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*If all beings have buddha nature,  
where is yours?*

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**James Low**

**Public Talk, Vienna, Austria**

**14 May 2009**

*Transcribed by Jo Féat*

*Edited by Barbara Terris*

Excerpts

*There is always something new to be interested in, always something to learn more about. The wave of objects coming towards us, and the wave of our projections going onto them, are interacting all the time. When waves meet in the sea their turbulence generates white froth. Similarly we pass our lives in the frothy bubbles of the encapsulating, over-invested moment.*



*On an ordinary level our lives are constructed on the arrow of time and through the basis of cause and effect.*



*We are asleep in the dream of duality. The actuality of non-duality continues to be the case even while we are asleep and dreaming of many different things. The sense of being a separate self is a dream formation that vanishes upon awakening. Our buddha nature is outside of time; it is not conditioned by any of the events that occur in time, for time is always dream time.*



*The paths of direct experience move into the heart of time, an infinite moment that has no beginning and end.*



*Because our felt experience of ourselves is now inseparable from unborn spaciousness, we don't have to be so controlling. With less, and in fact nothing, to defend, there is little basis for hopes and fears, and so we can be more tolerant of how things are. We can accept that some people don't like us and that some people do like us: that's all it is. Whether they like us or not is like a little shooting star; it's a passing phenomena which doesn't alter the basic relaxed openness.*



*Space is open and winds move through space. Space itself is not moving. In the same way the mirror is open; reflections come and go on its surface, but the mirror itself doesn't move. Our buddha nature is not something hidden inside us, it is not something to discover in the future when we are ready; it is not something we had in the past and then lost. It is simply the basis of existence moment by moment, existence as the non-dual arising of self and field.*



*However, in our relaxed open spaciousness everything arises just as it is, and the hospitality without demand heals the intense nervous agitation which drives the engine of samsara.*

## Contents

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<b>Different views of buddha nature .....</b>	<b>2</b>
Ignorance came into the world in three stages.....	3
<i>The Forth Road Bridge: removing obscurations one at a time.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<b>We each make a world with ourselves at the centre .....</b>	<b>5</b>
Relaxing and centring.....	5
<b>We weave a narrative, whereby creating an illusory sense of self .....</b>	<b>6</b>
From the relaxed open state no intention is required .....	8
Dzogchen compassion.....	9
Question .....	9

## Different views of buddha nature

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There are various ways of looking at the idea of buddha nature. It can be a potential for enlightenment or an awakening inherent in all beings. From a materialistic point of view it is an idea that gets in the way of having a good time. While you are worrying about where your buddha nature is and whether it is healthy or not, you could be eating, drinking, dancing, and laughing. There are of course different views about our potential as human beings, let alone as buddhas.

From one point of view, being interested in eating, drinking, dancing, and laughing is an obscuration which creates difficulties if you want to find your buddha nature. When our buddha nature is seen as very subtle, fine, and spiritual then we also have to become very fine, subtle and spiritual. With this view it becomes vital to be aware of how powerful or crude impulses, either arising directly from inside oneself, or experienced as coming from outside, catch us and put us in a spin. On this kind of path it is very important to hold oneself slightly apart from the turbulence of the world by going regularly on retreat, or taking up the vows of a monk or a nun. By this, the mind gradually becomes more sensitive and fine enough to be able to detect the presence of the subtle form of our buddha nature.

Another understanding is that buddha nature exists as a potential, like a seed that is hidden inside every being, and as with any seed, it requires the right environment to blossom and ripen. If these ripening factors are not present then the seed will remain dormant. The practices associated with this view are designed to create an environment rich in the factors necessary for ripening. These factors can be described as methods for gathering the accumulations of merit and of wisdom.

The accumulation of merit comes about through the intentional development of virtuous activity: building monasteries, building stupas, feeding poor people and so on. These activities are linked with the development of compassion which finds its fulfillment in the bodhisattva vow. We develop an intention to work for the benefit of all beings in this life and in all our future lives. This deep and powerful intention transforms every ordinary activity one does so that it becomes a radiant basis for merit.

The accumulation of wisdom comes through recognising the empty nature of all phenomena including oneself, and seeing that all the phenomena which one takes to be independently existing redolent, rich and full in individual value, are actually empty of self substance and are transparent and luminous like a rainbow in the sky. The basis of attachment – the basis of being strongly enmeshed in the daily turbulence of life – thereby becomes lessened.

From this buddhist point of view, wisdom is not really an accumulation because all phenomena have been empty from the very beginning. It is not that we are building up wisdom, rather we are taking

down the constructs of ignorance. When the veils and obscurations of habitual grasping are released, wisdom is there, fully formed, as it has always been.

The view that wisdom is innate is the basis for most kinds of tantric practice. In these practices we work with our buddha nature as the lively ground of our creativity to manifest different forms according to the many circumstances that can occur. Such methods are very useful because we are normally acting under the power of ignorance, experiencing the world through the fundamental split between self and other, subject and object.

## Ignorance came into the world in three stages

The many different methods available in buddhism have all arisen in response to circumstances. Buddhism is not setting out how one 'should' live but rather offers methods for dealing with the many difficulties that can, and do, arise when we are under the power of ignorance. When we are free of ignorance there is no specified way we should behave, rather we are free to express ourselves as the energy of the pure ground of being, a ground which is innately, effortlessly ethical. So it is important to get some clarity regarding the origin and function of ignorance.

One approach to understand this is the view outlined in tantra which says that a long time ago, due to a sudden looping in the flow of energy, ignorance came into the world. It is described that ignorance developed in three stages. The first stage is called '*simultaneous ignorance*' which means that although we are abiding in the natural realm of purity we don't see what is in front of our face. It's there, as it always has been and always will be, but now we don't see it. Our own nature pure from the very beginning is there – it's the basis of all thoughts, feelings, manifestations, and sensations – but when these manifestations arise we don't see them for what they are but take them to be something existing in themselves.

Who is it that doesn't see the nature of what is there? 'I, me, myself'. Who is this 'I, me, myself'? This is the manifestation of the open pure nature. Nothing has been lost except the immediate presence of being with what is always there. This presence has not gone anywhere. It is not lost. Yet it is not attended to, due to a fixation on the intoxicating qualities of the many 'things' which appear to have been cut adrift from their integrating ground. Natural knowing and the ignorance of natural knowing are present at the same time.

The one who does not recognise its own ground is itself a manifestation of the ground. 'I' is the radiance of the ground. In this unaware intoxication the activity of the mind doesn't cease. Many productions arise but they start to turn around this central point of 'I, me, myself'. This point is itself just another manifestation, but because it has claimed this central role it constellates a particular kind of drama: the theatre of duality in which I am seeing you, and you are not the same as me.

According to the tradition, this is elaborated in the second aspect of ignorance, which is called '*semantic elaboration*', a linguistic elaboration, through which our speech appears to be referring to real concrete things outside ourselves. We see ourselves as being real and concrete and the words that come out of our mouth seem to be coming from us. Who is speaking? I am speaking. I am speaking to you. Each time this interaction goes on both subject and object take on more solidity. There is an intensity, a denseness, and an expansion and enrichment into many different forms and possibilities.

This leads into the third stage, which is called '*the ignorance of not understanding karma*'. Instead of seeing the cause and effect nature of the evolution of our existence – a matrix of interactive cause and effect in which subject and object are moving together all the time – we come to see ourselves as fixed inside ourselves with fixed objects outside. This separation from the environment gives rise to a feeling of anxiety and fear. Fear about the destruction of our particular form because there are many things in the environment that can attack this form, destroy it, and cause it to collapse.

However this form is also suffused with hopes and longings because our existence carries inside it a kind of emptiness, a feeling of incompleteness. This empty feeling looks out through our eyes into the world trying to find something to make us feel whole and complete. But because subject and object don't have a stable basis for relating, that connection is never fully secured. Even people who love each other have to part: they have to go out shopping, they have to go to work and so on. On this level of ignorance, the level that most of us live on, we find ourselves identified with a limited flesh and blood body, and pass our time working out how to gain advantage and remove disadvantage.

From this description we could think that we are trapped in a state of ignorance but actually we are caught up in a process of ignoring. This is maintained moment by moment by an attachment to, an immersion in, an acceptance of, the interpretive matrix of dualism in which subject and object are seen as being truly separate. We are asleep in the dream of duality. The actuality of non-duality continues to be the case even while we are asleep and dreaming of many different things. The sense of having, of being a separate self, is a dream formation that vanishes upon awakening. Our buddha nature is outside of time; it is not conditioned by any of the events that occur in time, for time is always dream time.

The basis of most tantric practice is to enter into a dynamic heartfelt relationship with a deity. Through the recitation of mantra and visualisation, the dimension of the deity and one's own dimension become more and more approximate, so that in the middle of the practice the deity, having purified us by sending rays of light into our body, comes to the top of our head and dissolves into us. We then dissolve into the deity that is inside us, and this mixed state of luminosity – of radiance – goes down into a tiny point and then vanishes into open spaciousness.

This state is the actuality of the buddha nature. All the accumulations of restrictive habits and limiting beliefs that have been built up over many lifetimes and aeons of karmic activity have no power to inhibit this union of the radiant nature of the person doing the practice and the radiant nature of the deity.

### The Forth Road Bridge: removing obscurations one at a time

This is the central point to understand. You don't have to remove the obscurations. We all have a lot of obscurations, and if we take the bodhisattva vow we also take on the obscurations of all beings, so that's a lot of obscurations.

In Scotland, there is a river called the River Forth, which has a big metal bridge going over it. People are employed just to paint this bridge. They start at one end and they paint and paint. The bridge is huge so that when they finish painting the bridge, they go back to the other end to start again because the paint is already peeling off! Although they can spend their whole lives painting the bridge, the whole bridge is never freshly painted. This is the problem of trying to remove obscurations one-by-one.

However, the path of tantra enables us to directly merge with the nature of the deity. The immediacy of this fusion is the transformation of our ordinary, alienated self into the divine form which is inseparable from the pure ground of all, the dharmadhatu. At first it seems effortful but by engaging daily in the practice we come to see that the divine form is our own natural radiance. In this state there are no obscurations. Whatever is encountered when we arise from the practice can be recognised as manifestations of the deity, be they thoughts, feelings, sensations, colours, buses or cars and so on.

In that way, we can immediately deconstruct the web of time so that it flows out of us rather than wrapping us up in itself. On an ordinary level our lives are constructed on the arrow of time and through the basis of cause and effect. Then it is as if we are an entity being moved from then to now, from here to there. And of course we bang into things and 'accidents' occur.

## We each make a world with ourselves at the centre

Our unique personal positioning in space, time, family, culture and so on causes us to attribute our own individual values to everything we see. Because of that, although on a formal level we are all sitting in the same room, on a direct experiential level we are each in our own individual room. When we look around this room, some things take our attention and other things we never quite see as our own particular interests blind us to their existence. We also attribute value to the things we attend to, value that we then take to be inherent in the object. We might say '*These flowers are nice*' which really means, '*I like these flowers*'. They might not be nice for someone else.

In this way, we have a tendency to slip out of our subjectivity into a sense that there are values inherent in objects in the world. We then seek out the objects whose values we appreciate and try to avoid the objects whose value we find to be negative. This leads us into the possibility of an endless fascination with the particularity of ourself. In cities there are many clothes shops since people want to wear different clothes to express their personality. In some cultures clothes express the status you have in a group, your tribal identity and so on, but even where the form is standardised, individuals will find a way to make a variation that expresses themselves. No matter how strange something appears to us, there are always a few people who will be interested in it.

This is why samsara lasts a long time – not because people are ignorant and walk around like zombies, but because people are too smart for their own good! There is always something to be interested in, always something to learn more about: some new place to go on holiday, some new restaurant to eat in, some new music, new film, new book... The wave of objects coming towards us, and the wave of our projections going onto them, are interacting all the time. When waves meet in the sea their turbulence generates white froth. Similarly we pass our lives in the frothy bubbles of the encapsulating, over-invested moment.

Learning about cause and effect and the basic building blocks from which samsara is formed is an important part of buddhist study, but it merely provides the map. A map *does* enable you to step back from the territory and have an overview, but then we have to engage in life as it presents itself moment by moment and life is very complicated. Powerful forces are moving around us continuously, like the economy, wars and climate change, and we cannot be in control of them. Trying to create the right cause to get us the effect we want can give us a big headache.

## Relaxing and centring

In the practice of dzogchen we leave the matrix of control and focus on relaxing the energetic weaving of patterns of attachment and aversion, so that the rapidity of the reiteration of the central point of 'I, me, myself', can be eased. With this there is an openness within which everything continues. It continues as it is, but not as it was! The subtle difference is that you move from the horizontal line of cause and effect – yesterday, today, tomorrow – to the immediacy of the arising together of subject and object, in which they are allowed to be just as they are. This is naked experience.

Usually we have ourself at the centre of our world. We want people to like us, and we don't want people to be angry with us. Trying to please people keeps us very busy but unfortunately for us, people have minds of their own and no matter how hard we try, they are never satisfied. So the ego is condemned to this endless work.

In relaxing and recognising the empty and yet immediately present quality of the buddha nature, there is a re-centring of the felt quality of existence. In this open spaciousness our energy manifests as both the way we go out towards the world and as the way the world comes towards us.

Because our felt experience of ourselves is now inseparable from unborn spaciousness, we don't have to be so controlling. We are both indestructible space and the emergent moment of our form, gesture, thought etc in this specific situation. With less, and in fact nothing, to defend, there is little basis for hopes and fears, and so we can be more tolerant of how things are. We can accept that some people don't like us and that some people do like us: that's all it is. Whether they like us or not is like a little shooting star; it's a passing phenomena which doesn't alter the basic relaxed openness.

In this way we can come to see that the buddha nature is indestructible. Indestructible means that it doesn't have a fixed form or quality that has to be protected. That is to say, what I call 'myself' and what I call 'the other' is the movement of energy; no entities are involved. Sometimes we rise up and we are happy and things look wonderful; sometimes we fall down and things look pretty grim. But awareness, this luminous noetic quality of the mind, doesn't go up and down.

Space is open and winds move through space. Space itself is not moving. In the same way the mirror is open; reflections come and go on its surface, but the mirror itself doesn't move. Our buddha nature is not something hidden inside us, it is not something to discover in the future when we are ready; it is not something we had in the past and then lost. It is simply the basis of existence moment by moment, existence as the non-dual arising of self and field.

Therefore, when the world impacts us and we become moved by it. Instead of feeling that we are being battered by events and need time-out in order to come back to being ourselves, we can experience the continuous movement of being in the world with others as being like an endless massage. If we are open to the various people that we meet in the course of a day, various feeling tones will arise, happy, sad, close, distant and so on. This is the richness of our being, the infinite range of colours arising from the potential of our palette.

Then we don't feel that we have to *do* something to the world. Our felt sense of individual agency – ourselves as autonomous sources of movement going out into the environment – gradually loses its intensity, and we find ourselves as participants in the co-creation of the mandala of life.

One of the teachers I was fortunate to learn a little from is called Chatral Rinpoche. His name means 'work finished'. When I was with him many years ago in India and Nepal, he sat all day long in his little room and very rarely went out. People would come and see him and he would talk, but he didn't go out looking for something new. A few times a year he would gather the money he had been offered and go to the fish market where he would buy the fish that were still alive and put them back in the river.

He knew many, many things and if people came to him wanting help he would always respond, but he didn't have a need to speak. That's a very interesting way of being. He didn't have to keep himself busy to reassure himself that he still existed because his existence was in his awareness of being part of the world. If nothing much was happening, then nothing much was happening. He wasn't hungry for excitement.

When someone came to see him then that was what was happening. When that person went away he just kept sitting peacefully. Now, that might sound very passive because there are so many exciting things to do in the world and we might feel a need to do them before we die. So is it more sad that we might not be able to do them, or sad that we are still trapped in the idea that we need something else, something new to complete us?

## **We weave a narrative, whereby creating an illusory sense of self**

One of the advantages of making an intentional renunciation is that you can start to see the nature of attachment, in particular the way in which we are attached to our beliefs and assumptions about

who we are, how the world is, and how our future will be. If we observe that process we can experience how we have been constituted out of the beliefs we hold. On this point the general buddhist teachings and dzogchen are not different.

In the general teachings we talk about the five skandhas, or the five heaps: the basic grouping of elements which constitute a human being: form, feeling, perception, construction, and consciousness. As they operate together they generate the experience that we take to be 'me'. By their interaction something seems to be generated yet it is just an illusion.

It is often said that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. For example, we could take our watch to a watchmaker and he could take apart all the pieces. We would look at them and think that now we didn't have a watch. We wouldn't know what to do with all these pieces, but when the watchmaker puts them all back together, our watch is returned to us. The watchmaker didn't have some secret ingredient of watch-ness in his pocket! It is the juxtaposition – the putting together of the pieces – which creates this magical epiphenomena of the functioning watch. In that way, we see that the patterns of manifestation create the semblance of true individuated identity. This is the illusion we are usually trapped in.

All that we *think* we are is just what we *think* we are. By weaving a narrative we create the illusory sense of our self as something truly existing. On the basis of these factors coming together in this particular way, our unique illusory form manifests. Each of the factors which contributes to this dependent co-origination is itself also dependent on the movement of other factors. We can continue to examine these links in the chain of signifiers as they become more and more subtle until we find there is nothing left. From this we can see how our seemingly substantial manifestation is in fact a flow of movements of energy.

The big difference between the analytic paths and the direct experience paths is that the analytic paths are looking at the construction of phenomena through processes of cause and effect operating in time, whereas the paths of direct experience move into the heart of time, an infinite moment that has no beginning and end.

By not analysing, not thinking, not constructing, we become aware of our inseparability from the open dimension which has never been limited and is yet the ground, source and mother of all. This is exactly the buddha nature: the inseparability of stillness and movement. Stillness is the unborn quality of awareness which doesn't go here and there. It is infinite presence. Stillness has no front, back, top, or bottom, and within it everything is arising and passing moment by moment; everything just as it is.

Normally we enter the world through our conceptual framework which rests inside the abstractions that we are at home with. These abstractions are at the heart of language, the seemingly empowering capacity to name and describe: "this is a room", "this is a city" and so on. We get captivated by the sense this creates of there being something already existing before we encountered it.

However, through direct experience we come to see that the world is born fresh moment by moment. When we relax, we experience the spacious nature of awareness which offers hospitality to everything, and in that state we experience the world as simply experience, the non-duality of subject and object. This experience is not something vague like a kind of dream or fantasy. Hard things are still hard; soft things are still soft. When you go '*Ouch!*' it is not a fantasy but it *is* impermanent. It is empty, illusory, and is grounded in the buddha nature.

You may think this is ridiculous. Who wants a buddha nature that's got "*Ouch!*" in it? We want a buddha nature with "*Wow!*" in it! We want a happy, hopeful future. This is the discourse of the ego

that wants to be in control: *"I won't be happy until everything happens on my terms."* This is the ego being honest about its own desire, its own agenda. But the ego is also the energy of the buddha nature. It's not an alien implant; it didn't come from another planet. The ego is not some bad thing you can get rid of; it's just one of the many appearances that arise. If you recognise it for what it is and, with awareness, you allow it to do what it does, it won't cause too much trouble. However, if you believe what it says then many difficulties will arise.

Small children often say they can do things that they can't. *"I can do that. I can climb that tree. I can swim across that pond."* The child lives in hope. The child wants to be big like an adult, but it is actually quite small. The same with the ego: the ego wants to be grown-up but really it just wants to play at winning and losing. Especially, **me** winning and **you** losing!

However the unborn buddha nature remains relaxed and peaceful, allowing all these different games to come and go: not trying to control them, not merging into them, but allowing new forms to arise as required.

## From the relaxed open state no intention is required

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There is a story about the great yogi Milarepa. When he was old he had many students living around him in caves. They had been studying and practising together for a long time.

One day some students came to Milarepa and asked *"Down in the valley there are many people who don't know anything about the dharma. Shouldn't we go down and help them?"* Milarepa replied, *"If you stay here for another five years do you think all the people in the valley will have vanished?"* Milarepa was hoping that after five years his students would have less desire to help.

The desire to help is a movement onto the world. Because it believes itself to be good, the desire to help is often blinded to the actual contour of the situation by the intensity of the wish to do good. Directly trying to help people who don't want to be helped is likely to be a waste of time. Probably when we were children we were told again and again by our parents that we should try to wish people well, try to be good people, and remember to be thoughtful and kind. This good intention is like a rider on top of a wayward horse. The wayward horse is pulling this way and that, but our intention is to go in a straight line.

From the relaxed open state no such intention is required. Like Chatral Rinpoche, it is not necessary to say too much. We might ask ourselves *"Why am I doing this?"* *"Can I really hear what they are saying?"* *"Can I really see how they are?"* If I can completely receive them as they are, maybe many of their problems will just melt away like snow. All of us hold ourselves together. We have so many voices in our heads telling us what to do and what not to do. Our aspirations to achieve something often create an overextension out into the environment so that we then need the environment to respond to us and support us. We, the rescuer, now find ourselves needing to be rescued!

However, in our relaxed open spaciousness everything arises just as it is, and the hospitality without demand heals the intense nervous agitation which drives the engine of samsara. Our whole world is vibrating with thoughts, feelings, and concerns. This doesn't require an antidote, it is not intrinsically wrong in itself. Rather all that is required is to integrate all experience in the immediate presence of relaxed spaciousness. It doesn't antidote the agitation the way a medical antidote does – that is to say, it doesn't remove the symptom – but it frees us to see difficult situations not as a symptom of fault and error but as yet another form of the radiance of awareness. If you are sad, you can be sad. If bad things are happening in your life, then you can cry. If good things are happening, you can laugh. The one who is laughing and the one who is crying have the same buddha nature. That basic, relaxed awareness never changes.

## Dzogchen compassion

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Therefore in accepting all the movement of oneself without being put into turbulence, we become able to allow other people to be as *they* are, and that is the function of compassion, according to the principles of dzogchen.

Compassion is not doing things *to* people, nor is it doing things *for* people. Compassion in dzogchen means not resonating with their anxious resonance, so that no mutual reinforcement occurs. The spaciousness of being with the other gradually allows them to settle into themselves.

## Question

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**Question:** Why do we still have to meditate if you say all we need to do is to relax?

**James:** The question of how to relax is a very interesting one, because the more we relax, the more the subtle levels of agitation reveal themselves. At first it's like brushing leaves off a garden path, later it's like washing a delicate wineglass, finally, you join the bomb disposal squad and you have to work out which wire to cut otherwise you will blow yourself up!

The problem is how to integrate all the different forms of energy that are always already integrated. The open 'I am' of awareness naturally integrates everything. When the ego 'I am' tries to integrate, it is destined to fail. That is why relaxation is the path. We have to get out of the way of ourselves, to stop confusing the manifestation of our energy (I am this / I am that) with the ground of our being (I am infinite).

In the morning when I go to work on the London underground if I am lucky, I may get a seat. So, I am *being here* on my seat, and the person next to me is *being there* on *their* seat with *their* newspaper. Their elbows extend out so now they are '*being here*' in my space. I feel invaded! Where is dzogchen then?

This is why our practice is to rest in the open state of natural meditation, so that in these situations we don't just go back to our old habitual reactions or patterns of thought. From this point of view, recognition of the nature or awakening as dharmakaya is not the big problem. The issue is to keep the presence of that state whatever form energy is arising in.

If you are able to do this then you don't need to do much formal practice. However, because these forms are very subtle it is easy to cheat yourself. When we sit in meditation we are simply getting to know ourselves better. We experience our openness and our habits of foreclosure. When we are at home in the inseparability of stillness and movement then the forms of movement whether 'good' or 'bad' are no longer the main issue. That is why we practice.