

# Open Space and Infinite Potential



## An Inquiry into Our True Nature

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**James Low**

*With reference to **Direct Indication of Buddhahood beyond Classification***

*by Nuden Dorje Drophan Lingpa Drolo Tsal*

*which is Ch. 8 of **Simply Being**, by James Low [3rd edition, Antony Rowe, 2010]*

*Extracted from the Seminar. 21<sup>st</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2009*

*Mannheim, Germany*

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### Excerpts

*What we have is a path of inquiry, which means being willing to not know in advance. So it's not about changing one belief system for another; it's not about becoming a buddhist, but it is about learning how to look clearly and simply at what is actually happening.*

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*Many of the difficulties that come in dharma practice come because we ask the ego to do things it can't do. The mind and the content of the mind are not the same. The ego is a content of the mind. The content can't do what the mind can do. The content of the mind is always smaller than the mind itself. To ask twenty people to sit on one chair would be silly. To ask the ego to be free of grasping is silly. Rather than spending time trying to transcend your limit, enter into the state free of limits.*

α

*The basis of dzogchen practice is to find oneself in the relaxed, natural state of awareness. This state is not something far away. It is not something mystical or esoteric. It is always there but it is hidden by its own brilliance. The radiance of your own mind – which arises as the continuous stream of thoughts, feelings and expressions – is itself the basis for not seeing your own nature.*

α

*Thoughts come and go in the spaciousness of the mind. Speech arises and passes in the spaciousness of silence. Movement occurs and vanishes in the spaciousness of stillness. In that way, whatever we are doing is precisely just what it is, but is never cut off, never separated, from the integrated field of arising.*

α

*It is very important to precisely understand what is meant in buddhism by illusion. Maybe a better way of translating it would be 'ungraspability'. As our life moves moment-by-moment we can either be present and participate in it or we can go off into some daydream, but whether we are in a daydream or whether we are present, nobody can stop time.*

α

*It is autumn now and the squirrels are coming to the end of their very busy period; they are collecting their last nuts and so on before the winter. They hide the nuts sometimes under the ground, sometimes in little holes in trees. Of course, the memory of the squirrel is not so good. In the early spring time you often see them scabbling in the earth trying to find their nuts. In the same way I put my life somewhere, I stored a little bit here, a little bit there – but when I came back, I couldn't find it. Because actually, we can't put things into the future. Nobody knows what the future is going to be. This is a big problem.*

α

*Problems exist on two levels: one is as an event and the other as part of a narrative. As an event it has a beginning, a middle, an end. As part of a narrative it is endless. The less we enter into absorption in the ego's narratives and the more we are fresh and precise with phenomena as they manifest momentarily, the more clarity pervades our activity in the world.*

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## Dzogchen shiné

We began this morning with the practice of having a simple fixation on the breath or on an external object. This is a method for resting peacefully, which is called *shiné* in Tibetan and *shamatha* in Sanskrit. The idea is that by maintaining our focus on one simple object we will not get lost in the various thoughts, feelings and so on that arise, and the mind will become peaceful.

In dzogchen the understanding of resting peacefully is slightly different: The nature of our mind, which is to say the true nature or state or quality of ‘I, me, myself’, is open awareness, an awareness that does not rest on any object.

The traditional Buddhist description of our ordinary consciousness is that we have our sense-consciousnesses and the three further organising consciousnesses that act on what is presented by the sense consciousness. Each of these consciousnesses arises with its object. For example, our skin has a great deal of sensitivity, but if we are sitting comfortably we are not really aware of our skin. Then suddenly there is a sensation and you want to scratch it. The arising of the sensation is happening with the arising of the consciousness of the sense of touch. There is no continuous sense of the surface of the skin. We become conscious of our skin when something impacts it in some way. When we have a strong absorption or fixation connecting consciousness, the sense organ, and its object, there is a kind of simplification of experience, as the object appears to be self-existing as whatever we take it to be. In

taking it to be what it 'is', we are taken in by it. Another example is that if you are on the metro and become very absorbed in a book you are reading, you might not notice when it is your stop and go past it. However, these states are all impermanent because they are arising on the basis of transient conditions.

In the view of dzogchen, the mind itself is not the same as its expression, our consciousness. Our ordinary sense of self, which we see as *apart* from the world, is actually *part of* the world. Subject and object arise together and they are identical in being part of the flow of impermanent experience. Our individual ego-sense of self, which takes itself to be the owner of our body, is concerned to maintain the health and safety of the body. And due to this we are always trying to bring from the environment things that we feel would be good and to keep away things we feel would not be good. Our individual self feels like something which is true and self-existing, yet it is neither true nor self-existing. This means that we always have to be busy trying to maintain something which is crumbling and falling apart moment by moment. The problem here is our not recognising who is the one having the experience.

The basis of dzogchen practice is to find oneself in the relaxed, natural state of awareness. This state is not something far away. It is not something mystical or esoteric. It is always there but it is hidden by its own brilliance. If you had a very powerful light bulb and the guru was to write the meaning of life on this bulb and then switched on the bulb and said "*Now read out the meaning of life!*" this would be very hard for us to do because the very brilliance of the light would make it impossible to see what was there. In a similar way, the radiance of your own mind – which arises as the continuous stream of thoughts, feelings and expressions – is itself the basis for not seeing your own nature.

Ignorance doesn't come from outside, from anywhere else. Think of curtains hanging at a window. We can see that they are folded. We can't see what is inside the fold, but the fold is just the curtain itself. Nothing has been added to the curtain to hide what is in the fold. The curtain itself is hiding itself and it's hiding itself without doing anything. We fold ourselves into an intoxication and an identification with the ceaseless flow of experience.

For example, let's say a friend of yours had some difficulty at work. Their boss has done something not helpful and they became very upset. They tell you about it; you are quite sympathetic. Then they want to tell you about it again; you find yourself being a little less sympathetic. They feel the need to continue talking about it and perhaps you find yourself saying something like "*Well, these things happen!*" That is to say, we are saying to the person "*If you remain wrapped in this event, you are creating suffering for yourself! The event has gone. The moment in which your boss was persecuting you is over. The boss who continues to persecute you is the boss in your own head and this boss in your own head is happy to persecute you for as long as you are willing to let it persecute you.*"

Our mental life is dialogic: someone is in conversation with someone. The mind is full of voices. Some of these are the voices of our parents, our teachers and so on. When a voice speaks there is a response. Sometimes we have strong negative beliefs about ourselves arising in the form of a communication and we think, "*Ah, I am so stupid!*" Who is speaking there? "*I am speaking.*" Who am I speaking to? "*Myself.*" Just as a dressmaker cuts pieces of cloth from a length of material so we also have wonderful scissors with which we can cut 'I', 'me', 'myself' out of the continuous flow of experience, thus creating the illusion of three separate entities.

What does this mean? It means drama; it means theatre. You have to be a very good actor to do monologue; usually a play is more interesting if there are at least two actors. Luckily, we always have three: I, me, myself. "*Today I am happy to present 'Experiences in Samsara', in which I will tell myself what is wrong with me.*" This kind of movement goes on all the time. When we say, "*I am stupid!*" a thought is arising and passing, just like a bird flying across the sky. But when we – and this is where language becomes very difficult – when we are identified with the thought "*I am stupid!*" it creates a particular kind of energetic contraction. And this contraction is like the fold in the curtain, so when the fold occurs you can't see clearly but what is actually hidden, is nothing at all.

So, who is being confused? I am. Who is the one who is doing the confusing? I am. What is the basis for the confusion? I am. The belief that I am a separate entity is the basis of all these confusions. Who then is the one who says, *"I am"*? This glass in my hand came from a factory, this watch I am showing you came from a factory, these sweets in front of me come from a factory and me, I came from my mother and father. They are my factory. If there is any problem with the product, don't blame me, blame the factory! But where did we really come from?

This is the heart of dzogchen, to really look and see *'Who is the one who is here? Does this presence or awareness come from anything?'*

### Mirror, a traditional example

The practice is simply to relax and open. Then, without doing anything, to allow whatever comes to just come. Whatever arises comes by itself and goes by itself. There is no one doing it, and the awareness which perceives this movement is not doing anything. The traditional example for this is the mirror. The mirror has no content of its own which is why it is able to show whatever is in front of it. When we look at the images on a temple wall we can say, *"This is a painting of Tara"* or *"This is a painting of Buddha"* or *"This is a photo of the Dalai Lama."* That is to say, the painting or the photograph has a specific defined content, but the mirror has no fixed content.

The appearance in the mirror, the reflection, has no substance. Something is there, because you see it, but you cannot grasp it. Ungraspable appearance is traditionally called appearance and emptiness. This appearance is revealed to our awareness and this awareness itself has no self-substance. It is awareness and emptiness. The radiant potential of the mirror to show things is called clarity and this clarity is inseparable from emptiness. In all this unfolding there is nothing to be grasped. That is to say, the central place that we give ourselves as an ego-agent is unnecessary.

The reflection arises effortlessly in the mirror. The thoughts, feelings and sensations arise effortlessly, but they then start to spin around the central point of *'I am the one who is doing it'*. This central point of *'I, me, myself'* is itself a reflection.

When the reflection claims to be a substance, you have a confusion. The confused identification leads to a delusion that things are also substantial. The feeling that *'I exist, I am a thing'* leads to the experience *'Everything I experience is also a thing. I am a thing in a world of things and some things in the world can attack me and some things in the world can help me.'* This is what we call samsara. The thought *'I am a thing'*, and the thought *'Everything that I experience is also a thing'*, are just thoughts, and these thoughts have no self-substance to them.

It is like believing in Mickey Mouse. We see Mickey Mouse; maybe at one time in our life we loved Mickey Mouse. We might have had a Mickey Mouse pillow, or it could be Batman, could be Spiderman, could be Barbie, could be My Little Pony... any piece of fantasy turned out by the film studios and sold at enormous expense to parents can be believed by the children to be truly existent. What makes Mickey Mouse real is belief. What makes *'me'* real is belief. However we would say, *"Mickey Mouse is not real, but I am real!"*

What does this mean to say, *"I am not real"*? In English the root of the word *'real'* is linked to the word for a *'thing'*. A *'thing'* is something which exists in itself. But we can see that our bodies are dependent on causes and conditions. Due to our parents having sex at a particular time, without the use of contraceptives which may have been intentional or not, there is a discovery of the woman being pregnant. This can be an exciting or an anxious result. Then the foetus developed and we were born. We entered a world with specific conditions: our parents, the kind of birth we had in hospital or at home, the expectations the world had about us, the particular kind of welcome that was available for us. Our parents might have strongly wanted a boy or a girl; the mother might have wanted one gender and the father the other. So, due to causes and conditions—the ongoing display of many interacting cultural

factors, economics, sociology and so on—we develop as we are now. That is to say, there is no fixed internal essence, no ‘James-ness’ of James.

A great deal of what is called ‘James’ is arising as a reaction to circumstances which are not ‘James’. The ‘James-ness’ of ‘James’ is environmentally determined and the name ‘James’ is applied to a phenomenon manifesting in different ways according to circumstances. It’s not that ‘James’ is somehow inside himself as a private personal essence. Rather, the intersection point where self and other meet, is where ‘James’ arises.

That is to say, my existence is performative; it displays itself according to circumstances. Some of these circumstances are what we call external; some of these circumstances are internal. There are events in the world and also our memories, our conditioning, the kinds of permission or non-permission we got in childhood. Psychotherapists use technical terms such as introjections, core-beliefs, scripts or drivers to refer to this ‘internal’ structuring. Operating within this structure are the ego-defences such as projections, introjections, defensive splittings, condensations, displacements and so on. There are many different technical words but basically they all describe how moment by moment our sense of self is undergoing an ongoing editing or shaping or fabrication that we carry on in order to maintain the continuity of our sense that I am ‘I, me, myself’; that I am still me.

## **We are constructed out of constructs**

The reason for explaining things in this way is so that we start to see just how much glue is inside us. We are very attached to constructs. Why? Because we are constructed out of constructs. If we wash off the glue and are not putting ourselves together, what would we be? Would there be a collapse? An existential crisis? Nietzsche didn’t do too well himself; Kierkegaard was not a happy boy. Generally speaking, awakening to the existential fact of the ungroundedness of identity—the fact that we are thrown into a world we didn’t choose, a world which already has a momentum and in which we are constantly trying to find a way forward, and in which death is surely coming—this gives rise to a lot of anxiety. We feel we have to hold ourselves together.

Writers like Samuel Beckett have highlighted the endlessness of waiting, of the gap, of the lack, of the sense that our life never seems quite complete. We are ‘*Waiting for Godot*’, for the one who never arrives, waiting for happiness, waiting for our prince to come, waiting for some completion of our existence. But since our life is a work in progress, how could it ever be complete? Yet if it is not complete, then who am I? That is the modern dilemma. Recently the great father of structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss, died. Structuralism describes our experience of the world as arising through interpretative structures based on binary oppositions. Every assertion involves something being negated: ‘*I am a man because I am not a woman.*’ That makes life very simple: ‘*What it means to be a man, I don’t know but I do know that I am not a woman.*’ That is to say, there is no internal essence to the self-definition, each ‘entity’ being defined by all that it is not.

Thus if we say meaning is created at the border: ‘*I am a man because I am not a woman*’, man-ness is no longer inside the man, the man-ness of the man arises at the surface in contact with the woman who is ‘other’. Similarly in buddhism we say that there are two separate domains, samsara and nirvana.

—*What is samsara?*

—*It’s not nirvana.*

—*What is nirvana?*

—*It is not samsara.*

—*What is nothing?*

—*It’s not something.*

But if I am not something, I must be nothing; I must be nothing at all.

When human beings behave in terrible ways, committing genocide, destroying culture, environment, hope, there is a sense of collapse. All the ‘somethings’ that we were attached to crumble and there is an abyss, a desolation, a nothingness that numbs the spirit and promotes alienated isolation in each

individual. Nothingness becomes like death, a devouring absence which swallows presence, leaving only an anxious trembling in the unquiet heart.

For the ego 'nothing' is the door to madness. Nietzsche pointed out that when you have the death of God, you have the death of metaphysics. When you have the death of any overview offering a meaning of life, you have nothing but madness.

What then is the meaning of life? *'The chance to have fun!'* This is the meaning for many people nowadays. A nice car, two or three holidays a year, some recreational drug taking. Meaningless fun, for fun does not generate meaning, being by nature ephemeral gossamer. If 'something' starts to vanish, then there is just nothing at all. For example in science fiction novels and movies you get a lot of depictions of life after the apocalypse, in which people are running around in the rubble left after the collapse of civilisation. But this situation of collapse is one which is already embedded inside people – if there is no god, if there is no contract between god and the world, if Darwin is right and evolution is just a series of accidents, then we are merely some material form of happenstance, of contingency, just a material form arising out the chain of evolutionary accidents.

So what's the point? We are here for a short while. What will we do? Many people decide they need to save the planet and there are many conferences about preserving the environment. People point out that we must think of our grandchildren, but the secret life of the ego is different. The ego says, *"Forget the grandchildren! If I am going to die, why should anyone else have a good time after me? Forget the lot of you; if I have to die I am going to take as much as I can right now!"*

Buddhism proposes a different solution to the same issue. It proposes the deconstruction of the binary opposition between something and nothing. The buddhist view is that 'nothing' is the ground and source of every 'something' and therefore the door to liberation is through 'nothing' for it frees us from attachment to illusory 'entities'. Nothing is not death; it is not the opposite of life, but rather is the ground of life and the field within which it occurs. All something is empty of inherent self-nature, of personal individual essence. Something is the appearance, the radiance of emptiness, of nothingness. These are not two separate domains but are always already non-dual. There is not just one thing nor are there many different things. Manifestation is like the reflection in the mirror—here, direct, yet an illusion, an appearance which is nothing as such. Therefore in the practice we don't resist the falling away of things, of something, of anything, of all things. For a moment there is the quiescence of appearance—just open empty space. Then it is full again of somethings, which are its display, its showing, its revelation. Appearance and emptiness—this vital non-duality is the heart-blood of the buddhas. This is the real protection against extremes of eternalism, of fixed unchanging essences and of nihilism, of total final vanishing.

## Guru Yoga using the white letter Aa

In order to directly experience this openness we make use of the practice of guru yoga. 'Guru' refers to the natural state. Our human teacher is somebody who manifests from, and points us to, the natural state. 'Yoga' means integration or inseparability. This practice can be done in different ways. Today we will imagine a white letter 'Aa' in the centre of our being. See it as a capital letter 'A' or if you know the Tibetan letter Aa then imagine that. It is surrounded by rays of rainbow-coloured light. It represents the immediate presence of all the teachers, immediate since the teachers are not far away. Not being caught up in the line of the three times—past, present and future—all that we encounter is immediately present.

So, we have the presence of spaciousness and the presence of the teacher at the heart of our being, and we make the sound of 'Aa' one time and just rest in that open state.

Because the visualising or the imagining of the letter 'Aa' is something we create, we don't need to keep visualising it after we have sounded it. Just relax and be with whatever occurs. The mind is open like the mirror and full of reflections like the mirror. We follow the path of *'the middle way'*, which is the path of

integration. We neither fall into reflections, into whatever is arising, nor do we strongly hold back, observing what is going on from a distance. Be relaxed, open and present with whatever is occurring.

At first we do this practice just for a short time at first, because the central point is to relax and not make effort. We are not trying to do anything. We are not trying to get rid of thoughts we don't like. We are not trying to hang on to thoughts we do like. Just let things happen as they are, in a state very open. Okay, so now we will try this together.

[Practice]

In the practice, we just allow experience to arise and pass and then, since we are integrating ordinary life into the open state, we continue to welcome all that occurs when we move in the world. During the break, when we are walking down the street, eating something, talking with people, relaxed and open to whatever is occurring. Be aware of the movement of subject and object. That is to say, not strongly defining yourself on the inside but observing yourself as a movement of energy which takes different forms according to different encounters. When you speak with different people, you experience yourself in different ways, sometimes more open, sometimes more closed. It's not about forcing yourself to be just one thing, but observing: *'This is the instant manifestation of myself in the environment.'*

[Break]

### Nuden Dorje: 'All objects are like the sky'

Nuden Dorje writes that **'the outer objects we believe in—the experienceable phenomena of samsara and nirvana—have from the very beginning been like the sky.'** The sky has no limit, no substance, and he is saying that each object is like the sky. If we take something quite concrete, like this glass of water in my hand, how can we say it is like the sky? When the sky becomes filled with thick clouds it seems that we can't even see the sky. Could we then say that my hand is like a set of clouds obscuring the glass? As we discussed earlier, 'glass' is a name we put onto this object. So what is the 'this' onto which the word 'glass' is put? The this-ness of this is potentially just a finer kind of cloud. So what we get is a thick cumulus cloud—that's like saying "the glass"—and then we get very fine clouds, the alto cirrus, which is like assigning 'this' to it.

If we observe our own mind in relation to whatever it is in my hand, if we try to just relax and stop putting something onto this, what is this? We just sit, open. Something is there but it is ungraspable. On a clear summer's day we see the blue sky, but we can't grasp it. It's like that. There is an appearance, but it's not the appearance of something—that is to say, it has no inner 'something-ness' essence—it's the appearance of nothing.

This is very different from the European tradition. If Plato were here, he would say that the reason we can see a glass is because in the true realm, in the pure realm, there is the pure glass and what we see is the shadow or the reflection of the pure glass from this side. According to Plato, what we have here is a false or a faulty representation of the pure form of the glass. That is to say, there is an essence somewhere which shows a particular form, which is what we take to be the glass. This view runs through a great deal of Western thought and is connected with the idea in the Christian tradition that man is made in God's image. St. Paul wrote to the people of Corinth that *"Now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known"* meaning that when we die and go to heaven and see God, then we see that *"Ah, it's like this!"*

### What we see is an interpretation

From the buddhist point of view, what makes the glass dark is our own mental activity. This activity is the basis on which we think that there is truly something there. This is quite an amazing point of view: everything in this room is the creation of your mind. If you have a photograph on the wall and you look at it and then look away, is it still there? Yes, and we tell ourselves that it still being there



proves that it exists in itself since it continues through time. It has a life of its own. The existence of the photograph is independent of the observer. It is an object existing in the world. This is what we tell ourselves but from the buddhist point of view, this is false.

What we see is an interpretation. We have the capacity to construct interpretations. If in your next life you are born as a mouse or a cat, you will not have the capacity to make that interpretation. The perception of a photograph is the creation of your mental activity. The meaning we impute, the value, the identity we see as being inherent in or embedded in the object is placed there by the activity of the mind.

This is a very difficult view to embody and to live, particularly since we live in a consumerist, capitalist culture, which is predicated on the existence of commodities and where everything has a price. Experience is held to be generated by the interaction of subject entities and object entities. One of the very interesting areas of trade is the trade in futures, so you can trade on the future price of corn, for example. You can buy cashew nuts a year from now. The flower on the cashew tree hasn't even ripened but you have already bought the nut! Where is this nut? In the future. But you can trade it and pay money and even lose money doing this. This is the meaning of a capitalist economy: it starts with the absolute belief that anything we can imagine can be treated as and traded as, a real entity. This way of conceptualising that which has not yet come, as being something which can be taken as if it already exists, is possible because of our tendency to believe that things are strongly real.

One of the many reasons for the world economic collapse was the way in which people were buying debts. Now we can imagine buying apples, buying ice-cream – but why would you buy a debt? Most of us don't want to have debt. *"Hmm, if I buy your debt, I can make money on your debt, because I'll buy your debt and then I'll sell your debt—which is now my debt—to someone else for more than I paid for it."* This is just like the game of musical chairs which the children play at parties: You have ten children and nine chairs. You play music and when the music stops everyone has to sit down. When the music stopped, Lehman Brothers, the investment bank, couldn't find a seat but unfortunately, it was we who then all fell down!

What is very helpful when we look at how the world functions, is to see the capacity of the imagination. You could say the imagination is the cause of heaven, but is also the cause of hell. In dzogchen they say there is 'one ground', which is the natural state and is always infinitely open. Out of this arise samsara and nirvana, both. The domain of integrated connectivity is called nirvana and the domain of fragmentation, of differentiation, of attachment is called samsara. This samsara means 'endlessly busy'.

Then Nuden Dorje says, **'All objects are like the sky'**, it means that there are no commodities. A commodity is an appearance which is within the general field of appearances but which has become ring-fenced, separated off, and taken to be autonomous. But each object is present within the total environment of arising – everything arises at once. Not me first and not the other first but self and other together. This means then, that as we move in the world with objects, what we call the subject and what we call the object are changing together moment by moment.

So he says in the text, **'All mentations' dualistic ideas are merely names devoid of even an atom's worth of true reality.'** Ordinarily, as soon as we are looking, our habitual interpretation gives us the sense that we are looking at something that exists prior to our looking. Here we see the glass I am holding and we are convinced that the glass exists. But as the text says, this is itself mentation or mental activities, dualistic ideas.

Some of you may be familiar with the story of *Alice in Wonderland* and how she falls down the rabbit hole. Alice gets a bit confused about where she is, crawling around, and she comes to a little room. There is a table and chair. She sits on the chair and looks at the table. There is a bottle and on the label it says, 'Drink me'. And there is a cake and it says, 'Eat me'. Objects don't speak but here, clearly the object is speaking. She drinks the drink and eats the cake and has many many adventures. Sometimes it's like that. Perhaps you open your and see a bar of chocolate. Although you are not actually psychotic you hear voices, and so you do as you are told and you eat the

chocolate. But of course this is not correct, the message is coming from us, from our mind. **We** say, *"This is chocolate"* and **we** say, *"I need this chocolate"*.

What Nuden Dorje is saying is that all these names that we put—all these ways in which we create the many objects of this world—have not even an atom's worth, the tiniest point, of true reality. But again it is very important to see exactly what this means. It doesn't mean that there is nothing there at all.

Each thing is precisely what it is – and what it precisely is, is an illusory appearance. Everything we see has the same nature, as illusion, but that illusion shows itself in many different forms. Each of us here is manifesting these chains of causes and conditions, our personal history, the environment we developed in and so on. When we look back in our life we see so many events that were once real and are now no longer real. Things we once believed in, people we were once with, are gone. Situations that we took to be absolutely important, absolutely definitive of who we were, are no longer the case. Their reality, or their profound meaning, was an illusion. Illusion doesn't mean that it didn't happen. It means that it happened 'in the manner of' a dream.

This year I became sixty. Where did my life go? I look back, I think, *"Oh, what happened?!"* Gone, it's like that. Everything that happened, happened, but it happened as a happening. It is there in the moment but you can't hang on to it. We were here this morning and this morning is gone. We can't go back into the morning. It's like that. The morning was here and we were here and when we look around, "Yes, I saw you in the morning, and you, and you..." – but it's gone.

So, it is very important to precisely understand what is meant in buddhism by illusion. Maybe a better way of translating it would be 'ungraspability'. As our life moves moment-by-moment we can either be present and participate in it or we can go off into some daydream, but whether we are in a day-dream or whether we are present, nobody can stop time.

When we notice that things that were once important are now not important, that could make us pause and ask ourselves, *"Am I really a squirrel?"* It is autumn now and the squirrels are coming to the end of their very busy period; they are collecting their last nuts and so on before the winter. They hide the nuts sometimes under the ground, sometimes in little holes in trees. Of course, the memory of the squirrel is not so good. In the early spring time you often see them scabbling in the earth trying to find their nuts. In the same way I put my life somewhere, I stored a little bit here, a little bit there – but when I came back, I couldn't find it. Because actually we can't put things into the future. Nobody knows what the future is going to be. This is a big problem.

### How to live in the moment

So, how will I live in the moment? To live in a stupid moment is to sing *"la la la la la"* and hope things will be okay. To make too many plans for the future and imagine that it will be some direct linear extension of the present is also stupid. I would imagine most of us, when we look back on our lives, don't see a straight line. We see a zigzagging course with many spirals. Well, if that happened in the past, it is likely to happen in the future. Nuden Dorje is suggesting here that we look very precisely at what it means to be alive now, because if you don't really get it, you will be living in fantasy, not actuality.

Our world is usually triangulated: there is self and other, or myself and the immediate moment, and then there is my interpretation – so that makes a triangle and as Freud pointed out, triangles are problematic. In English we have the saying "Two is company, three is a crowd." *"There were three of us in this marriage, so it was a bit crowded"* Princess Diana famously said. The immediacy of just being here, the 'two' which exist in nonduality, is confused by presence of the third, which is the abstraction or the interpretation of the moment. What he is saying here is that all of these interpretations – all of these names, concepts, and ideas – have no real truth to them at all.

He continues, **'Towards the bewildering whirl of illusory appearances which are empty and devoid of inherent self-nature we look in terms of particular entities and apply names to them.'** This is what I have been describing: on the open potential of the situation we apply a name and then we believe

that name to be referring to a truly existing entity. Living inside what is revealed through the name, we see only a part.

In fact we can never see the whole. For example, it is hard for us to imagine that our parents have a life which doesn't involve them being our mother or our father. When you are a child, these people, the mother and the father, exist only as mother and father. They have a whole other life which the child will never know. So, when you think you know them, what you know is revealed inside this little frame of reference established by the roles held in place by a specific meaning.

It's important to see that every naming is both a revealing and a concealing. Because there is no real essence that can be found in anything, when we apply a name to it, we create, from the unborn potential of this object, a particular reading that is incorporated into the narrative of the understanding. This is why we should never take ourselves too seriously. One of the things we can never do is speak the truth: all we have is opinions, the view from here. And the 'here' is always embedded in time: 'This is how it looks to me today – and not only may it look differently to me tomorrow but I will be different tomorrow'. As the Buddha said, "*Friend become enemies and enemies become friends.*" Circumstances change: what appeared to be the case is suddenly not the case.

Nuden Dorje is suggesting we sprinkle a little bit of doubt-powder on our food, not putting too much weight on anything, because when we put weight on things, we take it for granted that they are what they appear to be. Things appear to be what they appear to be—and what they are is nothing at all.

That is a big difference between the buddhist and the western way of thinking and it is very important in terms of how we live our lives, since we can only be cheated by things that we have been believing in. So is there anything that is safe to believe in? No, everything is an illusion. But isn't this very weird then? Isn't this a terrible world of paranoid people? No, because it's not about falling in and merging in the object, and it's not about anxiously stepping back and looking at the object and checking it out. It's about the middle way, which is to be present moment by moment as you change, and as the world changes.

For example we get *dis*-appointed if someone does not keep an appointment. When we make an appointment with the future we act as if it will be the case and then when it is not the case we feel upset. The one who has cheated us is not the other person; we have cheated ourselves by believing that impermanent phenomena are permanent. This doesn't mean that we should give up and say that it is all hopeless but maybe we can ask ourselves, "*What is the weight that I bring into a situation?*" I remember when one of my sons was about seven we were rowing on a pond in a park. When we came to the bank he jumped off to tie up the boat. To do this he needed to pull the boat back in, so he put one foot back in the boat. The boat continued drifting out and his legs kept being stretched further apart and his face changed from surprise to shock. And then he fell into the water. That's what happens with attachment. In life we have to recognise the point of no return, the point where manifest change is inevitable. Resisting it is hopeless, so we have to leap into the unknown. If we try to hedge our bets by hanging on to the past while stepping into the future, we are likely to fall.

For this reason the Buddha said that the cause of suffering is attachment. When we become attached to an object, our centre of gravity becomes obscured, since the centre of gravity is now the centre of gravity of a fused system. There are two who have started to function as one and the centre of gravity doesn't belong to either part. Yet we continue to think that we are centred in ourselves. This is why when people come together and decide to be a couple, both parties usually feel quite disoriented, because as a couple they are creating a new centre which is 'we'. The 'you' and the 'me' become 'we' and the 'we' has a life of its own. Now if both parties are thoughtful and respectful, they will balance each other to maintain this new centre. But of course we have the habit of being 'me', and the 'me' and the 'we' are not good friends. For the 'we' to be the centre, the 'me' will feel off balance. And if the 'me' wants to rectify itself and find its own gravity, then the 'we' will be pulled off balance.

This is very important for meditation. On an outer level the texts often advise us to leave our country and go to live in a place where nobody knows us. Then we can get a new sense of alignment with our own ground rather than being caught up in obligations. Of course, this is difficult to do and not necessarily very useful. It is more important to find out *“What is the true ground of my natural identity?”* The ground of ego-identity is attachment to specific aspects of what is arising in the experiential field. Anxiety arises when these attachments are disturbed by the impact of the impermanence of the world.

For example when we have an economic downturn there is more unemployment. When people lose their jobs, a great deal of their sense of identity goes. This is because we become attached to having the social identity that goes with a particular kind of work. We become attached to having that usual amount of money coming in at the end of the month. We become attached to the structuring of our time which goes with being in work. Reflecting on the changed situation we can see that who I thought I was, was dependent on something which I took to be me, when in fact it was not me. I selected some aspects of the passing flow and said they were ‘who I am’ but then they vanished. Due to my need to always be something in particular, I have become a hostage to fortune. But I am not the king of the world and cannot control events. Many things happen that we don’t expect: sicknesses, redundancy, difficulties in relationships, difficulties with children, parents getting sick and so on. Then we are often surprised to see that our lives are really determined by events, yet they have always been determined by events.

What then is the meaning of a personal identity in relation to an ever-changing world? Nuden Dorje says in the text that **‘We must decide that their nature transcends being the object of limiting interpretation.’** So all these entities, both subject and object, which we have created by the application of names, need to be looked at with fresh eyes. We need to see that what they truly are is different from what we can take them to be by the application of language. Regarding our existence, we seem to have our own personal identity because in fact, we are an object to ourselves. Each of us can apply many interpretations to ourselves; we can describe our favourite food, what we like to do at the weekend, what age we are and what kind of work we do and so on. These are the threads or strands of meaning that we use to bond the object, ourselves, into a framework of knowledge. From this we elaborate the various narratives we can think and say about ‘ourselves’.

Nuden Dorje is indicating that all of this work is not going to create anything because who you actually are – what the glass actually is – is something which transcends, or cannot be caught by, the semiotic web of interpretation. That is to say, we all talk nonsense all the time. We reassure each other about the interpretations of our world and, in the desire to maintain these particular storylines, we avoid looking precisely to see both what is there without the storyline, and what the real status of the storyline is. So, one of the things we can do with this set of instructions is to observe how we create our world.

We will soon be having a break and then you can enjoy a cup of coffee... or you might prefer to have some tea? You can observe *‘I want coffee rather than tea’* or vice versa. What is the nature of that choice? Is it entirely to do with the taste that I want in my mouth? Or is the choice in some way telling me something about myself? I am the sort of person who drinks tea in the morning and coffee in the afternoon, or vice versa. Every time we make a choice, we are bringing a particular kind of shape or limit or definition into the potential of all the other things that we could be doing in that moment. So rather than operating from our automatic pilot, doing what we always do—which gives a misleading sense of given-ness or naturalness to what we do—by observing ourselves in the moment of the choice we can see the dynamic selective defining which occurs. This is one aspect of being awake: that each moment is precious because each moment is vanishing even as it appears. As it comes into being, we are here, this is us, as if we were on a surfboard on the edge of a wave; the wave is moving and we have to move with the wave. We are here but not anywhere that can be caught or defined.

Our balance is dynamic, not static. Our life is dynamic. The Buddha’s teaching on impermanence is always gesturing to the fact that there is nothing stable. So if we are not here – present now through all our senses, in touch with what’s here – we are walking in dreamtime and in that dreamtime we are very

open to being caught by narratives of reification, of objectification. With even the most simple tasks we can mindfully bring our presence back to observing washing our hands, observing walking step by step, observing how we start to enter a conversation with somebody. In particular we can observe the observer and see how we are not a fixed function but an open ungraspable presence.

[Break]

## By understanding the illusory nature we awaken from ignorance

This text is a short one; it is a *terma*, a treasure discovered by the first lama in the line of Chimed Rigdzin Lama, C.R. Lama. It is quite dense because it is a 'path of understanding'. Inside the general field of dharma there are many different paths. For example there are the 'paths of compassion', which highlight the wish that all beings may be happy. In making such aspiration and effort you can believe it is actually helping others and it also makes you feel good. It's a simple thing to do and it makes you feel good. This text however is complicated and it might not make you feel very good, but compassion is a bit of a blunt knife whereas wisdom is sharp. Wisdom is for cutting through delusion. Many of the things that make us feel good are still wrapped subtly inside a strongly held sense of truly existing objects.

Why is this understanding of the illusory nature so important? Because it is the way to awaken from ignorance. Ignorance is a practice of not seeing what is actually the case and imagining that something which is *not* the case, *is* the case. This requires effort, an effort which has become normal for us. However this habitual effort prevents us from relaxing and opening to what is actually the case. Due to the effortful maintenance of illusion we are being cheated. Who is cheating me? I am cheating me. I have to catch myself cheating myself. Maybe the policeman and the thief are the same and that's quite difficult. When the dog chases its own tail, it tends to run rapidly in a circle. That's why this is difficult.

In dharma our difficulties are described in detail not in order to frighten us but to awaken us to what is already going on, These limitations form the forest of our own mind and we want to find a way through the forest without being lost. When Hänsel and Gretel went into the forest they left a trail of pebbles. When Ariadne was giving her beloved some help to go into the labyrinth to fight the Minotaur, she gave him a thread. The teaching is like that. It is a way not to get lost in the forest.

When we sit engaging in a practice that has a clear object, like observing the breath or reciting mantras while doing visualisation, it is not so difficult to stay on target. But the practice in dzogchen is to relax and stay present with whatever is occurring, so there is no fixed point of reference to return to if we get lost. We have to re-settle ourselves in the open presence and that is not easy, since presence is present, yet ungraspable. The more we can see how we get lost in attachment, the easier it is to relax back into openness. The moment-by-moment attachment and identification that binds us into each arising phenomenon manifests on the basis of the patterns Nuden Dorje describes. He is talking about how we can stop deceiving ourselves and through that find a state of infinite relaxation, a relaxation which is present in itself and not dependent on anything else.

By maintaining the practice you reach a certain turning point or crossroads. At first, in relation to our ordinary existence, it is usual to have the sense that the glass is real. The idea that the glass is an illusion seems like a fantasy construction. When the balance tilts to the other side on the fulcrum point then you see *'Oh, this is really an illusion!'* At that point we see that the thought that says *"This is truly self-existing"* is artificial. And that is the point where we start to understand *'Ah, so much energy, so much effort, goes into maintaining this false perception!'*

When we find ourselves caught up in thought, this is occurring because we are recruiting these thoughts to maintain and develop the continuity of the belief-system that we are inside. We are building and constructing all the time but natural awareness is relaxed and open whatever happens. It doesn't need thoughts to pull it into existence. So, you can let go of thoughts. You don't need to be worried. Worry is a waste of time. Anxiety is ridiculous. What is there to be anxious about? Anxiety is always about thoughts. It is not about events. This is because we cannot know

what an event will be until it arrives.

- I am worried about going to the dentist. I don't like dentists.*
- What is the thing that is making you worried?*
- I told you, the fact is that I don't like dentists.*
- Your statement 'I don't like dentists' is a series of thoughts.*
- No, it's not, it's a fact. It's true for me. And if you are my friend, you have to believe what I say!*
- Oh... I am so worried that you are anxious about going to the dentist!*
- Thank you, at last you understand!*
- Life must be very hard for you...*

In this way you can see how compassion is linked to the actual situation of the other rather than to our grand plan about how to 'help all beings'. Of course, the person doesn't want to recognise that they themselves are frightening themselves: *"Because I know I don't like dentists, on the journey to the dentist I am becoming anxious. I sit in the waiting room and I hear the noise of the drill. My body is tensing up; my breath is getting a little bit short. I don't want to be here. Oh, maybe I should just leave. Now it's already too late!"* Who is doing this? The mind is doing this to the mind. The dentist will help your teeth.

The more we understand what the text is describing, the more we start to see how much effort we put into maintaining our familiar patterns. The principle instruction in dzogchen is **to relax**. In this way it differs from most of the other paths whose principle instruction is to make effort. But being relaxed is not the same as being lazy, because being lazy is also a kind of activity. That is to say, it is an attachment to, an immersion in, a particular mood. So 'being relaxed' here means relaxed and present. Often we put these things as opposites: I am either attentive but a bit buzzing or I am relaxed but a bit gone. Here it means: relaxed and present, not doing anything while being here.

Then Nuden Dorje says, **'Whatever objects arise are self-liberated and towards the ceaseless flow of whatever appearances we see, we should remain free of the stain of holding them to be truly existing.'** All objects are self-liberating! This is a sign that when something remains for us, it is not remaining because it is truly remaining out of itself; it is remaining because of our attachment. That is to say, moment-by-moment experience is changing. But we don't experience that because of the subtle movement of attachment, identification and investment. Our attachment is not to the moment of experience itself, for that is ungraspable. We attach to the concepts echoes and traces we abstract from the lived moment.

For example, you might wake up one morning and feel a bit down, with low energy. If your delinquent self—the one who doesn't want to behave—is in charge, then you roll over and pull the duvet over your head. If your judicial self is in charge, then you pull yourself together and squeeze yourself into the shape required for today. Both of these are activities, and they both arise from inner dialogue between abstractions.

It might often feel that a mood is happening **to** us. When you are in the mountains and the mist is coming down, you can see it rolling down the hill. In the same way depressed feelings or anxious feelings seem to pour through us. In the mountains if the mist wraps itself around you, you can't see where you are. There seems to be no beginning and end to it. Similarly, our moods, once you are inside them, seem to go in all directions. But the mood of depression has no energy in itself. We ourselves move into the identification. Who is this happening to? Me. Who is the one who says, *"This is happening to me"*? This is the unborn awareness. The unborn awareness is not happy or sad. It doesn't love or hate. It doesn't have good days and bad days. It's just present and aware. Within that mirror-like state the reflection called 'subject' and the reflection called 'object' move in ceaseless interaction, giving rise to all our experiences, including what we call 'depression'.

### **Ego will never be enlightened: ego is a content of mind**

Now of course many people when they are depressed say, *"I hate this! I hate it, I want to die, I can't bear it! Why does this have to happen to me?"* But who is the one it is happening to? Each time we are caught, the one who is caught is our 'Doppelgänger'. Each of us has an identical twin. When we

were born one twin is very aware and alert and enlightened, and the other twin is very heavy and dull and unenlightened. Unfortunately the stupid one eats all the food and becomes very very big, and the awakened one becomes very very thin. Whenever somebody asks, *"Who is there?"* the big fat one shouts *"Me!"* The little thin one very quietly says *"Me too"*, but nobody can hear it. The big fat one certainly doesn't want to hear it. It's very sad. So what food does the big fat one eat? The food of thoughts, feelings, sensations and all kinds of experience. This is how the ego is growing all the time, by consuming the world.

Hopefully you can see from what I have been saying, how our active engagement – as the one who needs and who likes and who dislikes – creates a glue or a bonding between the impermanent arising on the object side and the impermanent arising on the subject side. When we start to see that, then the one who doesn't speak can just enjoy not speaking. That is to say, when we see that *'I don't have to develop myself in order to become enlightened'* then the conflict between the awakened state and the unawakened state can be ended.

The **ego** will never be enlightened. That's not what the ego does. Asking the ego to be enlightened would be very silly. The one who needs to be enlightened is already enlightened. In philosophy this is termed a 'category confusion' and describes mistaking the domain and function of aspects of our experience. If you relax and stop making effort, then the natural state, free of effort, will be revealed. If you are very busy trying to make yourself ready to enter the natural state which is without effort, you will not arrive where you want to go. *'I am going to run fast until I am ready to sit still.'* It doesn't work. People who run a lot will become addicted to running. I go to my work early in the morning when good people are still in the beds. Who else is out in the streets? Joggers, hot and sweaty and running... Why? Because they become addicted to running. It's just the same with thinking: *"Oh, I haven't done enough thinking today. Thinky, thinky, thinky... that feels more like me now!"* The practice of thinking doesn't lead to our understanding non-thinking.

There are two kinds of non-thinking: there is the non-thinking of being disassociated, spaced-out. And there is the non-thinking of the state of clarity, free of enmeshment in thought. It is the second one that is described in dzogchen and this state has been there from the very beginning. This is completely central yet it seems so strange: how could the best thing that I do be to stop making effort?

When Nuden Dorje says, **'Whatever objects arise are self-liberating'**, 'object' here refers to what we take to be outside objects and inside objects. The perception of the glass as well as all the thoughts and experiences out of which I make 'I, me, myself'—these are all objects in as much as they arise like reflections in the mirror-like mind. And they go free by themselves. This is something we can check out for ourselves.

We will sit and do the practice again in a moment and you may start to see *"Oh, if I don't make effort, the whole world doesn't stop."* Thoughts, feelings, sensations continue to come but I am not merged in them. Neither am I stepping back and separating from them. My mind itself reveals whatever is occurring. Thoughts, experiences, sensations come and go. If necessary, all I need for action is there—I have all the things that are required, the thoughts, the feelings, everything is still there—but I have no need for action because I am not constructing myself out of thoughts. The meditation is here; it's in the world. Other people are there; somebody asks, *"How are you?"* and you reply. Life goes on.

That is to say, the movement arises within relaxed open spaciousness within the infinite field of experience, as a specific response towards the other who is likewise a dynamic manifestation within that ever-open field. This is the heart of freedom for we don't have to construct ourselves all the time. When we let go of our effort we experience simple presence, nothing else, and it is enough. We don't have to reassure ourselves, reaffirm ourselves, because the centre, the basis of our identity, is spacious awareness without content. It has no personal anger or desire yet due to the non-duality of our nature and our being in the world, the world, the field expression, ceaselessly invites us and we manifest according to the situation. Thus Nuden Dorje says, **'Clear, empty and free of grasping, like the sky, that is the recognition that will then arise. To remain spontaneously in that state is the development of insight.'**

The mind has no content and yet it is always full of content. As is said in the **Heart Sutra**, '*Form is emptiness, emptiness is not other than form.*' The mind is not a thing and yet every thing arises within it. It doesn't have to grasp, because it is open. It doesn't rely on anything, so it can let everything go.

We all know the story of Don Juan. This is a man who always needs to pursue the conquest of a woman. In that sense he represents the ego-mind, always needing some new object in order to confirm its own existence. That is to say, the ego is object-related. These can be external objects or internal objects. The value of an object doesn't last long, which is why the ego is fundamentally unreliable.

### **The sky offers limitless hospitality but ego's hospitality is limited**

When the text describes awareness as '**clear and empty**', it means it has no content of its own, nothing that might experience a lack. It has no basis for needs and therefore has no basis for grasping. Therefore it is '**like the sky.**' The sky remains open—if a storm comes, if many clouds come, if lightning comes—it offers hospitality. If there is a beautiful day and many birds are flying—it offers hospitality. If a nuclear bomb goes off—it offers hospitality. Space itself cannot be destroyed. Because it cannot be destroyed, it is without fear. Because it is without fear, it has infinite hospitality.

The ego's hospitality will always be limited. To ask the ego to have infinite hospitality is punitive and cruel because the person that I am hospitable to might exploit me. Many of the difficulties that come in dharma practice come because we ask the ego to do things it can't do. The mind and the content of the mind are not the same. The ego is a content of the mind. The content can't do what the mind can do.

For example, I am sitting on a chair and this chair is one of the contents of the room. More people can sit in the room than can sit on this one chair. This is obvious. Likewise the content of the mind is always smaller than the mind itself. To ask twenty people to sit on this chair would be silly. To ask the ego to be free of grasping is silly. Rather than spending time trying to transcend your limit, enter into the state free of limits. This state is called '*lhag-thong*' in Tibetan and means 'the best seeing' or 'clear vision' or 'seeing exactly how things are.'

### **Aa practice: advice on adjusting your balance in post-meditation**

Okay. So we will do a little practice. As before, in the heart is a white 'Aa' surrounded by rainbow light. Say 'Aa'. Just relax in the sound 'Aa' and open. If you find yourself being caught up in your thoughts, just relax again into the slow out-breath. Then it's a question of balance, not falling into whatever is arising nor holding the mind apart from it as if it were something else, but being exactly present in the infinity of the moment. By being present with whatever is arising, each arising goes free by itself. We are still here, not as a thing, not as a position, but in and as a state beyond language.

[Recitation of 'Aa' and ten minutes of quiet sitting]

With this practice, as we start to move in the world, we integrate the experience of movement in the state of openness. Integration is not the same as fusion. Integration means that we don't divide the world up into myriad seemingly self-existing objects. It doesn't mean you become so stupid that you can't even tell the difference between a car and a cow but rather that in the moment of the arising of the experience of the car, you are aware of the non-dual nature of the experience.

This is the non-duality of our presence and our participation in the field as it arises. In that way, everything we do is very precise but not locked into and limited by our cognitions about what is happening. Thoughts come and go in the spaciousness of the mind. Speech arises and passes in the spaciousness of silence. Movement occurs and vanishes in the spaciousness of stillness. In that way, whatever we are doing is precisely just what it is, but is never cut off, never separated, from the integrated field of arising. The actual quality of this integration is not something you can describe, but only experience.



As an image to help us understand this, we might imagine our lives occurring on two axes. One is the horizontal axis of self and other. Integration here is the experience of oneself and the other arising together. For example, I can see you more clearly than I see myself. I have to turn myself into another to see myself. That is to say, to see my own face I have to find a mirror to look into and see my reflection. But your face I can see directly. This is very strange. In that way we can start to see, *"Oh, how you are, is how I am!"* We are not homogenised, not all boiled together like tomato soup, rather each appearance, including myself, is in its own place as my world. How you are is part of my experience. Just as how I am is part of your experience. In that way subject and object arise together. They can appear separate but they are always together.

The other axis is a vertical axis, in which the ground of experience—the unborn openness or the emptiness of the dharmakaya—gives rise to everything that occurs. That is to say, the emptiness of the mirror reveals, when I look in it, not just my face but also the room behind me. In other words, I don't have a personal ground inside me, a ground of 'me', an essence of 'me', but the ground of 'me' is the ground of you. When we just stay relaxed and open in the practice and when we have more and more experience of the coming and going of whatever is arising, then we start to see—sitting here, relaxed, eyes open—that awareness is not inside looking out, nor is it outside floating about in space. It's pervasive and reveals everything. It can't be located as being a particular this or that. This is the ground of everything, and subject and object arise together from and within it. Each thing that arises, arises in its own place, within infinite hospitality.

Although it feels as if I am inside me, this is the subtle commentary of the ego, which is always pulling experience towards itself. When we try to locate the ego we find it is always on the move like a jumping frog. And when we try to establish its content we find that it is always changing. It is a point of reference, 'I, me, myself', and is able, in its emptiness, to merge with myriad appearances. In this way it is empty like the mirror yet disguises the actual nature of the experiencer by claiming a personal continuity of existence as a real entity, my own identity.

Thus openness, or nirvana, and limitation, or samsara, are very similar due to their inseparability from the ground emptiness of all. The experience of what is out there is as much in my mind as what appears to be inside. As is often said in dzogchen texts, *"Don't hold the mind inside! Don't hold experience outside! The mind is neither inside nor outside."* Experience also is neither inside nor outside. Relaxed and open, everything arises by itself.

We could talk for years and years about this, but maybe enough is enough! There is no end to description of this detail, and that detail... The main thing is to get the central principle of the practice, and to take it into being with oneself so that you are constantly re-finding your balance. Not falling in, not stepping back; not falling in, not stepping back...

*Meditate 'sky to sky' in the infinite openness of all phenomena*

In terms of meditation, the infinite openness of all phenomena, including self and other means our practice is, as traditionally described, 'sky to sky'. In the Tibetan understanding, clouds arise from the sky. The sky is open and empty and it shows different things like rainbows, clouds, rain and so on. When we sit we sit as the sky, infinite, welcoming. Whatever arises is also like the sky, infinite, ungraspable, without inherent essence. The great sky reveals through its awareness the sky-like subject and the sky-like object.

As another example, we might think of a stage on which there are stage are two actors. Imagine it is a small theatre company, so every night they put on a different drama. In tonight's play, each actor is in their role, and being in role, they speak with the voice, tone and gestures of that particular character. The next night, they appear on the same stage in a different play, in a different role, speaking different tones, using different gestures. When the actor comes off the stage, does she become her real self? Or is she just playing another role? Maybe she phones her mother, then she phones her partner. When speaking to the mother and speaking to the partner there is a different tone of voice. The content of the conversation is probably rather different too.

In that way we can see that although we feel we exist as a unique individual with our own defining recognisable characteristics, we are just like actors, always presenting ourselves in different ways in different situations. You might think that this view is mad but actually it is the basis of sanity. In fact to believe that you are always the same is the real madness. When a person is in a state of great disturbance they will offer the same presentation to whoever is there. When we are very anxious or depressed, we are so self-preoccupied that we find it difficult to be in actual relation with the other and to make fitting gestures towards them.

## Our identity is performative, not essential

It is our very emptiness, or our very openness, that allows us to be socially appropriate. Awakening into the dharmakaya, the mind aspect of our buddha nature, is to be so open that there is no fixed position inside oneself and manifestation comes according to the particularities of situations. Rather than having to hold ourselves together as a substantial self with a fixed continuity through time, by relaxing and resting in the openness, energy manifests as required.

In dzogchen these two aspects or principles are referred to as *'kadag'* and *'lhundrup'*. *'Kadag'*, or primordial purity, means that the mind itself, that our true nature, is not a fixed thing with any shape, colour or conditioning. Because the mind is not a thing it is not relative to other things. It cannot be marked or sullied or damaged by anything else—for it is not a thing standing in relation to other things. From the very beginning, from beginningless time, our mind itself has been empty, open, radiant and infinitely pure. Being indestructible, uncontaminate-able and ungraspable, it is incomprehensible. It is not an object that can be defined and made sense of by the application of concepts. You don't have to find your own mind – it is not lost or somewhere else. All that is required is to stop imagining that it is something it is not.

When we first come across these Tibetan technical terms, they can appear to be referring to something far away and on a different level, but they precisely address our own experience, because our identity is performative and not essential. It's when the performativity is arising out of scripts, out of patterns or procedures, that our freedom is constrained and diminished.

*'Lhundrup'* means *'formed immediately, spontaneous'*. That is to say, the openness of being shows itself as the radiance of the display of the phenomenological field. In the immediacy of the revelation everything is perfect as the unborn expression of infinite openness. Some sense of this can be experienced in art, music and dance, in dance improvisation, in miming, in clowning, singing, playing instruments together... In that situation the feeling of non-separation from the other people allows an immediacy of connection, so that there is a co-creation. It's not about one person leading and the other following, but about the people who are involved arriving in the same place at the same time in the same mood. This is not organised from the outside; it is not a quality of leadership like the conductor of an orchestra, nor is it a kind of fused herd-instinct. Rather it arises from not placing oneself apart, from not thinking, *"What will I do? What will they do?"*

This involves trust, relaxation. In ordinary life trust arrives from rehearsing a lot with people. Dzogchen practice opens the doors to intrinsic trust, to relaxed spontaneity. This releases the tension arising from anxiety as we let go of the responsibility and the burden of individual agency.

This reveals experience as a communication; for all that we encounter manifests for us according to our capacity, faculties, orientation etc. Self-forming or self-organising is intrinsic to the experiential field. Of course we can edit our experience and construct our own narratives but this is superimposed on the automatic self-arising or autopoiesis that is already there. Openness is non-editing, non-blocking, non-'improving' of the flow of experience. The field of experience is simply the domain in which moment by moment, communication between all arising forms is mutual and responsive.

Ignorance and attachment in buddhism refer to a kind of communication failure in which part of the system appears to be cut off and separate. It's like the song by David Bowie, *'Ground Control to Major*

*Tom'* where he goes drifting off into space. We ourselves take it upon ourselves that we are something separate and so it is as if I am communicating out from myself towards a world system which is outside myself. But we are always and already inside the world system, which is infinite and beyond appropriation.

### Indra's Net

One of the images often used in buddhism to illustrate this point is that of Indra's net, a net which spreads throughout the whole universe, with a jewel at each intersection. Each of these jewels has many facets, and each facet reflects all the other jewels on the net so that there is an infinite multiplication of experience, yet each facet looks as if it is the central point revealing everything else. Similarly each person, each sentient being, is the centre of the universe. They are not the one true centre of the universe, for the universe, or rather, polyverse, has infinite centres.

From this point of view, you could say that monotheism is one of the great tragedies of Western civilisation because monotheism indicates that there is one central point and that everything is constructed around that central point. The structure of Tibetan buddhist mandalas is similar, there is the central deity and then the attendant deities right down to the doorkeepers and so on. But in the Tibetan tradition they say that there are *infinite* mandalas and that actually each person is the central deity of the mandala. You are the central person in *your* mandala and the servant in *someone else's* mandala.

Energy arises showing different forms. We are both the infinite non-specificity of space—that is to say, no matter what words you use to try to describe yourself, you'll never catch yourself—and simultaneously we are the infinite potential which shows many different forms according to different situations. What happens when we lock on to attachment to a specific form? We lose the felt sense of openness and become fixated on the maintenance of a particular shaping, which we take to be ourselves.

There are two aspects to this process of being diminished: we become limited because we don't experience the openness of the ground of our being, and we become limited because we don't experience the range of our potential. So the more we become attached or identified with a particular position, the more constrained or tightened we become as we defend ourselves against the changes in the environment which sustains us.

Generally speaking, people are divided into two groups: Those who think they are bigger than they are and those who think they are smaller than they are. So, how to be one's own size? How to be in touch with one's own qualities in relation to other people's qualities, as they actually are? To be too proud is not helpful; to be too small and humble is also not helpful. From the point of view of dharma, our position, our qualities, our situation is always contingent. The actuality of our lives is that in different situations we go up and we go down. These are the functions of energy. If it makes you happy when you go up and sad when you go down, this is just how it is. However if you develop a storyline about it and hang on to the narrative, then you will be cut off from the next actual connective moment since identification with the story is an interruption of the direct immediacy of being in the situation. It is not to suggest that we should get blown about like an autumn leaf, since our energy is also part of the communicative energy system. We don't have to be dominated by others but when our energy is connected then we are part of synergy, and when that happens, then everything is somehow okay.

If musicians start jamming together, and let's say the bass guitar has a long riff to play... if they are right with it, then everybody's energy goes with it too. But sometimes you hear musicians stealing their place, making their solo too loud or too long. They distort the music and you get their movement into being 'the star'. When somebody becomes a star, the capacity to articulate into the evolving field is diminished. George Clooney, sweet man as he is, is always George Clooney. If you see George Clooney in a film, he is a star—not an actor. The actor is somebody who inhabits a role and tends to live inside the role, not too small, but not bursting through it either. The star is condemned to be more than their role, and other than their role. Being special sets them apart and so compromises their participation.

The ego yearns to be a star and so tends to find role adjustment difficult. The ego is the aspect of ourselves which moves out of being part of the evolving, non-dual manifestation into feeling *"I am a unique person. What about me? Do you really know me?"* In that way it is saying, *"You cannot show me where I have to be. Instead let me tell you about me."* Given this, it is very helpful to start to observe ourselves and see the internal narratives which cause us to feel separated off from the evolving field.

Our ego is seeking to build its power base and so cling to knowledge. It wants knowledge to precede experience, as it seeks to determine the outcome before the moment of participation. Heidegger writes about having resources *'to hand'*. That is to say, instead of keeping our knowledge inside us as a definition of who we are, our knowledge is around us the way a carpenter or a plumber has a box of tools. When the hand of the plumber goes out to the spanner required for a particular joint it is because the hand of the plumber is empty, and he can choose the right spanner. He takes the spanner up, does the work, and then he puts it down. In the same way, we have many different qualities, many capacities but none of these are definitive of who we are, precisely because our being is indefinable.

Yet, when there is an anxiety, our self-questioning becomes ungrounding and we seek for definite answers, for true knowledge: *"Who am I? This must be me!"* Such certitude gives rise to an attachment in which we take just some of our qualities to be truly definitive of who we are: *"This is who I am!"* The plumber is stuck with just this one kind of spanner. *"If I put down my spanner, I won't be a plumber. But because I have this particular spanner in my hand forever, I am not a very good plumber."* This is the dialectical tension of the ego: it is never empty enough, and therefore it is never full enough.

## Examining your thoughts

Then Nuden Dorje says, **'When practising, however you do it, many different kinds of thoughts and experiences will occur. Then you must unwaveringly examine how they are in terms of where did they come from, where do they stay, where do they go and what shape and colour they have.'**

Maybe a thought or sensation or experience, arises, for example *'I am tired.'* Where does that come from? We tend to think, *'Oh, that comes from the fact that I am tired!'* You might even think, *'It comes from me. I am the one who is tired.'* Both of these responses are somewhat solipsistic; they form a sealed circle. Avoid falling into and believing the cognitive content but instead examine: where does it come from?

Whenever we find a 'solution' as to where it comes from, keep looking on that point, looking again and again. If you keep looking you will see that 'the solution' vanishes—it was just another transient idea. Keep looking till you see that each and every thought arises as the manifesting potential of open awareness. When the thought is present in your mind, where does it stay? Does it rest on anything? Does it have a shape, a colour? Keep looking and each solution that seems truly valid will vanish like the morning mist.

You might feel, *" am having the thought. The form of the thought mirrors who I am."* In this way the question of who I am, finds a solution in another thought. So, one thought is saying something confirmatory about the status of another thought. This is a kind of nepotism: *"On the basis of being a thought, I would like to validate this thought."*

Actually all thoughts are all reliable. *"Trust me, I am a thought!"* The thought is just what it is. It is we who take it to be something that it is not. This is what we have to look at, because the habit of attachment is based on the reliance on concepts as the basis of meaning and truth, as if the true meaning was inherent in the thought. This is why in the practice of dzogchen we have to become more awake, more suspicious, to let the thought show us what it is so that we don't over-burden it with our longings and projections.

There is a saying, *"If you give someone enough rope, they will hang themselves."* This is a principle used in police interrogation. If somebody can be encouraged to talk, through that talking they will reveal

something they are trying to conceal. The detective shouldn't be in too much of a hurry. The detective has to just be calm and relaxed and listening, acting as if they are completely taken in. Then the criminal, in being more relaxed, lets slip something incriminating.

It is the same in the meditation. We stay very relaxed and open, present with whatever comes and then, very gently, you can bring this question softly into the sphere of attention: *"Where do thoughts rest?"* Luckily, your mind will provide you with a lot of answers. Very relaxed and open, you just observe thoughts coming. Then whenever a solution comes, whenever you seem to see precisely where the thought is resting or staying, where it comes from, where it is going to, just stay with that. Because this is the vital point where there is the difference between a conceptual construction, an interpretation, and a direct seeing. When the answer to the question is another thought, and then another thought, you remain *inside* the woven matrix of conceptual elaboration and the solution which has arisen is simply a thought, which also vanishes.

It is fortunate that our legal systems have appeal courts because sometimes a person is found guilty, they go to prison, and then someone comes up with the question, *"Hang on, was this person really guilty?"* And then they go back and reopen the case and look at the evidence again. Sometimes they find that there has been a miscarriage of justice, perhaps because at the time of the original trial there was a need to find an answer, a need to find someone guilty. Similarly in our desire for rapid alleviation of the anxiety of not knowing, we come up with an easy solution: *"It is like this! Case closed; justice has been done."* But maybe not. Maybe the judge—who is also known as 'I, me, myself'—is in fact a criminal. This is quite frightening. This comes a little close to Mr. Kafka.

Buddhism is a troubling kind of inquiry since it proposes that our experience of the world arises from ignorance. In popular language we have the expression that *"One's life is based on a lie."* And then the one who is appointed to check out whether there is a lie, is himself a liar! This is why, in this text, they talk a lot about clarity. Looking again and again. If it was very simple, you could just do it once and then, *"Oh, that's it!"*

But we have meditation practice, which means we look again and again and again, day after day, month after month, year after year—because looking and seeing is difficult. Difficult because we have prejudices and prejudice is the enemy of justice. Many courthouses around the world have a statue of 'Lady Justice' holding a set of scales and a sword. She is often given a blindfold because justice should be blind. Isn't that an interesting idea? It means not looking to see what one wants to see, not seeking to affirm what one already 'knows', but being willing to not-know in order to arrive at true knowing. This is the particular quality of dzogchen practice.

In this time we are spending together I don't think that I am suggesting that there is anything you should believe. Rather what we have is a path of inquiry, which means being willing to not know in advance. So it's not about changing one belief system for another; it's not about becoming a buddhist, but it *is* about learning how to look clearly and simply at what is actually happening.

### **Advice on staying present with the one who is present**

Let's do more practice with the use of the 'Aa'. This time we can focus on examining whether the mind remains somewhere. In a very gentle way, observe moment-by-moment as experience is arising, what is the relation between the experience and the experiencer? Who is the one having the experience? We do that not by chasing after the thoughts. We are present, aware, and open to whatever is occurring. We are not looking in the way we look at things in the world. Not heavy looking to see 'What is happening to me?' It is a question just of staying present with the one who is present.

This is quite subtle, because if you pull in too tightly, you create a position, *"I am looking from here at that"*. If you are too loose, then you just disperse and fall into whatever is happening. So, if either of these extremes is happening, just release into the out-breath. This brings more space, and in that

moment of space, there you are, present. Rest in that and observe whatever is occurring. Does anything abide? If so, where and on what?

*[Recitation of 'Aa' and ten minutes of quiet sitting]*

### **The mirror offers hospitality to all reflections**

Through our practice we can see that our mind is like a mirror. There are two aspects to this. Our mind is both open and full of a continuous flow of experience. The stillness never changes and is ungraspable, being the nature of the mind itself. Within this stillness, energy is ceaselessly arising and it arises as all the thoughts which create 'self' and 'other'. So when we do this practice we are gently shifting our attention away from identification and intoxication with whatever is arising, towards becoming aware of the spaciousness within which all this is arising. In terms of meditation practice the key point is: don't try to hold your mind away from arisings.

If you try to calm the mind and stop the flow of thoughts, then you are doing something artificial. You can do this and for some time there won't be any thoughts, but then the thoughts start again. So, that state is unstable and in fact it is just another form of manifestation. It is not likely that you will find yourself in the natural state by means of methods that are willful and manipulative. This is why the image of the mirror is very helpful. The mirror is always empty even as it is full of reflections. It is the emptiness of the mirror that offers the hospitality to the reflection. When you look in the mirror, and you see your own reflection, the invisible openness of the mirror is the basis of the potential, or the capacity, for your reflection to be there. That is to say, openness, or emptiness, and manifestation are not two different things. So you won't find an emptiness or openness on one side and a manifestation on the other side.

Openness and manifestation are naturally integrated; they are always already in balance. So it is not that we have to get them in balance, we don't have to adjust anything. It is not like reviewing your diet, "*Oh, I am eating too much meat, I need to eat more vegetables. I won't cook so many things and I'll keep a bit of my plate empty. Oh, I have too much manifestation; I need to have more emptiness. I'll keep my mind empty.*" Rather the 'work' is to relax the desire to work, to be in charge, to manage the situation. By not doing, by allowing whatever comes to come, paradoxically there is the dawning of clarity. Clarity reveals that integration or non-duality is a given, it is just how it is. The ego's turbulence and endless activity is just part of how it is. It doesn't have to be changed. All that is required is that we see that it's not the only game in town, that we open our vision to the infinite, to the whole beyond totalisation.

At first it is as if there are two distinct aspects. On one side there is emptiness, openness and awareness, which is the presence that registers the appearance of whatever is occurring, and the clarity which is neither falling into what is arising nor stepping back from it, but is allowing its full brilliance to be there. On the other side there is the *appearance* of whatever is occurring. Yet from the beginning these two have been inseparable.

When we say 'Aa', we are not relaxing away from appearance for appearance isn't the problem. The problem is how we take appearance, what we make of appearance, what we do to appearance. The key thing is to relax identification with, or involvement with, what is arising as if it was one's true identity.

### **Awareness relaxes into the ground, which is open**

I can have an identification with my body and say, "*This is who I am*". If I am practicing general vipassana meditation, I can relax this a bit and say, "*This is what is arising as what I call my body*". I can relax this a bit more and just be present in the moment with what is arising. However, my body is also defined not just internally by my identification, but externally by my *dis-identification* with other forms: this glass I am holding is not my body; you are not my body; this room we are in, is not my body; my body is both what I take it to be and what I take it not to be.

When we say 'Aa' and relax we are relaxing both the identification and the dis-identification, and opening to the integrated field of arising. The mind is not something inside the body, although mental functioning manifests as something inside the body. That is to say, my thoughts feel as if they are something inside me: *"I have thoughts about you who exist outside of what I think of as being me"*. This is mental activity. Mental activity which is separated from its own ground operates as the basis of dualistic identification. So, when we relax with 'Aa', stuff continues to come. At first, because we just have the continuation of our ordinary experience, it looks like, *"I am inside; that is outside; I have been doing 'Aa' practice but nothing changed, so now what?"*

The key point is that nothing is changed *in the manner of arising*. However awareness is revealed, as we relax from thinking that I am inside myself. It is only the energy vortex of conceptual elaboration that blinds manifestation to its own inalienable ground. This is the central point of relaxation. It is not that I have to give up what I have but that the 'I have' has never been the true situation. And because it is an illusion—or a lie, or an ignorance—energy is involved in maintaining it.

We probably all have some experience of telling lies and know that when you tell a lie, you have to remember that you have told a lie. Then you have to remember to whom you have, or have not, told the lie, because we usually tell a lie for a specific purpose. There is quite a lot of activity involved in lying, not just in the moment of working out what sort of lie to tell and how to tell it, but in maintaining the illusory world created by the lie. In the same way, the construction of the individual sense of self as if it had a true essential continuity, exists as a lie. The lie is not *so* far from the truth. We are here, everything continues as before. The illusion is not that there is an appearance, but rather that it is the appearance of particular entities imbued with their own personal essence. Appearances *are* there, but they arise in the manner of a dream. Like a reflection of the moon on water, all appearances arise spontaneously, together, fully formed.

Thus when we do the practice and relax, we are not trying to make the room dissolve, but our experience of what is in front of us may change. As the effort required to keep things as they appear relaxes a little bit, they start to reveal more of what they actually are. In that state we simply allow everything to arise and pass. Rather than having a sense of a fixed subject looking again and again at objects which continue to be present—and which I understand or make sense of on the basis of what I remember about them from before and what I can predict about them being in the future—the arising is now everything-at-the-same-time as an ecstatic revealing. It is ecstatic because ego is stepping out of its seemingly fixed position and is thus directly revealed to be part of the energy flow of manifestation. Self, other and everything is the immediacy, through the senses, of the potentiality of the ground.

The advantage of this experience is that when we move with this open integration into the world, we don't ask appearances to be what they can't be. Because we don't feel so cut off from what is going on participation becomes easier and more spontaneous. When I wave my hand in front of my face, I can feel the wind as the air is moved towards it, but in space, which is empty, there is no resistance, no friction. Similarly, as we relax into spacious openness, we have less and less friction with events.

Buddhist literature contains many references to *'the unconditioned'*. The unconditioned means that because nothing exists as a substantial entity, it doesn't exist in relation to anything else. Space is not a thing, so it doesn't exist in relation to anything else. However in ordinary terms we can say that this glass and these lozenges are existing in relation to the two sides of the table in front of me. We can move them to different corners; we can measure the distance between them; we can say one is bigger than the other; one has more colour than the other, and so on. That is to say, we compare and contrast, and by doing that we make things relative to each other or seemingly connected which each other because of similar qualities.

We can say, *"The watch is more expensive than the glass."* On one level, if I break the glass it won't bother me as much as if I break the watch. But if I break the glass I can cut myself with the broken glass, and a broken watch is probably not as dangerous. You can see that there is no end to that kind of

thinking. That is the nature of samsara, comparing and contrasting: *'Is this good or bad?' 'Will I spend Christmas with my family or with my friends? Is it better to do this or do that?'*

This kind of thought is the energy of the mind, but the mind itself has no shape, no colour; it doesn't come from anywhere, it doesn't stay anywhere, it doesn't go anywhere. It is easy enough to say this about the nature of the mind but it is not helpful to simply parrot it as dogma. What we want is to get direct experience. So we take up the questions and investigate them again and again in our own experience. Does my mind have any colour? Does it have any shape? When we start to see that the mind itself has no shape we taste its infinity, that it has no limit. Then we see that there is nothing outside of it. Remarkable! Amazing! Who would have thought it? No one, for it is outwith the realms of thought.

Within this open, unshaped, unformed awareness—an awareness which does nothing and which does everything—everything is revealed. This is difficult for us to understand because if we ourselves don't put the kettle on, the tea won't be made. On an ordinary level we know that if we don't do the action, it doesn't get done. Action involves mobilisation: we bring our resources together towards the task and moving into contact, the task is performed. The mirror, in contrast, shows everything while doing nothing. There is not somebody inside the mirror pushing out the images. Without effort, the mirror shows what is there. This is the fundamental difference between dualistic consciousness, which is an activity of the mind, an arising of energy, and the mind itself, which is like the mirror, effortlessly displaying whatever is there.

## The essence of practice

So, the essence of the practice is quite straightforward:

- Relax. Be present with what is occurring without falling into it and without holding back from it. The more you relax the habit of mobilisation, the more you are relaxing from the identification *"I am the one who has to effortlessly make things happen"*
- From that we awaken to the sense *"My true nature is an awareness of what is occurring."* Within that awareness its own energy arises as both subject and object. That is to say, you still continue with your daily life—engage with your work, family and so on—but without being so fully enmeshed in it, so fully identified with it that there is no space to explore more gentle and harmonious and contactful ways of proceeding.
- The practice is quite straightforward; we simply have to go back into it again and again and again.

What can help is starting to observe how much tension we carry in our *body*, in our *voice* and in our *mental functioning*. Make sure to relax the body. Notice if there is a lot of muscular tension; go swimming, have a massage, do some yoga or tai chi or something similar. With the speech as well, if you feel tension in the throat, that's often comes because of an anxiety about speaking or not speaking and is linked to tension in the diaphragm. So ease the breathing. Tension of the body and the speech are very much linked to the mind. Remember that the ego is illegitimate. It has claimed legitimacy as the centre of our being, as our true identity, but it is not. Because of this illegitimacy it is always agitated. It's frightened that it will be exposed, found out and so it has to create some protection. Seeing and solving problems is what the ego is doing all the time, but its way of identifying the world as being full of problems means there are always more problems to solve...

Dzogchen is not some magical solution that you drink three drops of everyday. But the more relaxed we are, the more open we are, we offer more welcome to the evolving phenomenological field, and this provides—certainly in my experience—the best way of dealing with problems. Because problems exist on two levels: one is as an event and the other as part of a narrative. As an event it has a beginning, a middle, an end. As part of a narrative it is endless. The less we enter into absorption in the ego's narratives and the more we are fresh and precise with phenomena as they manifest momentarily, the more clarity pervades our activity in the world.



## Dedication of Merit

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**DE YI SA LA GO PAR SHO**  
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May I put them on that same stage!

*By this virtue may I quickly gain the attainment of the glorious guru's stage, then may I put all beings without even one exception, on that same stage!*