Marketing and working out what is the return on my investment is a prime way of maintaining conditioning. We take phenomena as strongly real and then we try to ensure that it manifests in the form that is best for us.

The Buddha's teaching is that all phenomena are impermanent and illusory, and you, the one who is looking for benefit, are also impermanent and illusory. That's very hard. All of our life is built in the other direction. We want to keep our job, we want to keep our friends, we want people to like us... We put a lot of time and energy into developing ourselves in particular ways that we think will be socially acceptable.

### We want things on our own terms

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Basically, as Freud indicated, this is because we are looking for reassurance. We want to be loved but we want to be loved on our terms, as we are, that is to say: love me – love my

condition. But when the Buddha loves people, he loves their buddha-nature and he is not very interested in their condition. Very often the thing which for us is most fascinating about ourselves is exactly that which gets in the way of any kind of awakening: the various structures and rituals of our lives, the familiar habits, resonances, voices, inclinations and so on.

We need to start to observe what is the limit of myself? Why do I turn away from this? Sometimes we turn away from things because it doesn't help the other. In such a situation, we have to reflect on the purity of our motive? Was our intention primarily for ourselves; that we want to say something or establish something in order to make the situation the way we want it.

Again and again, we have to observe, why is it so important for me that life is structured in this way? Who would I be if my life were no longer structured in this way? As we discussed earlier, the traditional description of our true nature is 'pure from the very beginning, not resting on anything, not requiring any covering or support'. When we look at our ordinary sense of self we see it is one hundred and eighty degrees the opposite – quite closed in, fragile, and needing endless support and maintenance.

The more we see the faults and limitations of identifying with transient, impermanent situations, the more we are able in the meditation, when thoughts and feelings arise, just to let them be there. We don't need them. The *ego* needs them because the ego is a thought and thoughts get lonely, which is why they always go out in groups. But who is the one who is experiencing the thought? Relax into that state: this is the mind itself; it is not a thought, not a feeling, not a sensation. The mind is not created by these and it doesn't need them.

In the meditation the more we can let go of the better it is; whereas in the world the more we can accumulate, learn, and know how to use, the better our mind becomes. This doesn't mean that you have to practise renouncing external phenomena. Rather, by relaxing into this open state again and again you come to see the dynamic, impermanent nature of illusory forms, of subject and object. Doing that lets us freely participate in the unfolding matrix of the world without too many hopes and fears.

**If you ask the world to give you heaven, that's a very big mistake. The world will give you the world. You eat a lovely dinner and the next day you have a good pooh; that is what happens in the world. The delicious food was vanishing as you ate it. If you didn't eat it, it would be of no benefit for you; yet as soon as you put it in your mouth it has vanished. The aesthetic quality of our existence is revealed through a participation, which alters the field of experience.**

**In that way, by not asking impermanent changing phenomena to be stable, we cling to them less. Having less expectation of them, we don't spend our time conditioning the environment and being conditioned by it. This manifests as the second form of purity: the purity free of stain.**

OK, so now we will do one final Three *Aa* practice. If you want to go out, you can do more meditation in the forest by yourself. We do the Three *Aa* practice and just rest in the open space.

[Three Aa practice]

## Day Four

### Purity inseparable from manifestation: more on *kadag*

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We come to the last part of our time together, and we will continue with the work of stabilising the sense of *kadag*. This is not a thing that you find once and then have; it is more a mode of being, a state of awakening, and something to return to again and again.

Yesterday we examined the nature of conditioning and our habits of identification with energy, as if they were a series of true entities. Each time we come into this identification with a thought, a feeling, or a sensation, there is the reaffirmation of the true existence of ourself and simultaneously the limitation of being cut off from awareness of the ground. A central point here is our willingness to identify with a limit as if it was the totality of one's existence. Attachment is not a stable state; it's this moment-by-moment fusing into the energy that's arising, where energy clings onto energy and creates the sense of a unique, precise, fixed, enduring entity. As we looked yesterday, the sense of 'I' faces in two directions. It is both the link with the infinite ground and the point of entry into identification with momentary phenomena, so it always stands at the crossroads of samsara and nirvana.

There is a traditional saying in the view of dzogchen that 'there is one ground and two paths'. Everything has the same basic ground, which is this open dimension; the mirror like state, which is our own nature. The two paths are the path of integration of the reflection with the ground, or, the path of intoxication with the reflection. This intoxicated state has the same ground as the awakened state but it doesn't take you anywhere else, and it doesn't create anything truly self-existing. But while we are in it, it is as if we are indeed in this limited conditioned state moving through time on the basis of cause and effects, karma and so on.

It is very important to have a direct experience of your own infinite nature so that when the experience of 'I' arises you observe how it is the movement of the mind; it is not the mind itself; it's not the true identity.

We will do some practice to investigate this, but investigating it in a very relaxed, open way, by seeing rather than looking, because we are not looking *for* something. We are not like a bird watcher in the forest trying to see a rare bird, but rather in a relaxed, open way just seeing what is occurring and staying with what you see so that it reveals itself.

### We are too intelligent for our own good

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Once again, we have to see that we are all too intelligent for our own good. Our minds go so quickly, that as soon as we get a sense of what something is, we leap on to the next thing. We tend to rest on an idea and come to a conclusion as if the idea would tell us the truth. We don't have to be so active. Like the great interrogator in Dostoevsky's, *Crime and*

**Punishment**, he simply waits, and Raskolnikov comes through the space offered to him, into the revelation of his own complicity.

In the same way, without trying to prosecute the falsity of your mind, remain relaxed and open and observe very precisely how thoughts arise, how you are tempted to rest on them, and how the thought then leaves. Wake up to the deceitful nature of thoughts; they always offer more than they can deliver.

### Visualising *Aa* with rainbow light

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We will start in a simple way with the Three *Aa* practice. However, this time, in the space in front of us, we can imagine a small, white letter 'A' surrounded by rainbow light about an arm and a half's length in front of you.

Sitting in the usual way, let the weight rest through the skeleton so that the muscles can relax. The head is slightly raised and the gaze is open in to the space. Some people can visualise very easily and for others it is more difficult. For our purposes, the feeling tone is more important than the precise visualisation.

The *Aa* as emptiness represents the awakened mind of all the lineages. It is the quality of all our teachers, so that whatever practices you have done, in whatever lineage, can come together in this simple point. We recite *Aa* three times, and integrate the state of our spacious heart with the space in front of us in the form of the *Aa*. Then let the *Aa* dissolve. Rest in space, and just gently as a background interest hold the question: where does the mind rest?

Whenever you find a solution to this, or whenever you seem to find a stable site. then just stay with that, not identifying, not pushing it away, just remain with it and see what happens. Continue doing that with whatever seems to offer you the place or site from which you operate as a state of awareness.

#### [Three *Aa* practice]

As we have looked before, it is better to do that kind of practice for a short period of time so that you are not getting into straining or making effort and, again and again, observe the site of the self. When you recognise its impermanence: the fact that all that manifests in the mind is self-liberating, then the ego function is revealed very directly to you as just a moment of energy. It is not wrong or bad – you don't have to get rid of it – it's just not what it appears to be. If you take it at face value, at how it presents itself, then you will be enmeshed in the fantasy of stable entities.

The more we observe, the more we find that everything that could be us, vanishes and yet we are still here! What is that quality of still being here? This is the clarity of awareness: the capacity of the mind to illuminate the field of experience, yet the one thing it can never illuminate is itself as an entity. The clarity which shows everything, cannot be shown itself because it is not a thing which enters the world of objects.

Again, we see the indestructible primordial purity of the mind existing not as something apart from manifestation but inseparable from manifestation. It is pervasive. Every experience, good or bad, is just an aspect of this ground clarity, and yet it never covers nor contaminates the ground clarity.

So now let's go back into the practice and this time we will focus particularly on what is the shape of the mind? This is why it is a real advantage to do the practice with your eyes open because, as you know, our tendency is to see ourselves as living inside our body. When you are sitting here you hear the noise of the traffic, sometimes birds are singing, people are moving, and in our ordinary understanding we would think that these are events happening outside our mind coming in to us.

Relaxing into the open state, just observe in a very calm way what is arising and where you are you in relation to it. Then stay with whatever conclusion you come to and see what happens to that. Have you established anything that can endure through time, or is that just another conceptual elaboration?

Again and again, recognise the nature of the false solution; we don't have to remove it, we observe it going free by itself and this brings us to the state of the purity free of stains. When we allow each of these propositions to come and go by itself you find that they leave no trace. And when they leave no trace, manifestation and the open purity of the mind are inseparable as the natural radiance

We will do the Three *Aa* practice again looking for the dimension, the height, the width, what is outside, and what is inside. Look again and again at whatever conclusion you come to and when you find these conclusions; just see what they actually are. They will show themselves directly to be reliable or unreliable. You don't need to check out your conclusion through reading some book. If you stay relaxed and open, the mind will show itself.

### **[Three *Aa* practice]**

#### Why these enquiries are fundamental

If you are not used to doing this kind of practice it can be quite difficult, because the objects we are attending to are very subtle. However, they are fundamental enquiries for various reasons.

The first reason is that in learning to look in this way we develop a calm openness which allows whatever is arising to be there and reveal itself. This is linked with the quality known as *dang*, which is the capacity of the mind to exhibit whatever arises.

Traditionally, it is compared to a crystal ball being placed on a piece of coloured cloth. The ball in itself has no colour, but it has the quality of allowing itself to be suffused with the colour that it is placed next to.

When we relax and open and a sound arises, on one level it appears to be, for example, a motorbike, and if you start to think about it you can even see the direction the motorbike is going. If you know about motorbikes you can imagine the size of the engine. How nice it would be on a sunny day to be on a motorbike in the mountains. You might then recognise

that meditation is a waste of time and devote your life to holidays! This is the path of conceptual elaboration.

However, if we stay with the sound itself as it arises and, with the background training that we have been doing in vipassana – not strongly building on the nature of sound, not having to define it as this or that– it then moves out of the space. Like the crystal ball, we offer full hospitality to this arising, and then it goes; it doesn't leave any trace and it doesn't need to be managed, edited, or reacted to.

We start to see that the colour is *within* the crystal ball, and the sound is arising *within* the mind. If a motorbike sound, which from a conceptual point of understanding is maybe two kilometres away, seems simultaneously to be inside the mind, then what is the dimension of the mind? By staying in the practice, the experience of being in the world will illuminate the nature of the world.

**Returning to this one ground and two paths... On one path we allow phenomena to show themselves, and on the other path we tell phenomena what they are, according to the knowledge and conditioning that we have. On the first path we experience directly the manifesting and self-liberating of every kind of phenomena, and on the second path we are condemned to always being busy trying to make sense of what is going on. We have been doing the latter path for many lifetimes, so for the purpose of practice we need to tilt towards the former path.**

**However the goal is integration because that is the quality of the natural condition: the conceptual understanding is also part of the manifestation of the ground. If we recognise this, there is no limit to obscuration! The key thing is to go back into the practice again and again until you have your own direct experience.**

We will do the practice again now.

### **[Three Aa practice]**

That particular area of examination is very helpful for being able to separate the mind from what arises in the mind, and to awaken to the nature of the timeless state.

As long as our identity is linked into the process of thoughts, feelings, and sensations, or is concerned with cause and effect, then we can see the particular lines through which the patterns of our identity come into being. But the mind itself – awareness – doesn't come from any place and doesn't go to any place, but rather is the field within which all this movement occurs, a movement which itself doesn't come from anywhere or go to anywhere.

This is the basis for the awakening of non-duality, so spending time with this simple area of enquiry is very helpful. If you find this confusing then it's important not to struggle, because what is there will not reveal itself through struggle or effort. It is better to go for a walk, say some prayers, and come back into a state where you have more openness and confidence. Then, very gently, take up the enquiry again.

We will have a break now, and then we will have some time for questions and thoughts before we end.

## [Break]

### Questions and Responses

#### The reflection of the mirror, or the mirror itself?

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**Question:** In this meditation, is the one who is watching or investigating the thoughts the reflection of the mirror, or the mirror itself?

**James:** That's a very interesting question. At first, of course, it's just the reflection, because we start the practice and then we maybe get a bit distracted and then we remember, *'Oh, I should keep an eye on this'*.

Gradually, however, the more we do it, the natural clarity of the state of the mirror itself is the one that is illuminating what is there. In order to facilitate that movement across, we want to do the practice in as tender and gentle a way as possible. Most of us have quite a tendency to criticism, blaming, judging and so on, as well as tendencies sometimes of ambition and a need to get things right. All these subtle tendencies or flavours can come to inflect how we ask the question, so that there is a kind of over intensity or acceleration inside it.

Imagine a gymnast who is leaping over a high horse and doing a twirl in the air. When they land, they have to land stably without wobbling or moving forward. They have to have a beautiful perfection in the movement through space so that the landing is just an easeful arriving.

In a similar way, with practice, we learn how to hold these questions as if we were tuning a stringed instrument like a guitar – neither too tight nor too loose.

In meditation there are two main problematic directions. One is called 'sinking', in which our clarity starts to fuse into whatever is occurring. The other is excitement or agitation, in which many ideas are manufactured very quickly. It creates a sense that something is happening, but actually it is a distraction and it takes us further away. At first we have to be a bit active otherwise we will forget what to do, but gradually the clarity of open receptivity starts to be ongoing and that is the basis from which it is much easier to see what is going on.

We live in a culture which has been dominated by a 'will to power' – the 'can do' attitude – but just because you *can* do something doesn't mean you *should* do it, and part of what we have to practice is being useless. All the thoughts, all the elaborations, all the insights we *could* develop, we don't *need* to develop. We don't have to build our buddha-nature; it's not created out of our thoughts, no matter how wonderful and shining these thoughts may be. This is the really subtle renunciation: to freely accept that energy will tell us about energy. It will not tell us about the *ground* of energy and so patterns of thoughts themselves will never be able to describe or illuminate what is there.

In the tradition, we have nine levels of transmission. These are often condensed into three levels. There is the direct transmission of the Buddha's mind; the symbolic transmission of the vidyadharas or those who are awake; and the spoken transmission for ordinary people. As you come into this third level of transmission, which is woven in with language, all the

complexities of semiotic elaboration come close to the dharma teaching. Every word we say evokes many other constellations of association and possible meaning. Therefore, the transmission occurs through words, symbols, and directly in the meditation practice.

Our goal in practice is to move from language, which is part of movement, towards stillness and silence, and then back again as an integrating force. But, first of all, we have to let go of our attachment to turbulence.

Any other thoughts or questions?

### Integration is not homogenisation

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**Question:** When you asked us to look to see where is the mind, it was clear to me that my mind was high up above me. I know that this is connected to my childhood when I had some traumatic experience and I learned to go to a higher level.

Now it's a double experience; it can be very nice to be up so high above and in this state of mind you can see a lot, but the other thing is that you are not connected with the body. What is the best way to deal with this?

**James:** What you are describing is a kind of dissociative, protective splitting from the impact of some kind of trauma. Of course one of the fantasies that we often carry is that we exist in a simple way – that we are just one thing – but everybody has multiple aspects to themselves. We are incoherent. If we were more coherent the world would be persecutory. For instance, at the end of this village you will see that somebody has built a very big house and they have put a large metal fence all the way around it. They don't live there; this is a symbol of their success. Having established who they are, they now have to protect it, and the best way to protect it is to keep everyone out. If we want to relate to other people, part of that is to accept that we are called into being in different ways.

From that point of view, it is not that these two aspects need to somehow come into being one. Due to causes and conditions I find myself like this, and due to other causes and conditions I find myself like that. Who is the one who is aware that *'Now I am like this'*, and *'Now I am like that'*? The more subtle attention one can pay to these states without judging them, then the one who is offering that subtle attention *is* the site of integration.

Integration is not homogenisation; it is not like putting everything together in a blender and making one taste. Even as ordinary people, we can never know who we are because we are always becoming according to causes and circumstances. However, being at home in that co-emergent becoming can help us to feel at home in the world, since the trauma that causes the dissociation is one which cannot be worked with.

When we are young we don't have the cognitive skills, the social support and so on, but gradually we can start to offer hospitality to all the parts of ourselves. To have the capacity to have an overview is very useful. When the submarine is under the water it can put up the periscope and have a look around.

So you have a personal periscope! At least you got something out of what was probably a pretty shitty experience! A lot of what we are concerned with is how to make friends with the different aspects of ourselves.

As you can see from the thangka painting on the wall, Padmasambhava has eight main manifestations. Padmasambhava is always represented as very powerful and able to

manage any situation, but he didn't hold on to a fixed sense of his identity and try to establish himself in the same way in all circumstances. He shows completely different forms.

When trauma causes us to take on different forms it is terrible that some force we didn't want to happen made that happen for us, but the positive side is that it shows us the creativity and the potential for multiple ways of manifesting.

From time to time, on an ordinary level, we get sick. When we are sick we are not well. We can think, '*Oh, I don't want to be sick, I want to be well.*' But it's amazing to be sick! When you have a cold, water dribbles out of your nose – this is amazing! The body might shiver a little bit, and if you stay with the experience, this is who you are.

To be at home however you are is the best preparation for death. In the course of a day many different things happen to us and impact us. However, very often these things are denied because we have the narrative of the continuity of 'I, me, myself' as I know myself to be. This narrative gives us a sense that we are more coherent than we actually are, and because of that we feel we have something fixed which we can contain. When people are in that situation, moving towards death is difficult.

Some people die in sudden accidents, or illnesses of various kinds. Some ways of dying will take you into the gentle care of doctors, which is not necessarily the best environment to die from a dharma point of view. That is to say, if we are surprised in our daily life we are going to be a hell of a lot more surprised when we die.

Experiencing these states in yourself and becoming more aware of the different states, you can start to see how one state starts to blossom out and dissolves, and then some other state comes along. This is good preparation for the death process where we find ourselves becoming something we don't recognise: '*I am not who I was*'. At that point we can ask, '*Why is this happening to me? This shouldn't be happening to me*', but this is not very helpful since it *is* happening to us, and it's irreversible.

The more you can observe how your lived day-by-day existence is something movable and changing, one state to another... once you move into the death process it will be the same. And with each transformation. . . here I am. . . here I am. . . here I am. . .

Any other questions?

### Potato peelers

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**Question:** Yesterday we did some practices using the sounds *Hung* and *Ha*. I am wondering in what context I would use these different practices, and where does this lead me?

**James:** According to the tradition, there are some general guidelines on when to use each of the practices, but we have to remember that each of these practices is a method.

For example, we have potato peelers and their function is to remove potato skin. But if you have beautiful small, new potatoes you wouldn't want to peel them. No matter how beautiful your potato peeler is, it is useless in relation to new potatoes. In the Tibetan tradition they have very many 'potato peelers', and the general opinion of many Tibetan teachers is that all western people are old potatoes with very thick skins! So they offer the special gongdro potato peeler which everyone should use.

I did a retreat in Tso Pema and did many kinds of different practices including prostrations. At the end of the retreat I told my teacher what I had done including the prostrations, and he asked, *'Why did you bother?'* I said, *'I thought I had to.'* And he said, *'Oh yes, you thought you had to.'* I replied, *'It says in the text that we have to do that.'* He said, *'But did you ask yourself if it was doing you any good? What is the point of me teaching you dzogchen if you want to be stupid?'*

So, in the end it is up to you. All the methods are good but only **you** live in your skin. No matter how much knowledge, experience, and intuition someone else has they are always working with a general picture of how the other person is.

However what we have been looking at a lot at over these last few days is the dynamic nature of our experience; it is changing moment by moment. The key thing is to try all the practices and get a sense of how they function in general, and then apply them in your own range of states and find out for yourself if they are helpful or not.

Part of the problem is that we want someone to tell us how to do things; this is the position of the child in relation to the parent. Many dharma texts talk of the guru or the teacher as the father, but when you get to the door of enlightenment it has a sign on the top that says: *"Adults only!"*

Any other thoughts or questions?

**Comment:** In answer to the question what does the mind rest on, I came to the conclusion that it is silence. But as well as silence there is sound, so there is the connection between sound and silence.

**James:** The key thing is that when you have a sense of the mind as silence, it is hovering on a kind of fulcrum. It could move into being a concept: 'It is silence' and 'Now I know that it is silence', or you can tilt it back to being the experience and just **be** the silence.

The more you can rest in that state itself, the more it is impossible to say anything about it. Then you will experience that all sound is coming out of that state of silence, and that you are the source of all sound, but this you is not something that can be grasped. Being is not an entity.

I think the key thing is go into the experience. But thought is a thief; it is always trying to steal something; it always wants to have something to take away. If you rest in the silence there is nothing to take away.

### [Don't slump back into the Realm of Sleep](#)

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I will just say a little more in relation to the ground especially in relation to compassion. We will soon be dispersing from this place and going on different kinds of journeys into different kinds of environments, but most probably these environments are not particularly supportive of practice. How are we going to maintain the value and the usefulness of what we have been exploring here together?

The most important thing is to explore the nature of energy. What we have had here is shared experience. Your journey is an experience. When you get home that is also an experience. If you imagine putting your key in the front door and you then arrive in a familiar space.

This is the Realm of Sleep because everything in your house will try to pull you back to the assumptions you have about yourself. It can be quite comforting to be among familiar objects and people, even if they are annoying. If they are annoying when you get back, they were probably annoying before, and that's also part of your world, so we don't need to change the external circumstances. We are just trying to see things with fresh eyes, bringing this quality of openness and generosity.

When you go into the kitchen, you turn on the tap and water comes out. This is amazing. Your soft hand touches a piece of metal and water comes out. You open the fridge and a light comes on, and this light shows you things that you can eat – amazing – wonderful!

The world we live in is incredible. There are trees and in the trees there are little animals with feathers, and they go, 'tweet, tweet, tweet.' Why do they do that? We don't know, and we also don't believe Mr. Darwin either. Why they are here is something to do with the Buddha and not to do with evolution. Materialism is the death of dharma and it's a very big disease: it explains everything by removing the value from everything.

Coming back to the freshness of the situation, you open a drawer to get out your clothes for work and you see something red; you can just be with the red. What is red? It's an experience. [Although of course we need to use language to mediate our passage in the world, we want to redirect it to the place of being a support, because for many of us it becomes the director.]

Language identifies, explains, and illuminates, but this is only half the story, because it is also obscuring and the obscuration is very important. If we no longer feel the impact of the redness of the red, or are amazed that cars work, then the vitality of being alive as a participant in the world collapses and we become somebody who is managing our life. This has a kind of power to it, but also quite a lot of dullness.

The Buddha's basic teachings on impermanence are an invitation to be connected in a fresh and vital way with our existence moment by moment. When we see that everything is changing it also becomes easier for *us* to change. If a lorry or bus is stuck on a flat road you would need many people to push it in order for it to move, but if it's on a slope and it's already starting to move, it's much easier.

This is exactly the same question as in psychotherapy; neurosis gives the impression of stasis, so the state seems to be the same but actually it's dynamic and repeating. The more we can see that *we* are doing our neurosis – that it's not something which imprisons us but something that we are co-creators of – then it becomes much easier to change it.

You will find that the first teachings of the Buddha and dzogchen go in the same direction: *'All the dharma methods are helpful but our lives are short. We don't have much time, so the key thing is to find practices that work for you. You can only do that by getting to know yourself. Therefore, the key point is to observe yourself and not limit yourself by assumptions about yourself.'*

The difference between buddhas and ordinary beings is that buddhas know they are buddhas and human beings *don't* know they are buddhas. We don't know we are buddhas because we think we are something else, so we have to enquire into that process of thinking *'Why do we think, and how do we think, we are what we take ourselves to be?'*

OK, if we do a final Three Aa practice, and at the end of it we dedicate the merit.

### [Practice and Dedication of Merit]

I'd like to thank Sylvester for his translation into German, and of course Sylvester and Li for the organization, which is a huge amount of work. *[Applause]*. Maintaining an environment like this is truly a gift because this is a very unusual kind of place. Every time I arrive here I certainly feel very at ease and at home, and that's a very sweet offering out into the world.

I would also like to thank you all for coming and engaging in the practice because it requires a lot of focused attention. The things we talk about are quite difficult. They are difficult intellectually, but also emotionally, because they put into question many of the beliefs we have about ourselves. I think it's very helpful that we meet together and we can at least know there are a few other people in the world concerned with these questions.

Personally, I am not very into centres and formalisations because they often tend to be places of politics and so on. But one of the possibilities for the future is to have more sense of an informal sangha. If people live near each other they can meet from time to time and do some practice, share a meal, and have a sense of not being alone in this deep project.

I believe I am coming back again next year so I may see some of you then, when we will have sunshine every day!

**Sylvester:** I would like to take this opportunity to thank you greatly in all of our names for bringing us once again such a great bundle of rays that illuminate a lot of the views and possibilities to be present. *[Applause]*

**James:** Thank you.