
Discovering the natural state

Session Three

Using deity practice and tantra to discover the natural state, with reference to shiné

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18 June 1995

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Unedited

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We will continue looking at emptiness and the nature of the mind. When we take up such questions as ‘Who is the one who knows?’, or ‘Who is the one who is looking?’ , we find often that we can become very confused because we are used to having some fixed notion of self-identity, related either to thoughts, feelings or sensations. Yet when we start to examine this point, we find that our places of identity are impermanent and it can often feel that the one who is looking, is a sensation. You might get something that feels like the back of your head, and that's where you seem to be looking from. It could be a memory, or it could be an idea, but this kind of construction is not surviving through time.

And it is at moments like this that we get the benefit of the more general reflections that we have been building up for some time on impermanence and non-attachment. Because through non-attachment we develop a sense that when we find something to cling to, and we hold back from clinging and look instead, we find that the thing that we were going to cling is largely a construction of our own mental processes. This is a very essential recognition, because as long as we believe that we can find entities in the world that we can rely on, then we are going to be more likely to invest our energy in these entities than taking up the difficult task of holding back the energy that goes out into attachment on object, and stay with the anxiety of the loss of identity that this brings about.

For example, you may have a small child who has never been to school, but this child has friends who are already going to school. The child keeps saying, ‘Oh I'm going to school in September, I'm really looking forward to going to school’. Then the first day the child goes to school, it gets to the door, and says, ‘I don't want to go in there. I'm going home with you Mummy.’ If the mother thinks of the child suffering in the school, she'll let the child come home. Of course on one level that is being kind to the child. And we have a similar position except we are both mother and child for ourselves. On the one hand we say, “Oh I want to get enlightened, I want to get free of attachment”, yet when we come to the point of being on the edge of entering into an attitude of non attachment, we get very scared and retreat back into something we can be attached to.

That is why it is important to prepare the ground, by taking up the general examination of the world through the lens of impermanence and understanding non-attachment.

The three seals of the mahayana dharma, the three basic principles of mahayana dharma, are suffering, impermanence and absence of inherent self-nature. Through the absence of inherent self-nature we come to realise that all phenomena outside ourselves and our own bodies and our own thoughts are devoid of an inherent self-nature. But clearly we exist. We are all sitting

together in a room, and we can look at each other and we see I exist, you exist... So on some level, clearly we are here.

We have to always remember that the Buddha taught the middle way. He is not describing a nihilism, in which everything is just dissolved out into nothing, and there is just some big hole in the middle of the world. What is called *anatma* in Sanskrit and *dagme* in Tibetan, the absence of self, essentially means the absence of an inherent self-nature. This doesn't mean that we don't have a self. What it means is that self is processional and contingent. Because clearly, I exist. It would be ridiculous to say the Buddha taught non-existence. 'I don't exist': this is madness. I exist. But I don't exist as anything except what I am becoming. So there is no essence of James-ness, which I can return to.

What I find is that James reveals himself to James through the process of James-ing. Sometimes James reveals himself to James in ways that James would rather he didn't reveal himself to James! And I think could I really have done that? But the day that we can no longer surprise ourselves will be the day we are dead. In the process of becoming we are called into being by the world through our response to the world, which means that we are not the authors of our own fate.

Three kayas

So rather than the sense that I exist inside this flesh and blood house, which will keep me protected for a while, and then I'll die and pop into another flesh and blood house and so on for a long time, rather the self is not separate from embodied being. All that I am is part of the self. And the self that is all that I am, is in an interplay with the world and cannot be separated from it. The experience of realising the revelation of being as process is called the '*three kayas*'.

These three kayas are often spoken about in their Sanskrit names - *dharmakaya*, *sambhogakaya*, and *nirmanakaya*. Dharmakaya means that there is no essence that can be established as being something as such. When we look into the root of self we don't find anything in particular, and therefore we can say that through this penetration into this essence of self that just goes on and on forever, this quality is infinite. It is not constrained in any way. It is not a thing. Out of this infinite openness there arise all manner of thoughts, feelings and sensations, not as things, not as entities, but as a radiant display of infinite being. So whenever a thought or a feeling arises, instead of it existing in a separated subject-object relationship, I am having a thought, I can feel a pain in my knee, there is the recognition that this sensation is the display of this infinite open potentiality.

Then through these thoughts and feelings all the richness of potential somehow one manifests something. You know, I could talk about all sorts of things but somehow I am talking this. I don't know why I am talking this, but anyway I am talking this. And the words fall into a shape. You are listening somehow or other, maybe here, maybe spaced out in your heads, but somehow we are all taking up a shape. It is this shaping in the moment which is being transformed through the movement of internal feeling and of a response to what appears to be external phenomena, that is called *nirmanakaya*.

Now on the level of being in this embodied form, if I am with someone else and they get to me in some way, they appear to be real and I appear to be real, and we lock into something, whether that is under the impact of desire or hatred, envy, jealousy, whatever the compacting force, nonetheless we are locking in. This locking on leads to a point where I lose the sense of

the thoughts and feelings that are arising as a radiance from spaciousness, I lose the sense of spaciousness in my being, I get trapped into a particular way of locking on to someone, and then my thoughts and feelings appear to be channelled and produced by this tight interactive response to someone else.

And this how *samsara* begins. It is not a big deal. Samsara, nirvana, being enlightened, not being enlightened... it is not a big mystical deal. It is a very straightforward process. Either you recognise it or you don't recognise it, and there are means to recognise it and means not to recognise it.

Tantric visualisation as a method to understand the nature of your mind

There are two main methods into the realisation of this. One is through profound enquiry. The other is through tantric visualisation. The only valid purpose of tantra is for understanding the nature of your mind and for developing compassion. Yes, it has magical formulations of power and control, which, as far as I can see, are completely unhelpful for people living in the west, since we have electricity and other sources of power. We don't need to do pujas to get money and power since if we want money and power we can just get a job. We live in one of the richest countries in the world. If you want money and power, get off your backside and work! We live in a very fertile regime, we don't need to do magic.

Tantra gives you the choice of working with yourself as the deity or with visualising the deity in front of you. I think it is generally easier for beginners to see the deity in front of you. The deity can be having sex with a partner or be alone, they can be naked or they can be nicely dressed. They can be with many people or they can be on their own. At the beginning it is probably best to focus on one deity, however if you are going to approach the practice through your mood, you can have as many deities as you want, as long as it evokes in you a positive feeling of connectedness.

There are two main methods for the practice in tantra. One is the system according to *mahayoga*, where you pay careful attention to every detail of the deity. This has the benefit of focusing the mind. It's like a very elaborate form of the shiné meditation we have been practising where you try to avoid distraction by focusing in the detail and building up an impression of the deity. In the second system according to *anayoga* one operates with the feeling tone of the relationship that one has to the deity. One doesn't build it up carefully bit-by-bit, but in an instant - it's described as being like a fish turning in water - the deity, in fact the whole mandala, arises just in a spontaneous form.

There are many details and there are many systems of developing these deities and you can get into all of the information and it's quite interesting. But the essential structural point is something I will describe for you.

The structure and outline of a deity practice

First in front of me there is a clear blue sky.

Secondly there appears the form of the deity. One can build this up from seeing a point of light which manifests as five rainbow-coloured light which comes together into a letter which

transforms itself into a lotus out of which arises the deity, and many elaborated things, but in a simple form you can just say “There is the deity”.

I pray to the deity and I focus my attention on the deity through the use of a *mantra* or a short prayer. My faith and devotion has several functions. One, it keeps my attention on the deity and is a way of using a positively-focused attention to avoid distraction, so that it has the same affect as doing the shiné meditation of focusing on the breath. However shiné, focusing on the breath, is a low-energy fixation on an object, whereas praying with tears of devotion coming out of your eyes - “Tara you must save me, Tara you must save me” - is a high-energy fixation on a particular object. The energy which is devoted towards this deity you can use across the whole spectrum of devotion. You could have a respectful approach, “You are a high great deity, I respect you please, from your place above me, come and give me what I want” , or an erotic approach, “Oh sweet one, oh baby, oh honey I am thinking of you all the time. At night I dream of you. In the day I wander around. Only your name is on my lips. I need you to be close to me. All I want to do is be with you all the time.”

In more elaborate practices, you may have the idea of offering gifts up, and you imagine the whole sky filling with beautiful things to delight the senses and then from the deities, rays of light are coming down and merging into you. It’s all about this interplay of moving between, so that the focus of your attention stops being so much inside yourself looking out, but you are caught up in this whole dancing interweaving of subject and object from all sides together.

Then having recited the mantra—and one of the things about *mantra* is that it can be a very boring and tedious thing to recite—it doesn’t offer any hoops for distraction in the mind. It is a way of pulling energy into a repetitive, hypnagogic sound-effect, so that you are gradually induced into a trancelike state. Less of the energy is focused through the sense on the world and you are able to fixate more clearly on this visualised image.

Having done this for some time, one then stops the recitation, and the deity then moves over to the crown of one’s head and then starts to dissolve from the head down and the feet up into a small ball of light. If you can’t visualise clearly you don’t need to worry too much, you just have to have some sense of light as much as you can. Also when you are doing the mantra you can just imagine a small ball of light, maybe white light—if it turns into green light or pink light it doesn’t really matter, the main thing is always to be surprised and open to whatever comes. Don’t be anxious. Anxiety is the absolute enemy of happiness and openness. We don’t need it in the dharma practise. So there is no such thing as an error if you are able to work with it. Error only arises when we have rigidity and since everything is impermanent, what have we got to be rigid about. And that’s not delinquent.

So now the ball of light comes and descends from the top of our head, down - and by the top of our head remember before we were talking when we meditate the chin is slightly down so the top of the head is at the fontanel where the cranial parts are meeting - and it goes straight down there and into the heart. Now our body then dissolves into this ball of light. If you have the strong sense that your body is a solid flesh and blood body, then when you were visualising the ball of light and doing the *mantra* it’s very helpful if you can focus on rays of rainbow-coloured light flooding into your own body and dissolving any substantial sense of self - bones, blood and pus and so forth.

So our body dissolves down into this ball of light, which is the essence of the other body dissolved into light. These two lights merge together into one ball and this ball just gets smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller and smaller until it just vanishes. Now at that point you

don't want to be an observer of the situation, when you are experiencing this devotion. The reason why this experience is often described in quite erotic terms is because in an erotic situation, when you are coming close to someone, you don't want to be an observer of yourself having sex. I mean, that would be kind of a bit spooky. You want to actually be in there somehow. So through this visualisation you want to be in there and as the deity's coming to you, it's like a very erotic moment. You are completely in that so that your awareness is penetrated into your body. as it is dissolving. You're not out here looking at it; you are trying to use the intensity of the moment to collapse the subject-object division. You want as much identification through the body as you can. As you are praying you may find your body is shaking, tears come, the hairs on you skin move; one should be completely intoxicated by this experience.

So then dissolving down this ball of light goes down into your heart and in that moment of going out, you are going out through the centre of the ball of light "Huh!"

At that point everything is stripped away and there is just an awareness. There is no longer a subject onto an object. So it's absolutely vital that you become intoxicated in this moment. Totally caught up in it. Otherwise you are just outside and nothing's really transformed. Then with that moment one wants to stay relaxed in this open awareness and whatever arises, just allow it to pass through. There's no reason that you want to hang on to anything because you don't want to add anything to this state since you are no longer a point or an entity that could have things applied to it or that could contain things.

Mind at this point is an awareness without centre or circumference and what is arising is the effulgence of that awareness which is merged in emptiness. Whatever arises you recognise as the display of your own mind, letting it arise and letting it pass away without clinging to it. And if something arises and then you have another arising which seems to be saying this first arising is unpleasant, there's no reason to go after it since mind itself is empty. There is no shape and no blame and no guilt and no pollution that can go onto it since there is nowhere for it to stick. So it just passes right through. Things stick when you grasp them. If you don't grasp them they just pass through. So what is required at this time is not to do anything at all but just to be relaxed and open.

And you just remain in that state until you find that that state reveals itself as this room, as this world, and this world is integrated in this expression of being open. The world as the expression of this empty state. When one starts to get the feeling that this world is getting separated off, then you quickly go back into the meditation and arise back in it. So it's moving and pulsing, just like our breath comes into us and our breath goes out of us. We bring the world down into one point, into emptiness, and then out of emptiness, one point, two points, many points, the world. And this pulsing is the nature of the mind according to both dzogchen and mahamudra.

Doing practicing, saying Om Ah Hung

So this is the key principle that underpins all tantric visualisation practices. If we remember that this is the essence and this is why we do the practice then we can see that all the other forms, all the other aspects like making offerings, saying long praise prayers, are a kind of foreplay, something to get you in the mood.

OK. So maybe now we can practise. The mantra that I would suggest you use is “*Om Ah Hung*” “*Om Ah Hung*” is the essence of all mantras. “Om” represents the body of the Buddha. “Ah” represents the speech of the Buddha and “Hung” represents the mind of the Buddha.

So we start imagining in front of us a clear blue sky. Arising out of this clear blue sky can be whatever deity you have a relationship with, and if you have no initiation and no deity you can just imagine a small ball of light and this ball of light represents the enlightenment or the awakened state of the Buddha. Then we’ll recite together ““*Om Ah Hung*” We’ll recite that many times. The we’ll bring that to an end and at that point you imagine the deity or this ball of light coming over to the top of your head and then, if it’s a deity, dissolving down until it’s this ball of light and then the ball of light going down into your heart. Your own body dissolving into light down into his ball of light and then really concentrate your energy. Really pull it all together into that point. Imagine you are sinking down and down and down almost like if you are falling asleep or if you have ever had an anaesthetic, as if you are falling backwards. And then out into this openness. And then just stay very relaxed and open and gradually we’ll just move on into the experience of being in this room together.

And remember that this is a method to try to get you to a state where you can experience the mind as an awareness that includes all that arises rather than as a subject which is reacting to things that arise.

If you feel that you don’t want to try this then you can just sit and observe your breath. OK so if we just sit comfortably and we’ll begin the visualisation.

[“Om Ah Hung” practice]

In a very relaxed remember just allow yourself to be present in this room. And if you feel like it just take a few minutes to reflect with a partner on that experience and the structure and see if you have any questions. Then we can take a few questions before having a short break. After that we’ll do another style of meditation before we end.

Questions

[Question: He says when he is contracting this ball, energy, this ball melting, his heart is beating very much tuck tuck. Is it normal or not?]

Yes that can happen sometimes. If maybe you are a bit pushed in your life, a bit intense then maybe you need to do some calming first and just do it stage by stage by stage. So it’s a sense of relaxing, coming down, coming down, coming down. You don’t want it too tight, if you pull it too tight you’ll get that locking. So you want it intense, but relaxed at the same time. And if it is getting tight and you find that your heart’s beating just relax. Take a few breaths and relax. Never try to push through things.

[Question: I had the impression that (there were three people) and we had the impression that the condition after the dissolving one could say this stage of emptiness, one could say it was compared to like when one falls asleep and like in deep sleep where you can still hear things, one is still in awake, but still a little bit dumb state, not very clear or something. It’s a little bit funny and I wonder if that was correct or may be if we done something...]

Yes definitely there is something wrong with your mind. That’s the point when you can start really exploring the nature of the mind as it unfolds because sometimes the mind is very clear

and you can enjoy that clearness without being attached to it. Sometimes the mind becomes very foggy and dull. At that point you don't need to try to clear away the foggy or dullness, you can just stay try to remain on an awareness of the one who is having the foggy mind. That is to say. " My mind is foggy" so there is a sense of a 'my' having 'a mind which is covered with fog'. So I am feeling dead, sleepy, so who is the one who is sleepy?

Once you get back on to the one who is sleepy, it's no longer a state of sleepiness. So without trying to push it away you just do a backward somersault and give a bit of space and keep that awareness. Because in that one is trying to unify these two points: one is impermanence and the other is non-attachment. The point of unification of these is the lack or the absence of inherent self-nature. Remember these three points of the mahayana dharma? So by recognising that the one who is looking, the one who is experiencing being covered or cloudy or heavy or anxious or confused, whatever state the mind gets into, the one who is the experiencer of that is devoid of inherent self-nature. Later we are going to do a meditation which will hopefully make that a bit clearer.

So with this sense that the one who is looking or knowing has no inherent self-nature, there is then nobody essentially. By relaxing into that openness, there is no place on this side to be attached out there on that side. So one is then working with non-attachment, just relaxing the impulse. The key essence for this practice is always just relaxing. Relax the impulse and then you notice that whatever is the state which appears to be a state of mind - almost a thing - starts to move because it is impermanent. So you're not attached to substance. If you don't project energy onto arisings—and if you stay with recognising that things, when left alone, are impermanent— then nothing comes together in a very solid or substantial way. Yes?

[Break]

Meditating on a white letter Aa, the symbolic representation of emptiness

This next style of meditation is in some ways similar. It's like when we were doing the initial shiné practice we were focusing on the breath. Now what we want to do is - you can do it with your eyes closed or your eyes open - if you get distracted easily it's probably better with your eyes closed at first, but with time it is very good to practise with your eyes open - in a very relaxed way looking in front of you, either, with your eyes closed, visualising a clear blue sky, or if you are working with your eyes open, looking into the middle space in the room in front of you, not fixed on the wall, not pushing out but just relaxed, just in touch with this space in front.

Then in that space you visualise a blue or a white Tibetan letter *Aa*. If this doesn't ring any bells for you, don't worry; think of a capital 'A'.

This *Aa* represents the root of the Tibetan alphabet. In that way it is seen as the point at which *Aa* - it's nothing in itself really - but every sound comes out of it. Therefore it is like emptiness, it is the source of everything. So when we are visualising this *Aa*, we are seeing this as the symbolic representation of emptiness.

And what we do is we just focus our attention on the letter *Aa* as we would in the shiné that we were practising before on the breath, but this time with as much sense of openness as possible. So instead of having a kind of focused, sharp attention onto the breath, onto this narrow point, as we're aware of this *Aa*, particularly if you practise with your eyes open, you are

also aware of everything else. But it's a sense of constructions falling away and one is just ... just relaxed with the *Aa*.

One maintains this attention for some time and then just allow the *Aa* to drop so that you are just merged in the space in front of you, just resting in space. So it's as if there is this sky outside you and the sky inside you and you are meditating sky to sky. And through his relaxed, open sky-to-sky, all the constructions of sensations in your body, of memories and thoughts, are just arising and just moving through this space like clouds moving through the sky. Then you can stay in that state for as long as you like and that is a very nice place to be. And from that state of meditation, because you are sitting there with you eyes open present in the room, you can then get up and make a cup of tea or you can carry on with your ordinary life, and then just sit and relax into this space again. So it's really a practice to do in everyday life. However if you do it and you are not very used to it will make you feel spaced out. So you should be careful not to drive a car or a motorbike immediately afterwards.

So first of all the openness focused on the letter *Aa*. Then dropping the letter *Aa*, being open. But then we'll go one stage further and we'll take up a question. And we'll take up the question "Where does the mind rest?" Now we're not asking this question in an intellectual way we don't want to generate a whole lot of fancy ideas. We want to take it as a focus for an examination. Just as say I asked the question "What happens to a piece of butter when you melt it in a frying pan?" So you would have to look, you would have to watch very carefully, you would still have the question, but there is not many thoughts you need to have about it. You just need to accurately focus at it. So when we take up this question "Where does the mind rest?" we want to be looking just in that sort of way, not making thoughts, but just focusing. What is going on? It's a phenomenological enquiry "What is the mind?"

Now there are many answers to this question and if you read my book of translations, *Simply Being* you can see many different mahamudra and dzogchen answers to that question. But all of these questions that are formulated in words can be unhelpful because they can put many words into our head so that we construct an answer rather than looking for ourselves. It can be very easy in the dharma when you have learned a lot of words to speak from the words and not from the experience.

So we have to balance this very carefully to learn to study texts and to get an understanding of the structure, but when we come to practise to be able to drop these conceptual elaborations and go for experience because the answer to the question "Where does the mind rest?" is an experience. People write about their experiences, but for you it will be your own experience.

So, very relaxed, either with your eyes closed or open, sense of space in front of you. If you are working in the room don't be staring at anything, just have a relaxed sense of the space in front. Focus on this letter *Aa*. Visualise it clearly. If you can't visualise it clearly don't worry, just focus on this middle-distance space and stay relaxed with it. Stay on the *Aa* for a while and then just drop it in your own time, then stay relaxed and open in this space. Stay like that for a while and then take up the question for yourself "Where does the mind rest?" And we'll do that for about ten minutes and then we'll bring it to an end.

[Goodbyes...]

End