

# **What it is to be human and to practice the dharma**

*according to Tibetan Buddhist teachings*

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## Excerpts

Being human is only one option among many. We are not innately human in our real nature, this is simply a momentary display and the pattern of the display, the manner of the display, is not the main thing. What is important is the relationship between the expression that we have – how we take up the way of being human – and the ground of that expression.

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We do not need to radically change our external behaviour because, as Patrul Rinpoche points out, what needs to shift is not the manner in which phenomena arise, but the manner in which they are dissolved. That is to say, life continues as usual, getting up, washing, going to the shops, cooking food. But the particular style, the particular mood with which we engage in this activity is very different. Whatever is arising, is arising as the manifestation of the state of openness. That is why it is called dzog pa chen po meaning 'great perfection'

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It is common for people who have been around in Tibetan buddhism for a while to have many different initiations from different teachers. The initiations may be in different lineages, with different requirements for daily practices and so on. Consequently people may have commitments to recite many different mantras every day. It can become easy to get overwhelmed and lose the sense of the whole endeavour, which is: we do the meditation to get a particular result.

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The purpose of eating is to satisfy the taste sensation in the mouth and the hunger in the stomach and to make sure you take in enough nourishment to sustain body and mind. The purpose of meditation is similar. First of all, it has to please our mouth: we have to actually enjoy doing the meditation. I don't like broccoli. I refuse to eat it, so there would not be much point for me to pray to the broccoli buddha. Similarly it is important to find a practice that tastes sweet on your tongue and gives you increasing clarity. It is not enough to just do it because somebody told you. You need to check into your own experience, your own sensation. What am I getting out of this? Buddhism is pragmatic in that way. We don't do it for the sake of just doing something but because we want to get something.

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The main teaching of the Buddha is that our lives are restricted by ignorance, so, as buddhists, we have full permission to be ignorant since the Buddha has said so very clearly that this is the basis of our situation! To be ignorant and not to understand things is absolutely allowable, to be ignorant and to ask lots of questions...

Our topic tonight concerns what it is to be a human being, according to the Tibetan buddhist tradition. Firstly maybe we can get some ideas about what it is to be human by thinking about our own motives in coming here today. So please take a couple of moments to reflect on this for yourself. Is there something that you want to get, something particular or just a vague feeling. Reflect on that for a couple of minutes and then talk to someone sitting next to you for a couple of minutes, sharing what you want.

In many ways we construct the world in terms of the sense of self that we have. We process the world in a particular way that gives us a continuing sense of self. If one starts to meditate and slow down the pattern of thoughts, then the sense of self that we normally rely

on, which is a dynamic construction, it is very difficult to keep the continuity of that and one often feels lost and confused.

In that trembling quality, we can use the dharma to 'fill up'. There are very many books, there are a lot on the table there, and one can study the dharma and exchange these ordinary thoughts about going to the supermarket and paying your taxes, with very complicated thoughts about buddhist philosophy, about tantric lineages, about which guru is good and which is bad. Buddhism can supply a lot of interesting extra thoughts. Buddhism is both a socio-cultural phenomena with a huge history and literature of great complexity, and a very simple way in which we can start to explore our own existence.

In coming into the dharma, one confronts a movement in two directions. On the one hand there is the possibility to learn many interesting things, and with this knowledge to construct a new kind of identity for oneself, but it also opens up the possibility of exploring the basis from which we make our thoughts and constructions about the world. In the actual meditation practice, when we are trying to enquire into what goes on, on the one hand we need some information, some teaching on the meditation and its general purpose, its view of philosophical frame for the meditation, and on the other hand if we know too much, if we take a reliance on knowledge, knowledge is always predictive and one then tends to predict, out of the knowledge that one has got through one's ears, on to the actual experience that is occurring.

**Q.** Inaudible Question

**J.** Just as if we want to draw a tree, you see children drawing a tree, they know a tree and they draw a tree but it doesn't actually look like that at all. You know it is a tree, they might tell their parents they've drawn a tree, and we can agree with them that it is a tree, because they say it is a tree. The idea of the tree precedes the actual perception of the tree. The more we have an idea of a tree that is built up through habitual resonances; it becomes more and more difficult to see the actual tree itself.

This is very important for meditation because the more you study, the more you can know what your experience should be in the meditation. Instead of being able to just sit with an open expanse of possibilities which you can enquire into in a very direct way, then you find that you already have an expectation of what should be occurring. There are two principle dangers in that, one is that on the basis of the knowledge that one has taken in one will misidentify the nature of the phenomena that are occurring in the meditation. The second danger is that one will imagine that the things that one has read about in the text, or has heard teachers talk about, is something that one can never attain. That is to say, the experience of meditation you think you should be getting becomes punitive for you, it punishes you as being stupid and worthless, because you can't get it, rather than being an inspiration.

So it is very important that we think how we are going to make use of whatever understanding we have of the dharma. Traditionally it is often presented that one should come into the dharma and empty out one's own traditional ways of responding and completely internalise the dharma presentation. That is very difficult because we also have to be able to think about what we are doing in order to stay alive. If we are going to think about what the dharma means for us in our world, then we need to understand a lot about our own motivation, about how we might be turning the dharma towards our own purposes.

I'll take it up in a different way. In order to be able to practice, we have to be present as ourselves. This means we have to know who we are, but we can't know who we are until we do the practice. The tension between these two points is a place of great confusion. This confusion is written into the whole movement of the dharma. Although in starting to practice the dharma, one may hope for more clarity, one may also find an increase in confusion. One shouldn't be too surprised at that because change produces anxiety. That anxiety we see demonstrated again and again as we have political changes, economic changes, anxiety manifests.

## Five kinds of human existence

With that as a kind of opening frame we can look more precisely at traditional buddhist notion of being human. In a traditional text by Che tsang Pa, Ratna Sri Buddhi, he describes five kinds of human existence. The first one he describes as a 'mere human existence' and this means to be born in a barbarian country which has never been visited or disciplined by a buddha and where the sound of the dharma has never been heard. Or, if one is born into a dharma country, then one follows a different path. Of course with traditional definitions like this, it is saying something both very interesting and something a little bit narrow minded and prejudiced.

Basically what it is saying is that if one lives in a frame of reference which is never put into question, then one will simply return to basic concerns such as eating, sleeping, having a family, being an ordinary person, without any awareness of other possibilities. The focus of the dharma is to interrupt our preoccupation with ordinary life. If one doesn't come across these kinds of ideas it is quite difficult to open up and make a critique which also contains a path inside it. In modern Europe now we have many systems of critiquing phenomena, feminist critiques, Marxist critiques, deconstructivist critiques of the nature of language, the function of ideology. These critiques don't open up a path. One of the things about the buddhist teaching is that it both critiques, or puts into question, how we are in the world. It makes us think about how we are with other people, our sense of self and through that it opens up a path of a different intentionality. Most modern critiques, in my understanding, open up a space of some understanding but they don't open up some way forward. That subversive dissolving movement can be very enabling but it also takes us to the edge of a void that can be deeply problematic and full of anguish.

The second kind of human existence that is described is 'an ordinary human existence' which is grounded in not being able to clearly decide between good and bad actions. For example, one may want to help people, but not be sure what is helpful. One may make a gesture towards people and they say, "Why are you giving me all this advice? I don't want to hear that." This occurs again and again. If you have children and the children want to go and play football in the evening, and you say "What about your homework? Shouldn't you be doing some work for school as well?" What about sport, don't I have to have a healthy body as well? I could become a millionaire sportsman. Then it is very difficult to know. You can't tell the kids, "No, you can't go out and play", because you might think, "when I was young I always had to do homework and what has it done for my life? You don't actually know what to do. You want to help, be useful, but the world is so complicated that the guidelines that your parents and grandparents had don't seem to be useful any more. There is a kind of lostness around. I am sure we could all think of many examples like this in which the frame of reference is too confused for us to make sense of things.

The third kind of existence that is described is a 'misguided human existence'. The traditional example for this is that if you were given one measure of wealth or one hundred measures of dharma, you would choose the money. One's frame of reference is distorted in that one can't see the wider possibilities of being a human. Imagining that one can make one's life safe by the accumulation of material goods, one keeps trying to get more and more and to make one's life concentrated and secure, thinking what have I got in the bank, .... This is essentially an organisation of life as a defence against anxiety. Because fear of loss, of old age, of sickness, fear of having less than other people, all of these tormented forces which certainly swirl around in our culture make it difficult to have a wider perspective.

The fourth human existence is called a 'defective human existence'. The traditional description of this is one in which the sense organs are not intact, are not complete. Or if one does have all one's sense organs, one is very stupid or has some mental brain damage. This also refers perhaps to birth accidents, traumas in later life, being in a car crash and being physically damaged in some way, and to the way in which we live inside our bodies. Very often we don't use our eyes very well. It is autumn, there are beautiful trees all around us and there are incredible trees all around us and we are in our heads thinking about something. We don't have direct contact with the world and our lives in Western Europe anyway are directed towards controlling the environment. Many people want to have music playing all the time, controlling the environment of sound, and creating a sense of continuity of sound. In fact if we are just to sit here, as we were before, there was a telephone ringing, there are noises outside. The world is alive. The world has different noises and flavours moving in it, which we cannot hear and respond to if we are blocking it off all the time with music machines.

Sitting in this room, it is a bit cold but anyway, it is autumn, and soon winter will bring even lower temperatures. We also get very used to being in centrally heated comfort where we don't get disturbed by changes in temperature. This is very far away from the traditional description of a 'defective human existence' whereby a person with limitation in their sense organs is cut off from the richness of the world.

I would suggest that there is some way in which we try to constantly control the world and impose our desire on it is also a kind of defective human existence because it is also cutting ourselves off from life as it presents itself.

### ***Precious human existence***

The fifth kind of human existence is called a 'precious human existence' which traditionally is described as one having the eight freedoms and the ten opportunities. I won't go through all of these. They are available to you in many texts. The essential point is that one needs to work towards developing a healthily alert body and mind and use this to develop one's contact with the dharma. I think we need to think a little bit about what dharma means. I will say a little about this and then we can have a break and move around a little bit. What I was saying at the beginning, the buddhist teachings, moving both in terms of books, teachings, understandings, and in terms of the opening up of the possibility of self-exploration - these two movements in the dharma have to be recognised as being, at this time, rather different. Otherwise, if we read these traditional texts, texts that in a sense are the dharma, what they are saying is that unless you are in my gang, you don't understand anything. We have heard this kind of stuff before, haven't we - so we don't want to go into a tradition that is saying simply, 'we are good and you are bad'.

This is what I was referring to earlier by the socio-cultural phenomena of the dharma - how it presents itself in the world, constructing itself, taking up a place of one religion among other religions. By becoming interested in the dharma, taking on dharma things, one can take on an interesting new identity, something to talk about with your friends, meeting regularly, maybe that dharma group wants to support a monk, build a monastery in India..... so they need to make a bit of money, so maybe they hold some coffee mornings of the kind that you imagine the good people of the village hold in this very hall. These are not bad things, it is not wrong to do this kind of thing but it is not very different, it is just more of the same. Whether you do it as a christian or a buddhist or a muslim doesn't make any real difference. Being a nice person in the world, helping other people, there is nothing wrong with that but the Buddha's teaching offers another possibility as well.

The belonging which the dharma speaks of is both a socio-cultural belonging which says, 'Well, I am a buddhist and I do this and this is interesting and important' but the main thing is the belonging of the self-recognition of one's true nature. That is a very different direction altogether. Our interest today is primarily with the second thing.

For that reason before we take our coffee break we will do a little bit more sitting meditation so that we can integrate the coffee into the meditation rather than having a sweet social chat, which we can do anytime. Because setting up meditation in one area and worldly activities in another area doesn't take us very far. In the mediation we want to have a sense of openness and awareness and at the end, when one has a sense of depth and calmness, to come out of it and come into the room and bring the room into that state, so that one is not in here and then , pop, out into something different. Let's sit and bring some of that state into the world, with awareness.

### Sitting

## **Human beings – the hinayana view**

Up until lunch I will now say something about human beings from the hinayana point of view and after lunch from the mahayana and vajrayana point of view and tomorrow from the dzogchen point of view, looking in depth at the nature of self-conceptualisation from the point of view of dzogchen.

To be born in a human body is considered very wonderful from the point of view of the dharma because we have both the experience of suffering and the ability to do something about it. In the other realms of suffering, people have either suffering and can't do anything about it or they have no suffering and drift into a hazy existence, can't do anything, are just spaced out. In the traditional depiction of the possibilities of existence there are seen as six realms. First the human realm, then the animal realm, then the hungry ghost realm, the hell realm, the jealous gods and then the gods. Each of these dimensions is seen as having particular causes. We can see them as being actual places where we can go to, actual physical dimensions, or as symbolic representations of psychological experiences. The latter reading is quite popular nowadays. There are some advantages in seeing these realms as mirrors through which we can understand more about ourselves as we are now. However that particular position tends to privilege the human existence in which we are now as being the central or the principal one, as if this is really what reality is and the other realms are variations on the theme of what existence is, ways in

which we can see what this is. Essentially they become a self-referencing back to our own image of what is important, back to the self.

In many ways this is a mirror image of international capitalism, which posits a future in which everywhere all over the world everyone will be eating MacDonald's and drinking Coca Cola. In England at the beginning of the century there were over four hundred varieties of apples, now in the supermarkets they only sell eight kinds throughout the country. All the richness, variety and possibility are concentrated into varieties which will stay well in cold storage and look shiny and glossy on the shelf. This way in which the richness of possibility which exists in the world is distilled down into commodities which are easy to process through large scale capitalistic functioning is a very powerful metaphor that runs through so many aspects of our lives.

In a similar way one can see that in a traditional system where there are six realms and there are real hells over there is turned into something which, rather than being different to and perhaps challenging our experience, is turned into something which simply tells us more about our experience. The point of this is that everything comes back to being a story about the self, which is to say the human self, which is to say the nineteen nineties self which is an ego-focussed narcissistic inward-looking self. What I am trying to say is actually quite complicated; the world we live in is actually quite complicated. One can take a simplistic dogmatic buddhist view and put that view on your head and it will tell us what to think. I don't think that will actually take us very far, because we live in a world of intense complexity and the dharma can open up ways of understanding that and taking a but it does mean that we have to move a little bit..... I don't know how to express it any other way than the way that I do.

If I just backtrack a little on this, one of the features of our culture at this time as I see it is both a fascination with difference, what is other, but also an enormous fear of that difference, that otherness. In that way buddhism which is "other" and different is very exciting, but our desire is very often to find something in the dharma which will help to complete our lives, to complete a gap that we feel in our lives, or to remove an irritation that we feel in our lives.

That is fair enough, because as the Buddha said, life is suffering and we don't like suffering, we want to avoid it. But if we try to avoid suffering by simply making our own situation more comfortable, we are confronted with the problem to develop total control. If anything arises which interrupts this sense of safe space that we have created for ourselves we become anxious again. We can see that the dharma has many things to offer in terms of helping to make our lives more secure, so that if we feel anxious we may want to do some calming meditation. For example if you have an interview with your boss at work, and you feel troubled before you go into the room it might be very helpful to sit quietly beforehand and concentrate on your breathing for a little while. Then you feel more open, relaxed, present and that will probably give you a certain advantage in the conversation. There is nothing wrong with that; it is being quite sensible really. However what it does mean is that a meditation technique is used as a way of helping you negotiate with the boss for more money and then with the increased pay that you get, you go and buy a new video machine and watch videos of people blowing other up and get you mind disturbed by anger and desire which are the main things that float in videos.

To use dharma, meditation, in that way, is it really helpful? That has to depend on the context. If the context that we have for ourselves is only one life, a life that is passed on this round earth, a ball floating through space, in a universe that originated from a big bang, a purely

accidental movement that is just flowing on until it dissolves in which every cultural and human experience that we have is simply a construction, a construction that fills the gap of the absence of inherent meaning, then if that is the view that we have of our lives, then to use meditation to make something more comfortable, makes a lot of sense. But in that sense we use dharma as a commodity, like any other commodity, that we purchase in a place like this and we add it on to our lives and it provides a kind of comfort.

Question: Is that really possible, what you have just described?

Answer: Nichiren Shoshu buddhism includes this very functional utilitarian use of the dharma, based on cause and effect. Chanting the Lotus sutra is a good cause so if I want a good effect, I can chant this and pray. I want enlightenment so I pray for enlightenment. I want a Porsche so I pray for a Porsche.

Q. Does it really work?

A. Well, I use a similar meditation technique between patients. If I see one patient, I do a little sitting and then I see the next patient. I do this to help clear my mind. That is a very functional use of meditation. It helps me in my work but it is not particularly concerned with anything else. I know a lot of people who work as stress consultants who will use meditation techniques. I am not saying it is wrong to do that. In a sense it is very intelligent to do that. What I am suggesting is that it is not really the principle function of the dharma.

When we come to a sense of these six realms the traditional texts give very elaborate descriptions of these places, especially of the hell realms. What the rocks look like, what the fires look like, what the demons who torture you look like.

There is a real question. Is it true that such a place exists? Of course we cannot know from ourselves whether such a place exists. We do not have accounts of people seeing them with their flesh and blood eyes. Who can give an account of how they went there and came back without any shift in consciousness? In Tibetan culture there are many account of great yogis who meditated and had visions of the hells, who really believed they went there.

There is also a very interesting group of women called *Delogma*. “De” means “going across” or “back” and “log” means “back again”. “Ma” is the feminine ending. Delogma is the women who go beyond and come back. There were women, usually fairly uneducated women, who go into a trance and in the trance seem to voyage down into the hell realms and talk with the people there and they can communicate messages among relatives. That is a fairly common element in the shamanic tradition. But I do not know that we can take their account as being a fairly definite proof, in the scientific sense that the hell realms really exist.

So in the end we have to rely on the account of people and make a movement of belief. This is quite difficult because since the European enlightenment we have had quite a focus on rational thought and we are very aware that if things can't be proved in a clearly logical manner, somebody may be out to cheat us. And we have probably all been cheated by people we believed in our lives, whether in a love story, a work story or whatever... We believe something and afterwards we thought, *'Wagh! That's not true, I've been ripped off.'*

So the positivistic philosophy from Auguste Comte and his associates that sets up the scientific position is very attractive because it also addresses the problem of anxiety. Once we know something is definitely the case we can relax our anxiety. As in allopathic medicine where lots of medical trials are carried out, and you have a lot of scientific evidence and the government licensing board says “This evidence proves this drug is safe.” It is a very powerful way of knowing in our culture. But if you use something like Bach flower remedies, what have

you got? Funny little bottles, a story about this very nice old doctor and the people who seem to be involved in it all seem to be very nice. You try it and something seems to happen, and some people say "Oh, this helped me". You may continue taking them. But the kind of proof embedded in that is very different from a scientific kind of proof. It is a proof from a kind of feeling, a mood, a sense of okay-ness. It is very subtle gesturing expressive belonging with this kind of a product. It is this latter kind of approach that one needs much more in coming into the dharma. It is not a scientific kind of proposition that is established out there, but neither is it a hallucinatory kind of self-indulgence located in one's own wandering thoughts. The proof rests in a very complex shift in the interaction that we have in the world.

As we will look a little later in this weekend, one of the Buddha's main ideas is around non-duality. One of the Buddha's main teachings was on non-duality, the absence between any real separation between subject and object. It means that what is in play is a horizontal moment between two points that are fixed. To explain more, if I really look into myself deeply I don't find anyone there. When I really look out and investigate you, as a phenomenon, I don't really find anything there. So in here, is an infinite horizon of movement, of self, and out there, there is an infinite becoming, a kind of horizon of other. Somewhere between these two horizons, there is a becoming, something is in play. Just as if you are taking something like Bach flower remedies, you could take the little bottle and put it into a laboratory and ask, "What is in here?" and you would get a print-out of subtle traces of something. And you would say "*Ah, it is because there are subtle traces of this, that it works*". All is in the middle, but it is not a middle between two fixed points. I could say, "*The walls are very hot, let's all go into the middle of the room.*" We know where the middle of the room is.

Everything is in the middle, but the question is, in the middle of what? There are no fixed places. Space has no boundary so to use a middle and an end has no point. That is why I use the word horizon, because you never get there and it is always open and becoming. That horizon is out there and it is in here. You do your meditation, and I don't think anyone ever gets to a point where they fully know themselves, because it is always becoming, something else. The same with us as a person, something hovers in me being here. There is a presencing which is unsayable. This is the way in which phenomena present. They are very clearly there but when we try to say what they are, we never really get there. We get very elaborate and prescriptive descriptions. But the thing itself is not the description.

Take this back towards the six realms, with these hell realms either we can say "*I have never seen them. No one I know has ever seen them so they do not exist. They are purely a symbolic representation that human beings have created in order to learn something about themselves.*" But that does not take us very far. If on the other hand we say, "*Yes, these realms do exist and the experience of going to a hell realm, where you are burned and tortured, where your body is devoured, is very frightening.*" Then the sense of that becomes something very powerful which might actually shock us and help us to shift problematic behaviour. In very much the same way with small children, people used to say, "*If you don't go to bed now, the big bad bogeyman will come.*" Nobody has seen this man, but he is very powerful and functions in a very real way - to shift children's behaviour

In our culture from the time of the European enlightenment, we have people like Voltaire who say that the whole of Christianity is simply a story of the bogeyman. They say it is all just a story told to frighten people, and that you shouldn't believe that, that you should take life back into the palm of your own hand. They say we should think about life, act well and take

responsible decisions about what we want. That is very much the culture we have all grown up in, with these assumptions.

Historically buddhism is almost asking us to take a retrogressive step – to go back to a kind of primitive unenlightened kind of thinking for the purpose of becoming enlightened. But of course the European enlightenment is predicated on the primacy of the *cogito*, of the intellectual ego. The Buddhist idea of enlightenment is rather different. If we concentrate our sense of self in the adult rational ego we can feel in control. Once you learn to think clearly you have a lot of control in your life. This vision of western security has been put into question by Freud and the psychoanalytic project where the presencing of the unconscious puts into question the conscious ego rational self's total control. But still there is an enormous belief in our culture in being adult and rational. This rational self is very much concerned with control. If we imagine that we have done something wrong and when we die we find ourselves in a hot hell where people are burning us and sticking sharp hot objects through our orifices, we will not feel in control then. We will be saying, "Mummy, daddy, help me!" There is no mummy daddy down there because in hell we just pop into a sudden existence there. The belief in hells actually requires us to take up a notion of ourselves that is very frightening. It means I can go to a place where I am totally at the mercy of the other force.

If we think of the kind of modernist dream of capitalism, there was a great hope that in everybody's house there would be all these wonderful electric devices and we probably know from stories our grandparents have told us, how difficult their lives were. Before electric washing machines, having to rub and scrub until your fingers were red - today it is a very different experience. In those days you used cotton nappies for babies, washing them out by hand, taking them into the garden to hang up and dry and then maybe the rain gets them all wet again before you have a chance to iron them. You feel despair because the baby is crying and needs a new nappy but you have no dry ones. Being out of control like that is terrible. Nowadays we go to the supermarket and buy Pampers. That makes it so much easier. People feel in control of their lives in many ways.

A lot of our culture is still driven by a dream of total control. When we think of the hells and hungry ghost realms, if we are born there we will have pretty well no control at all. This is like a real nightmare and of course the echo of that nightmare is what obsesses Hollywood where movies about madness and aliens and our lack of control. When you are down in hell you can't get to the telephone to dial the police. It is a place where you feel really powerless.

Another way to think of that is to look at our early experience in life, coming out of the womb and being very raw and vulnerable; not knowing language; not being able to speak; unable to say "I am hungry. I am thirsty". Only able to cry and hope that your mother can identify that this cry means "I am wet" or "I have pain in my belly" or "My head hurts." In that state we cannot protect ourselves from people who may want to hurt us, to abuse us or abandon us. That is probably quite a terrifying experience for each of us that we hold inside ourselves.

One of the ways that we try not to be in that situation is to make our own meaning. So we adopt the ideas or attitudes that make sense to us, that feel alright, and we let go the attitudes that don't feel right. We treat the environment as a vast supermarket where they have "pick 'n' mix". There is often a desire to take that attitude to the dharma: I like this bit so I'll take a lot of this. I don't like this bit, so I won't have any. We might want to have some of the meditation and the philosophy but not the cosmology. After all in the traditional

description it says that in the centre of this world – because the world is flat – there is Mount Meru. Mount Meru is 40,000 yojanas high. A yojana is 7 miles so this Mt. Meru is about half a million kilometres high. It gets dark at night because the sun goes behind the mountain. In the morning the sun comes out from behind, and that is sunrise. We would probably find it difficult to believe that. Then we might think, “Well, if the Buddha can talk about that kind of thing, and clearly that is not the case, then when he talks about hell realms and heaven realms, maybe that is just a similar kind of story. These are very important issues for us.

## **Distinguishing spiritual dharma from cultural dharma**

We don't live in a country where there is a long tradition of continuity of the dharma. When we come in contact with the dharma, we want to fit it in with what our lives are. Some cultures might say “*Well, we don't know very much about the world and the Buddha knows a lot so now we'll believe in Mt. Meru.*” How do we do it? This is a real question that we need to take up. If we give too much credence to our own adult rational self, we will simply pull in more of the same so that the dharma will just become a support to help us get more comfortable. That is not going to take us very far. On the other hand if we allow that the teaching of the dharma is true, then we have to work with its power to confront our lives and put into question our perception of our lives. We will then confront the subversive power of the dharma to make us really question the premises by which we live.

That is what I was trying to address earlier today by the difference between a socio-cultural form of the dharma and the essential dharma practice that takes one towards enlightenment. This is very different. We shouldn't disguise the difficulty. For people like Tibetans, they don't really separate out these two aspects, they are a fused experience. For us, some things clearly make sense and other things seem like cultural prejudices and traditions. The danger is that we only choose the bits that fit in with our vision of ourselves as we are.

The traditional presentation of the dharma is that you should accept the whole package without questioning it. Usually it is very safe to do this since we have a teacher, usually it is a male teacher, who is the papa figure, the expert who knows everything. We go and we get this expert thing from him. This is the traditional method and there can be an enormous security in that. Here on the one hand is the one who knows, who is kind and generous, and here on the other hand is the student who is eager, respectful, humble and that makes a beautiful pairing.

“Thus have I heard...” which is how the sutras come down. This is where Ananda, the main transmitter, simply says “Thus have I heard...” and repeats verbatim what he had heard the Buddha say. It is the memorising of a clump of speech. That clump comes into me, then I live with it, then I teach it to someone else; it gets passed on, a bit like a game of pass the parcel. It is very important not to drop the parcel, and not to write anything on it, because the parcel is good. It is ‘The Teaching’, a solid thing.

All this is very different from our western way of thinking about things. It seems to me that our task is to find a way of combining the importance of the dharma and of its tradition, making sure that the tradition continues, but finding a way of bringing that into the way that we learn, through questioning, through discoursing, through different points of view. All that is a very subtle task and one in which it can be easy to get lost.

## ***Four Noble Truths***

The position in the hinayana is that samsara is a very dangerous place. It is dangerous because it is a state beyond our control. This is demonstrated through the Four Noble Truths and the teaching on impermanence. The Four Noble Truths are the first teaching that Buddha Sakyamuni gave and he described how what we encounter in this life is suffering; that this suffering has a cause; that this cause can come to an end and therefore the suffering can cease; and that there is a path, various ways in which this can be done.

The cause of suffering is attachment. Attachment here means commitment to a notion of things as being real, important and vital for our existence. This means that as long as we have that sense of attachment, whenever things change, we feel troubled. It is particularly a problem because of the nature of impermanence. Because all phenomena that manifest arise due to particular causes, and end when the functioning of that cause comes to an end, they are impermanent.

This time of the year is a very good time to examine this because in the autumn we can see the way in which things that seem so rich and so full, turn in and collapse. It is a common experience that we see the days of summer as being infinite and long, as if they will stretch out for ever and ever. Yet, autumn comes. Today as we walked along the path, there were still grapes on the vine and they had a nice colour, but the frost is getting to them. In a few more weeks they will start to collapse in, to shrink and to rot. That is not a mistake. That is in the nature of things.

Things have a beginning, a middle and an end. When we become involved in attachment, we often get obsessed with the middle bit. With the middle period, where things are strong, full, and seem to have reached a completion. When we allow the time to unfold a bit more, we see that what seemed to be the completion is actually just one stage towards the dissolution. Attachment is linked with various factors in our psychology. A major one is how we deal with anxiety.

Traditionally in buddhist philosophy, it says that attachment arises from ignorance. Ignorance here means a non-recognition of the open dimension of awareness. When we have an open awareness, and the awareness is staying open and not located in any particular point of view, then we are not vulnerable. If the place from which we view things, the shaping that we set up for our awareness, is located in a precise point, then we are vulnerable, so that instead of being aware of a process of knowing, that knowing is something that unfolds, we start to imagine that 'I' am the one that knows things. 'I' have this knowledge. The 'I' then becomes not only simply a referencing back to a point of self, it is identified as the creator of our activity. I am doing this.

For example, I can say, 'I am lifting our arm'. Really, my arm just goes up! If you do Tai Chi you will know that you are not giving yourself a series of robotic instructions. Usually you are in a room with other people, and you are looking around and somehow you get more and more sense of what is involved. You could take a series of photographs of a great master and number all the photographs and try to practice these movements but that would take you very far away from the principle of tai chi. It is not a scientific knowledge of something that is learned from the outside. It is a particular way of gesturing one's being in the world. One learns tai chi by being with other people who do tai chi. It is an interactive process. You learn it in the world. It is not as if the tai chi was outside and you then put it inside, and then when someone asks you

to show it to them, you then put it outside. Rather, one allows oneself to relax into the mood of tai chi, that is what you do.

It is the same way with sexuality. Sex is not a series of operations that you can learn to do in a particular order. Sexuality is a mood which one experiences in the presence of another. In that way it belongs in a gesturing in between. It could also belong in the memory of another, but it has to do with connectedness in the world. In that way our lives are an ongoing movement of responsiveness to the environment, to what other people are doing. We are in process in the world with other people, an unfolding together all the time. Often we want to mark out our territory and have a sense of ownership and power and dominance in that area. Then that attachment to a particular form is confronted by impermanence. If impermanence is seen as a mistake, as something that shouldn't be happening, then we feel threatened by it.

Now I can look back at when I was younger and I can remember the things that I used to do then. I cannot do these things anymore, but I can remember doing them. Sometimes I think I should still be able to do them, because if I can't do them, then who am I, because I used to be able to do them. This is a question as we grow older, part of our lives, that is me, is gone. I am still me, so where the hell has it gone? The 'me' that I know of as the owner of my history, that 'me' is not a 'me' that I have. The 'me' that I have, is the 'me' that is here.

This is one of the real problems that we encounter a lot with old people. Partly it is because many old people in our culture are isolated, but it is partly because some old people will talk about their life and tell you about all the things they have been, as if that was what they are now. Of course, they did those things, but who was the person who did it? I have often talked with people about what they did in the war, how they jumped from planes and were very fit and healthy. But the person who is telling me this is an old man, who is shaky, frightened and living alone in a high rise flat and frightened people will break in and steal his possessions. Fifty years ago he was very big and strong with big boots on and he would have shot the intruder. Now he is a frightened old man. Where has the healthy soldier gone? I think that is an important question for all of us. Memories that we had of our childhood, of things that we have done in the past, these are actually like ghosts that hover around like in Ibsen's play. Where has it gone?

With examples like that – and I am sure you have lots of examples from your own life – we can see that there is a way in which our attachment to events that have passed keeps us from actually being present in the moment. That can happen both with pleasant and unpleasant experiences from the past. One might think 'Oh, ten years ago I could do this and that and I had all these friends and I could do many things.....' and because of that wonderful past, whatever I have now is not as good as it should be. Or it can be that whatever we had in the past was really dreadful, some kind of terrible accident or disease, or abuse, and we feel that this has put a curse on our life, and we find ourselves thinking 'Oh, if only that had never happened.....'. These thoughts take us away from being in the present. It is as if until we resolve this thing in the past, we cannot really be in the present.

But, where is this past? Where does it exist? The past exists only as a series of memories in the present. That is to say, we are having a perception in the present moment and calling it the past. This is one form of stupidity. From a Buddhist point of view, this is an outcome of ignorance. In this way the past, the present and the future all get mixed up together. We turn the past into the future, because we keep projecting on to it.

## ***Karmic habits***

This is the way karmic habits unfold. We have a karmic pattern in our life which keeps insistently repeating itself. We start with an assumption that something is the case, and act on the basis of that assumption. The assumption comes into place because of stupidity, that is to say, the reliance on thoughts as real, and also because of our attachment to the known as a defence against the anxiety of the unknown. We all experience that kind of thing when we identify a pattern that we have, we know what the pattern is, we try to change it, but we find we just can't change it. It is as if some power deeper than ourselves is committed to something that we are actually unsatisfied with.

In psychotherapy, many patients present knowing the particular triggers that they have. They may say, *'I drink too much. The reason I drink is stress. I am trying to cope with my stress.'* They have all sorts of plans to cope with their stress but somehow they find that they are drinking. Now, from a psychoanalytic point of view, you would say there is an unconscious drive or an unconscious pressure which leads the person into drinking. But from a buddhist point of view, we would say they have a karmic propensity in that direction. Somehow some pattern has been set up in the past which carries them forward and the bit of ourselves that is available as a conscious ego, thinking of intentionality, of willpower is often not really strong enough to deal with it. So, just being aware on the level of conscious recognition, doesn't dissolve the pattern very quickly. Over time it may very well do that but very often – for example with someone drinking a lot and becoming violent – recognising it does not wash it out, because every time that you repeat the pattern, you are actually intensifying it. So, there is the recognition, which is subtly dissolving it, happening at the same time as the repetition which is powerfully reinforcing it. That is why these deep patterns are often difficult to change.

**Q.** Is there nothing to be done?

**A.** It means that powerful methods must be used and this leads us in the direction of tantra, which uses such stronger forces. The hinayana approach of doing a calming meditation and being aware of the habits will very slowly erase them, but we may well not have that kind of time scale available to us.

## ***Attachment is embedded in being born human***

Attachment is a kind of general disorder which can infect particular patterns, and is reinforced by particular patterns. For example, maybe you grew up in a family which placed emphasis on table manners. You were told to keep your elbows tucked in, not to put your hands on the table, not to eat with our mouth open, not to make slurping noises when you eat your soup. Then, when you are older you find yourself being very attracted to someone and you start a relationship. But the first time you sit down with them to eat, they have some soup and they slurp it. You find yourself getting irritated. 'What's wrong with this person? I thought they were so nice!' Fights and nagging can start over things like that. Such instances are like the tip of an iceberg. In a sense it sets up a whole system of beliefs and values that were established in one family, coming in contact with a system of beliefs and values from another family. Part of our psychological development as infants is to learn the environment we experience, our family culture, and to have an identification with it. Even if as adolescents when we rebel against our family, we are probably carrying on a deep level, a lot of unworked-through identification.

From a buddhist point of view, this developmental movement of learning a culture, is based on attachment. We have a facility inside us to get involved with things, to identify with

them and to make them our own. This tendency, which is born with us as we are born again and again in whatever realm in samsara, this tendency is reinforced every time we go into a particular pattern and become attached to it because we then defend the pattern against other people. If I say to you 'Don't slurp your soup!' it is because when you slurp your soup, you are attacking my territory, because 'you shouldn't do it'. I need to believe that. My belief is total, and you shouldn't do it!

**Q.** What is the neutral way to eat soup? How should we eat our soup then?

**A.** What I am trying to say is that we have learned it in a particular way and if someone tries to do it in a different way, it actually puts my whole identity into question. It may be that if I have a very balanced secure ego, I can tolerate a bit of that difference, but if everything that the other person does is different to me, how tolerant can I be, since our pattern will predict a response from the other.

For example, if you only like to have sex at night and you get into a relationship with someone who wants to have sex in the morning, you could say, '*Okay, you have sex when you want to, and I'll have sex when I want.*' Not much of a relationship there! There is no interaction. The interaction involves some shift in my position which puts me into question. If we do that all the time it is quite difficult. The Buddhist principle underlying this is attachment. On the one hand it is fine to be open. For example, in Britain, many people are very open regarding our immigration policy and would say, 'Let everyone in who needs or wants to.' Other people would say, 'Hold on. I don't know what it means to be British any more. There are all these new people here. How can they be British?' This is because they are attached to a specific definition of being British and cannot, for example, think that a Muslim person can be British.

One way to look at this is that it is the nature of attachment is causing such responses. People's attachment to an identity, when it gets challenged, makes them very anxious and insecure. Attachment is at the root of all that we construct about ourselves.

A story by Gampopa is recounted in *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*. There was a yogi who had been meditating in a cave for a long long time and he had purified many things and one day he was sitting outside watching pigeons eating grain. The thought came to him, '*If I had as many soldiers as these pigeons, I could make an army and defend my family against their aggressors.*' He became very interested in this and shifted his whole life and ended up becoming a general. There was a sudden flip-over into attachment. We can be hooked very quickly in that way. Mahayana texts often say that one moment of anger burns away kalpas of virtuous action. The anger arises from an attachment. No matter how we try to smooth things down and be nice, if that hook is under the surface, it gets to us.

Attachment is embodied in us when we have the karma to be born as a human. The karma for being born as a human is stupidity, attachment and desire. This is the package of forces that particularly projects us into this realm, to have this kind of experience. Attachment is written into our physiological make-up. We are programmed for it.

In Sarnath, the place where the Buddha taught his first sermon, there is a little Jain temple. Jainism is a religion that developed about the same time as Buddhism. Inside this temple there are paintings on the wall. The paintings depict the tirthankaras, the Jain equivalent of buddhas. You can see pictures of their Mahavira in meditation and there is a lion with his teeth in his shoulder, and blood pouring down. In the next painting he is again sitting meditating and there is a guy behind him with a bag of hot coals, putting first one and then

another hot coal on top of his head. There is a whole sequence of such images and they are to show that, by the power of his meditation, he was not affected by any of these things.

It might seem rather discordant to us that such impassivity is held up as something to emulate but it does point to the idea of achieving a state in which there is a control of mind over the body. It is achieved by having a frame of reference which is not experiencing the pain or difficulty as pain or difficulty, as if there is a very radical reframing. Although pain is presenting itself, it is being understood in a different way and in that way the attachment to the body and the ordinary sense is overcome.

However in order to have the power of meditation to resist this you have to have quite an attachment to the meditation process. The Buddha, when he reflected on things like that, would give the example of when you want to cross a river you need to use a boat. When you get to the other side, you don't pick up the boat and carry it with you. That is to say, the methods that we use in practising meditation, we use at particular times for particular purposes. When we don't need to use them, we don't use them. That is to say, they are functional. They are not intended to be integrated as part of one's identity, otherwise by the process of learning more meditation methods, one would be constructing a more elaborated sense of identity.

Attachment is written in to the psycho-physiological experience of having a human body, so what can we do? In the hinayana position, what they try to do is to wind the whole thing down. By lowering the energy in the whole system there is more space to examine things. One slows down one's thoughts through vipassana meditation, having a very simple focus, becoming more and more aware of how one becomes attached to things; externally cutting off from disturbing circumstances; creating as much as one can an area of safety around one. With this gradually as one experiences the arising of a desire of attachment - a movement out towards something as real - one allows that to just dissolve and so one doesn't act.

The ultimate fulfilment of that point of view would be the mahaparanirvana of the Buddha, the ultimate complete enlightenment, often described as the blowing out of a lamp. This is because, as it is described, when you look at a candle or a butter-lamp burning, you are seeing very quick pulsing of flames. Whether a scientist would agree with that or not I don't know, but this is the traditional explanation. There are burning moments which are very close together and the juxtaposition of these burning moments gives the impression of continuity of the flame.

Similarly in our experience of being in the world there is a momentary presenting of all these moments of being in our body and of our thought. These are momentary points repeating each other, one after the other. Usually because they are running very very quick, they seem to exist as one consistent phenomenon. When you slow it down actually you see that there are these separate instances. If you manage to really slow it down then you can make the gaps between the moments so large that nothing can jump across. Just like if you go to the cinema and there is a screen projector and at a certain speed it looks as if the series of separate stills is a continuous image.

So the Buddha Sakyamuni, in his meditation, was able to slow his perception down until it was like a series of stills coming with an ever-increasing gap between them until there is just a series of frames and then any involvement, any movement towards that, stops. Because it is the speed of the presentation of phenomena which is so seductive.

In the hinayana tradition when they talk about blowing out the lamp it is as if the continuity of the Buddha's being just suddenly came to a stop. The word in Sanskrit is 'santana', in Tibetan it is 'rang rgyud'. 'Rang rgyud' means the flow, the continuity of one's being, the linking of the past, the present and the future. That has to be cut off. We normally experience our past as a kind of pressure. Thoughts come up from our past which take us up into the future. It is very difficult to stop in the present, there is an insistence to go into the next moment.

To return to the topic of the hells, one of its functions is to frighten us. This fear causes a shrinking. Our ego as it were wants to expand out into the world and indulge itself and do what it wants to do. But if the world presents barriers that my ego hits and if they are unpleasant, I am going to withdraw. You might feel like stealing something and you are just about to steal it and you see a policeman coming down the street, you put your hand in your pocket. Some limit of the world has come to press back on you and so you withdraw.

The image of hell functions in a similar way as a reinforcement, as a kind of global super-ego to help us retreat from situations that we might ordinarily go towards because of our attachment. Again the issue is about function. The image of hell is not there to make people feel bad and worried and guilty as if to feel bad and worried and guilty is a good thing.

Maybe for most people in this room, your behaviour patterns are really quite gentle. You act with awareness and sensitivity most of the time. In that case hell is perhaps not so relevant for you just now. However for people who are caught up in wars and terrorism, the concept of hell might be helpful. If you feel that the only thing that will stop you shooting other people, is somebody shooting you, then justice is turned into 'the law'. By justice I mean the ability to reflect on what is reasonable behaviour, what is ethical between people. That breaks down if somebody is going to shoot you. You don't have a conversation about justice then. You simply are hoping that somebody will shoot the other person before they shoot you. That is why the idea of the hells as a bad punishing place was useful for containing people who were caught up in cruelty and fighting and blood feuds. The images of heaven, of a very pleasant place are also made use of; they can seduce for people to softer more gentle behaviour towards each other. Most of the time we want to have more pleasure and less pain.

We have to remember that the teaching of the dharma, whatever is presented, is presented as the possibility of taking up this material in a functional way to have some effect on our life. It is not a body of dogma, of set knowledge, that you have to pick up and put on top of you head and support until you die. Rather it is a menu, a set of possibilities, that you can try and see what is efficacious for yourself. However we need to know that in coming up to read the menu we are starting off from a position of ignorance and attachment. So, it is difficult to trust our own judgment, but it is also pretty difficult to trust the judgment of teachers. We have got a bit of a double bind. That is the nature of samsara. That is why it takes a long time to get up. Otherwise we would just put up "Exit" and like lemmings, everyone would go, over the cliff. The Exit is not out in the world somewhere and it is not in ourselves somewhere. It is in the interaction of subject/object being transformed by an opening of awareness.

**Tea break.**

## ***Hinayana view and mahayana view of enlightenment***

**Q.** ...[inaudible]...

A. In mahayana enlightenment is termed *'mi gnas pa'i mya ngan las 'das pa'* *'Mi gnas pa'* means 'not abiding anywhere' and *'mya ngan las 'das pa'* means 'enlightenment'. So, the mahayana enlightenment is not located in any particular place.

However, from the hinayana point of view you have samsara here, and nirvana there. You go *from* samsara into nirvana. It is like changing your nationality. One time in India I thought I would try to become an Indian citizen. They said to me, *"OK, if you want to be an Indian citizen you cannot have dual nationality. You have to give up your British passport and apply for an Indian passport."* So in the middle there is a kind of no-man's land where you have no nationality, and then you come in and get the Indian one. In that way samsara and nirvana are kept separate. But in the mahayana idea, enlightenment is not located in another place but it exists in parallel, suffusing everything, but with a different quality.

So, the difference between samsara and nirvana in the mahayana and in tantra is an aesthetic difference. As Milarepa and many other people have said, *"If you recognise your mind in the morning, you become a buddha in the morning. If you recognise your mind in the evening, you become a buddha in the evening."* There is a point of recognition which means that buddhahood is just there in the next moment, which means that buddhahood must be something quite ordinary. In the mahayana, buddhahood is no great trauma, simply an aesthetic shift. The experience shifts radically, forever, but it is no big deal. It is a movement of mood and gesturing in the world.

**Sitting followed by a break**

## **Deciding which view and practice works for you**

Buddhism offers many different ways of looking at things. It is not that there is an external view and an internal view, an exoteric and an esoteric path, but rather that there are a range of approaches that can be taken up according to the needs of an individual at any one time. This range implies that the individual has to make a choice, and that individuals should know if they are making an appropriate choice.

It can be difficult to choose and one way to avoid this difficulty is to ask someone else to tell you what to do. Indeed, a great deal of Tibetan buddhism is structured around finding someone else who will tell you what to do. For example if a teacher is going to give an initiation on a particular meditational deity such as Chenrezig, if you ask the teacher, *'Should I meditate on this deity?'* you can be 99% certain that they will say, *'Yes, it is a very good thing to meditate on this deity.'* But how will you know whether it is really good for you as an individual to meditate on this deity as opposed to anybody else?

You have two things to trust. One is knowledge that you might build up of the field by studying, by reading, by going to seminars and so on. The other is by trusting your intuition, for example, a dream, a physical feeling you might have when looking at a statue or a pictorial image of a deity. Or you might feel that you want to follow any particular practice given by a teacher because you want to be close to that teacher. The connection that you feel with the teacher is largely intuitive or emotional.

Intuition is an uncertain phenomenon. How can you know whether that intuition is some expression of a karmic pattern, some old habit that you have been running for a long time? It

may feel like it is a fresh new beginning, but it may simply be something familiar. We may be familiar with this pattern from relationships, of meeting someone, being attracted to them, thinking 'Oh, this is new, this is different.' and then after a few months recognising that you are back in the same old pattern of avoiding intimacy, getting angry, or whatever it is. These are very important issues to think about.

As I was suggesting yesterday, the structure of Tibetan buddhism is focussed around teaching and the teacher but that is anti-democratic. We live in a democratic society and I would suggest that if buddhism is going to develop here and be important in our lives it has to take on a more democratic form. This means that the focus has to shift on to the learner. What is it that you as people who are interested in growing and developing yourselves, what is it that you need to support you in that task? As learners, obviously we do not know very much otherwise we would not be learners but we do have some sense of what we want and of what we don't want. A bit like with a small infant, when it is learning to eat with a spoon, it is maybe not very efficient at eating without spluttering out the food but it also knows when something comes in its mouth that it does not like. So there is a difference between spitting out food that you do not like and having difficulty swallowing food that you might quite like.

There may be some difficulties for us as dharma practitioners in practising meditation, but we need to learn to differentiate between doing something that is difficult to do but is worth struggling with, and struggling with something that is not actually doing you any good. As children we are very much at the prey of other people's desire. Children are often forced to eat things they do not want to eat, forced to eat once every four hours when they are not even hungry, then later they are forced to sit up and shit when they don't want to shit. These phenomena are maybe getting less in our culture but they still insist that the adult's desire overrules the child's. Although we have our adult self, wanting freedom, individuality and our own discrimination, there is still a little bit of us that is vulnerable to being bossed around and told what to do. We are faced with this question, 'Should I trust myself or should I trust another?'

### ***Faith is a method, a strategy***

In buddhism, faith is a very important phenomenon but we need to know what it is that we have faith in and why we have that faith. Faith is strategic. This is important to understand. It is like the example I gave yesterday, this traditional example the Buddha gave of using a boat to cross the river and leaving it at the other side. If our desire is to understand more about ourselves, to become free of limitations, so that we are less in suffering and through that release of limitation to be more open and available for others, then it is important that we have something to support us in that.

That is employing a method and faith is a method. It is not a signing away of your freedom. It is not like what many people in the 1930's did, joining the Communist Party or joining the National Socialist Party, a big organisation which says, 'Join us, belong with us. We have a world mission.' But then, having joined this organisation you find that you have to do things that you don't want to do. If you said to your leader that you didn't really want to do certain things you were told that you were an enemy of the people, or of the party, and that you needed to be sent away for re-education. Faith in buddhism is not like this at all.

Faith is a particular attitude that allows one in a safe environment to open the fullness of one's being to one's potential. The buddhas and the deities that we meditate on represent the

fullness of our potential. They are not merely symbolic; they also exist. If you like, they are a kind of role model. Our faith is the deepening of the inspiration that we could have of trying to emulate, to copy, that state of being. But if we say that our role model is someone that has maybe eighteen hands and wings and three heads and we imagine that at Christmas time we go to visit our mother with our wings and eighteen hands she might not be too happy to give you some turkey. This is really the case. To try and gain buddhist enlightenment is not the same as trying to be a nice person.

Although from the point of view of tantra, samsara and nirvana are not really different, yet the point of view that one takes up in trying to identify with the state of existence in nirvana is different from that in samsara. By samsara I mean here the sense of existence following existence in different realms, in different states, an existence that is constellated around the idea of a separate ego self. By nirvana I mean a state of open awareness in which phenomena come and go easily without being related to the ego self. The difference is subtle and yet very profound.

On an ordinary level I think we get some sense of this if we think of the difference between someone who is fundamentally selfish in their approach to life and another person who is fundamentally generous in their approach to life. You may all know people like that. Of course these are all people; they eat, walk around, they wear clothes, they do jobs. In many ways they are very similar. They are just people living their lives. Yet the quality that you pick up from being with someone who is selfish is very different from being with someone who is generous. Is that a sense you would have?

The attitude of nirvana is of a total generosity because there is no ego reference point to bring everything back to. Whereas from the point of view of samsara we are always caught up in a dualistic perception of self and other so there is always a reference point of 'me'. When I am trying to be generous I am also thinking, "Oh, I did all that for them." so the gift goes out but it is on a rubber band and it bounces back. In England when people go drinking in a pub, usually each person buys a round of drinks and you can see who is happy to buy a round and who would like to hold back and maybe leave before their turn comes. Some people feel opened up by the idea of hospitality and other people feel more inspired by holding back.

Since our topic these days is of being a human being in relation to the dharma we can also think of this in relation to the practice of tantra. In the state of openness I was talking about yesterday, when one has done a dissolving practice, dissolving into light and going into a state of openness, then by maintaining this state of openness as thoughts, as feelings arise the thought, the feeling is arising in the state of openness, not contradicting it. At the point when a thought arises that we enter into a relationship with, where we start having thoughts about a thought, about a physical feeling, that is the point when there is a movement from the nirvana side to the samsara side.

Although it may be a bit pretentious to call our meditation an integration into nirvana, every time when we dissolve into a state of openness we are putting ourselves into the place where that might happen. Just as if you are learning to play the cello and you try to play Elgar's cello concerto you may be very far away from his intention in doing it but none the less you put yourself in the place where that becomes possible. If you practice some Jimi Hendrix tune on an electronic base, you are not putting yourself in the place of Elgar's cello concerto. No matter how much you do of one you don't move into the other. So when you practice the tantric meditation you are putting yourself into a place where the field of nirvana is opened up.

## ***Why it is important, even in tantra, to reflect on the nature of samsara***

So what one needs to do at that point, when you dissolve and are in this state of openness, you have a choice when thoughts arise, either to go with the interest or the intoxication of the thought or to try to relax back into the openness. Our tendency is always to go for the content because it is out of the content that we create ourselves. So I might be sitting doing some meditation here and then I have a thought "Oh, tomorrow morning my flight is at 9.30. How will I get to the airport to catch this flight?" That is a very important thought, but it is a thought of this world; it is a thought about me, James, needing to be back in London to go to my work on Monday morning, because I live in the world and I have an identity that is, for me, important to protect because then, 'I know who I am'.

But when the question arises in the meditation, what am I committed to? Am I committed to using more of my energy to developing my thoughts to make sure that I get on the plane or to letting go of the thoughts and going with the openness. We probably all have very busy lives with many demands and pressures on us so we have many thoughts about practical things that are important for our lives, but at the same time the meditation is important.

So as beginners it is very important to set up enough space so that you can privilege the spaciousness and the openness over the content of the thought. That is the reason why tantric practices, despite using profound meditation techniques, start with very basic reflections on the nature of samsara. We need to make use of as many methods as possible for undermining the deep intoxication that we have for our ordinary reality. We live in Western Europe in a culture that is completely dedicated to a materialistic notion of the value of life. All the time on television in advertising and magazines, it is repeated to us in many subtle ways that purchasing things is a very important thing to do. 'You need this in order to be happy.' 'Because you are worth it' [...] We meet very few occasions when the other points of view are being put across.

## ***The Four Reflections that turn our mind away from samsara***

That is why the four basic reflection on impermanence, on suffering in samsara, on the rareness of gaining a situation where you can practice the dharma, and on the nature of death, are very important things to think about again and again. It is not that one thinks about these things in order to become a buddhist. Being a buddhist is not the point. One thinks about the fact that everything is impermanent – and all that we will ever have will fall away and leave us and that even if the things remain, we will eventually die and have to leave these things behind us – we think about this in order to put our own attachment to these things into question.

Yes, it is very important for a mother to love a small child and want to take care of it. We also know in our culture that if a mother devotes all her life to her child, when the child grows up and leaves home, the mother can feel quite empty because the role she has taken up as mother is now redundant. When the whole of a woman's identity has been embedded in being a mother it is a terrible shock. So, it is not to say that one should not love and care for one's children, but we have to understand the nature of love and attachment. Love that is possessive, that is based on dependence, will inevitably lead to suffering. Love that is based on a desire for the other to develop in a particular way in order to satisfy one's own ambition or desire, is very dangerous. If you want your son to inherit the family business and feel betrayed when he doesn't seem to be moving in that direction, you can get very angry and you may even feel that

that anger is actually an expression of your love, but actually it is very destructive. One could list many such examples, of how what starts off as a good motive of wanting to care for and protect someone, becomes imprisoning after a while. As I indicated yesterday, attachment is predictive. We want the object that we are attached to, to continue in a certain way which will maintain the sense of identity that is generated by our interaction with it.

When the buddhist teachings direct us to reflect on karma and how it will take us into new situations of suffering, buddhism means by karma that the patterns established in one time in our lives, will repeat themselves again and again. The pattern will not repeat itself in exactly the same form, that is to say, in terms of the content, but the structure will remain the same. If we act from desire and perhaps steal something the tendency to take things will continue to present itself again and again. Karma doesn't repeat itself in exactly the same form but the structure, the form, the way of taking up a position, is very similar.

That is why it is very important to reflect on impermanence as you travel around in your ordinary everyday work, allowing yourself to experience it in terms of the fact that things don't endure in time. Perhaps by taking an imaginary screwdriver and gradually unloosening the screws of the construction of samsara. If most of the week we are just wandering around in our ordinary perception and then try to sit down on a Sunday to do a little meditation, it is not going to be very easy. We need to be continuously applying as many different methods as we can to our interaction with the world, so although meditation on impermanence is taken from the hinayana teaching of the first part of the Buddha's turning of the wheel of the dharma, it is very important to keep reflecting on it as we go about our daily life. For example, we will go in a while to have a cup of coffee, and before we do this you might be feeling very thirsty, and then once you have had a cup of coffee you no longer feel thirsty. The sensation of thirst is quite a strong sensation and unattended, it can dominate all your thinking. So that sensation was impermanent, because when you have the coffee it vanishes. We can see that pattern going on and on all through our lives.

We are always moving from one moment to one moment, we have a beginning, a middle and an end. Often we live our lives drowning in it as if we are in a dream, reacting to all these impulses. So being aware of the beginning, the middle and the end helps us to divide up these situations, helps us to think more clearly of how our lives are constructed. Particular triggers invoke responses in ourselves, how subject and object relate in our world. The more we enquire into this, the more we see that although the ego believes that it is in control, actually it is not in control at all. If you are driving a car you might have a sense that you are in control of the car but actually you are responding all the time responding to changing stimuli. You are reacting to these all the time, like a car coming towards you, some mist coming across the road, you react from a whole basis of responses.

That is to say that the object brings about a shift in consciousness. As the object arises, it brings about a shift in consciousness at the same time. Consciousness is not a fixed state, it is not as if there is a constant fixed knowing subject 'I'. As a new situation arises, consciousness manifests in a way that fits it. There more one is aware of impermanence and the interaction between oneself and the world, between subject and object, the more you can see that what you take as a constant sense of self is actually an ever-moving flow of responses to situations. It is very important that this is not just an abstract philosophy. This is an experiment that it is vital to do.

As I was saying yesterday, because buddhism has such a huge literature and there are so many concepts in it, there is a real danger that we approach it from a passive dogmatic point of view. What is called for is to practice with awareness, making different kinds of experiments to try to establish for ourselves whether these ideas are true. All the buddhist practices of meditation or of belief are established for particular purposes. It is a bit like when you start to learn some do-it-yourself skills around the house. Perhaps you ask a friend if you can borrow their toolbox for the weekend and there is a drill in it with all sorts of attachments and you do not know what they are for. You can get some information about them from the manual but you only *really* know what they are for when you start to use them and then you see what each particular bit does, if it is good for drilling through wood or through brick...

There is no manual for yourself. In meditation you can only really meditate once you know what you are, and you have to meditate in order to know who you are. That is the double-bind, because how will you know what kind of meditation you should be doing until you know yourself a bit more? If you don't even know if you have jealousy....? Many people think, 'I am not at all jealous. I'm never jealous, I'm a pretty easy person and that doesn't apply to me. I don't need to do that practice.' Now, that may be the case, but I imagine for most of us all of these qualities are really there but we haven't looked into ourselves enough to really see them.

The focus that I was trying to mark out yesterday was the primacy of the nature of attachment because attachment arises from the sense of a subject and an object, a subject in here who is looking out there at a world that is separate. This is the basic duality. This is essential ignorance. In here we want to make the outside world safe by controlling it in different ways. If we take this as the central principle and we use this as a line to enquire into ourselves I think it starts to give us some sense of how it is that we are in the world, by actually doing a phenomenological enquiry into how we are with other people.

For example, how do I deal with group dynamics, with colleagues at work, with buddhist groups or whatever it is? How do I try to control things to get the best for me? Or, how do I try to please everyone else so that they will like me? It is that kind of enquiry that we need to be doing, otherwise the dharma is simply something that is out there, in a book. I mean it is me, if I am in samsara. The question for me is 'How is it that I am in samsara?' It is not a question like 'How am I in this room?' I am in this room sitting on a chair. There is a door and I can walk out.

It is very important when thinking about the kind of practice that we are going to do, to remember impermanence. We don't know when we will die; it might be quite soon. If we think over the last week, how much meditation practice were we able to do? Probably not very much. But it is possible as we walk about and make a cup of tea to remember impermanence. That is why it is very important to have a range of practices to be able to do. If you only focus on a very profound practice, that you do in a cave, on top of a hill, in a particular place at a particular time, then maybe it is never going to happen.

In a vipassana meditation after you have stilled the mind, becoming more aware of just breathing gently and becoming very relaxed and open, then you become aware of the thoughts that are rising. The thoughts come in a very quick way and so you try to make sense of them by labelling them and labelling them as 'impermanence'. You can take that into the outside world: 'Now that is arising. Tea is coming. The flavour is in the mouth. The focus is on the flavour in the mouth. What was first presenting was thirst, now the focus is on the flavour in the mouth, not on the thirst. Now it is wanting to do something else [...]' One is aware of just as on the inner

field thoughts and feelings are arising moment by moment, continually changing, externally they are as well.

Many people get anxious around Christmas time because they may have to go and see their family and they feel quite anxious about that. It can be quite scary, even as an adult, to spend time with your family if your relations with them are not very comfortable. From a buddhist point of view, you could think, 'I have to go and see these people at Christmas, for three days. Three days has a beginning, a middle and an end. As you go into it you may feel trapped but if you have even a basic sense of buddhism, then at least you know that you can talk with your mother for a bit and then offer to take the dog for a walk. Talking with your mother is one bit. It has a beginning. Then you can leave that bit: 'I am not with my mother any more, now I am with the dog.'

Or you might take up a position from mahayana buddhism of compassion. You might think how your mother had a difficult time bringing up children, how her life was very hard, she got a bit lost in the middle of this and it is so sad that she is still caught up in these very painful attitudes. In the first way you have a space which is outside the experience. 'It will soon be over, space is coming.' In the second way you have some space in the interaction because although you can feel the pressure to be caught up in the pattern, you are taking up a new line crosses which opens up some space. Or you might imagine that your mother is Tara and all the words she says are mantra sound so when she complains you imagine that all the words are just empty mantra sound and you rejoice in the beauty of it. Or you might do a state of dzogchen openness and just integrate your mother as she arises.

The important thing is that you need to know what is your own capacity in this particular situation. If the object is very powerful, you may need to use just the most basic method you can just to keep your head afloat. There is no need to use very sophisticated tool if you don't know how to use it. It is much better just to have a screwdriver.

We need to have a clear understanding of the nature of the context. What is really the problem. What exactly is my capacity at the moment. What do I know for shifting. But this is subject again. You have to be at the centre of your own life, you can't do it from the rulebook. Of course this is uncertain. We will get confused. You won't know what to do, as an abstract '*the best thing to do*'. We will only know what is the best we can do in this situation. The more we allow ourselves to be centred in our own life, the more we can make an accurate judgment.

**Break for coffee**

## **Finding and doing a practice that we like**

In Tibetan buddhism, although the philosophical positions are pretty general across the different schools, when you come to the practices, they tend to be specific to particular lineages. It is a very common experience for people who have been around in Tibetan buddhism for a while to have many different initiations from different teachers. The initiations may be in different lineages, with different requirements for daily practices and so on. It is not rare for people to have maybe one hundred different mantras they are supposed to do every day. It is then easy to lose the sense of the whole endeavour, which is: to do the meditation to get a particular result. The purpose of eating is to satisfy the taste sensation in the mouth and the

hunger in the stomach and to make sure you take in enough nourishment to sustain the body and mind. The purpose of meditation is quite similar.

First of all, it has to please our mouth. We have to actually enjoy doing the meditation. I don't like broccoli. I refuse to eat it. It would not be much point for me to pray to the broccoli buddha. Similarly it is important in the range of possible practices to find one that tastes sweet on our tongue. You also have to have a practice that takes away your hunger, which helps you feel held and gives you an increasing sense of clarity in your life. Also one needs to have a practice that will sustain one's growth over a long period of time, a practice whose benefits can be incorporated. The practice is something one continues doing on a regular basis, preferably daily and with the felt sensation that it is doing you good. If you only know it is doing you good because somebody told you, then that is a bit questionable. You need to check into your own experience, your own sensation. 'What am I getting out of this?' Buddhism is pragmatic in that way. We don't do it for the sake of just doing something but because we want to get something.

In tantra what one wants, is the experience of openness, of dissolving our ordinary sensation into emptiness, and being able to maintain the sense of that openness when phenomena arise in all their variety. When one is able to maintain that continuity of openness in the face of whatever arises, then you have the essence of tantra which means 'continuity'. That is the essence of all tantric practices. If you look at these long meditation cycles, pujas, with their many different and complex prayers and visualisations, all of that complexity is designed to increase one's ability to integrate complex thoughts and emotions into emptiness. Very often the complexity itself becomes so difficult that one struggles with the complexity and feels hopelessly lost, and in that case the method actually defeats its own purpose.

### ***Practice of visualising the letters Om A Hung***

So, today we will do something very simple. The visualisation that we will do is to quietly imagine that in front of you is a clear blue open sky, and in the midst of this openness expanse there is a ball of light. Don't worry about the details, just get a sense of what we are going to do. This ball is light, present, luminous but it is also empty of substance. It is like when you hold a crystal up in the sunlight and you get little rays of light coming out. You cannot hold it in your hand, but it is on your hand. It is clearly there but it has no substance. This is a very traditional metaphor for the experience of appearance and emptiness. That is to say, what we experience in the world all around us, what we actually see, is light. Just now if we look around this room what we actually see is colour, light. If we look at the walls we know they are made of brick, but what we see is light. On to that we put the idea that there is a brick there. The power of our belief in the solidity of the object in some way helps to solidify it. In this visualisation what one is presencing is the open luminous quality of the light.

In the centre of this ball of light you can visualise whatever figure you like. It might be Guru Rinpoche, Tara, Yeshe Tsogyal, or just another smaller ball of white light. Remember that in Tibetan buddhism all of these deities have a light body. They do not have a solid flesh and blood body the way that we do. They are a luminous presencing which is devoid of substance. So, we visualise this in front of us and as we visualise it we recite three syllables, Om, A, Hung.

OM, A, Hung are often described as being the essence of all mantras. A mantra is the essence of the deity in sound. It is like a telephone number. Saying it, is like dialling the god's telephone number and then you get through. However because the god is a long long way away, the connection may not be very good and so you have to dial it many times!

In tantra, Om generally represents the body. The body is usually represented by a white letter Om on the forehead of the deity. For our purposes today you don't need to think of the shape of the letter but if you are visualising the deity you want to have a sense of white light coming out of the forehead. If you are visualising a ball of white light, out of it a ray of white light is coming. As we are saying this Om A Hung, be particularly aware of rays of white light coming towards you and dissolving through your forehead, filling your body with white light. As this white light fills your body it is dissolving and purifying what we might call the sins of the body, or all the ways in which you have used your body to create more problems for yourself and for others. Through this your body is purified and becomes a body of light. All potential illness and sickness are purified.

Then there is the red letter A which represents speech. That appears in the throat of the deity, or you could see it located somewhere in this ball of white light. Rays of red light flow out into our own throat and dissolve into our body filling our body with red light, purifying the sins of speech. All the complexities that we have created through speech, both for ourselves and for others we purify through this red light coming and dissolving into us.

Then from the blue letter Hung in the heart of the deity, a ray of blue light comes and dissolves into our heart, purifying all the sins of the mind. By the sins of the mind we mean ways in which our thinking has created suffering both for ourselves and for others.

This ray of blue light is coming in and dissolving and all these tightnesses that have been created through our thinking, all this rigidity and ego tightness is dissolved and we are purified. There is a sense of these three rays of light coming in and filling the body with light and increasing the sense of the body as light, as pure, as open.

Buddhism's basic view is that every person has buddha nature, every person is pure. Yet, I think, we find if we are honest and look into ourselves, we don't like what we see very much. It is one thing to say, 'I have a buddha nature'. It is another thing to really believe that my nature is pure and perfect. We also live in a christian culture which takes a very different position, a position based on ideas of original sin and of a basic error from which there is no escape other than through the blood of Christ. For a Christian to say, 'I believe in Christ and so I am God', would be considered a doctrinal error. But buddhism is saying something like that, buddhism is saying that from the beginning our nature is completely pure, that there is no god higher than us, that the world has not been created by a higher god whom we have to worship.

So there are both psychological feelings and general cultural attitudes which may make it difficult for us to accept this deep original purity. We need to know that there are a lot of forces that are working to take us in a negative limited view of ourselves rather than helping us to be open. The more we can be aware of these limiting views, the more we know about how we limit ourselves in our interaction in the world, then as we are reciting the Om A Hung and experiencing the light flowing into ourselves, then we can have the sense that it is exactly these attitudes that are being purified. First we have to understand intellectually why these views are false, and then we have to have the actual direct experience of them being washed out of us.

So after we have recited this for a while and experienced this light coming into ourselves then the ball of light comes to the crown of your head and shrinks in size. If you are imagining a deity inside it shrinks from the head down and the feet up till there is just a small ball of light then it comes through the top of your head, the fontanel and descends straight down into your heart. Then with this ball of light in your heart, your whole body by now is full of light, your body

dissolves into light, into this ball. That ball of light dissolves into itself and the light disperses in open space. There is just this sense of open space.

Rest in that state of openness for as long as possible. You may find that thoughts and feelings arise very quickly, if that occurs just relax. Don't wait expectantly for thoughts to come, don't follow after them, just relax, you are not trying to remember about being in your body. If thoughts about your body come, just relax, don't cling on to them. It is all about relaxation, openness and trust.

The gently we will come back into the awareness of being in this room and we will attempt to keep as much sense of this openness as possible while we are with other people and during the lunch break. If you find at that time that you get lost, then you can just close your eyes, get back in touch with that sense, relax into it and then come out into the world. Meditation in this sense is not something artificial but is a way of reminding ourselves of a more spontaneous natural way of being.

### **Practice and then Lunch Break**

## **About being a human and being an animal**

Before I speak about the idea of being human in tantra, I'd like to go back to the idea of hell. I'll take up the idea I spoke of yesterday where the idea of hell forces us to question the human centred perception of the world that we usually carry. If there are hell realms, hungry ghost realms, animal realms and various kinds of god realms, then there are people in these realms having an experience which is very different from ours.

Just in the break I walked along the road and there is a field with a horse and a pony in it. A horse and a pony are quite familiar to us, they are part of our world and yet what the world looks like from the point of view of a pony in a field with an electric fence around it, we don't quite know. From the point of view of buddhadharma, birth as an animal is caused by stupidity. Stupidity in the sense of a potential turning away from our full potential. Animals are trapped in a situation where other people control their fate. If they are domesticated, they are raised for someone else's intention. They are fed with particular substances to turn them into the kind of eating substance that we want. If they are wild, their environment is changed by human beings all the time and generally they are involved in a chain of devouring, eating things smaller than themselves and being eaten by things bigger than themselves. In that kind of state of being reborn as an animal one does not have much freedom. It is maybe quite useful for us to imagine what it is like being a pony in a field. Someone comes towards you and appears to make friendly noises. They hold out some grass and when you try to get the grass you touch the fence and get an electric shock on your face. You don't have any hands to reach over and get the grass. You are living your life in your face. As humans we can protect our faces very well but most animals have to have their face right out there, very exposed. If we find an apple with a rotten bit in it, we can use our hands to eat just the good bit. Most animals just have to stick their face in it and get all the bits up their nose. The physical condition of animals makes a subtle discrimination very difficult.

From our Judeo-Christian background we tend to see animals as a separate race. Animals are there created by god for our purposes, a notion that god has given the world and everything in it over to human beings. There is the idea that we are somehow descended directly from god

although we are cut off from god by our original sin through Adam and Eve, but still our line is separate from that of animals, it has a unique movement.

In Buddhism there is a very different idea: that the human mind can take up location in a variety of settings. Although we are human now, our mind, our awareness, our consciousness, is not intrinsically human. Due to causes and circumstances we happen to have been born in a human body at this time but when we die, due to the forces of our own desire as expressed through our karmic tendency, we can take birth in many different places in different physical forms.

Personally I have often been fascinated by insects, the kind that are born and move through their life without making any home. As human beings we seem to have a desire to have a home and even nomads have particular kinds of constructions of tents that carry some kind of continuity with them through their travel. If we think of the Jewish myth of the diaspora and the spreading out from Jerusalem, people spread out but "home" still exists somewhere, as Jerusalem. For the christian tradition there is the idea of the Garden of Eden, not as a geographical place but as a state of being which human beings aspire to return to, state of oneness with god.

Buddhism does not use this kind of language. If we think about it, we are born into a home, we have a family, a mother tongue; we have a sense of belonging. This seems very true and real and is very important for our physical and psychological development in this life. If we take up the idea that we have been born many times before in many forms, that life is not something given by god, that we don't somehow just fall out of heaven, nor is it somehow a magical creation of the meeting of the sperm and the ovum, but rather that the sperm and the ovum on meeting create a context for the consciousness to enter into, then we can see that from this point of view, our present human body is just a hotel. It is an impermanent situation through which we express our karmic potential of this life. If you like this is a very radical decentring of the nature of the subject. "I" me, "I" am "James", "I" am born in "Scotland", all the things that I can say about "me" are located in this body. If I believe that I have had many lives before, then before I was James I was somebody else. When I die I will get reborn as somebody else. I don't know who I was before I was "James" and I don't know who I will be after I have been "James". This "James" becomes very intensified as a kind of identity in a huge wave of ignorance.

You can see that by taking up this approach to understanding the human condition, there is a constant shifting of focus from the conscious ego intentional self towards a more open reflective awareness. An awareness, which is able to experience the whole range of the experience of becoming in the sense that "I", as "James" reveal myself to myself. I am in the process of "Jamesing" myself, because five years from now I have no idea what "James" will be.

If I am still alive then in this body it will have some connection with me and I will have some memory of me, of what I was five years before. I can construct this fixed identity of myself, "Ah, when I was twelve I did that, when I was twenty I did that..." and I can even have a sense of my own intention of myself "This is what I have, this is what I am..." but what I am is not something that I can know because I keep changing and becoming something else. And of course I encounter people who want me to be the same. So, I try to say to people "Yes, I'll be the same." then I find I am not the same and that can feel problematic. People get a bit angry.

The reality of my life as I know it is that I keep becoming, and revealing myself to myself. I know myself in the display of myself. I am revealed to myself in my presencing in the world with other people. When I am sitting here I don't know what I am going to say, and I look here and I speak. There is not someone in here who knows what I am going to speak and who then speaks it. Out of that little person up and out of my mouth into the world outside. I am in the world with you, we are all becoming something together, we are evolving moment by moment in the same field.

It is an interactive field of becoming. It is very difficult to be true to the actual phenomenological experience of this because of the many demands that we make on ourselves to be reliable and to predict, and to know how we will be. For the actual experience of being human is a becomingness. But the demand of human culture is that we dress this in an entirely different language.

**Question** You are living in a relative world and other people demand that you have names. How to handle this?

**Answer** Two things. It is often said that on a relative level if you want to practice the dharma you should go to a country where no-one knows your name. As long as you live in a place where many people know you, they will be having projections and demands on to you. I live in the city where it is very anonymous, I don't really know any of my neighbours but I notice that when I walk down the streets here and people look out of their house, they are very interested. This is a small village and people have it as their territory and they feel they have a right to know who is walking down the street. In the street I live in London it is exactly the opposite, we all look away from each other if we meet in the street. In a sense that is a lot of freedom, because if I am good or bad, drunk, want to wear a dress and a blond wig, nobody will say anything. That is an outer way of making sure you live in a place where you have some distance from these projections.

On a deeper level I think one needs to continue to be available in the world as part of compassion, to speak the language that other people speak but to know for oneself that it is an illusion.

For example, I have trained in many different kinds of psychotherapy and I teach in different psychotherapy institutes and I think that because what I teach is probably okay, people are happy for me to teach there. They are also a little bit suspicious because the people who teach there *belong* in that institute. That is their home. That is what they believe in. They are dance therapists, art therapists, psychoanalysts, or whatever it is. The fact that someone like me can teach one on a Monday, another on a Tuesday and a third on a Wednesday, they don't understand how that can be. They want to believe that what they do is really important, the best thing. It is the best thing for them, therefore it must be the best thing. Whereas for me, it is just one of many possibilities. One of the many things that human beings do.

I don't know if that answers your question. People want us to take up a position. They want us to take up a frame that will make them feel safe. But when we practice the dharma we are putting ourselves into question and inevitably through that, the place that we take up, the way that we live, will be challenging to other people. They may even resist it and say, *"Why do you waste your weekends teaching this kind of thing. What do you get out of it? You work all week, why don't you have a rest? Why don't you get a proper job and get your life together instead of messing around with these funny things?"*

So, returning more to this point about being human, if we take up this notion that being human is only one option among many, that we are not innately human in our real nature, then this is simply a momentary display and the pattern of the display, the manner of the display, is not the main thing. What is important is the relationship between the expression that we have, how we take up the way of being human, and the ground of that expression.

## ***Dzogchen, tantra and being human***

This takes us into the area of dzogchen. Dzogchen is a system which says that the ground of being and the various ways in which being manifests are complete and perfect from the very beginning. For example, in London we have some very expensive shops, and as a parallel phenomenon we have many snobbish people. For these people, when they go shopping they want to go to a very expensive shop because then they can trust that the thing they buy is good. If you go to Harrods, it must be good because you pay twice as much as in an ordinary shop. That is to say, if you find a good source, if you go to the good source the thing that you get is good. If you go to a bad source, a little corner shop, you can't trust the quality. The proof of the quality is in the label. A great deal of our modern capitalist thought is based on that. People want to pay a lot of money for a designer teeshirt. Every teeshirt is a 'designer teeshirt' since somebody has to design every teeshirt that appears. But if it is a 'Designer teeshirt', with a big "D", then you pay a lot of money for it. So, if it has YSL, or Gucci on the label, then people say "Oh, Gucci, it must be good." In this way the language of representation, the formal construction through an intellectual definition precedes the actual experience of perception.

The position with dzogchen is the exact opposite of this. Because the position of dzogchen is that since all things come from the same source, all things are good, are Gucci. And so the kind of discriminations that we ordinarily use don't really apply because they have no basis. The ground, the basis, from which they manifest is pure. It is a bit like the christian idea that we are all the children of god therefore we should respect each other. However we never get to meet god directly, whereas in a dzogchen approach we are actually trying to contact this basic ground nature, the ground of being through our meditation. With this experience, remaining in this experience, all that manifests has that pure quality. It is very similar to the meditation that we did just before lunch in which one has the experience of openness and one keeps repeating the practice until one has a direct experience of openness and then tries to maintain that.

In tantra, in order to maintain the sense of the practice when one has come out of the formal meditation, one uses certain conceptual supports. Thus for example one will say that all sound that one hears is the sound of mantra, or the guru's speech or the mantra of the deity so that when you hear some sound that starts to disturb you, you turn it around by reframing it as the guru's speech, the sound of Chenrezig's mantra, or whatever. So what one encounters is the habitual definition of phenomena arising in one's mind on the basis of a karmic perception. Then one puts down, like playing poker, a higher card and you say "Ah ha, Chenrezig!" and you win the game. You are using a higher order perception.

I remember one of the things when I was first doing a lot of sitting meditation, I used to get pains in my knees a lot and my teacher said, "*When you feel this pain you have to realise this is the blessing of Guru Rinpoche. Guru Rinpoche can see very clearly that you are meditating and he is sending you a clear message that he is pleased with your meditation. That is what you are experiencing, this is what you are calling 'a pain in the knee'.*" It was actually very helpful to have this idea. Because as a sensation developed in the knees, my usual way of responding had

been, "Ow! I don't like this. This is pain". There is a sensation and there is a habitual ego focussed label being put on it. "This is pain. I don't like it. I am going to have to stop." I, James, have down here, a pain in my knee and I, James, don't like the pain in my knee. There is a dualistic relationship and the more the pain increases the more it increases my sense of dualistic separation. But I can't cut off my leg and leave my knee outside. So I do the next best thing which is to shift my position and disturb my meditation because the pain has dominated myself.

That is a very common kind of dualistic perception in which subject and object are in conflict. If I transform this by saying that the pain is a blessing, then subject opens to the blessing, wants the blessing, then the difference between subject and object is diminished. They are allies, on the same side. The dualistic separation of subject and object is actually diminished.

That example shows the whole basis for the tantric system of transformation. Tantra seeks to take the ordinary phenomena of life and by applying the tantric frame of reference to turn the experience into something different.

**Q.** ... you were talking about dzogchen...?

**A** I am just going back to that. I switched back to tantra. I think we have to be clear what the basis for dzogchen is, because as long as you have a perception of "me" and "my knee" then you are not in dzogchen. If you experience "me" and "my knee" then you have to do something to shift yourself out of that state and that is why tantra is so very useful.

From the point of view of dzogchen everything is completely pure, and if my knee is painning me, it doesn't feel as if it is pure and I am not in the state of dzogchen so I need to apply something different quickly to get me in a more relaxed state where I can go back to that. In order to understand the essence of dzogchen we need to keep practising until we have this experience of real openness. It is not something that can be understood by words.

A traditional example is that if you ask someone who has grown up in a country where there is no sweet taste, if you ask them to describe what is sweetness, they won't really know. You might make a video in a bakery of chocolate cakes and show them this video and say "This is sweet" but they won't really get the idea. What you have to do is put a little bit of sugar on their tongue and then..... "Oh, that's sweet!" The tongue has areas on it that identify different tastes, salty, sweet, sour. It has different areas on it. What you don't have is a kind of colonial movement from the salty bit that wants to take over the whole of your tongue, to establish the kingdom of saltiness. The bit of the tongue that responds to sugar is there for all the people of the world whether their culture gives them sugar or not, which is why Coca Cola sells so well.

The capacity to recognise one's basic nature is there of course, because nobody recognises oneself but oneself. If there is a self, there must be a real nature to recognise. But most of the time when we try to recognise ourself the mirror that we look into is the distorting one. In dzogchen texts the words that they use to describe one's real nature are ones that relate to one's face, 'rang zhal' or 'rang zhin', your own face. Of course, the one thing we never see is our own face. What we see is a representation in a mirror or a photo. That is the closest we ever get. So we are very habituated to the idea of understanding ourselves through systems of representation. This whole area of language that we float in has varying definitions. The point at which we actually recognise our nature, see our own face directly, unmediated through any mirroring, any system of representation is really quite radical. In that it cuts away the ordinary location for self-definition.

It is a bit like the distinction that Wittgenstein made in his early writing between what can be said and what can be shown. Something like love cannot be said, it can only be shown. “I love you” cannot be said, it can only be shown. You can show love. Someone can feel they are loved by you. It is demonstrated. Some things can never be said. They exist in the world and so you can see them. Dzogchen is like that. It cannot be said but it manifests itself in a very direct way.

**Break, coffee, sitting**

## **An overview of dzogchen**

There is now quite a literature on dzogchen, some of through the works of Namkhai Norbu and other accounts can be found in Tucci's 'Rituals in Tibet', Hoffman, and Per Kvaerne, a buddhist scholar in Oslo. I will move over some main themes but you will have to do a lot more study yourself if you want to understand the background.

From the nyingmapa point of view dzogchen is the culmination of all the nyingma practice from the hinayana aspects right up to the tantric practice. Dzogchen becomes a radical commentary on the other forms of dharma practice, causing us to question some of the assumptions that they operate with. Basically it is part of a long conversation that has been in buddhism between those who believe that one must slowly build up a basis for enlightenment and those who believe that since buddha nature is there innate, fully formed, and that what you have to do is remove the covering. In the nyingmapa system of practice one needs to take up both because ... as I said earlier, we don't like ourselves. We think we are unworthy. If we had been carrying this as a particular karmic disposition for a long time, it is very hard to get rid of.

Nowadays some people practice what they call 'affirmations' and books are written about this method of developing a positive feeling about oneself. An affirmation would be a statement like 'I am a beautiful person and I am entitled to love.' You make a commitment to yourself to sit in front of a mirror every day and say, 'I am a beautiful person and I am entitled to love.' It is not hard to see why people want to say this but it is as if they are talking to themselves from the outside, as if from the outside they are trying to layer themselves in a belief that does not really arise from inside. It is essentially a kind of dialectical movement. Basically I am rubbish, but 'I am a beautiful person and I am entitled to love.' That may be very useful to highlight the contradiction and work it through but from the point of view of dzogchen, one must have a fundamental belief in one's own buddha nature in order to really do the practice. The theoretical supports for the view that 'my nature is pure from the very beginning' are to be found in the mahayana literature, in the "Heart sutra", in the madhyamika literature and in the tantric critiques of that.

The basic view of dzogchen is not very different from the general mahayana view of basic buddha nature. Where it is radical is in saying that until you actually have a direct perception of it, all the rest is simply a conceptual elaboration. In the hinayana practice enlightenment is very far away and one does lots of purification to try to get a little bit close to it. In the tantric mahayana one acts as if one were enlightened. It is as if I were Guru Rinpoche. I see myself as Guru Rinpoche and I say his mantra and I try to experience an identification with that, using the form of the deity as a transformational metaphor.

Whereas in dzogchen one starts from the very beginning with the position that "my nature is pure". Not only is my nature is pure but the nature of all phenomena that manifests is

pure. Because everything is impermanent and changing, there is no self-substance in any phenomena. Therefore whatever sense we have of appearances as being discrete and separate and truly existing in themselves is simply a construction of our own conceptual processing. We have to really have a sense that this is how it is.

That is why doing an ordinary thing like having for a cup of tea, and noticing how the thirst that one had before has gone, is very important. Before, the thirst seemed to be very real, but now it has gone. Where has it gone to? If the thirst was real I would always be thirsty. There is a sense of impermanence being this flow of phenomena that is changing all the time.

The question then would be, what is the cause of the flow? In general terms, the particular content or nature or form of the presentation of the flow is generated from our karma. From a general buddhist point of view, one would see that the precise form of manifestation of the content of the flow arises from our own karma. There is kind of horizontal causality. We are caught up in the flow of becoming, acting interacting together, and that is causing a reaction response which generates particular situations. But, all that manifestation is arising from where, from what and as what?

This is what dzogchen takes up, because, the essential question we have to ask ourselves is, "Where does the mind come from?" We need to take this question up and sit with it. You can sit with it in the bus, in the car, in meditation, on the toilet, but you have to actually sit with this question some time in your life. We need to have a direct engagement with the experience of 'here I sit as a knower, someone who knows things, so what is the status of the knower?'. If we are not clear about the status of the knower we have a lot of confusion about the status of the known. If we take up the view that impermanence indicates that things are insubstantial and are substantialised by our conceptualisation, then in reality we live in a mind made world.

So what is the nature of the mind? This is the key question and enquiring into the nature of the mind, answers arise and the answer arises out of thought, "My mind is a big hole. My mind is like an aeroplane." Whatever it is some thought arises "Oh, my mind is like this..." Some thought arises from the mind, is that thought able to define what the mind is. this is how we normally understand things. We take up a thought and we sit ourselves inside the thought and use that thought to define what it is.

The thought is like a torch on a dark night. It is a big big dark night and a little little torch. You see something but it is not the whole story. Because we are intelligent and educated people we have got a lot of torches. We create our life like an amateur light show with lots of torches, pressing all the buttons, because we know a lot about a lot of things. Or, we know a little about a lot of things.

What is important is to recognise that this is our habitual way of making sense of things. This is very familiar territory. It is secure for us. It is the area of our mastery, of our power. If you have a small child and it wakes up screaming in the middle of the night you go in and pick up the child and you say, "Don't worry darling, it is just a nightmare." We know it is a nightmare. The child is caught up in something it doesn't understand. Gradually as we grow up we learn to use thoughts to protect us against nightmares of various kinds.

In dzogchen what we are trying to do is to move out of this familiar territory of the construction of our world, our familiar identity through conceptualisation. We are trying to get a different kind of experience. Of course like any immigrant we might get homesick. If you were

a Jewish refugee in the 1930's it might have been very nice to arrive in New York and have a sense that you wouldn't be persecuted. But at the same time if you met someone who spoke Yiddish it might have been nice to have a chat about the old days and the village and the kind of pickled gherkins you could make.

This is the essential question in practising dzogchen because Garab Dorje in his famous teaching on 'three points for the practice of dzogchen', said the first point is that you need a direct meeting. You need to see directly what your own nature is. The second point is to destroy all doubt. To destroy all doubt means in this sense, to take up this new experience of openness and when the habitual form that will take you back arises, cut through it! So, as an immigrant you might start to feel nostalgic but you say, "Uh, I'm an American now!" So you cut the uncertainty of "Oh, maybe I should go back .... I wonder what granny is doing now. They must be out planting the beetroot ...." The third point of Garab Dorje is to continue in that way. So first you get this direct recognition "Ah!" Then naturally enough some doubts, habits, uncertainties start to manifest themselves again and you need to keep dissolving these habits on the basis of the initial realisation. Thirdly, you have to continue in that state. You have to take it on through time, through infinity. Whatever arises, you resolve in this new state of vision.

This means that one doesn't need to radically change one's external behaviour because as Patrul Rinpoche points out very clearly, what needs to shift is not the manner in which phenomena arise, but the manner in which they are dissolved. That is to say, life continues as usual, getting up, washing, going to the shops, cooking your food. But the particular style, the particular mood with which you engage in this activity is very different. Whatever is arising, is arising as the manifestation of the state of openness.

That is why it is called dzogchen, or dzog pa chen po means 'great perfection', or it can mean 'great union'. There are two different Sanskrit words which feed into the Tibetan word "Dzog pa chen po". Essentially what it is meaning is that because every phenomena is arising in this state of openness it is complete in itself, just as it is.

Very often our experience of phenomena in the world is not to experience the phenomena directly it itself, but to experience this phenomena in relation to other phenomena. Like, we maybe have a glass of wine and we think "Mmm, this is quite a nice wine, it reminds me of..." The meaning is generated through a sense of relationship with other things, resemblance, better than, worse than... It is all about adjustment. Whereas, from the point of view of dzogchen, everything that arises is perfect, just as it is. It shouldn't be better, it shouldn't be worse. In the realm of great purity, even broccoli, which I normally do not like, is perfect.

Of course it is by being open to broccoli, that there is something of interest in that. This is so important because so often our perception is clouded by a judgment we have already made, or by a longing for something else. This is why the style of practising dzogchen is about openness and relaxation, accepting things as they are. So what we have to do is first of all finding a way of deepening our sense of openness. At first we and the thoughts that arise are in an intimate relationship of attachment, there is very little space. We are prisoners of both anxiety and knowledge. The first step that we need to do is find a way to cut through this logjam of thoughts and feelings that is continuing all the time, to get a direct experience of openness.

When we have some more experience of this open space, then whenever thoughts arise we can just allow them to be there in whatever form they are inside this openness. Of course,

one of the thoughts that will insistently arise is “I exist”, or “I like this ”, or “I don’t like that ”. But the thought is just a thought but it is a thought that we are very familiar with, like a comfortable old pair of shoes. When you see them your toes start twitching and you want to put your feet in them because you know they are going to be comfortable. The thought “I don’t like broccoli” fits like a glove. It comes as a whole package. There is broccoli, and there is me, and there is the not liking. What one needs to do with the experience of openness, is when the thought “broccoli” arises, and the “I don’t like broccoli” is to be able to let go of both. To let go of “broccoli” on the subject side and of “I don’t like” on the subject side so that there is an open free sphere of awareness where subject style thoughts and object style thoughts arise and move together, but neither of which is established as the centre of the movement.

Thoughts are not like some kinds of friends. With some kinds of friends if you turn to them and say “go away”, they’ll leave and you’ll never see them again. If in your meditation you say “Piss off!” to the thoughts, they go away for a while and you have an open space. Then they come back again. They love you. Thoughts will never leave you. We shouldn’t fear that somehow we will empty our brain and then just live in a big empty hole. First of all we have to tell them to “piss off” and there is a special word “Phat!” in Tibetan for doing this. This word, which is used in chöd practice, is also used a great deal in beginning stages of dzogchen to clear the clutter of the mind because if the thoughts are coming very quickly, you can’t think. There are so many thoughts you can’t actually think. One uses this expression to cut a gap in which you can recognise something. When you start to be aware that the thoughts are sticking together and you are getting a sort of gluey chain and it is all building up and getting a bit solid, that is when you need to say this word “Phat!”. It is really the shock factor that is important. As Patrul Rinpoche describes in his text Tsik Sum Ne Dek, “By saying Phat!, one opens up the state of hedewa.” It is a bit like sometimes if you are walking down the street and someone comes behind you, you give a start...Oh!... and you are out of yourself. Or if you are going down the stairs and miss a step, and “Oh!”

This experience can’t be clearly described in language because language is predicated on subject/object difference. The more we do it the more we come into a territory where we don’t know what is going on. And so at the end of this you may feel a little shaky and uncertain because you are in a state which you don’t know. What is very important then is to relax. It is nothing to do with using willpower. We are trying to get to a place which is no place, so pushing won’t get you there. We use the Phat! as a way of cutting a space that we can relax into. Just as you might look at your diary and put a stroke through a page and say, ‘I won’t do anything this day! I’ll just relax.’ Draw a line and it is free time. By saying this Phat!, one is cutting out some time, some space. It’s like how sometimes when the telephone rings I choose not to answer it, because ‘this is my free time’. I need some space. This is some space and then a thought comes, Phat!, you cut it out.

We have to think about the motivation we have in doing this kind of discussion and practice together. I hope that there is a sense running through it of being more open and aware to benefit ourselves and to benefit other beings. This is the essence of refuge and bodhicitta. Whether we do it in a formal way through reciting traditional words, or not, the main thing is to have the essence of it.

Now maybe to end we can sit quietly for a couple of minutes and reflect, *“May any merit or benefits that have come out of this ga*

*thering, we open this to share with all sentient beings.”*