

---

# Trusting yourself...

## Eifel Retreat First Evening

---

**James Low**  
**Kamalashila, Eifel 2nd April 2009**

Transcribed by Tobias Roeder

Edited by Barbara Terris

### Excerpts

*There are many false or unhelpful ways in which busy preoccupation can be a way in which we move from birth to death without really having a life.*

...

*Seaweed moves with the waves of the ocean tumbling and turning it. Seaweed doesn't get knotted, because it just keeps moving.*

...

*Through observing how we become with others we can start to see, that the flow of the manifestation of ourselves is inseparable from how other people are. We arise with others and we can observe that in our various interactions. So actually we are a united field of arising, and the different qualities of the field bring about different expansions and contractions.*

...

*When you experience directly, everything happens at once, and you can be present with everything happening at once! You don't have to analyse it and break it down into bits in order to make sense of it. The immediacy of everything being there, brings about a response. We find ourselves coming forward.*

...

### Contents

---

<b>TRUSTING YOURSELF .....</b>	<b>2</b>
DIFFERENT TRADITIONS, DIFFERENT EMPHASIS .....	2
FROM THE DZOGCHEN POINT OF VIEW .....	3
<i>Openness: allowing ourselves to be part of the world.....</i>	3
<i>Energy: trusting that our nature is good .....</i>	4
<i>Non-dual: who is the one experiencing what is going on? .....</i>	6
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS .....	6

## Trusting yourself ...

---

Our topic is about 'trusting ourselves'. We look at that in various ways through different buddhist understandings and in particular the view of dzogchen.

In meditation, a lot of the time, we don't trust ourselves. And when we *do* trust ourselves, we feel that it leads us astray in some way because all sort of feelings, sensations, memories and so on arise inside us. They illuminate some things; they obscure other things. How can we know if how we are is OK? When we are small, big people tell us all the time whether we are OK or not. We get many many messages from those around us. And so one way to trust yourself is to do it in a very externalised form: to say, if I follow the rules, if I fit in, then that 'fitting in' will make me OK. That externalizing adaptation brings many advantages but also quite a few disadvantages. If our gaze is to the external and we are looking for validation from outside, we are at the mercy of other people's opinions and we also are distracted from observing ourselves.

### Different traditions, different emphasis

---

In the buddhist tradition, the most general or basic path of renunciation<sup>1</sup> is a path based on rules and regulations especially for the people who become nuns and monks. There are many vows that they take and by spending their day in a manner that is regulated by rules and regulations, they can trust that they won't go wrong. They learn to eat very modestly, to go to sleep at fixed times, to keep their gaze to the ground when out walking, not to carry money with them and so on. These many different rules protect them and act as a kind of separation from all the hooks and triggers that are in the environment. When they have got used to living in that very structured environment they can trust themselves, that is to say, they can trust '*I know I am a good monk*' or '*I know I am a good nun.*' That way may appear safe, but of course if they become exposed to triggers, they can get lost because beneath the surface we have got many habits, many tendencies, which can always get activated if the circumstances are right.

As buddhism evolved and many different paths developed, more attention was given to finding a positive expressive vision of ourselves and aligning with that. So, in the mahayana tradition we have the bodhisattva vow, where we dedicate ourselves to the benefit of all sentient beings. By taking up this stand – by vowing that the trajectory, the movement and intention of our life, is for the benefit of others, by pulling all our energy towards that direction – we become less dispersed into the usual distractions of everyday life. That gives a kind of wholeness and continuity, but of course, being an ideal, we do not live always up to it. Then when we fall down from it we can start to feel bad: '*I wish I was better in doing my practice ... If only I could ...*'. So the ideal that can lift us up, can also become persecutory and put us down, since we never quite attain it.

In the path of tantra you have something similar where you have an identification with a symbolic form, a divine form – the living embodiment of the many good qualities set out in the general mahayana tradition. And these good qualities, when we do the practice and identify with them, give a sense of rebirth into a purified sense of identity, and by aligning with that we can feel that we are trustworthy. From this purified sense we can start to move out and become able to deal with many different situations without fear of getting lost. But again, this is a very conscious and intentional practice. And because we are easily distracted we can forget to do it or our attention can get pulled away by something else.

In these three styles of practices I briefly outlined just now, methods are offered whereby one could have a more ordered or clarified existence – but we don't always live up to them. We don't

---

<sup>1</sup> Mainly in the hinayana-tradition

always manage to maintain them. Even the very gesture of trying to become trustworthy can lead into mistrust, when we find that we are often preoccupied by tendencies that are going in the opposite direction. We then experience that we are divided against ourselves.

### From the dzogchen point of view

Now, we may say that some tendencies are good and other tendencies are bad; that some tendencies are more divine and others more demonic – the Tibetan buddhist tradition has many ideas of obscuring forces, of local demons and so on that get in the way and ensnare the practitioner—but from the point of view of dzogchen, in order to trust ourselves we have to know who **we** are.

Methods which seek to take us towards a purified version of ourselves are seen as not necessarily helpful. Because as long as our gaze is somewhere far from us or on a symbolic version of ourselves, it is difficult to directly examine: *'What is the ground of my being?', 'Who am I, moment by moment?', 'What do I arise from?', 'What do I arise as?' and 'How can it be that in the course of a day I can be many different people have so many different aspects and possibilities of manifesting and yet somehow there is a continuity of myself as myself?'* I still know that I am 'me' although I've done many different activities and had many different feelings and thoughts in the course of the day. So, dzogchen is concerned to look at the source of our existence. Not a source that's far away in some distant time or some distant place, but at the immediate source of our existence as it manifests moment by moment.

### Openness: allowing ourselves to be part of the world

That source is described as having three main aspects. One aspect of **openness** is that when we try to find ourselves as a concrete substance, we fail. Again and again whatever we appear to be falls through our fingers, because time moves on and we find that we become somebody else. Looking more deeply and in an expansive way, we see that our own nature is open. It's not something that can be grasped; it's not an entity, but with a nature always full of many different possibilities. These possibilities are undifferentiated as subject and object so that when we come to trust ourselves, – in a manner of dzogchen – it's trusting the integration, the non-dual integration of all phenomena. That is to say, we are participants in the world. To trust oneself is allowing oneself to be part of the world. To trust that we will respond into situations in a way that's suitable. So, rather than looking for some true essence inside ourselves we find that one aspect of trusting ourselves is to be more present in our senses; more connected with other people, so that we come into being **with** them in a way that fits in the environment. It is not about manufacturing a special self that is sealed off and apart, some kind of 'pure form'.

The classical Indian and Tibetan descriptions of the bodhisattva describe someone who will show different forms in order to help people in different ways. The Buddha himself, when he appeared in the hot hells carried a bucket of water to cool people down. Then when he went to the cold hells he carried blankets to wrap people and make them warm again. In each situation he showed something different.

So, part of it is trusting our openness, trusting the richness of the situation and trusting the immediacy of how we manifest in the world. Now, of course when we don't trust our immediacy, when we start doubting ourselves, then we start relying in thinking and planning *'What should I do? How should I speak? Are they going to understand what I'm saying?'* And this very busy conceptualisation becomes like a screen between ourselves and the world because now we have to go from what we worked out inside ourselves out into the world throwing ourselves out, but not

quite sure what will happen. So we're somehow disharmonious, we are not in rhythm with what's going in on.

From the dzogchen point of view trust begins with the experience of being completely **open** – or in another language completely **empty**; that we don't exist as a fixed substance; there is no particular way in which we should live; there are now formal guidelines of rules and regulations but when we see the open potentiality it means moment by moment we don't close down; we don't take on any rigidity, any basis in memory or habit. The openness allows an unimpeded movement into the world of connection with other people.

This is the area of trust that we can start to explore together over this weekend. In the course of that, we will discover how we have internalized messages in our lives that make us not able to trust ourselves. Some of these are based on having a very critical view of things we've done – say in the past. Perhaps we've done something we judge to be very bad; we feel we failed and we don't forgive ourselves. We remain connected with that event, taking a particular historical moment as showing who we really are: *'I couldn't have done that if I was a good person, there must be something wrong with me. To make a mistake like that means I can't really trust myself.'* And so some kind of wobble or hesitancy gets embedded in how we are. This is part of what we need to look at. The various ways in which by being mistrustful of ourselves or on the other hand complacently trustful thinking *'oh, I'm fine, life's OK'* – which leads to a sort of sweet sleepiness in which we don't see what's really going on and then, when things go wrong, we get a whack and there's a kind of shock. These two extremes don't help.

### *Energy: trusting that our nature is good*

---

In the language of dzogchen what we're looking at, on this level, is **energy**. Out of space, energy is manifesting all the time. Our nature is energetic; it is very dynamic. There is nothing fixed in our body; speech is always moving and changing; the mind is always full of thoughts and so on. However patterns exist in that energy, patterns of spiralling back, of repetition, of foreclosure in which we build up a rather fixed sense of who we are. And it is these habitual forms, these conditioned patterns, which can get in the way of relaxed, open responsiveness into the situation. So, at the heart of this is exploring how to relax – to trust that because our nature is good, if we do less, if we make less effort, there will be more space for the natural goodness to manifest. A lot of the time we are busy developing ourselves, improving ourselves, making ourselves try harder, all because there is some subtle underlying belief that actually there is something wrong with us; that 'as we are' is not quite good enough, that some more work must be done.

This very business ties us into the different dharma methods that we learn but some of these methods don't really lead anywhere. Some people are very ascetic; they think there will be a benefit if they punish themselves. Other people develop a tendency to worry and act on the premise that *'if only I think a lot about situations I will be able to get to the proper solution'*. But of course, worry is a waste of time; it doesn't do any productive work at all. There are so many false or unhelpful ways in which busy preoccupation can be a way in which we move from birth to death without really having a life, because we are always in preparation for the time when we will be 'good enough', 'sorted enough' to just be fully present.

In dzogchen our aim is to befriend ourselves, to stay close to ourselves and through that to really allow our selves to reveal themselves – so that we can find out who we really are. The more we try to impose rules and regulations on ourselves, the more we are chasing some ideal form, some template that actually hides ourselves from ourselves.

So, when we are practising here, let's really listen to ourselves. For example, if you feel tired, you can lie down; you don't have to sit up. We don't have to be in a particular position. If you feel cold, you can get more blankets. If you need more cushions you can get more cushions. You can take care of yourself. If you have an idea that meditators should sit in a particular way, that's what is called 'an idea'. Whether that idea fits you or not, we don't know. Only you can know whether it helps you or not? But of course, we already have a difficulty there:

*'How can I know if what I feel is OK?*

*Maybe I don't know; maybe I'm a stupid person and maybe I always get things wrong so I should go and ask someone else.*

*Who will I ask?*

*It is better for me to trust other people than to trust myself.*

*But I have to trust myself to know that trusting other people is better than trusting myself because who trusts other people?*

*It's me!' [Laughter]*

*'So I trust I made the right decision to mistrust me and trust you!'*

You just can't get away from the fact that you are in the centre of your existence. There is no one else we can blame – although from time to time blaming our parents or bosses at work can be quite enjoyable!

In the end, we have to work out what it means to exist, what it means to be alive. Our breath is going in and out, blood is pumping in our veins and thoughts and feelings and sensations are going on. The five senses are alive and we are in the midst of this incredible complex dance of experience. This is the starting point to become more aware of how it is to be ourselves. So rather than thinking of how we should be, let's take a more phenomenological attention, an attention to the experience of ourselves as we manifest moment by moment and try to stay closely connected with that. That's the meditation practice that we will do. Our timetable here includes movement since experiencing the body in movement is also very important. It helps to open up the lungs and allows the system to feel supported, so that we relax more. We can also come to realise, through movement, that the body is always moving. The body is not a thing; the body is a flow. It's always flowing; even if you are sitting reasonably still the body will still be moving in some way.

One of the big things that happens in meditation is that people learn to sit very still. Sitting still is a method; it is a method for understanding some-thing but it is not a method for understanding every-thing. It is completely unnatural and it's unlikely that you become more natural by being unnatural. Certainly teachers – at least when I was at school – used to say *'Sit still!'* Once you have grown up to be a 'proper person' you have absorbed all this information and have to respond as if there was no reaction. But the body is always in movement. So in our practices here, we are trusting the nature of bodily movement, coming to know how our body moves, and in particular seeing habitual movement patterns. We see how we close down the possibilities of how our body can move – grossly or very subtly – because we take up a particular posture, maybe our head a little bent, maybe a little down; maybe our shoulders a little collapsed... In these ways, we maintain an internal structure which either excites a lot of thoughts to arise, or closes thoughts down. The more we can observe our bodies in movement – such as when we eat together, when we chat with people, when we notice that with some people it's easy to talk, with other people it's more difficult to talk – you can experience what that is. It is not: *'I should try harder to be a nice friendly social person'*, which is a nice thing to do if you just want to be friendly. But we're here to examine ourselves. It's not an insult to the other person if you find *'Actually, I don't have much to say to you'*. It is something to be aware of: *'Why is that? Is that something about how the person sits, or their tone of voice, or what?'* We are always in a resonance with people around us. As we become adults we learn to overwrite this, to be able to carry on some communication with everyone, but actually our body has a life of its own. The body responds to other people; it opens or it closes and that is a very

important thing to be aware of, just to allow yourself to see how you expand, how you contract. And what is that all about?

### *Non-dual: who is the one experiencing what is going on?*

---

The central view of dzogchen – we will unpack this later in detail– is the idea of **non-duality**. That is to say, that there is no real separation between subject and object. When we sit in this room we look like many different people but actually when we experience each other, on one level, we are an experiencer ‘I, me, myself’ and the other people whom I experience. You are an object for me and I am an object for you, although this is not the whole story. Because we experience ourselves in the moment that we experience the other person, I experience myself experiencing you. I am an object for me and you are an object for me; so in the level of object we are in the same field. We are aspects of experience.

*‘Who is this one experiencing what is going on?’* I can say, it is ‘me’ and then I can give my name and my history and what I like to eat and so on. This is the profile of the one who is experiencing this. But everything I say and think of at that moment, is also an object of my experience. So, through observing how we become with others we can start to see, that the flow of the manifestation of ourselves is inseparable from how other people are. We arise with others and through the various interactions you can observe that. So actually we are a united field of arising and the different qualities of the field bring about different expansions and contractions. Who is aware of this is the central point, and what is the nature of awareness. Is it some personal core inside us, a personal centre? Or is it more something panoramic?

In the meditation we were just doing, we were focusing our attention. When we observe our breath, or an external object, there is a subject and an object and a focusing of attention in between. Some degree of willpower is required for that which gives a sense of *‘I am the one who does it’*. We enter a feedback loop of *‘I am doing this’* and sometimes we may think *‘I’m not doing it very well, but anyway this is what I should be doing’*. When your mind goes off you think *‘Oh, where am I now? Ah yes, now I remember what I should be doing’*. This is a flow of energy! The whole thing is a flow of energy. Our existence is always moving out, blossoming moment by moment: new experience, new experience, new experience ...

When you focus your attention, it is passing through time. So along this arrow of time: *‘Who is the one who is aware?’* This is the central question we are going to be looking at, because the real nature of the knower is the source of everything we have. This world exists for us as an experience. If we don’t experience it, it is nothing for us; maybe for other people, but nothing for us. To be alive is to be in a state of movement between these five sense-doors and all phenomena. This is an energetic vibration that is continuing. It’s not me looking out getting this information, adding it up, coming to a conclusion. The sort of research that is going on in cognitive psychology creates a particular kind of narrative around this but this is not what we experience in meditation. When you experience directly everything happens at once, and you can be present with everything happening at once! You don’t have to analyse it and break it down into bits in order to make sense of it. The immediacy of everything being there brings about a response. We find ourselves coming forward. The more relaxed and open we are, the more we can feel the full range of immediacy of the givenness of things – and from that we come into our unique responses. This is the flow of the buddha-activity according to dzogchen.

### Questions and Answers

---

**Question:** Is it generally possible to have a sense of the tendencies which people have? For example, I’m watching people now and wondering what they do, what are their tendencies?

**James:** Maybe we don't need to analyse what is behind how people appear. There is just an immediacy of someone being open or close. If somebody is closed that doesn't mean they are always closed. If somebody is open that doesn't mean they are always open. But in this moment, doors are opening and closing all around us and the question is: can we move forward when a door opens? And can we stay back in our skin? To be more attuned with other people is sometimes moving forward and sometimes not. Energy, in that sense, is a communication or a response; it's a meeting rather than what you called a 'tendency'. Tendencies –called 'karma' in the tradition– are particular patterns which are built up through time and which determine the kind of experience we have of the world. *'Because I'm me, this is what I'm looking for; this is what I want'*. All the other things are irrelevant, *'Just give me what I want!'* And so, I become a little blind and stupid to all the possibilities. The more we can release the pent-up energy of these tendencies, the more space we have to be with the field of experience and to move with it.

Think of how seaweed moves with the waves of the ocean tumbling and turning it. Seaweed doesn't get knotted, because it just keeps moving. That's one difference between dzogchen and general Mahayana. Mahayana will say *'I want to save all sentient beings and this is what I'm going to do to save them'* whereas in dzogchen it is about developing an availability which will manifest – or not. It doesn't have to manifest.

**Question:** ... responding and moving like seaweed... I would like to practice that way.

**James:** Good, then you've come to the right place! Part of learning to do that is simply to observe ourselves and notice what tendencies we have. When we avoid things that we think we won't like or will be difficult for us, then we are choosing to keep doing more of the same and we are likely to restrict ourselves. In buddhism there is a lot of discussion about 'conditioning'. As soon as something takes on a shape, other people have all sorts of expectations. As soon as you come out of your mother's body, in fact even before you are born when you're still inside your mother's womb, people have all sorts of thoughts about who you are and what you are going to be. As soon as you come out, people are hitting you with language: *'Oh what a lovely baby ... Ohhhh, it's a boy! Ohhh, it's a girl!'* And so you are brought into social things and you can get trapped in this stuff forever! You get conditioned because other people have all these expectations about who you are and who you will be. So, moments of freshness are actually very rare. Culture is very pervasive; it seeps right through us.

Because we internalise things and our brain like a sponge sucking everything in, all the traits that are in our family setting become our traits. A lot of that can involve selective attention where we only see certain features of the environment, and give particular values to different phenomena which leads to the choices we make. So there are many things in this world we never do, never taste, never try – which means that if we want to help people, we have a very limited repertoire. And so part of wisdom as well as compassion, is being available to manifest as required. Both require us to move beyond conditioning, to see how we have tied ourselves in knots and to start to loosen these knots by experimenting and trying to do different things.

I realise that may seem slightly at odds with what I was saying earlier about just experiencing what seems to open for you and what doesn't. The question then would be, when you find yourself thinking, for example, *'Oh, this road is blocked for me'*, to observe that experience of being blocked. What I think you'll find is that we get positioned in a particular way. We get located in some part of ourselves, some slightly neurotic or anxious place so *'Who is the one who gets located there?'* Perhaps I get frightened, scared, anxious or bored and may feel trapped in a social situation where I do not want to be, then I can ask *'Who is the one who is trapped?'* You are aware of being trapped and you are trapped, both at the same time. When the awareness of being trapped collapses into the experience of being trapped, then you're just trapped! If you just relax and remain aware of being trapped, then you have two functions happening simultaneously. Accompanying the

awareness of being trapped comes a feeling tone '*I wish I wasn't trapped*'. If you go with the feeling, then you forget the awareness.

So always we come back being present, present with whatever is going on. The more hospitable you can be to all the states of yourself, the more quickly they start to move. Then you find they've tumbled out and something else arises. Everybody has different kind of tendencies and these are all just patterns of energy.

Three 'Aa' Practice, followed by

Dedicating the merit from this teaching and practice, for the sake of all sentient beings.

---