
Buddhism and Psychotherapy: a question of attention

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In my experience as a therapist, one of the areas where the practice of meditation can be helpful, is in separating off the one who is aware of the experience, from the flow of experience. That is to say, it is as if one is sitting on the bank of a river observing the river flowing, without being pulled in.

I intend to look at this question of attention as it's practiced in buddhist meditation, and as it's relevant in psychotherapy.

...

We do need to be able to move in the service of another and what I take from buddhism is, through some practice, a developing understanding of emptiness. The gesture of being available to be used by the patient as is necessary, to be idealised when that is helpful, and to be turned into the toilet-cleaner when that too is necessary, because all of these positions from time-to-time are necessary...

...

In the same way that tantric meditations go back into emptiness, so working as a therapist, having good sessions and bad sessions, positive transference, negative transference, all of that goes back into emptiness. There is nothing really to say about work, more than: 'Oh, I had a busy day.'

...

That's why we do this simple meditation, which we do with our eyes open. Certainly with our hearts open... not creating any blockage between ourselves and the world, but with a very calm, clear focussed attention simply on the space, within which we find our existence.

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Our topic is buddhism and psychotherapy, with particular reference to the central question: *'How do we understand suffering and the reasons why people suffer?'* The focus is primarily on buddhism: both what buddhism has to offer to the practice of psychotherapy, and also what psychotherapeutic understandings might have to offer those of us engaged in the practice of buddhism.

Attention, without attachment

One of the things Freud was very concerned with was the nature of analytic attention. What is attention in the practice of analysis? Early on, he developed the notion that the analyst should provide what he describes as a *'free-floating attention'*. By free-floating attention, he meant that the analyst should be able to hold an awareness both of whatever is occurring in the physical manifestation in the patient, i.e. in what they say, whilst also listening to what they **don't** say—without the analyst's own prejudice closing that space. That is an important requirement in the analytic training, but of course, it's very difficult to do.

In my experience it is one of the areas where the practice of meditation can be helpful, because in basic buddhist meditation what one is attempting to do is to separate off the one who is aware of the experience, from the flow of experience. That is to say, it is as if one is sitting on the bank of a river observing the river flowing, without being pulled in.

Now, most of the time in life we are caught up in the attachments and busy involvements in our world. This kind of involvement, although it makes us feel alive, also means that we often lose perspective. We may feel that life is driving *us*, and become troubled, feeling out of control.

One could say that the main movements in neuroses—depression and anxiety—are problems of attention. Even the problematics of so-called 'personality disorders' such as withdrawal, schizoid, or active over-confusion, and patterns of excessive involvement such as 'borderline' or 'narcissistic', are conditions often of lack of attention. That is to say, the person finds themselves pulled into situations with only one pathway, where there is no sense of choice left. There is no space for alternatives or perspective. In the area of psychosis also, despite us having to take brain functions and biochemical imbalances into account, I think one can also make a case that psychotic disorder is an attack on the ability to pay attention.

We can certainly see the same issues in terms of child development. Mental disturbance or existential disturbance in children is usually revealed through disturbances in attention. Children often become preoccupied with giving attention to sensations in the body, or to a private world as in autism; or they may be hyperactive, when they cannot control their impulses. We could say that healthy functioning in a child is demonstrated through a flexible movement of the ability to give attention to the world as it changes.

For example, when the child is in the playground, it has to pay attention to the many things that are going on, to very complex movements of intimacy and distance, as children get together and separate. The child also has to learn that playtime is when they should pay attention to sensation around their bladder, so that when they go back into the classroom, they don't have to go out again to pee. They have had a pee at the proper time.

I intend to look at this question of attention as it's practiced in buddhist meditation, and as it's relevant in psychotherapy. Every psychotherapeutic model concerns itself with the politics of attention.

First, we will do some meditation practice together. I can explain different kinds of meditation and you can experience for yourself the impact of that on attention. Then we can explore the function of psychotherapy in relation to meditation. I will also take questions, because no doubt some of you are involved in clinical practice.

When we look at the question of what does it mean to help someone, which often depends on how we construe who is another person, how we make sense of that. Who another person is for us, is dependent, I would suggest, on the kind of attention we pay to them. A lot of the time who another person is for us, is dependent on the field of assumptions that we have before we have met the person. That is to say that we are always preoccupied with something. We are occupied with the messages and attitudes that we learned formerly in our childhood; and through all the experiences that we have had in our lives whether or not we are very conscious of them. Because these preoccupations are very familiar, and often largely unconscious, they just seem normal.

One possibility is to develop a phenomenological method in the line of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, in order to become aware of our prejudices—the obscurations or distortions which we are carrying all the time—and bracket these to one side so that we can try to see more clearly what is actually there. This of course is a major concern of buddhist meditation, especially the kind of practice called '*vipassana*' in Pali or '*lhag tong*' in Tibetan, which means looking carefully, trying to observe the way in which thought, feeling and sensation arises in the continuum of our being and create passing obscuration.

For example, when I came on the plane this morning from London, we passed over and through many different kinds of clouds. There were some very thick clouds which when the plane went through them you couldn't see anything, and there were some very light, fluffy clouds that were just creating a kind of haze around the aeroplane, but you could see the sky through them. There were other clouds that were extremely beautiful patterns, just hovering in the distance like beautiful paintings in the sky, very fascinating and drawing the attention out. Then coming down into Berlin, there was a quite low cloud that looked like some kind of warm blanket wrapped over the earth to keep it warm. These are all similar to the kind of obscuring experiences we have in our own mind. Very often, we wrap our prejudices around ourselves to keep warm and safe in the security of knowing who we are and what we believe in. Sometimes our prejudices are like very fascinating patterns and we are drawn towards them, taken out of ourselves into this manifestation which seems to carry so much beauty and truth. However, like the cloud in the sky it will just float away.

This of course is a great problem in the practice of psychoanalysis. When you start to formulate the potential for an interpretation on the basis of the information that you are deriving from the patient's story, something forms and it appears real. It appears very fascinating and appears to explain a great deal about this person. You can take it into yourself and speak it out, with a voice of authority. However, if the analyst had not spoken at that moment, this cloud would have moved by; some other cloud would have appeared, also fascinating, and they could have said that.

That is to say, meaning is contingent; it is situational, and it is not essential. If our attention collapses into and onto an evanescent, momentary arising and holds it as true, we are likely to delude ourselves and the other. However if someone comes to see us and we are a therapist, we are somehow called upon to speak. Yet every act of speaking reveals

something, but it also conceals something at the same time. If the therapist is thinking about the patient's mother, then where is the father? When you are thinking about the mother and the father, where are the grandparents? Whenever something comes into focus, everything else recedes into the background.

This is why Freud is so very important in terms of thinking about buddhism. His idea of a free-floating attention that does not go into the past, which is not focussed on the future, but is just open to whatever is arising, means that there has to be an ability to contain the impulse to respond.

Metaphor of shooting

It's a bit like when they are training the police in shooting. I don't know the system in Germany, but in Britain first of all you practise shooting on a target. Then you put the target on the silhouette of a person. Then these trainee marksmen go into houses, entering the door suddenly they see a 'person' just behind the door... They have to shoot the 'person', but some of these silhouettes have '*policemar!*' marked on them. Now, if you are a policeman you really shouldn't shoot another policeman. So, you are ready to shoot, there are interesting things to shoot, but there are also some things you shouldn't shoot. This is exactly the problem of psychotherapy. You do have to say something, there is something to work on, but what is it? Where to put the pressure?

One has the same problem in meditation as well. When a thought, a feeling, or a sensation arises in the practice of meditation, the one who is aware of this arising is often also very involved with it. At that point, this awareness, which should be meditating, has now got lost in the process of mental functioning. One is in a kind of daydream. That's a point when samsara or confusion or suffering is likely to shoot **you**, because you are not aware. On the other hand, you wake up from that state of being kind of collapsed. Hhhaa! Then you go back to the breath or whatever, and you think: '*Oh no, now I have to do it!*' That is the point where you shoot yourself, because you say: '*Oh, I must try harder, I must work harder!*' And you tighten yourself.

In the practice of compassion, we don't want to shoot other people, and we don't want to shoot ourselves. The best way to do that is to maintain awareness.

And it's the same issue in analytic psychotherapy: We don't want to get completely trapped in transference, and we don't want to unconsciously act out countertransference onto the patient. But at the same time one doesn't want to take a position which denies the impact of both transference and countertransference. So one has to develop an attention which allows powerful and potentially disturbing phenomena to arise without being sucked into them and without reacting against them.

Metaphor of the mirror

The metaphor of the mirror is used a great deal in buddhism, because a mirror will reveal the form of whatever is placed in front of it whether that thing be beautiful or ugly, boring or exciting. The development of this capacity for a mirror-like awareness is also vital in the practice of meditation and, I would suggest, in psychotherapy.

Countertransference

In the British schools of analytic psychotherapy, there developed from about 1950 onwards, an interest in countertransference, that is to say the response, largely unconscious, from the

analyst to the material that is transferred onto them by the patient. Paula Heinemann particularly, in her 1951 paper, developed the view that countertransference, this habit in the analyst to respond in a profound and often confused way to the patient, is not a mistake, but is a necessary part of intimate human relating. The impact of this kind of thinking is that the analyst must accept their own complexity and not try to scrape what is arising away, like froth on the top of a coffee.

In theravadan buddhism (also called hinayana buddhism, by Tibetans), there is a great deal of attention to classify or sorting out what is good, what is bad, what is samsara, what is nirvana, what makes us confused and what makes us liberated. With this practice of separation, there is the idea that one can free oneself ultimately from complexity. The idea is that the Buddha is somebody who is very calm and very clear, whereas we, who are still wandering in samsara, are very confused and disturbed. Our experience is seen as being like a lamp, a burning lamp like a butter lamp or a candle in which the flame is always subject to the movements of the wind and cannot be stabilized. What the Buddha does is, he blows it out and lives in this safe, eternal, illuminated darkness.

That is one goal, and it has also been a goal in therapy as well, where removing pathology, curing the patient, of normalizing the patient, is a major social dimension of psychiatry and state-funded psychotherapy. But in buddhism they also realised that this part is very limited, because it means that a great deal of ordinary human experience has to be denied, as one tries to move more and more to a calm, cool, separated existence. So, through the development of what some of you will know as '*mahayana buddhism*' there was also the development of tantra. In tantra, there is an attention to the complexity and richness of the human condition, in which every single occurrence of being human is seen as profoundly and infinitely meaningful. This is usually done through the identification of the human being with a divine form, and the divine form is seen as innately meaningful and therefore through this fusion or union we ourselves in our ordinary operations become meaningful. Meaning is given by the identification with the pure form.

The Freudian Project

To a certain extent one could say that in the Freudian project, the identification of disturbing material as having its ground in the unconscious, gives both a liberating validation and an invitation to enthusiastic attention. In this Freudian project, the unconscious is identified as the source of the experience. An understanding of the root being in the unconscious, is very, very interesting plus it can serve to separate the analyst from the fear that the material is a sign of them being out of control.

The key point is that if we have guilt and anxiety, attention is likely to be lost. If one holds to the notion that clarity exists as a separation of good and bad, one creates for oneself a great vulnerability to anxiety. If the analyst has the permission to allow confusing thoughts in their mind, not only when they are themselves in the role of patient, but when they are in the role of professional person, that allows a freedom of movement which actually opens a possibility of what Freud refers to as 'free-floating attention'. What does it mean if the psychoanalyst, who would have many, many years of training, reflection, their personal analysis etc., is sitting there experiencing all sorts of peculiar phenomena?

This is not so different from the position of the Tibetan lama. When you read biographies and autobiographies of Tibetan lamas, they describe their meditation visions which can seem like free-association since their relationship to the process of their mental functioning is not one of rigorous control. For both the psychotherapist and the tantric meditator, the

position is essentially that of awareness as the matrix of channelling. That is to say, things come to mind.

Carl Jung, Wilfred Bion... many analysts, psychotherapists and philosophers have been concerned with examining what is the nature of thinking? It seems that our thoughts are not things we think, but things that arrive; that we are the observers of our existence, and only rarely, certainly in the mental domain, are we agents. This is a very, very important idea, because ethics depend on us taking responsibility for our actions. However, if a great deal of our experience is not our activity, it frees us from the constraints of a particular restricting ethical discourse.

Resistance

It is very difficult to examine something about oneself if one already knows it is a bad and shameful thing. If our understanding is that something is bad and shameful, we don't want it to be part of our experience. This is 'resistance' to free association, in a Freudian analytic sense. The instruction just to relax and to say whatever comes into your mind is very, very difficult, because we find ourselves editing.

Jung's early research revealed what we do when this happens. He would use both the general list of words and particular patterns of words according to the patient's own history. He would run through a list of words asking the patient to give an immediate response. He used a stopwatch to time the gaps between his word and the patient's responding word. He found that words which had some psychological connotation, which were linked into past experiences or guilt or anxieties, which were 'hot' for the patient, caused a longer gap.

This was an important finding because it showed attention coming under attack, from guilt and anxiety. The longer the gap, the more conscious thinking about the response is embedded, and so the more likely one is to have some editing and a shift in the rawness, in the directness of the response. Because he wanted the associations to keep on coming, it became important to create an ambiance in which the presence of the analyst is not experienced as punitive or dangerous, that is to say, that there can be a ground belief that the analyst is not occupying the superego position.

This is a very difficult position to set out. In ordinary language what it means is that the analyst is trying to create a field in which the person will feel they won't be shamed. However the analyst also needs to indicate that they won't become too aroused by the material. So, the analyst themselves takes a position that polymorphous perversity is a normal basis of functioning. That's very important. It is in some ways an attempt to remove the negative without accentuating the positive, because the fear is that if you give a positive approval to it, it will encourage delinquent behaviour in the patient.

Removing anxiety in order to allow direct experience

In the sphere of tantra, you have a similar desire, which is to remove anxiety. The goal is the same: to remove the anxiety in order to allow a more direct experience of the world as it is. In the practice of tantra, through visualisation of a deity, and identification with that deity—who is seen in their absolute nature, pure, free of any defilement—one gains the permission that any activity of thinking, speaking, and behaviour is pure.

The practice of tantra is graded in different series or levels, from a view that starts largely benign or pure, in the sense that fresh milk is pure. That is to say, pure is identified in relation to impure according to the ordinary structures of dualistic identification. It then

moves up in the direction of a non-dualistic appreciation of the infinite purity of all things, no matter how they may appear in their ordinary manifest mode.

So that for example the offerings that one makes to the gods and that one then partakes of either symbolically or actually, shift from being things like milk, butter, yoghurt in the first stages to menstrual blood, human faeces, urine, dog meat, human flesh. The purpose of this is to confront the repugnance, the resistance, the thought, *'This object is awful and will contaminate me'* If I transcend this taboo, I will somehow lose my sense of self, I will become other than my familiar self. Shifting from one state to another helps to raise awareness of our habitual fixity of self-identity which operates as a construct.

It is important to appreciate that this method is not about producing a psychopathic indifference. Rather it is to be aware, as sensations of repugnance arise, that repugnance is both a limit and not a limit. That is to say, on the level of ordinary functioning—what in buddhism would be called 'relative truth'—such a limit is vital, otherwise social interaction breaks down. However, according to absolute truth or infinite truth or the reality as it actually is, the limit that arises is dependent on contingent formation of self identity. This thing which arises as a limit is also manifesting; it is simply an expression of the purity of all things.

For both analysis and tantra the key thing is the role of anxiety. In the analytic constellation the ordinary egoic sense of self is under attack from two spheres: one from unconscious impulses, and the second from criticism from the environment which is arising. This sense of being under attack creates a sense of anxiety: *'I will be annihilated. If I give in to my unconscious impulse, the world will punish me. If I give in to the rules of the world my life will end, because the libidinal energy, the life energy of the unconscious impulse will be cut off.'* So, the ego is constantly a servant of two masters. Knowing that something is dangerous, we can shy away from it. We can also defend ourselves from the world, by telling lies... Wilhelm Reich is a great explainer of the pathways of that. We defend ourselves against the unconscious impulse by denial, by repression, which makes us stupid because we are having to cut off an integral part of our experience.

I think we could say that in both buddhism and psychoanalysis the healthiest place to be is: awake, alert, with our eyes open. This is not the awake alertness of a rationalist or Cartesian observing self which is apart from the thing observed. It is not Apollonian in that sense. It is more the Dionysian engaged, enmeshed awareness, which is close to the facticity of being, of our lives as they are; the life of the body, the life of our speech with all its slippages, the lives of our mind with all the confusions, perverse fantasies and angers. It is engaged; it is arising together with it. That is to say, it is a quality of gaze. It is not the objectifying gaze of science, which looks across at the other, but it is perhaps more the maternal gaze, which holds the other close, but without denying or editing the experience.

So, there is a lot in that. What I would suggest, is that we now take a short break and when we come back we will do some meditation practice.

[Break]

Attending to the other

Therapy is related in its root to the notion of attending. So the *therapeutikos* is the person who attends. It is both a person who attends to the sick, but it was also the term that was

used for those who attended to the gods in the temple. The interesting thing about being an attendant is that one has to keep one's attention on the other to observe what is the trajectory of their desire. An attendant who is a nurse—and of course Dionysus was particularly the god for nursing mothers—needs to see what is the patient's desire, but also what is the desire of the wholeness or the health of the patient.

A patient, somebody who is sick, may desire something, and may be committed to that desire, but it may be an unhealthy desire. So the question is: *'Should the attendant satisfy the desire, or resist the desire by attending instead to a higher form, for example to a model of therapy or a model of the healthy body.'*

Our attention is always, in all our activities, both towards ourselves and towards the world. This is very important to remember in terms of meditation. There is a danger that meditation becomes very self-focussed, whereby one goes into a private world, cutting off disturbances from outside. The risk in that is of cultivating a monadic notion of self: *'There is me and I want to develop myself.'* or, *'I will get enlightened through purifying my own processes, which is essentially my business.'* I might well come to think that my aim is to develop some kind of clarity or wisdom through this purification of myself, and then having achieved that, I will then move out into the world with some kind of compassion. In buddhism this is also spoken of, but it is, I think, important to understand, that this is a method. The ultimate goal is the unification of wisdom and compassion, in which one is attending, with an open awareness to everything that arises, that is to say, to oneself in the world. It is not that I come through myself out towards the world, but rather that self and world arise together.

So, we'll practise some different kinds of meditation now. Some of them are focussed more towards the self, and some are focussed in this joint movement of self-world co-creation.

[Meditation]

One of the great tragedies of our Western culture is the public education system, where due to specialisation and fragmentation there is no longer the experience of small working cultures in which children learn by doing with others. The value of doing with others is that when the child is learning to do activities such as helping on the farm, or helping in the kitchen, or cutting wood, whatever it is, as they stray from the culturally defined path they are corrected in the movement of the activity. In this way they experience themselves in a world which is a to-ing and a fro-ing, a coming and going; they learn to make use of what is at hand. There is a sense of usage, of usefulness, of practicality. That is to say the child, or to use Heidegger's term the Dasein, finds itself in a world which is already existing and so it must find a place in a world which it does not determine, can never control, but can learn to skilfully inhabit.

Perhaps you see why this comes into meditation. Most of us here would have gone to school. In a school you sit in a classroom, and you learn theory. You learn about things, often about things that other people do. And so one learns that the proper way to proceed is to start with the theory, and then move into the praxis. But in many ways, if one learns through joint praxis, you don't really need a theory, because you have the development of experience which carries a kind of folk knowledge with it, an embodied living knowledge which is close to existence, which is always through the body.

buddhist meditation practice goes through embodied existence, while making use of a view, a way of viewing the world, of understanding it, not as abstract theory, but as illumination of the living experience that is occurring moment by moment.

Three Aa's meditation

So, now we start to practise observing ourselves. We are trying to observe ourselves with a tender gaze of inclusion, of interest in what is going on, without immersion in it, also without the cold, distanced, pseudo-rational viewing.

We will practice in a very simple way, with our eyes open, which maintains the connection between ourselves and the world. So, just sit in a relaxed way, and allow ourselves to become aware of the space that is in front of us. With this sense of space in front of us we just recite 'Aa' three times and allow our attention to be resting on the space. And as we recite this Aa, we do it with a full breath, with a full release of the breath. We can try to experience all the tensions and knots in ourselves just being liberated out through this sound, so that we release this sense of separate, monadic me locked in this. We just release this into the space, and so the space is that in which I am included.

We'll do that and just sit for about ten minutes. Then we will come back to it several times. If your mind wanders off, just gently bring it back to this awareness of the space that is in front of you. The task is just to be relaxed and open. There is nothing else to do. Okay, shall we try that?

[Practice]

Okay. Have you any questions or reflections on what is the experience of attention. When you attend to your own state of experience, what do you find?

Question about space

Question: I do have an awareness of spaciousness but then I get hooked by an issue which I can't let go off.

James: An interesting thing about these preoccupations is that they give us a kind of touchstone to know when we get lost. So, try to observe what is this point where we lose an open awareness and go into whatever it is that arises? At first it's as if we try to hold this sense of space, where whatever arises is like a movement, but in coming through, it hooks our attention. Now we still have the movement, but we have lost the calm. Our goal is to hold the stillness and have the movement coming through, but without going into the movement. We don't block movement; we don't see it as a distraction, but there is just the pulse that is occurring through this spaciousness.

Let's think about dance as an example. In order to dance, you have to move through space. But of course, as you are moving, you are breathing, and so the space that is around you, is coming into you through your lungs and passing through your lungs into your blood. These little bubbles, this oxygen is going into your brain and keeping your whole body alive. So space is not something against us, rather space is what we occupy as space. We can all experience this in our bodies.

The key question both for buddhist meditation and for psychotherapy is the status of the ego in relation to the dynamics of the self, as something that reveals itself in movement through space. When we look back at our life story, we can see that our life upon to now has been nothing but change. How we were when we were born; when we were three years of age; when we were ten; when we were twenty. These moments have passed away. Our lives have been this movement through time and space.

But if you hear someone telling you the story of their life, as they recount the events... *'Oh, when I was seven and I fell off my bicycle...'* these memories come and are layered and layered and layered. The person is creating this 'house' of themselves, as the person it happened to. So, that which has gone and passed away is now pulled back, like a fish on the line and landed to give a true account of me, I, myself.

Suffering arises because our experiences don't fit our sense of identity

In buddhism a basic idea is that suffering arises because the experiences we have don't fit with the sense of identity that we have. In particular there are two basic things: not getting what you want, and getting what you don't want. And this happens quite frequently! So, something happens in the world. How do you know you don't want it? It could be a sensation, a sensation of pain. I don't want pain, because I don't like the sensation. On many levels, that's fair enough. Pain is often indicating that something is wrong.

However, if we thought about it, we would see that it is our notion our self that intensifies the suffering. We act as if sickness, pain, getting old... as if these are alien to us, that they belong to others and not to us. Most of us probably live as if we are immortal, as if we will live forever and we will have lots of opportunities to do whatever we want. Then, when we are happy, we forget that bad things will come to us. In fact we often experience bad things as a kind of mistake; something terrible that has happened but shouldn't have happened.

From Sakyamuni Buddha's experience of seeing suffering in others, he drew the conclusion: *'Since I have a body like theirs, as they suffer, so will I suffer. Suffering is not something that is apart from me.'* For the Buddha this did not mean that suffering would never come to him, even though he had grown up in very protected circumstances and hadn't had so much suffering.

The denial of death, suffering and confusion is part of ego defence's simple mechanism of splitting and projection, whereby when something bad is identified inside ourselves, we tend to split off from it. We make it other than ourselves, and then project it, pushing it on to someone else.

For example, we might watch pictures on television of the recent flooding in Central America and see people's lives being washed away, their farms, everything. We might feel compassion for them, but from an analytic point of view we might also be thinking: *'Maybe some of the compassion arises because it's going from me 'safe' here, to you' troubled' over there.'* It can even feel quite nice that you are troubled over there, because I get to be compassionate which then makes me feel good!

Now, the importance of buddhist reflection on old age, suffering and death is not to frighten us, but to insert these—as in an existential approach—to insert these exactly where they belong at the heart of our existence. It's not as if we exist as a pot, which at the point of our death is dropped and cracks out. But life is a process which is always changing, and in this dynamic movement there is happiness, there is sadness, there is anxiety, there is depression. There are many, many different flavours moving through the process of our human life.

When the ego—our conscious self-identificatory self—seeks to define the direction of this flow, and decides what should and what shouldn't happen to us, this generates a huge amount of anxiety. That's why in the practice of meditation we seek to develop an attention that allows whatever is arising just to arise, without editing, because the ego longs to be

immortal and omnipotent. But when we actually look, we can see we are not going to live forever, and that we have quite limited powers in the world.

Yet, what is the nature of experience? Who is the one who is experiencing the experience of me being myself? It means, usually, my experience happens to me. If it is a bad experience, I would prefer it happen to you; and if it's a good experience, I would like it **all** to happen to me and **none** of it to happen to you!

A linguistic signifier: 'Me, a name I call myself ...'

We live our lives with the basic assumption that 'I know who I am. I'm *me*.' Now, what buddhism would suggest, and I what I think Freudian and Lacanian analysts would suggest, is that this situating, this location, of the self appears to be embodied and embedded as substantial, but is **actually** the illusion of a linguistic signifier. This is very, very important. It is really at the heart of a buddhist understanding of self that 'I am a name that I put to myself'. Like it says in *The Sound of Music*, '*Me, a name I call myself*' Do you know this musical? With Julie Andrews?

[James Sings]

It's very kitsch. You need a lot of popcorn to get through it. But in this musical, she sings: '*Me, a name I call myself*.' And that is exactly what it is. Somebody says: '*Oh, is James here?*' '*Yea, that's me!*' James, that is a word, and that's me. Me is a word. I am me, I am James. This is a language game of words; words speaking to words.

Let's have a few more minutes discussing this, then some fresh air, then some more meditation.

This is all very important because the structures of neuroses, anxiety and depression are so often constellated around a substantial, reified sense of self: '*This happened to me. Why did this happen to me?*' One of the great crimes of psychotherapy has been to encourage the development of an individualistic victim culture. So people might say, '*My father hit me. He shouldn't have done that. He has ruined my life. I have been abused.*' This then becomes someone's statement about their position in the world and they have allowed themselves to be defined by these other people. It's as if before this event, they were a kind of wax that was moving and changing shape, and that this moment stamped them into a particular shape which they haven't been able to move from. This shape is like a wound and they present it to the world again and again, saying: '*Look at me, look what you have done.*' People nurse their wounds and by nursing it, it never heals. It is a particular kind of nursing. The person is the attendant of his trauma, the attendant at the shrine of this primal trauma in his life, which then defines everything else in it. And it's tragic. They are now unable to experience the movement of life, the free play of life. Their attention has been hijacked by this one event and they cannot move out in the freedom of space.

This is why psychoanalysts attend to dreams, because dreams are a very useful way of disrupting the trajectory of the narrative of the conscious ego. In the same way, in meditation, by keeping our attention on a neutral object, which could be the breath, or space, we start to see that the structures of obsessive, solidified ego-identity are actually dynamic, changing, pulsing... and therefore ungrounded. They are not embedded in anything, except in our willingness to identify with them as if they were substantial and real.

Imagine someone who has become a star in films then comes to act in a theatre. The audience will look at them, remembering they are a film star. It's very difficult for the actor

to overcome this so that people see the character of the play rather than 'the star'. Hence the dramatic movement is interrupted by the shining star—which is actually a black star—destroying the dramatic movement. That is what neurotic structure does to us. We become the star of our own neuroses, which endlessly disturbs the infinite dramatic possibilities of a rich ordinary life.

Thank you. Okay. So now we take a break, get a bit of fresh air and stretch our legs. Then we'll do some practice.

[Break]

Meditation: Focussing attention on the breath

So, we return to doing some practice of focussing on attention. Buddhism has many methods for doing this, but a very simple one that one can do anywhere, is simply focussing the attention on the breath. Some people prefer to do it on the sensation of the movement of the diaphragm; other people prefer to focus on the breath as it's coming out of the nostrils, just feeling the sensation on the upper lip. The advantage on concentrating on the breath is that it is always there. You have to be breathing to be alive, and that breath is what connects us with the world. As one is concentrating on the breath, one is experiencing this point of unification of self and world.

The first thing you have to do is just to be able to catch the breath with our attention. Try to keep the attention on the breath. If our attention strays away to anything else, we just gently bring it back to this simple sensation of breath going in and out. In terms of this practice, anything else that arises apart from this awareness of the breath is distraction. Clearly, the breath is boring; it just goes chchchch—chchchch. And the other thoughts and feelings that arise are very interesting! Nevertheless, we are now going to sacrifice all these fascinating things of our world for the sake of the breath. The importance in this is because when a thought or feeling arises that our attention goes into, that thought has somehow hooked our attention and fascinated us. So, what we have here is a struggle between the intention of focussing of our attention, and the exciting distraction of our attention by the other.

This is a very interesting practice in terms of psychotherapy. Certainly, in London I know many psychotherapists who teach this basic meditation to their clients or patients. Because usually, when we are caught up in depressive thinking, anxious thinking, obsessive thinking, we are just in the thoughts that are coming, and we are not aware that we have any choice. We succumb to the power of these habitual thoughts, this cognitive schema or whatever we call it. In the structure of buddhist practices this practice belongs on the path of renunciation. It gives us a very important skill, whereby we can renounce the status of somebody who is dazzled by the world, somebody who is just following impulses.

We turn our attention towards focussed intentional activity, so that we move from being a puppet of our karma—or move from being a victim of our childhood experience which has set up these repetitive seductive patterns—to somebody who takes a stand, but who takes a stand on simple attention. In that sense, to be able to focus one's attention where one will, is the basis for existential freedom. You can have no choice unless you can hold back from the options and look at them. But if one option has already grabbed you, you really have no choice.

We will just sit for a short period of time, ten minutes or so, just very quietly focussing on the breath. If you are not used to this, it may be easier to do it with your eyes closed.

Simply focus on the breath and, as I said before, if the attention wanders, the moment you recognize your attention has wandered, just very gently bring yourself back to the breath. Don't worry about where you went, or why you went there, just gently come back to the focus of the breath.

[Practice]

Now let's gently move on from this meditation, keeping the same kind of focus, but this time the focus is on this spaciousness which is here with us. If you are not a visual person, it's important just to keep the sense of the heart centre being very open, very relaxed to what you can feel and sense around you. So, we will do this meditation for about ten minutes, and then we will end for the day.

[Practice]

What we could do now, is to take the awareness, this openness, out into the world. When we leave this building, when we meet other people, try to simply keep the attention on the process of the becoming, which is our existence. This is a process which includes ourselves in the world and so we lose it if we get pulled out of ourselves into the world or sink from the world back into ourselves. It is staying fresh and present in this wonderful meeting place of being in the world. It doesn't cost anything to do and it might save you a lot of money on therapy!

See you in the morning. Have a good evening.

Sameness and difference

One of the big questions in therapy and in buddhism is the area of sameness and difference. That is to say: when we meet another person, how different are they from us? What is the basis our perceived sense of difference? And how much sameness is there, underpinning this seeming difference?

Particularly in Western countries since the collapse of modernism among intellectuals—it may not have collapsed in terms of international capitalism but it has collapsed among intellectuals—the post-modern view pays a great attention to difference; that is to say, *'the otherness of the other'*. Inasmuch as I claim to know you or know something about you, that knowledge is based on my assumptions; and so in knowing you I'm actually claiming you as an aspect of myself. This can be perceived as a colonial gesture, a colonising gesture. This attitude, which contains aspects of respect, also validates the autonomy of the individual ego.

The modernist position in science and the arts is very much influenced by humanism which started with the assumption: we are all human beings and as human beings we are basically the same and therefore I, as a human being, can make valid assumptions about any other human being. So we have a kind of paradox: In claiming fellowship or brotherhood with someone else—in claiming some kind of similarity—I may actually be attacking the reality of the individual presence of that person.

Of course this question was very much around in what, in Britain, we would call the second wave of feminist thinking. In the mid sixties there was a question: what can men say about women; why is it that men are describing women's experience; women need to find their

voice to describe their own experience. Many books came out wherein women would make statements about the status of women and then these were critiqued by other women saying: *'Yes, but women have many experiences and have many different voices. So, who can speak for me?'*

I can remember in the late sixties, when we occupied the university I attended... we had a lot of good parties and crazy times... always somebody would want to present themselves as the spokesman for the student movement—and it was always a man! They would want to come on television and become quite famous themselves. At that time there was a big tension between Trotskyites and anarchists. Trotskyites have the position that some kind of central dialectical understanding can explain everything. The anarchists said: *'Well, we have to question and just be present to the differences between people.'* The 'spokesperson' would say: *'But we as a movement have to take a stand and present ourselves to the world so the world knows what we are, otherwise we become nothing.'* Then the people of a more anarchist persuasion would respond: *'Yes, but we are many different people here. We have many different experiences. How can anybody speak for us? We are not a movement, We are people who are interested in exploring something.'*

This is a tension that you get in psychotherapy and buddhism as well. If you attend to the process, the experience of being human is always just so much information, so much variety and so much contradiction inside the stream of our own being, that it appears that we are in one sense fragmented, but also rich and complex and a multiplicity of selves. But at the same time, in order to survive in the world, we need to have a 'central committee'. We need to be able to organize ourselves and present ourselves to the world with some consistency, with a five-year plan of self.

We know that when five-year plans were being carried through in Russia under Stalin, many small things got destroyed. But **I** have a five-year plan which includes being at the hospital 9 o' clock on Monday mornings. When I leave my house, between leaving the door of my house and entering the door of the hospital, there are many, many little choices: I could go on the train to the seaside, I could go to a café, go to an art museum... I could do so many possible things, but my five-year plan locks on, and I crush all these other possibilities in order to fulfil the destiny of my commitment to my bank balance.

How much phenomenological attention can we open up to the world?

This is a quite common dialectic in life: how much phenomenological attention can we open to the world? When we do that, many things will present themselves to us as fascinating and interesting, which if we then respond to, will somehow take us away from the track that we need to continue on in order to fulfil commitments which we have made.

We also experience this a lot in the realm of the erotic where, if we are alive in a body, we clearly have erotic responses to the environment. But if we try to have a stable life and make a commitment to a person, then we have to somehow manage the facticity of the aesthetics of being, which include the erotic and the editing onto the track of commitment to be with one person, whatever.

So, it's this moving tension between our ability to shape our lives, to give form to our lives, and our ability to be formed by the impact of the world on us, which subversively takes us out of ourselves, out of the form which we have created.

Freud didn't say too much about mental health, but he did describe a healthy person as being able to love and to work. We could link that to what we looked at yesterday in terms

of attention: in order to work, one has to be able to focus one's attention within a field of distractions. The same with love: in order to love someone, one has to be able to focus attention in a particular way.

Many cultures deal with the question of focussing the attention in a relationship by attempting to disguise or to cover the woman. Whether it's about women wearing a wig so that only her husband sees her proper hair or whether she has to be covered in a yashmak, veil or similar... Nowadays we might think this is not very wise, but at the same time it points to the difficulty of the management of attention in an aesthetic field.

In buddhism, the problem of the fascination of the world through the erotic and through other dimensions is dealt with very much on the *hinayana* level by renunciation. That is to say, one sees the fascination of the world as dangerous, as something that will pull one off the path that one is committing to, and therefore one wants to put this temptation away.

In the general *mahayana* tradition—"Mahayana" is the development in buddhism which is concerned with creating a broad path that includes everyone—the complexity of the experiential field, particularly the erotic, violent or angry power-dimensions are dealt with by the development of a meta-narrative. The narrative is that all the beings whom I encounter have been my own mother in a previous life. So, whenever I meet someone or any creature or any animal, I know who they are. They are my own mother. Having been my mother in previous lives, I know that they have done only kindness to me. This view is often very difficult for western people who operate under the narrative that the cause of our pain and distress is a betrayal by our parents, but this is just another narrative. So, in this traditional buddhist view, knowing that the people are your mother, knowing that they have been kind to you, you enter your relationship with them already carrying a debt of gratitude.

Those of you who are familiar with the writings of Melanie Klein, will be aware of the importance she places on gratitude as the final point for working through the envious aggressive attack of the child on the parent, particularly on the mother. Of course, the difference with the Kleinian approach is that she would say that gratitude is a stage which one wins with the hard struggle of working through the actual felt rage and anger towards the parent figure. In contrast, in the mahayana buddhist tradition, gratitude is taken on as a dogmatic repositioning as a quality to be consciously developed. This pre-positioning of oneself prior to the actual situation can give rise to an intentionality that protects against raw engagement.

All religions are dogmatic in various ways, because they have a project which they are driving through and in order to bring that project to fruition, details have to be crushed. So, for example, when I was in India, many times I would hear western people saying to lamas: *'Yes, but my mother was unkind to me.'* And the lama would say: *'Did your mother not feed you? Did your mother not give you clothes, did she not clean your bum when you were small? Did she not help you to speak? Your mother was very kind to you.'*

So, when you look through the eyes of whichever editing of the world you privilege, whichever confirms the dogmatic position you want to hold, you put the evidence to the contrary into the background and don't pay any attention to it.

[Gaining the result by participating fully in the method](#)

Buddhists believe that everything that the Buddha taught is a method. Now, the method is not *the result* of the method. The method is *the means* to gain the result. One gains the result of the method by participating fully in the method. That is to say, one has to surrender to the narrative in order to be infused with the experience that arises from the immersion in the method.

This is a similar question in psychotherapy. I seem to be using many examples from psychoanalysis, but we could use other ones. Say for example, the question of using the couch. Should the patient lie on a couch, and what is the power differential in inviting someone to lie on a couch? Very often, patients who are a little aware of the politics of psychoanalysis may say: *'Yes, but I don't come here to be under your power. I want you to see me and respect me as a full adult.'* There is this important transition from someone being reluctant to engage in the process of the analysis, to them entering the analysis with resistance.

Either they are in it, fighting with it, in which case creative work can go on; or they can be outside it, complaining about its structure. As a therapist, one might say to a patient: *'I quite accept all your reservations about psychotherapy. I also have my own reservations. But either you do the business or you don't.'* On this level of practice, of psychoanalysis, of mahayana buddhism, these are discourses of mastery. But unless one succumbs to the will of the master, there is no liberation.

For example, you may decide: *'OK, I will take up the mahayana position that everybody has been my mother in a past life and that they have done me a lot of kindness.'* Then when somebody does something I really don't like, I first think: *'This person is an arsehole.'* But I then think: *'Oh, but this arsehole has been my mother and has been very kind to me. How very kind of them to offer me the opportunity to repay the kindness to them. In a past life, when I was a baby, I used to shit, and they would take my shit away. But now, they are shitting over me, and I will just wipe it off with a smile!'*

Voice from the audience: I think *this* is a question of incest.

James: That's an interesting observation, because in the discourse of mahayana buddhism there is very little discussion of the erotic. The place of all beings, men and women, is the place of the mother. The mother in that moment is not so different from the mother in the holy family holding Jesus. This is a kind of asexual, neutered but yet fecund mother. Big breasts but nothing very much downstairs!

Tantra: making use of identification

In the practice of tantra—which has the same view as mahayana buddhism, brought more alive through visualisation and through the belief that we all have an innate buddha nature—through receiving an initiation into the practice of a deity, one is consecrated as a person who manifests this divine enlightened nature. One is existing in a world that is also divine because it is full of enlightened beings. And so one uses belief, an immersed belief in this narrative, supported by many symbols, images, paintings, music, mudras, all kind of things.

One immerses oneself in a symbolic narrative and then generalizes this to every situation. So that instead of seeing people as one's mother to whom one has a debt of gratitude, one sees everyone as a god or a goddess, and one hears whatever they say as the same as mantra. A mantra is a sound, a set of sounds, which are used to protect the mind from

distraction. When you have a small baby, before the baby speaks it makes a lot of sounds. They make noises: '*Lala, mamamamam.*' This is the essence of mantra.

Mantra is sound which signifies, without signifying anything. Once the child comes fully into the domain of language, the sounds it makes embed it horizontally into the field of signification, which is the world. It can be very interesting to watch small children doing this, seeing the movement from a general openness to a limited specificity. In this way, what the Chinese call *the world of the ten thousand things*—all these precise differentiations that we experience and which become a hall of mirrors through which we gain a more precise definition of ourselves—is supported by the interactive complexity of language.

And so, in the path of tantra, in order to liberate the person from the emotional complexities which are evoked by this identification in the world of different objects, each precise with their own qualities, one *makes use of* the identification with the deity.

This is important, because what it is saying is that we can know whatever is coming, before it arrives. I know who you are before I see your face. My knowledge of you before you manifest is more important than my experience of you in the moment of manifestation. And if this is true, one will never be surprised! The world is, of course, presenting itself in all its rich variety and its changes. So one stabilizes one's position of awareness by knowing in advance what is coming; whilst at the same time is drawn into a response due to the specificity of the field as it manifests.

This is called the unification of wisdom and compassion. Compassion, in this context, is to allow oneself to respond to others within the dance of becoming as deities, as divine forms; because if we are truly gods and goddesses, then our experience is good. So, if a 'god' says to me: '*You've screwed up.*'; I say: '*Oh, thank you.*' And if they say: '*You did that so very well.*'; I just say: '*Oh, thank you.*'

Equanimity: nothing added, nothing taken away

This is the basis of equanimity, of not being disturbed, not being elevated by nice, praising words, not being cast down by insulting words, since the real meaning of the communication is already known before it occurs.

All sound is said to be sound and emptiness. That is to say, when we speak, what is speech but vibrations arising from these tensions in the voice box, in the throat? Wind passing across this vibratory membrane which sets out vibrations which are picked up in the ear? When these vibrations are then moved through the brain, they are understood as: '*Oh, you have insulted me!*' '*Oh, you have praised me!*' So the speaking and the hearing are energetic connections through the body. Speech, actually, is simply a way in which this co-emergent field of arising plays with itself. But clearly, words become solidified when they are wound around this point of the ego. Speaking and listening are impermanent actions; they keep changing, because sound always moves into silence.

Now, if one can move in the meditation practice into the real felt experience that 'I am this divine form arising out of emptiness, that I am fulfilled just through this presence in and as emptiness', then, as I was suggesting earlier, nothing can be added to this and nothing can be taken away. Imagine a situation where somebody says to us: '*I love you.*', and then we feel '*Mmm...*'; but then they say: '*Actually, I don't love you any more now and I want to leave you*', then we feel cast down. This is very common in life. Words shake us and we take on a shape. We build up this sense of ourselves according to the echoes of words people have spoken to us.

Our ordinary sense of self is formed, reformed & deformed by the impact of the words of others

Our sense of self, our ordinary sense of self is formed, reformed and deformed by the impact of the words of others, and, of course, by the impact of our own words. In tantra, it becomes very important to learn how to speak and how to hear. It's not that one should say any particular things, but one should speak with the awareness that sound arises out of the emptiness which exists in one's heart.

When we say emptiness here, we are not meaning a kind of existential loss emptiness, but the buddhist notion of emptiness as the non-reified, the non-essentialised experience of self as a process arising out of spaciousness rather than from the fixed point of me, I, myself. By speaking and listening in this way, sound moves through us, ceaselessly giving rise to the integrated experience of calm and movement. The calm of emptiness is not disturbed by the movement of speech, but is just integrated with it.

The Gestalt concept of 'contact'

To make a link with therapy here, in gestalt psychotherapy there is an increasing emphasis on the notion of contact. By **contact** they mean the sense that when I'm with a person, but it can also be with a group, then I am fully available to the impact of the experience of being with the other. So, I'm contactable because I'm not closed in on myself. I'm also not going out towards the other with a blinkered, a narrow focussed notion of what I should see or encounter.

One of the questions for psychotherapists is, how not to be overwhelmed by the patient's difficult material and pathology. This fear and anxiety often arise because the therapists see themselves as being a container for the patient. For example, this cup: somebody pours something into it, but suddenly I see that it's leaking. Then I look for a larger cup to put around it to contain the leaking. In the same way, the therapist takes up this position of being the maternal container for the disturbed, falling apart thing of the patient. We could perhaps consider that the tantric method of visualising oneself as a deity is a kind of containment of our ego disturbance, and that by returning attention to the containment (*'I am Tara', 'I am Padmasambhava'*), the egotistical movement of leakage out into samsara is contained. But from the gestalt point of view, there is no container.

Gestalt has the useful idea, that the self, the sense of self that we have, is created at the contact boundary of oneself and the world in which we live. That is to say, that self is constantly being born in the process of engagement with the environment. So that self is a co-creation of our embodied being and the world in which it is held. Self is not a pot or a container, but it is the moment of living responsiveness awakened by these interfaces

And I'm sure we're aware of this, but we have particular friends who, when we are with them, we feel more alive. They call us into being in a broader range of ourselves. One could interpret that experience as: I have a real self, which I keep hidden because I don't trust the world outside. Or: my self arises with the co-condition of the world. So that self is not a causal essence, but is the fruit of the generosity of one's engagement with the world.

So, we could take a break now, and then we can look at this notion of the three kayas or the three dimensions of existence, and then look a bit at dzogchen, but also do some more meditation and see if you have any questions or thoughts you want to raise.

What does it mean to be human?

One thing we did up to now was to look at how we conceptualize being a human being. Clearly, according to psychotherapy and according to buddhism, there are many, many ways of thinking about what is a human existence. If we go towards another with the intention to help them that is going to be influenced by how we understand who they are. But, of course, we can't isolate who a person is from a wider notion of what the world is, and in particular, whether there is a purpose to existence.

In materialist culture which dominates a great deal of our experience nowadays, there is an increasing tendency to take an interventionist view of our relation with the world, whereby we act on the world to try to bring towards us things that will make us happy and keep away things that make us unhappy.

Most religions have a soteriological interest; they are concerned with life after death, whether it's about being reborn in heaven or being reborn in a buddha land or gaining enlightenment and becoming a buddha. This, if you like metaphysical focus—focus on a wider understanding of what human condition is—then allows someone who believes in it, to make choices against a very broad time and space frame.

If you believe that you have only one life, and that when you die there is nothing after that, then why shouldn't you do whatever you can get away with? If you are not found out now while you are alive, it won't matter when you are dead. The consequences will come for someone else. We are very aware of this question now in terms of ecology, where we can see that our generation is causing a huge amount of distress, but somehow the fruits will happen to some other people. Generally speaking the world of psychotherapy is a world of one-life orientation. People come to therapy to talk about how the world has hurt them, and to try to find some way in which they can learn to make more use of the world.

The basic view in buddhism is: first of all, don't harm anyone, and second, try to help them if you can. In buddhism there is not so much consideration of how not to be harmed. Generally, they say that if you practise a focussed attention and awareness, that will help you not to get kind of lost in situations, which will make you a bit happier.

Although in buddhism we spend a lot of time thinking about the nature of suffering—where suffering comes from, and why we suffer—the focus of attention is: what is my role in causing the suffering which I experience? That is to say, what am I up to? A lot of psychotherapy has moved away from that position and is much more concerned with offering a space for people to come and say how the world has hurt them, who has caused their suffering. And that makes a very big difference, because if somebody is acting from the assumption that my suffering is due to the actions of others, and that is a culturally validated belief, they will often feel very attacked if you say: *'Hang on a minute. What are you up to?'*

We can see this in approaches based on Freud's seduction theory, which he developed when he was observing hysterical symptoms in young women. During his analyses what would arise would be some incident, in which the girl or young woman experienced sexual attention or sexual invasion from an adult male. Freud moved from the position that the distress that these women were manifesting in their symptom was a direct result of sexual attack by a male, towards the notion that the stories that the women were telling were a fantasy created out of the movement of their own erotic desire in the particular feminine version of the Oedipus complex. There are many ways we can unpack this, but I think that

the key question, in terms of psychotherapy, is the question: *'Why did it happen to me?'* When somebody brings an instance: *'My father did this to me, my mother did this to me!'* the question is: *'Why did that happen to you?'*

Children and adults

If we start with the view that children are born innocent but then the bad world attacks them and marks them, so that their unbalanced actions are a reaction to that trauma that is one particular story. In our culture childhood experience has become more visible and is read as more and more important. In most traditional cultures, I think it's fair to say that children are not very important. That is to say, they are loved and they are fed and they are clothed, but their experience is not seen as very important, because they are just children. What they do and what they say doesn't really mean very much, it doesn't explain anything, it doesn't really help anyone. They are kind of amusing, but anyway, they have to be encouraged to become human beings.

Tibetans have a notion that people really become human when they are about thirty-five. Many cultures have the same similar notion because it takes until that age to learn enough about life, to develop experience and wisdom and competence and to come out of the bubble of self and to start to see other people as real. That is when you become a human being; when you have something to offer into the world; when you shoulder your responsibilities, without being silly. These, we could say, culturally, karmically defined assumptions are very important in terms of the practice both of buddhism and of psychotherapy.

Nowadays there is the notion that life is about fun. What is fun? Fun is nonsense. Fun is temporary time-out. If you turn a central function of life into having fun, then what is denied is the existential condition of suffering; sickness, death, the transience of life, the contingency of human relatedness. All that is fragile is swept aside in the intoxication of this hysterical direction of fun.

The authority to act

One of the tragedies of the Nazi period in Germany and the Stalinist-directed experiences in Eastern Europe has been a particular reading of the nature of authority. There is a real fear that the authoritarian position is an attack on freedom; that to bend one's knee, to submit oneself to something larger than oneself, is an anti-democratic activity. This has implications for the authority of the therapist, for the authority of the dharma teacher. How can a tradition exist which is more powerful—where somebody sees more than we see about ourselves—because if somebody sees more about us than we do, is that not somehow a theft of our autonomy, conceived as the right of self-definition? *'I am who I tell you I am and who I tell me I am.'* So, when we think, *'Somebody seems to be suffering, I want to help them,'* who is going to define the reading of the nature of their suffering and the origin of it? Do we have any right to say, *'Well, your suffering arises due to attachment?'*

Many people are indeed in terrible situations, but what is really at the heart of the question is agency. What does it mean to be a person who acts, and what are the forces, the causal forces that bring us in a moment to act in one way or in another?

As a therapist or in general, one can take the maternal position of giving comfort and saying, *'Oh, baby, what else could you do? How terrible to be there, how awful!'* And, of course there is infinite love in that position; it's not a wrong position, but what is excluded in that moment is the father's position of saying, *'What on earth are you doing? How did you*

get yourself into this mess? There is a real tension between these positions. One finds them in both buddhism and therapy. No doubt we also have these conversations with ourselves. When we find ourselves failing ourselves, we can comfort ourselves, or we can kick ourselves. Very often we comfort when we should kick, and we kick when we should comfort. That's certainly true for my life.

It will bring us always back to the question: How can I help another person? Is it better to be awake in a world of horror, or to be comfortably asleep, avoiding difficulty and danger but being cosily wrapped inside dharma duvet or therapy duvet? Again, from a buddhist point of view, a lot of it depends on the view that you hold.

If you believe we are reborn due to the force of karma, then clearly death is not going to wipe it all out. One is in the machine that will run and run and run. And so it becomes vital to wake up and disengage from this momentum of karma.

From this point of view, acting to awaken people to subvert the sleep—the dream stories in which they are wrapped—is very important. This calls for radical action but by what right does one take on the authority to subvert the existence of another? is it ethical to take up the position that I know more about someone else's life than they do?

Certainly in the Tibetan tradition the guru would be established in the position of the one who knows and who can see what is the situation of his students. Therefore he could act in ways which disturb them, with the expressed goal of trying to awaken them out of what it is they are caught up in. They would act on the body in terms of giving the student work to do, feeding them, beating them...They would use speech; praise them, insult them, tell them lies, tell them the truth. They would use their mind by opening themselves to the person or closing themselves, becoming completely impenetrable, so that the student felt abandoned, lost, isolated, and unloved. If both people have some notion of what they are engaged in this behaviour may be very useful.

Anything is useful if you know how to use it, but if you don't know how to use it, you may feel abused by it. Of course we often only learn how to use things by being used, but while we are being used we may feel **abused**. For example in its early days the humanistic movement did a lot of work in encounter groups. Many people practised gestalt therapy which was very 'in your face' and could be experienced as abusive.

People made these gestures towards another—and we have to give the therapist the benefit of the doubt that their intent was not malicious—because there was a desire to waken someone, to say: ***'Oy! What is your life? Who are you?'***

Qualities needed to act on another without being self-indulgent

Awakening is not polite, which returns us to the question: ***'If we take up that position with someone, what are the qualities we have to develop in ourselves before we can make this kind of intervention on another so we are not simply engaged in ego indulgence?'***

In buddhism we would say wisdom and compassion operate together. That is to say, if one has a realisation of emptiness—both the emptiness of one's own process, and the emptiness of the existence of all the people one meet—then when one impacts them, one is not impacting a **person**, but is engaging with an open dimension, which is essentially empty.

At the heart of this I think we have attention, clarity—clarity going both to our own process and to the other. It has something in common with a psychoanalyst's awareness of countertransference in the analytic situation. What buddhism can bring, is that whilst having very open attention to the other, and an infinite respect for the presence of the other, one can still question the validity of the narrative that the patient uses to define themselves and their world. This is because the truth of a human's existence is not defined by their words, as we discussed yesterday.

Now let's do a little bit of sitting, and then have a break. If we do this practice we did yesterday, with the eyes open, very relaxed and reciting the three 'Aa's, and then just being present in the room as it is.

[Practice]

Take the taste of this meditation experience with you into the openness of this room, and take it further with you when we go out for lunch or let it be with you if you stay here.

Stay a bit open and available to experience the world as it is in this co-presencing. If you are sitting in the restaurant, you can just go into this practice very easily and quietly by yourself. If other people's conversation or words take you over and you lose yourself, just gently go back into it. Thirty seconds of just relaxing and opening, and then go back to the conversation. It's always about staying afloat on the surface of experience as it arises.

[Break]

Questions and responses about emotions

[Inaudible question from the audience about emotions].

James: I think the traditional buddhist thought on that would be that it is a question of identification. Awareness itself has no content. When sensations of irritation or anger arise, this is something which is passing through our awareness and which we identify with.

It is about how we understand the formulation '*I am angry*' or '*I'm pissed off*'. Perhaps we have a sense that our experience means something, that is to say, '*I don't want to be angry. Something's happening that makes me angry. This should not be happening.*' I can be angry at **myself**, for allowing myself to get angry. I can be angry **at the other** thing for making me angry. In any case, this flavour of anger or irritation has arisen.

Traditionally buddhist would use the metaphor of a crystal to describe how we experience 'our' sensations. When light shines into a crystal, depending on the nature of the crystal and the refractive index, you get different colours coming. So, anger would be like when our crystal, the crystal of this open self, is suddenly coloured red. We know, if we look at a crystal with the light in a certain direction, it can take on a reddish tinge, but the redness that is in the crystal is dependent on the angle of the light. It is not that the crystal really turns red, but the crystal appears to be red under certain conditions.

Clearly, when we are angry, we are angry. It would be silly to say we are not pissed off when we are, but again it's something about the status of the anger. Say, I am angry with you. '*I am angry with you!*' It's the intensity of '*I am angry with you!*' In that moment, there is an 'I', a 'you' and an anger which all are experienced as real and solid. These three factors

locking as real, means that the experience becomes infinite; it becomes as if it has always been the case. 'I'm really angry with you, I want you to pay attention, and there is nothing else happening.' So, it becomes very solid, cut off from the rest of the world.

Traditionally in tantra, it says, we try to keep what they call the 'three wheels of self, other and the connection between them', turning in emptiness. Say, we are talking, and I am starting to get irritated, I become aware of the irritation arising through me just like how the light in the crystal changes as you turn it. I can say: *'I am angry with you!'*, and it's real, but I can also hold the awareness that this is just like a filter on a lens. It's just one colour, which is covering it. Then the filter will pass away, and we will be back to something else. The filter is there, it is true that this mood or this colour is running through our connection, but it is not permanent. It is not defining who we are; it is just part of the mood of the world as it changes. So, it is both there and not there. In the sense that we don't take it too seriously, not in the sense of saying that it doesn't matter. It has only the reality that it has, whereas usually we invest these feelings with additional reality.

Student: The question is always how can I dissolve or change something that I feel as negative. Who am I that I think that I must not have this feeling. This feeling comes, it has been accumulated inside of me, and who am I to suppress it?

James: For example, this practice that we have been doing, this simple practice of these three 'Aa's into space is very helpful, because then what you can do is: you can practice expressing the anger, but expressing it into space. Because if you tell someone you are angry with them, it can be quite light. It can be just informative, so that you are share the kind of colouration of your world. Or you can say it to them in a way that puts something inside them that stirs them up. It's a very nice practice to think, *'If I'm going to tell this person I'm angry with them, what is my intention?'* Is it to help them because they may be doing something which makes me angry, or is my intention to hurt them, to get a kind of revenge?'

Student: But I have to express it emotionally to be understood.

James: It's an interesting idea. In the Western tradition the belief in catharsis is first really formulated by Aristotle in his theory of theatre in which he is saying that when ordinary citizens go to the theatre and see emotions being dramatically enacted, their own constellation of these emotions is evoked in them: They weep at the tragedy, they laugh at the comedy, and this clears them out and helps them to be more available for their ordinary life.

However, generally speaking, in the Tibetan tradition, they say that to express emotions is like drinking salt water. If somebody is at sea, and they have no fresh water to drink, it is very tempting to drink the sea water. There is some immediate gratification because the water is cool and refreshing but it is also very salty, and so it intensifies the thirst that drove the person to drink it in the first place.

Student: There is not so much difference between Aristotle and buddhism. For Aristotle, in a drama, there is no real anger; it's only a played anger.

James: It depends. For example, imagine that this cup is a spring, where the water is bubbling up from the bottom. Gradually, this will fill up with water. If you take the water out, it will be empty. But the water will keep coming in from the bottom. So, people go to the theatre a lot. You don't just see *King Lear* once, and get rid of all your fears of getting old. The fact is that dualistic structure generates energetic tension and this fills the pot of

our self with emotions and moods. We can release these, but we will fill up again, unless we cut the spring. And this 'spring' is the tension of subject and object.

Student: For me, this would mean that I just pour out my Western thinking and fill in Tibetan thinking instead. But I am still a European.

James: Well then, I would suggest you could unify it. To stay with the image of the spring, very often you can't see where the water is coming through, because it's full of water. If you empty out the water, then you start to see where it is filling up from. You can go to the theatre, enjoy the aesthetic experience and the catharsis that arises from it, and then do your meditation and observe the return of emotion to the liberated self. The same in dzogchen, in the use of 'Phat!', or if you do *rushen*, you have this clearing out, but then stuff comes back. At that point you can observe more clearly: *'Where does it arise from? How is it that once again I am getting into this?'* So the clearing away is wonderful, because it gives us space, and then you can watch: *'Oh, now the space is filling again.'* So you can use theatre, dance, anything for that.

When I go to Cologne, we often go to this very beautiful little museum, the Käthe Kollwitz Gallery. We meditate there because with her paintings and her drawings you get so much emotion. So we go and we look for maybe ten minutes intensively at the drawing, and get completely full of this. And then we go and sit and do some meditation, and become empty. Then we go again and look at the art, and each time you look at when you come from the meditation, into the image. It's so powerful. You just stand and you weep, because you are completely unprotected. In that way you can use the response and the space in a very dynamic way, which lets one experience the process of being touched by beauty in the world.

Especially, just a last thing on this question of what does it mean to be touched: listening to Bach, looking at a beautiful drawing. Somehow, we are touched, so in that moment, we have the question: *'Who is the one who is touched?'* It's a very interesting point for thinking. What is this subjectivity which is adapted to the impact of the world? And there you can see how out of emptiness, awareness arises as me having this experience.

That is very helpful again in thinking about compassion, because if you are wanting to help someone, it's really important that you have a clear sense of who is this one who is wanting to help? The more we can observe how we arise into being one who faces the world, gesturing towards helping, and see that is grounded in space, or grounded in the prejudice of the five poisons, then you have some real choice.

Student: I had the same experience with acting out emotions. It solidified my aggression.

Beginning and ending in emptiness

James: Typically, when you have a tantric practice, it is very complicated. But the simple form is that there is the visualisation—or you could say, the felt experience—of a clear blue sky and then in this clear blue sky, out of the sky, appears a letter which transforms itself into a deity. The deity then sends rays of light into you, and you pray up to the deity, and there is some intercourse between you. As you do the practice of the deity, you recite their mantra, and often you also visualise yourself in the form of this deity, which brings about a particular kind of mood. If the god is very peaceful, you might feel very calm, you might cry with pity and compassion for the suffering of all beings. If the deity is a wrathful one with flames all around them and a big ugly, angry face, making a roaring sound, then often you yourself get a little bit heated up and 'Rrrrrrrrr!' Or you might be observing a deity of some

erotic interest and find a certain warmth in your genitals. After doing the practice, the god comes to the top of your head and dissolves into a ball of light. The ball of light goes down into your heart. Your body dissolves into this ball, and then the ball shrinks down into emptiness, which is once again like the clear blue sky.

In that way, you have a whole enactment, which has a lot of catharsis in it of a wide range of emotions, but because it starts in emptiness and ends in emptiness, you don't carry away with you a charge that has been built up. You go fully into that experience, but the experience is held in emptiness, and the let go of.

So, really any buddhist therapy would have to begin and end with emptiness. The task for the therapist, who may hold a sense of emptiness in the session, is to find some way that will help the patient or the client also to have an awareness of emptiness. This raises the ethical question of: if a patient comes to therapy in a state of distress, is it proper to introduce them to a whole new reading of the nature of existence which they may adopt due to their state of disturbance, without having any rational thought about the nature of emptiness. A similar thing happens in psychoanalysis, where somebody is brought into the experience of the unconscious, although they may have had no idea of that before they began the treatment.

Question. How James integrates his meditation with his therapy work

Student: I would like to bring my meditation practice into my therapy work but I do not know how to. How do you manage, James?

James: It's said in the tradition that the Buddha taught 84,000 dharmas. He taught 21,000 to deal with anger, 21,000 to deal with desire, 21,000 to deal with stupidity, and 21,000 to deal with the mixture of the three. Basically, he thought that people were messed up in many different ways. And so, he wanted to help them as they were. In the nyingmapa tradition that I'm trained in, we talk of nine vehicles or nine styles of buddhist meditation and typically we practise the nine together at the same time. So when I came back from India and started to train in therapy, I was always being told in the institutes I went to, *'You know, this is what we do, this is our package, and we do this with everybody who comes in the door, because we are analytic therapists, cognitive therapists, or whatever.'*

So, although I have been trained in many different kinds of therapy and I teach different therapies in pure form, my own practice is, I suppose we would say, integrative. I bring together different styles according to the movement with the patient. I would try to bring some mood of maternal holding and unconscious maternal reverie, in which there is space for fantasy, and the uncertainty between fantasy and reality. At the same time I would try to hold the position of the father, offering clarity, the rules of the world, how our life is, that you have to face out and get on with it... There is a lot of slapping and challenging, enforcing the person to confront reality.

Most therapists would say, yes, that is what they do, but I think often what happens in our actual clinical practice is that we go father—mother—father—mother. First we are very kind, and then we feel taken advantage of, so we say, *'Hey, but the boundaries are this. You've got to do this and this'*. Then they get a bit frightened by this, so again, we comfort. What I try to work with is the fusion of the two, held together.

Between the sessions with patients I do some simple meditation. I often do this three Aa meditation, just to wash out the previous session, to be a bit fresh and open.

The second important point is not to believe that the ego does the work. The therapist's job is to try to get their ego out of the way so that the work can go on, and therefore to trust the process that whatever is necessary, will arise. However it is also an informed process, because I read a lot and I think a lot about psychotherapy theories.

Thirdly, without being too proud or inflated about it, I try to carry the awareness that if I don't speak to this person, who else will speak? The person's friends will be affirming them in their ordinary reality, and strangers are not going to say anything. I try, therefore, to make an intervention to awaken the person or to give them some fresh edge, as much as is useful for them. I believe that I am not just speaking to the ego of the person. Since the ego is often very fragile, when you speak, you can end up trying 'to protect' the patient's ego, and not giving them the awakening. So you have to speak to the bit of them that is, in a sense, indestructible, to the place that is covered over by the ego.

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky developed the notion of what he called 'the zone of proximal development'. It is used a lot in child development theory: that the child has some potential to move forward, and the adult, the mother in particular, has to position herself near enough to give the child support to come forward, but far enough away that there is a gap to move into. It's the same question for the therapist. What is the actual situation of this patient now? How can I help them where they actually are? So, the therapist has to position themselves in service of the other. It's interesting how in the Tibetan tradition they often say that the guru is like a fire. If you go too close you get burned, if you are too far away you don't get warmed. It is a very interesting example.

We do need to be able to move in the service of another and so I think that is what I take from buddhism; through some practice, is a developing understanding of emptiness. The gesture of being available, to be used by the patient as is necessary, to be idealised when that is helpful, and to be turned into the toilet cleaner when that too necessary, because all of these positions from time-to-time are necessary. Therapists are, I think, moving people; they are people who are prepared to say, *'I will turn the dynamic quality of the self into the service of others. And I will not take a fixed position.'*

As a final thought, it's very important, I think, in the project of integrating buddhism into therapy, not to generate a profit, a psychological profit, out of the proceedings, as a kind of ego profit, an ego inflation.

In the same way that tantric meditations go back into emptiness, so working as a therapist, having good sessions and bad sessions, being idealised, being degraded, all of that goes back into emptiness. There is nothing really to say about it except: *'Oh, I had a busy day.'*

So we take some tea, get a bit of fresh air, then do some practice.

[Break]

Three Aa practice

[Three As practice]

In some systems of meditation, at the end of it, I might ring the little bell, which would mark the end of the meditation and the beginning of something else. But when we practice in this very simple way—with these three 'Aa's and open up relating to the space here—the end of

the meditation is really just when the presence of the room comes into play and we start to relate to it. The potential is there for the world to be woven into this fabric of openness, which is the meditation.

People often talk about '*going into analysis*'. It as if analysis is a place apart from life, where different rules pertain and where one has experiences which one doesn't find in ordinary life. But it's the same problem as with '*going to India*'. If you go to India, you get to do different things: you wash your bum with your hand and you eat your food with your hand. You can wear different kinds of clothes and you have a different kind of experience. You can come back from India with all your beads and little bits and pieces of this and that, and if you walk around wearing all your little bits from India, people think, '*Oh, this person has been to India*.' It is the same, if you 'go into psychoanalysis'; you wander around talking about your dreams.

It is the same, if you '*go into meditation*'; you come back from the meditation with experiences, and you want to tell people about your meditation experiences, because every tourist wants to bring back something! But if we want the practice of meditation to be woven into our lives, to become something which is very close to our lives, then we don't want it to be a straw hat or something bizarre. We want it just to be very simple. That's why we do this simple meditation, which we do with our eyes open and certainly with our hearts open... not creating any blockage between ourselves and the world, but with a very calm, clear focussed attention simply on the space, within which we find our existence.

[Relating the three Aa practice to the three Kayas](#)

Now, to relate this to the three kayas: **Kaya** means body, indicating a form, a gestalt. In the history of buddhism, it is a movement away from the binary oppositions of samsara/nirvana, Buddha/ordinary persons, good/bad and so on, towards a triangulated system. In the early days of the formulation, the idea was that this first level, which is called in Sanskrit **dharmakaya**, is generated, or realised, as the **fruit** of the practice of wisdom. Dharma in that sense means something like reality or truth. So this is the form of reality; reality as it is in its most simple experience.

[Dharmakaya](#)

Essentially it is the understanding of emptiness. It is very important to understand that emptiness is not an essence. Emptiness is not a thing somewhere else. Very often, people talk as if the true nature of the cup is emptiness, as if somehow, if we took the bits that are not the 'true nature'—we took the 'false nature' out of the cup—we would just have emptiness.

But emptiness cannot be separated from contingency. Because this cup is existing at the moment, held in my hand, it is existing within a very complex matrix of many, many forces. I am sitting here. No haemorrhage has yet occurred in my brain. If that were to happen, I would drop the cup. We take it for granted that we are not suddenly going to have some brain attack and fall dead, be paralysed, or whatever. The blood which is going round our body all the time is carrying all bits and pieces which can easily cause some obstruction and then—Bang!

[Reification: seeing 'things' when actually there is only process](#)

The enemy of the understanding of emptiness is not manifestation, but it is reification, the seeing of things when there is actually only process. This is why in buddhism we spend a lot

of time thinking about impermanence and trying to see the flow of impermanence in everything that is occurring.

Empty means *empty of substantial essence*. Nothing that we can see in this room has any substantial essence because everything in this room is linked with everything else. Even when we meet here in this room and imagine we have never met each other before, we suddenly end up twenty something people sitting in a room. But we can say something. We have some knowledge of English or German or whatever, we have all kinds of cultural assumptions in common. Our perceptions of the other are dependent on perceptions which we've received from other people, and because many of you went to similar schools, you have similar ranges of assumptions. So, essentially what we have is the flow of experience of each other, and this flow takes shape according to information, habits, memories, assumptions.

So, this dharmakaya level of the understanding of emptiness is not something high and mystical. It is something simple and present all the time if we just attend to the basis of manifestation, in the moment it manifests. It is not apart from whatever is manifesting.

Sambhogakaya

The second level of *sambhogakaya* in the early stages of dharma was described as a *reward body*. Sambhoga means 'pleasure'. It was seen as a body of pleasure, or a state of bliss, which was the reward for the accumulation of merit. And so, in the tantric tradition, it was represented like the figures you can see in this painting, god-like figures who are shining and radiant with bodies which are made of light and without any heavy substance to them.

In the dzogchen tradition, Sambhogakaya is described more in terms of rays of light, spots of light, flashes, balls of light, and sounds: Rrrrrroar, bambambam. Essentially, it's when, in a most relaxed state in meditation, we dissolve from this ball of light—or we do these three 'Aa', and really go into the practice—and are just completely open; then something begins to arise. If we stay with the openness, we won't know what it is that's arising.

Now for example, we are sitting here in the meditation, and there is a noise: Rrrrmbam. Then we may think, 'Oh, it's a motor bike or it's a motor car. It's traffic in the street.' What we have heard is 'something'. We are used to hearing 'something', because generally speaking our security in the world rests in being able to see and to hear and to feel things clearly. If we go deaf, we want to be able to see very clearly. If we go blind, we want to be able to hear very clearly or have a strong intuitive sense, because we want to know what is going on.

This is very important for meditators because this desire to know what is going on, is the energy of the ego which is seeking a kind of lordly ownership of experience. This is the primary attack on the open radiant expression of the sambhogakaya. We are back again to this concept from Freud we had yesterday: *polymorphous perversity*. By that Freud means the baby's ability to take pleasure wherever it comes from. The baby doesn't know what is going on, but it knows what it likes.

And it's the same in the sambhogakaya. One has a raw, unmediated experience. It's not experience organised through cognitive structures or semantic categories for ordering and giving meaning, but it is just the direct experience, a purely aesthetic experience, through all the senses, which is beyond speech and is always radiant. One of the things about the deities in these [pictures, thangkas] is that they look as if they are illuminated from the

inside out. They are not turned back on themselves; they are not trying to make sense of who they are. They are just expressive.

You know how when the little baby starts to rub its downstairs and go 'Haaa', then the anxious parent says: '*No, don't do that!*' and maybe takes its hand away? This is what the ego does in meditation, when the open awareness starts to enjoy whatever is occurring. The anxious ego seeks to install the rules of the world (right/wrong, good/bad) into the very earliest level of experience. This, in meditation one may have all kinds of experiences, dreamlike sequences, visions, some beautiful, some horrifying, acts of cruelty, like a dream landscape. .. It's very important just to allow whatever is there to arise, knowing that its ground is open and empty, and being neither horrified nor excited by the content.

This is the real meaning of sambhogakaya for meditators, because it is the dimension of pleasure in all that occurs. It is the level of purification of the five poisons into the five wisdoms; of stupidity, anger, desire, jealousy, and pride into radiant experiences of openness to experience. The thing about having experience on this level is that it is a shameless level, of infinite expansion. It is open and radiant.

[Nirmanakaya](#)

Then the third level is called the *nirmanakaya*. Nirmana is linked to *nirmita* [Sanskrit] which means 'like a spark' or 'something which just comes up for a moment manifesting'. Being here in one's body, with other people in this room, is manifest existence.. Traditionally, this nirmanakaya is seen as a compassionate gesture by the Buddha who, whilst dwelling after enlightenment in a pure buddhaland, manifests into the world in a concrete form in order to help others.

For meditators, the meaning is that we, having achieved some realisation in our meditation, can stay relaxed and open just appreciating this sambhogakaya translucence of experience. When necessary, we manifest more concretely in interaction with others for the sake of the other, with the understanding that the other we relate to is existing also in the sambhogakaya manifestation.

[Dzogchen goal: never coming out of meditation](#)

It means that the goal, particularly in dzogchen, is never to come out of meditation; that meditation be maintained through the calm centring in this centre-less place of dharmakaya, with the full enjoyment of experience as it arises. It is very important that we are satisfied; not a self-referential masturbatory satisfaction, but an aesthetic satisfaction of appreciation of the light and sound and resonant quality of existence as it manifests through us, and as us. Out of that, one responds to the situation.

It is very important, to understand that in the dzogchen view, it's **not** that you are in this meditation, rich and complete, and then when you open your eyes, you see suffering people and think '*Oh, you look messed up! How can I help you?*' like some kind of sambhogakaya International Monetary Fund: '*Oh you people are starving! Let us give you some money*'.

Dzogchen is not America versus Africa; sambhogakaya up there, going down into the world out of kindness and pity. Rather, this level of arising includes the world. This is very, very important to understand in meditation.

When you wake up in the morning, you wake up out of yourself into the world. When you fall asleep at night, you leave the world '*bye-bye*', and you go into yourself. This is how to

live a stupid life, according to buddhism, not my prejudice, personally. It's not that we go in and then come out into the world, but rather that the experience of the world and self arise together.

The structure of samsara

We are always enworlded, and this separation of 'me' apart from the world with the illusory choice: 'I can go out into the world or not', this is ***the structure of samsara***. This is grasping at self, is to imagine that I have a choice about whether I am connected with you or not. This is madness.

So, the nirmanakaya is the experience, within the integrated field of awareness, of pulsing into a precise gesture towards another who is experienced in a precise way, and then the resolution of that gesture back into sambhogakaya and dharmakaya, so that life is the ceaseless pulsing of: open/rich—precise/precise—open/rich—precise... It's just moving all the time.

When the Buddha says suffering arises from attachment, this is gesturing to the fact that when we become attached and fixated on one thing, we block this natural responsive flow. We get hung up on something, and so are off balance; we start vibrating in terms of our own rhythms, our karmic rhythms, which means we can't en-rhythm, in tune, attune, to the actual state of someone else.

In the practice of dzogchen, nirmanakaya is the most important level

In the practice of dzogchen, the nirmanakaya level is the most important level. Generally speaking, in tantra, we see dharmakaya as very high, very holy, very wonderful, and we try to move up to gain this great state of enlightenment. We believe when we get this dharmakaya that that realisation is really how we enter into enlightenment.

But in dzogchen, everything begins with this possibility of openness, and this openness is not seen as something far away, something that is difficult to get, but as something that is always there, always available. As we say with this figure Samantabhadra/Kuntu Zangpo/ 'Always Good': it's just there, just below the surface, so we can contact it. Do the three 'Aa's, open, relax—and it's there!

It is possible to get the transmission of this through great teachers like C R Lama, Namkhai Norbu or many of the older yogis who have real realisation; but once you have that transmission you have to do the practice yourself. And the practice is: in the world we become disturbed. In the world we lose our balance and we start to get too crazy. Too dispersed or too tight, these are the main problems.

The key thing, first of all, is to get the direct experience of being balanced, of being in harmony, where you can feel the pulse of these three kayas. Then, with that flavour, that direct taste, when you start to lose your balance, you can start to learn traditional methods and invent your own methods for returning to balance. Then, having got this sense of satisfaction in oneself, on the level of dharmakaya and sambhogakaya, gestures into the world are truly just energetic moments without the necessity of generating a profit from them, of getting either a particular kind of reward or a validation for your unique ego identity.

Because the ego is always hungry; the ego is looking for affirmation of its own existence and its own importance. However, when we go into the meditation and we have this relaxed

openness, there is a satisfaction in that without hunger. Then we start to see different things in the world. Instead of being drawn towards people or situations that will give us something, we get more drawn towards where there is a need, or where we can be of use. So, there is a different kind of connection.

This offers us a very interesting model of mental health—the ability to act in and with the world, but without taking it too seriously, so that we don't run around like a hungry dog sniffing at everything. Curiosity is a very important force in science and the modernistic project, but curiosity is not so very useful in the dharma.

Sniffing in samsara, all you will ever get is another flavour of shit

Student: I am a scientist, so that will divide me. As a scientist, I should be curious; as a practitioner I should not. Is that so?

James: Yes, this is pretty much the buddhist view, because if you are sniffing in samsara, all you will ever get is another flavour of shit. I am not giving this as my view; it is buddhism's point of view. The curious mind is hungry for something, it is hungry for something, and it is the thing-ness of the looking that makes curiosity wrong. Curiosity is an attentive awareness, a phenomenological openness to everything with a little edge, but we don't need that edge, because if you sit, the world will come to you. That's why in India you see some yogis who sit under a tree. They sit under the same tree for thirty years, and the world comes to see them.

We all have our own interest. The problem is, that having an interest, it then becomes the definition of ourselves: 'I am a poet, I am a scientist, I'm a....' Then death comes and you are still saying, 'I'm a, I'm a...' That's why, in buddhist meditation, we try not to define ourselves in terms of a fixed position, but to stay open to the world as it presents, because we are not in control of the world.

Hopefully we can see in this view of the three kayas, it is by attending to what is there—what is our self, what is the nature of our own experience on its most subtle level, what is my experience before I get busy—that opens up the domain of dharmakaya.

Attention: its usefulness to psychotherapists and meditators

So, just very briefly to bring us towards the end, what we began with yesterday was attention.

As psychotherapists, the patients who come to see us are, of course, usually very busy with something. They are busy with their symptoms; they are busy with their story; they are busy with the problems of their life. So, if we as meditators can hold a space of just quiet relaxation in this place before business, that can bring into the consulting room a flavour of space which can help the patient relax from all that they have invested into their problems.

If, as meditators, we have spent time on this sambhogakaya level of experience where things are unformed, pre-verbal, where there is just intense experience which can hardly be articulated, then it allows us to be with the patient in their pre-verbal experience. Rather than it becoming a regressive move into early childhood experience, it is as part of the luminous quality of stumbling into existence which we all have, moment-by-moment.

Psychopathology, whether neurotic, psychotic or perverse, we could see as errancy; as moving away from this natural revelation, this spontaneous pulsing of the three kayas.

The task, therefore, both in meditation and in psychotherapy is to allow a movement from substantialisation, from the creation of entities, towards the experience of the process of becoming. The way we can support people in doing that, is by not clinging to fixed positions ourselves, by experiencing ourselves as this ceaseless availability within a range of possibilities into which we can pulse. Of course this is very difficult anyway to do, and it's particularly difficult in these times where there is increasing professionalisation, that is to say increasing concern to convince the public that what we do is good, and thereby creating more rules with which to kill ourselves.

So, now that we are approaching the end, I can round it up by saying that the key things to practise is the development of attention. You can do this through observing your breath; you can do it through focussing your attention externally on a small object like a pebble or a small statue of the Buddha. Place the object about an arm or an arm and a half span away from you, slightly above you, and just let your attention rest on that object. When the mind goes away, bring it back very gently. Of course you can also do this 'Three Aa' meditation with space.

If you work as a therapist and sit facing your patient, you can have your patient as your object of meditation. Patients come to us for our attention so we should attend to them. The more we have the ability to attend, the more they will feel the presence of our connection with them right through the hour. We'll keep our attention of everything that they say; we'll observe their bodies and be very close to them. We will also be able to attend to what is arising in our own experience without losing the sense of the room and the situation. Everything will be present in awareness.

So, that's a lot of words. Maybe we end now, just with doing this three 'Aa' meditation ?

[Practice]

I'd like to thank Norbert for his excellent translation. Very helpful.