

The Two Truths: a Dzogchen View

James Low

Frankfurt, 11th March 1995

Transcribed by Liz Fox
Lightly edited by Barbara Terris

The Paradoxical Double-Move of Tantra	2
The Teacher Student Relationship.....	3
The Two Truths: Relative Truth and Absolute Truth.....	5
<i>Finding what is a good fit for you</i>	<i>8</i>
Pure Relative Truth.....	10
<i>Deconstructing our assumptions.....</i>	<i>10</i>
Impure Relative Truth: seeing things as real and attachment to them	12
<i>Dzogchen and the Two Truths</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Thoughts arising in Shamatha meditation</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Thoughts arising in Dzogchen meditation</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Questions.....</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>Why don't we do it if it is good for us?.....</i>	<i>18</i>
Ethics and responsibility: when 'good' teachers behave 'badly'	20
<i>Can a Dharma view help us understand this contradiction?.....</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Should we intervene?</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>Why are we told to have devotion and what use is it?.....</i>	<i>23</i>

This weekend we want to take up the idea of the two truths in relationship to the role of teacher and then lead into the Dzogchen view.

So if we just take a few minutes to contemplate the things in our ordinary life that we rely on and take refuge in. Places where we stay, the nice warm bed we sleep in, our clothes, our cooking materials, our books, everything that we rely on to create our sense of who we are and our safe, familiar world. In traditional view one has the idea that these things we rely on in our ordinary life are somehow dangerous to us because they pull us into attachment. Because of that we try to renounce our attachment to these things in the process of taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

We use our reliance on the refuge, the Buddhist refuge, in order to protect us from pushing our energy out into the world and getting more and more attachment to it. The Mahayana view of emptiness helps us understand that all the things that we are attached to – all the things we take refuge in as a support for our ordinary life – are devoid of inherent self-nature. We then want to take refuge in the Buddha, not as someone apart from the world, but the Buddha as the spirit of awareness, the attitude of awareness which recognises the essential emptiness of all things.

This then allows us the freedom to be in the world, making use of all the things that we ordinarily make use of, yet without becoming tied in knots, and in fact using all these ordinary objects of attachment as a means of opening ourselves to deeper and deeper understanding of the Dharma.

It's through using the objects of the world, and the attachment that we have moving out onto these objects – through using that as the path – that we are able to experience how the free movement of the arising of the five elements is concretised into particular subject and object divisions through the nature of our own grasping. This is something that is actually quite difficult to do.

One of the particular qualities of Mahayana Buddhism, particularly in the practice of Tantra and Dzogchen, is the very interesting and difficult tension between a belief in the possibility of direct and absolute realisation of the integration of samsara and nirvana, and the humility of understanding that this is a very difficult achievement.

The Paradoxical Double-Move of Tantra

Tantra requires of us a paradoxical or double movement. One is both trying to attempt full faith through the experience of the meditation – a full faith in the realisation of the world as a buddhafield of perfect enlightenment – and at the same time trying to deconstruct the possibility of solidifying that view, through an attitude of absolute respect and devotion to the buddhas and bodhisattvas. You are using the refuge and the faith in the buddhas and bodhisattvas to deconstruct the potential of solidifying the other view of a pure buddhafield. We want to develop total faith and respect and devotion to the buddhas and the bodhisattvas whilst at the same time, using the possibility of the attainment of full enlightenment to deconstruct the attitude of faith that might be solidified into a kind of endless helpless humility.

This is especially important nowadays because everywhere at the moment there seem to be accounts of spiritual teachers getting into trouble. There is story after story after story of financial corruption, sexual exploitation, in the most devious, cruel and malicious ways. I think in a large way it is because people get into the position of being invested with a particular kind of authority, a particular kind of position of absorbing the hopes and positive fantasies of many people, and then turning this into something very solid. It's in that moment that refuge in the Buddha, refuge in the Dharma, refuge in the Sangha, stops being effective for these teachers as a way of deconstructing –or unpacking, or opening up, or allowing to dissolve back into emptiness – the fixed place that both they, from their ego desire, and their students, from their longing for perfection in the world, want to place them.

My intention is not to establish hope and humility as two polarities of a dualistic opposition, but rather to see them as two points in a dance whereby they deconstruct and open each other as they play and unfold.

This takes us in the direction of what are known as 'The Two Truths'. There is a huge literature on this subject in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese and Japanese, many hundreds of thousands of books. What I'll try to do is present the key points as simply and clearly as I can. However I would want to point out that the reason that these books are difficult to read and the reason that they are very technical is not because the authors want to confuse people, but rather that they are attempting to describe something that is very complicated.

Although it is certainly not necessary to become a great scholar to practise the Dharma, I do deeply believe that some study of these texts is important. It is through the study of the texts that we see that there are contradictions, that the whole thing is not some simple, easy story, but is a great ocean of contradictions. It is like that because the Buddha taught in many different ways, since people have many different qualities, different attributes, and so they need to approach the Dharma from different points of view. And if we have some understanding of the literature and of the key concepts, then we are able to have thoughts about the Dharma, we are able to try to make sense ourselves, from our own effort about what is being explained or what is being practised. If we do that then our attitude when we go to Dharma teachings will be one of an educated, intelligent awareness.

The Teacher Student Relationship

That attitude is a very good protection against naive, idealising beliefs in the absolute purity of the teacher as a concrete fact, because this is part of the paradox. The chapter in the *SIMPLY BEING*¹ which deals with the nature of the teacher constantly says you should idealise your Guru, you should think that your Guru is completely wonderful, that he never makes a mistake and that you should do whatever he asks. But we have to remember that this is a view *in terms of the practice of the Dharma*. It is an intentional view that we take up in order to realise something. As I said last time, the guru is a method. It's the point where we believe that this person who is the teacher is actually clear, enlightened, has everything, understands everything, that we fall into a madness with the teacher.

Now this madness can be very creative. If you have some Dharma thoughts in your head, if you have understood, even intellectually, something of the nature of emptiness, then should the guru behave like an asshole instead of thinking that being like an asshole is meaningful, you are able to understand the integration of asshole-ness and empti-ness. That is to say that you have to make use of the Dharma to make sense of every experience *including your experience of teachers*. Which means issues of power, authority, the use of financial resources, the use of sexuality, the use of alcohol, whatever it is that people get up to – these are things that can be thought about and made sense of in terms of the Dharma.

The text by Chetsampa, in *SIMPLY BEING* says that you must believe that whatever the guru does is good. This means that it is good because it is empty. If you don't understand that it is empty, then the guru being a bad person is not being good. The practice of Tantra is for grown ups, it's not for children. As an adult we may pretend to be a playful child, as for example in drama therapy where we are trying to learn something. Likewise, in the practice of Tantra we pray to the Buddha, or Tara, or Guru Rinpoche or whoever as if they are a great big wonderful parent with every nice thing and as if I am a very small little boy, "*Please come and give me everything I want*".

This is a psychodrama set up in order to create for myself a subjective experience which will free me and shift my awareness from a dualistic paradigm to a non-dualistic paradigm. This is a very mature adult thing to be doing. So clearly what we do in that kind of practice is to create for ourselves a play, a drama, through which, as adults intending to practise for the sake of all sentient beings and free all sentient beings from suffering – a very mature adult position – we act as if we are small helpless children, praying to a great Buddha in order to bring these two forces together, so that we dissolve into this state of emptiness and open.

1 James LOW. *SIMPLY BEING: TEXTS IN THE DZOGCHEN TRADITION*. English 3rd edition (CPI Antony Rowe, November 2010)

But just as if you were engaging in some kind of drama therapy in order to get more in touch with your own childhood, at the end of doing that you would need to come out of it as an adult so that you could go to back to work the next day. Likewise we go into the practice of meditation on the guru, or we go to see gurus, in order to get something in terms of our own practice. That is to say, we go as adults into a situation which takes us into a regressed position, a childlike position, in order to achieve something. At the end of that we have to come out of it and carry on with the responsibility of being adult. If we got lost in a regressed fantasy that the actual teacher is our own wonderful parent who will take care of us forever and ever, then we have entered madness. Because it is at that point that all the ego's defences are dropped and the person is extremely vulnerable in the face of another person who may well be intoxicated by all the positive projects and idealisations that they have been receiving.

In the Dharma, in the Mahayana Tibetan tradition, when we believe that if we pray to Guru Rinpoche he will come and save us, this is a method for understanding the nature of our mind. Yes, it's a very important method, and one that we should try to practise with as much full-faith as possible. In order to increase the possibility of using a dualistic vision to dissolve the attitude of duality, it is even more helpful if we can see Guru Rinpoche in the form of our own teacher. This is because it is a method of seeing somebody whom you ordinarily see in the flesh and blood body, as if they had a light body. You take that into the meditation, so that the whole world is dissolved in light and you come out of the meditation trying to experience the world as light. It is using a metaphorical relationship in order to realise a different dimension of reality.

Say you wanted to emigrate to America, the way to do that is through the America embassy. Now, say you are living in a very poor country, say you are a farmer in Bihar in India and you decide you want to go America. You would take the long, local, cheap passenger train all the way to Delhi, sitting in a hard wooden seat. Then you would walk through the streets of Delhi – it's very hot, it's very tiring – out to Chanakyapuri, and you go to the American embassy. You go in the front door, if they let you in, and it's air-conditioned. There's a very comfortable seat. You think, *"Ah I'm in America. I want to stay here for ever."* But then the man says, *"We're closing for lunch, you have to go out."* However you remember that when you went to the village school they told you that America was a democratic country where they announced that they would welcome all the immigrants from the world, the sick, the poor, the downtrodden, and so you reply, *"I am exactly that. I am a peasant from Bihar. I want to stay here."* But then the security guard comes and just puts you outside the door. So the business of actually getting to America itself is very very hard. You need if possible to have some friends who are already in America who'll help you. Auntie Tara. Uncle Amitabha. Grandpa Chenrezig. *"Please send me a letter of invitation so I can come too."* Then if you have good karma you get a green card and can go and settle; and if you have less good karma you can go on a tourist visit! But even if you have good relations over there who will help you, you still have to go through the embassy. And the embassy is both friendly and unfriendly. Often it is operated according to rules you don't really understand. You imagine that something is clear. You put in your passport, you think you get a visa, but then they come back and say, *"Sorry, some mistake. You have to go back to your village and get the headman to stamp it."*

So the guru is very much like the American embassy. Sometimes looks very nice, sometimes looks very not-nice. Sometimes helpful, sometimes not so helpful. Not a place to go and live. The teacher is not where you live; it is just an embassy. The ambassador lives in the embassy, but for other people who are travelling it is just a place of transit. You go to the embassy for a purpose. If the peasant from Bihar, falls asleep while waiting in this beautiful air-conditioned embassy, he may dream that he is already in America and that everything is safe but at a certain point he'll have to wake up from the dream.

You hear many people saying, *"When I met this lama I felt so good. I spent some months with him in India and it was really wonderful. But then I had to come back to the West and it is so difficult so now I want to save my money and go back to India and hang out with this guru. Then I'll feel very very good."* The danger in this is that you turn the guru into a kind of embassy hotel in which you have the false illusion that just by hanging out there, you are in the place to be.

When you go to Dharma centres, or you go to see lamas, or you go on pilgrimage to India or somewhere like that, it is very easy to mistake the embassy, the transition point, for the reality for the final goal, and so lose your purpose or your intention. Dharma centres, or Dharma places as they exist in the world, always

need work. It is very important if you become part of a Dharma centre, to participate in the work and help it to thrive. But helping Dharma centres to grow, or building monasteries to printing books, or whatever it is, this is to help you create a situation which will help you to make your journey. So again you have a paradox.

In the Dharma they have many terms like “path”, “way”, “vehicle”, all of them referring to journeying, travelling, getting things in motion. They are not really about settling down and being stable. So, although it is important to be involved in Dharma centres and to visit different teachers and sometimes to get involved with what they do, we have to remember that that is part of a journeying – that one makes use of that like going to a restaurant when you’re driving on the highway to give you more energy to continue. The guru becomes the point of entry or the transition way into something else, it is about making use of something as a way of travelling, as a way of getting to somewhere.

If this peasant from Bihar saved up a lot of money for a ticket and goes to America, then he returns to Delhi to the embassy he is so grateful to, this wonderful embassy that has given him a visa, so he goes to the market with the money for the plane ticket and he buys a hundred thousand butterlamps and puts them all around the embassy and lights them. He then worships with a great puja the glorious embassy of the United States of America. If he does all that, he won’t be able to get on the aeroplane.

People can become so intoxicated with the presence of somebody that in worshipping this person they forget that they need to make use of this person to get somewhere. Teachers are methods, nothing else. So you start off with the idea of going to make use of this wonderful spiritual presence in the world but then, through your idealisation of the door, you start to worship the door. The more you worship it the smaller and smaller you get until eventually you can’t even get onto the first step to get through the door!

That’s why it’s very important to return to the basics of the Dharma, to ‘the three seals of the Mahayana’, impermanence, suffering and the absence of inherent self-nature. Which leads into emptiness.

This again would be my encouragement because, although many of the texts that deal with this are difficult, if you understand the concepts then you have a tool, and if you have a tool in your hand you can remind yourself *“I am holding this tool because I want to use it for something.”* You can then take the power back into your own heart and act on the world, towards your own realisation.

The two main motives in the Dharma are to take refuge for ourselves and for all beings because samsara is full of pain and suffering, and to develop the bodhisattva intention out of a feeling of compassion for ourselves and all sentient beings. With these motives behind us we study, we go on pilgrimage, we do practice, we go and see different kinds of teachers. We do all this in order to intensify and strengthen our resolve to gain enlightenment for all beings and, through the practice of meditation, to dissolve our hindrances and to open our awareness so that we can actually be more aware and more compassionate in our living in the world.

The Two Truths: Relative Truth and Absolute Truth

The two truths are usually referred to as relative truth and absolute truth. By truth is meant ‘what appears real to us.’ Rather than calling them relative truth and absolute truth we can talk of them as ‘ordinary reality’ and ‘Buddha’s reality’, because that is really what is gesturing towards.

Essentially relative truth means whatever is constructed inside the organisational frame of a perceiving subject and an object that is perceived. Relative truth is divided into two parts – pure relative truth and impure relative truth. Impure relative truth is the relative truth in which you perceive objects as real AND you have attachment to them. And pure relative truth is when you perceive objects as real, but you have NO attachment to them. Absolute truth is when you neither perceive objects, nor have any attachment to them.

By ‘to perceive an object’ is meant perceiving something which appears to exist in truth. Let’s take, for example, the well-known zen koan: “What is this?”. So here we have a watch, which I am very attached to. We perceive this and we perceive this as something existing in truth – we know what to do with it, we can

look at the dial, it makes sense. We have a lot of mental constructs which can be located around this object. I have a particular attachment to this watch because it is my watch. But even if this isn't your watch, you have an attachment to it as something which supports the attitudes that you have that let you know that it is a watch. Is that clear?

So we have an attachment to the *concept* of watch which we strengthen every time we look at the watch and we know what a watch is. There is an attachment to pure ideas, in the Kantian sense, or the Gestalt or linguistic formations which generate identifications as specific meanings. So one has a double-level of attachment, both to the template of identification, of signification, and to the precise exemplars of these categories of identification. You might be able to free yourself from attachments to concrete entities like watches – you might decide that you will go and live in a cave and live very simply and renounce the world – but nonetheless the method of conceptualisation you have for making sense of the world is one which has attachment embedded in it and not only that. We are attached to the meaning-making patterns of signification that exist in language, because it's through our attachment to language as a meaning-making device that we create the identity that we have as a separate phenomena, of taking up a place among other objects.

This level of attachment is very difficult to recognise, because it's so normal for us. Through using language we are dealing with an intangible, metaphorical constructive system which creates the illusion of real things existing in truth. Language as a system of signification creates a particular world of meaning which we imagine has a precise correlation with objects that exist in the world. A watch appears to be what is here. But we have to remember that a watch is a cultural signification that exists on the development of science and all sorts of concepts of time. It doesn't exist in itself because it is created through a concept.

Our education leads us to believe that language has a direct-reality relationship to what is out there – that language in a sense is derived from objects that exist in reality in the world. This can seem a bit intellectual, but I think it is very important because in terms of non-dual philosophy, what we encounter in the world, what appears to be a series of discrete separate objects having their own qualities, is actually an interplay of language and conceptualisation which is moving and shifting and creating the boundaries between one identification and another. So in saying "this is my watch" I am both making a statement referring back to me in terms of my possession of this object, and I am also talking about the object as something that exists in truth that can be recognised as a real object, recognised by everyone here.

Sometimes when we meditate, not following after thoughts, then when we come out of it and we look, there is something, something's there, but what it is we don't quite know until we start the business of attaching thoughts and language to it again. When you come out of meditation, you may sometimes have had the experience that there is a kind of a gap, that you just kind of open, and then the world becomes a bit more concrete. Similarly if you run very very fast until you get out of breath and then stop – there is a kind of an openness. Or maybe in sex you can have that kind of experience of just a little bit knocked open. It's more that kind of moment. There's a gap and then language, conceptualisation comes in to fill the gap.

In Buddhism as in most religions there are spiritual practices designed to encourage this disruption. For example, the practice of silence in Zen monasteries. When you practise silence something arises and you want to say it to someone to confirm the nature of your experience (as a kind of feedback loop that strengthens the reality of things) but if you can't speak, for example when you have a vow of silence, something arises and you can't turn it into some-*thing*, you can't solidify it, so it tends to fall away a little bit.

MANTRA

The tantric tradition makes use of mantras. Although the syllables syllables of the mantra can be ascribed meaning, the meaning of the mantra, syllable by syllable, is not the main thing. The main thing is that on the one level they are meaningless sound. That is to say the meaning of these sounds does not belong inside the matrix of meaning which we ordinarily use in the world.

The word mantra means "mind-protector" because it stops the mind from getting woven into the matrix of dualistic meaning which is embedded in language. On the level of ordinary meaning you are saying

something that has no meaning and if you have done mantra practice for any length of time you may have experienced feeling a bit spaced-out. Saying mantra and using a mala does have signification on a cultural or sociological level, such as being a Tibetan Buddhist or whatever and that is an ordinary level. However in doing the practice there is a disorientation because thoughts rest on words and mantra is using sound to disrupt the ordinary use of language, which is to appropriate and colonise the world into samsaric, dualistic meaning.

This desire to own the world by making sense of it is very profound. If you've got time it's helpful to read chapter seven and chapter nine in *SIMPLY BEING*. Chapter nine deals with the way ignorance arises in the world. In our Nyingma tradition they talk of a three-stage development of ignorance. The second stage describes how once you have lost openness, once the mind is starting to look for something, it develops a particular kind of intelligence – an intelligent ignorance – and this is called “the ignorance which names all things”.

It's a bit like the the book of Genesis in the Bible. God creates the world. That will be the first level of ignorance, where God creates the world. The second level of ignorance is when he starts to name everything and to give it a register and a series. For us, we are absolutely convinced that this is reality because this is what we have been brought up to believe. Should you let go of that second level of ignorance you feel very anxious and it seeks to insist, because on the level of samsara the second level of ignorance is actually very useful; it's how we survive.

However in considering the relative and absolute truths, what one is trying to do is to reduce the attachment to the objects that one perceives. Moreover one is trying to reduce the intensity of the reification or solidification of the experience of the world as discrete entities. For the first level we have various practices like meditating on impermanence, practising generosity, making mandala offerings, fulfilling our bodhisattva vow of an intention to help others. These are just some of the many methods we can use to turn our attention from pulling the world towards us and getting the things we want and pushing away the things we don't want, towards a sense of generosity for others, a kind of looseness of being in the world.

In tantric practice we do the mantra recitation, and particularly when we come out of the mantra practice at the end, and are trying to hear all sound as mantra and all that we perceive as the pure form of the deity, and all thoughts as being the thoughts of the deity, we are trying to purify the attachment to manifestation as being substantial. We are trying to lighten everything up. There is a wide spectrum of approaches and in the longer tantric pujas one is moving across this whole terrain, dissolving attachment and increasing lightness. The intention is to dissolve the tension that normally exists between subject and object.

This reframing, or re-identification, of the nature of phenomena as they arise moment by moment gradually loosens our tendency to solidify and reify until subject and object can be experienced as playing together. The world arises again as revelation, revelation *in* emptiness, *as* emptiness, *of* emptiness. Through that one enters into the experience of absolute truth in which, although we say that nothing is occurring, clearly everything is occurring, but everything is occurring as nothing. It is the revelation within mirror-like awareness, and this is the real focus of Dzogchen meditation: to experience the world as a continuing spontaneous revelation which never becomes born as this or that with any subject-object separation.

In the earlier stages of practice we worked with the metaphor that it is *as if* I am Guru Rinpoche, it is *as if* I am Tara; one is taking one's being *as if* what is manifesting is real. One practises in the manner of a dream. For example, now we are sitting here in this room, and it is *as if* in looking at my watch I see that we are coming to lunchtime, and it is *as if* we will all go and eat some lunch. If we do this inside awareness, as the play of awareness, having the lunch, having a shit afterwards, or whatever, doesn't become real; it doesn't become separated off as something but is the play within awareness.

This is called the integration of the two truths. The relative truth, i.e. ordinary phenomena continue to occur, but they continue to occur within the understanding of the absolute truth. The relative truth is dissolved into the absolute truth. Not dissolved so that it becomes nothing; it's not like taking a marvellous swan that is carved out of ice, and putting it into a bowl of hot water so that it dissolves and there is nothing left of it, but rather, it is merged into it and yet remains discrete. Quite magical.

Finding what is a good fit for you

Question: You talked about method and goal. If the goal is going to America, what is the method?

James: The method is to make use of the embassy, meaning to make use of the guru, to make use of the teachings, to make use of the path. When we were young and summer came usually our parents decided where to go for holiday. If the parents are intelligent they have some idea what is a reasonable kind of place for a small child, so maybe they try to go to near the sea where there is a nice clean beach where the children can play. Usually young children are happy with any fairly warm beach. They don't care where it is, if it is Italy or Spain or Greece, they just get out a little spade and it's all very nice. Then when this child becomes a teenager they probably don't want to go on holiday with their parents. Wherever is suggested, they think is a bad idea; they want to know in advance and then they say, *"I'm not going to a place like that – none of my friends are there. It's a boring place for old people. Why can't we go some place where I want to go?"* Then when they are older, maybe twenty-five or thirty, if the parents are still alive, they think, *"It might be quite nice to go on holiday with my parents. It's a long time since we had a holiday together, and perhaps they are going to die soon, so maybe this is the last chance to have a holiday together."*

Likewise when we are new to the Dharma, whatever's going on is very interesting. We jump in enthusiastically, beating a drum, reciting texts, studying philosophy, doing prostrations or whatever, like the small child on a beach. Then after a while this feels a bit boring, *"I've done this before; it's not really what I want to do"*. I'm also not really sure what I do want to do because we teenagers in the Dharma never really know what we want to do, but we do know that we *don't* want to do which is whatever we *have* to do. Then as we get older and we have more years in the Dharma we realise probably that life doesn't change so very much and it's just kind of nice to hang out with some nice people and some teachers, and whatever they're up to, anyway it's OK. Like going on holiday with our parents now.

Having got to know ourselves a little bit we start to know what our real problems are. So that when we talk about the five poisons, anger, desire, stupidity, jealousy and pride, these are no longer, just general concepts or interesting things think about but we recognise ourselves in them. We know our own pattern of stupidity, we know how our own desire ties us in knots, we know the kind of situation we get pissed off with. At that point when we know ourselves a bit and we have some clearer understanding of who we are, we can have some clearer understanding of the Dharma, and so then we can start to fit ourselves, our particular karmic shape in this life, into the menu of potential that's in the Dharma and find the best possible fit.

It is useful if we have a teacher who knows something about the Dharma and also something about us so that they can give some advice on that fit. However the kind of advice we need from a teacher will change as we know more about ourselves, as we know more about the Dharma and know more about the fit. At first we are very dependent, but as we get to know more we can be more independent and we can then have a kind of consultation with someone to get more understanding about where we understand ourselves to be.

To go back to this basic word 'Buddha'. In Tibetan 'Buddha' is '*Sangye*'. '*Sang*' means purified, all obstacles and difficulties are removed and '*Ye*' means rich, full complete with all good qualities. So the more we know ourselves, the more we know the things that have to be purified, removed, if we are a very angry person or a very jealous person, or very stupid, or proud or don't do the practice – whatever our own particular pattern is – we can have a sense for ourselves what is the next task. If I have to work on my anger, what is the best way to deal with that? Now that we know what buddhahood is like we have these problems that we have to get rid of, since buddhahood is free of anger, jealousy, hatred etc.

So say for example I am a very lazy person, although I keep having the thought that I'd like to practise the Dharma, I feel tired, or I need to sleep earlier, or later, or at the end of the day I just want to watch television, and then in the morning I have got to rush to work because I don't like to get out of bed early. In this way I make no time for Dharma practice. Now, I might be able to motivate myself to do something by thinking about death, by thinking that my life will end, that I don't know when it will end, that it might end very soon, and that if I die now I will have achieved nothing. *"Oh my God, I'd better do something!"* I could use the reflection on impermanence and death to frighten myself. I could use fear to motivate myself. But it

could be that I grew up in a family where my parents were often trying to frightening me into activity and I grew resistant to it. *"If you don't do your homework, then you won't pass your exam, and you won't get to college and so will never get a job. Look at you, you will be like these drunken old people sitting on the park benches. So, get on with your homework. This is a very dangerous world you're living in!"*

For people who grew up hearing this sort of message, frightening yourself into practising the Dharma does not work. For some people meditating on death can motivate them to do practice but if you have grown accustomed to people trying to frighten you into doing things then this method probably won't be effective for you and it would make sense to use another line of thought. For example, you might think, *"Well, if I practise the Dharma and I purify all my bad karma then I will never have to be born again in a household where I have to do my homework every night!"* If you understand yourself a little bit and understand something of your own karmic habits as they reveal themselves in your past experience, you might decide that this approach suits you better. They are both just methods to start you practising the Dharma but once you know more about how you function, you can start to find what is a good fit for you, see what is effective in getting you mobilised and what actually just depresses you and takes your enthusiasm away.

If you go into a big supermarket they are selling all sorts of food, but if I have diabetes, many of the things are not food for me; they are poison. So although all of these things are food, actually many of the things that they sell such as jams, and cakes are actually poison for me. They are not a fit. So, method is very important and nobody else can really tell us about that. Even if I am a diabetic and my doctor tells me what not to eat, until I have eaten that food for myself and experienced the consequences of getting unwell, then I do not really appreciate how this is now a poison for me. It may not have been a poison for me when I was younger, but now it is.

Of course sometimes we try something and we don't like it, but actually it's good for us. Other times we try something and we don't like it and it's not good for us. Because it can be difficult to know the difference, that's why it is important to talk to teachers, to read, to reflect on what we read and hear, to talk with other practitioners and try to think together what is going on. *"Why is it that this doesn't seem to help me? Is it because I am being resistant to something? I'm saying I want to change but really I don't want to change and I know if I really do this it will change me, so I don't do it properly"* Is it that story? Or is it a case that actually that practice doesn't fit with me?

That's why it makes sense to do some of the preliminary practices and through that to recognise the ways in which we may sabotage ourselves. Some people, for example, are so greedy that they want the top thing immediately. *"I want only to do Dzogchen, the highest practice."* But they don't understand it and because they are full of greed and pride they feel ashamed at not understanding it, so they pretend they understand, and they do that for some years and then drop the whole thing. So it's very important to learn how you sabotage yourself. If you know a lot about that, then Dzogchen can make a lot of sense since the main practice of Dzogchen is to be able to dissolve the points at which you self-sabotage. That's the real essence of Dzogchen.

Question: You said in absolute truth neither is there an object, nor is there the awareness of perceiving of an object. There was this man, Kaspar Hauser who lived for many years during his childhood in a very dark hole, and when he came out of this hole he did not have names for the things and he could not call anything. Was this man enlightened because he didn't have conceptualisations and everything was totally new for him? Maybe it is like the accounts of children raised by wolves.

James: He was not enlightened at all because his was an intelligence which had been damaged by a lack of nurturing. To be born as a human being is to have the karma and the ability to learn language, and when language is denied intelligence becomes confused. It's a bit like the difference between destruction and de-construction. If you want to destroy European literature you can go to the libraries and burn all the books. Many people do approach the idea of enlightenment in that way. They want to destroy samsara and then get nirvana. But de-construction is that ability to engage with something which is complex and problematic and by very subtle movements in the engagement with it, to find moments in which a freshness is revealed.

Take feminism, for example. At first a lot of feminist critique of male positions in the world were destructive ones saying, “Men have had this for too long; men should stop doing this and we should knock the men down and then we will have more space and we will fill this space.” That’s stage one. Later on, feminists began to enquire into the nature of the narrative that the male establishes in society in order to constellate power in an ongoing and seemingly natural position-taking. By questioning in that particular way they revealed that what appears to be a given is actually constructed. And so you deconstruct, not to destroy, not to wipe something out completely, but just to show the ways in which it seeks to construct itself again and again. The skeleton that creates the game is revealed, and in that moment of revelation the game is transformed.

The path to enlightenment is a deconstructive, not a destructive, positioning. That is to say, it is an *engaged* activity. Somebody who has lived down a hole or in a cave and never known anything doesn’t have the ability to engage with the world in order to deconstruct it. They have what we would call ‘bad karma’. They don’t even begin to enter the game.

Pure Relative Truth

We’ll go on to do the practice that we’ve done many time before here, where we visualise Guru Rinpoche or a ball of light, we recite a very simple mantra, it comes to the top of our head, dissolves into us, we dissolve into it and then out.

Now if we think of relative truth and absolute truth, if you remember, the impure relative truth has “seeing things as real and attachment to them”.

When we visualise Guru Rinpoche or Tara or whatever deity, or this ball of light, we are trying to have the sense of it as transparent. We are seeing it, but in the moment of seeing it we want to have the recognition that this is simply an image like the quality of image that you would get in a mirror. What we are trying to do is have the sense of colours organised into particular shapes that resemble the form of a being, of Guru Rinpoche, of Tara or whoever, with specific ornaments and robes, but all of that being light. So you have form or shape but no substance.

One of the things you are trying to purify through this is the assumption that when we see something, there is something there. Our habit is to think that when we see something, there is actually some substance there. So what we are trying to do in this visualisation is see something while knowing that there is nothing there. But it is not that there is nothing there at all. Nothing is appearing as something, just as when you look in a mirror and you see something but you can’t grasp it. There is nothing to grasp. There is no substance to the reflection in a mirror and yet it is there. So you see how this is very important, how this links in with the purification of relative truth, because one is purifying the notion that when you see something, there is something there. This is saying “No. Every time I see something, nothing is there” But nothing is revealing itself as *something*, without the something becoming something as such. This is very important.

Deconstructing our assumptions

This is why some intellectual understanding of emptiness is very important because what we are doing in this practice is deconstructing the habit whereby we perceive substances as existing in truth, as being really there.

Here is a match. When you look at it, you can see it. You have all seen matches before, we may even have used them many times. When we look at it, it’s a match. We can see it’s a wooden stick with some chemicals on the end. This exists doesn’t it? This is definitely a match. It’s not a magician’s illusion. Here is a match. Now I’d like you to watch this match. What is happening to the match now? *[James lights the match]* Where is the match gone? The idea of the match may return but this particular match itself will not return. When we see the match, we forget that the match is made up of substances which are held together because of particular conditions in the environment. Matches are manufactured in a particular way. We are used to opening the packet and seeing matches looking a certain way, maybe with red heads, or blue heads but anyway it looking roughly like this.

In order for the match to exist like this, many many thousands of millions of conditions have to be in place. There needs to be a planet, there needs to be a climate on the planet, there need to be things that have developed through time to grow as trees, there needs to be people who plant the trees, who cut the trees, there needs to be people who make the metal that makes the saws that cuts the trees. There need to be vehicles to put the trees on, there need to be boats to put the trees on, there need to be factories wherever this was made where they cut it up very small. There needs to be a whole petrochemical industry that makes the head of chemicals. There are millions and billions and billions of factors resting in this one thing. This holds the whole world together, this match

So many billions of factors have brought this into existence in this room at this time, and then all sorts of other factors will lead to its destruction and where it will go when it goes in the rubbish. So it's moving through time, held in place in its particular momentary form as a meeting place of causes and conditions. So I think that it's very important to know that when we look at something we usually look at it in a very naive way. "Oh, it's a match." Somebody asks us, "Have you got a light?" It's very automatic. We see this existing just in itself and we don't see the whole incredible infinity of circumstances that have to be in place for it to exist.

The same applies to everything. It applies to our own bodies. Think how many complex factors have created our bodies as they exist in this room at this time. Just think of the position your body's in and all the things that cause it to be in that position. Habits, maybe not being used to sitting on a cushion, maybe tired at the end of the day, all sorts of factors are involved in it. The important thing of this in relation to Buddhism is the sense that – to return to the example of the match as – if this match is existing here as the fruition, the momentary coming-together of all these causes and conditions, then it has no essence in itself, there is no matchness in the match – it is simply the play of this infinite multitude of factors.

So if you change the causes and conditions you actually change the thing. If we soak the match a little so that it gets a bit wet, and then try to light it it is a bit difficult because water doesn't burn. Matches burn. What other use do we make of matches? Only for burning. When it's wet it doesn't burn but if we dry the wet match then the cause and condition of the heat being greater than the water will dry off the water so that the basic quality of this particular combination will reveal itself for a moment. Having burnt itself out, it burns no more. The substance there can't burn any more, at least not at this temperature.

Another example. In supermarkets they lay food out in different ways according to the susceptibility of particular food to changes in temperature. Some food is kept in a freezer, some is kept on an open shelf. So here we have a beautiful fish, but if it is not kept cold it starts to go off and we think, "*Oh I don't really want to eat this fish, it's not so fresh*". When we were small we maybe had a drawing book or a first reading book with a little picture of a fish and the letter 'F' for fish. Then one day mum says, "Tonight we have fish for supper!" and she cooks it and puts it on our plate. But fish is also lots of other things. Fish is this biochemical composition which disintegrates under different circumstances. Once the fish is killed the energy recycling force that was keeping it healthy and fresh is cut off and a new process starts, which is the process of rotting and corruption. So what we have to do is get the fish out of the sea and into the shops and onto our plates as quick as possible before this other decaying process takes place, otherwise, "Ugh I can't eat that!" It is the same with the ego. It is held in place by circumstances. Somebody says, "You're no good at this" and the ego collapses. Somebody says, "Oh you're so wonderful..." and your ego expands. It's like this – causes and conditions. Although we change our shape, we imagine that we are the same.

So we act as if there was a true essence or a self-substance to the things that we see and to ourselves. But in fact what we have is a ceaseless play-process of becoming – of the absolutely complex, infinitely complex interplay of causes and conditions bumping off each other and transforming and transforming and transforming.

This is why contemplation on impermanence is so absolutely important in keeping us in touch with the dynamic, moving nature of the world, watching how things form and unform according to the play of the environment. With this we can start to get some intellectual understanding that although we perceive something, there is nothing really there, other than the play of forces. We have the belief that there is something there and this belief is to be deconstructed through the meditation.

If we have that recognition then what we are trying to do with the visualisation of Guru Rinpoche is to see this form and to really hold to the idea that the truth of all appearances is that there is nothing there. Through that we purify the notion that something is truly there.

Impure Relative Truth: seeing things as real and attachment to them

Attachment is the quality of “impure relative truth”, the second aspect of relative truth. We develop our attachment to something that isn’t there. So here we are sitting in the meditation hall saying our prayers to nothing!! “Nothing, nothing come here and get rid of something!” Maybe it seems quite mad, to be trying to turn all the richness of the world into nothing.

However what we want to do is to be as devoted as possible to this something which is nothing. Ordinarily we have something as something – not very interesting. But Guru Rinpoche, nothing as something, something as nothing – now that’s much more interesting. When you have attachment to something as something which you like, such as a nice watch, you will have the same attachment as something as something when you go to the doctor and he tells you that this lump you were concerned about has cancer. And then you think, “Hell no, something *is* something and I don’t want this something! Get rid of the something!”

So what we are trying to do is to develop faith and devotion. The traditional texts say you should have such devotion that the surface of skin is rippling, the hair stands up on your neck, and tears run from your eyes. So we are saying, “*You, you who are nothing, come and save me!*” I don’t know if you know this song, “*I, I who have nothing...* ”? Anyway it’s a very nice song made famous by Shirley Bassey and sung by many. “... I adore you!” It is the idea that I am nothing and you are something. Now we turn it round, to say “*You are nothing, I am something; make me nothing! Baby baby c’mon! I need your love to get rid of me!*”

So this is the purification of attachment through the application of attachment to nothing. It may sound a strange thing to do by remember that the reason for us doing the practice is to recognise that suffering arises from attachment. If we can turn the focus of our attachment on to nothing rather than onto something, then nothing, nothingness, openness, radiance will become the most empowered object in our world and it will then be able to antidote our attachment to something as such, which is actually a delusion and a lie.

The practice is the transformation. Try to visualise this open clear blue sky and arising in it, is a ball of shining light, or the form of Guru Rinpoche or another deity we wish to use. Visualise this as clearly as we can as the manifestation just of light, a form which appears to be something but which is actually nothing. The real essence of Guru Rinpoche is emptiness – this is the dharmakaya nature – infinite emptiness.

Focus on Guru Rinpoche and recite the mantra, “*OM A HUNG BENZA GURU PEMA SIDDHI HUNG*”. Be aware of your own thoughts and feelings, if you are making this image too strong or weird or distorting it in some way. Try to stay with the visualisation, do the mantra and relax the thoughts and feelings that are covering it over. Doing this with devotion. “*Guru Rinpoche, you are the essence of all the Buddhas, of whatever is enlightened in the world, you represent this. I have total faith in you and you are nothing.*”

Then at the end of doing this, this form comes to the top of my head and dissolves down into a ball of light, goes down through the top of my head, into my heart, then my body dissolves as light. Remember, rays of light have been coming from Guru Rinpoche, from his three places into me, dissolving me with light, so now my body is a light body, his ball of light comes into my heart, my body of light dissolves into that ball, so now subject and object have come together. There is just one ball of light and you want to have this real sense of going in and in and just dissolving and then there’s nothing...

Gradually, through these rays of light that were coming from Guru Rinpoche into me, I have gone from being something-as-such into something-as-nothing, into radiance of light. Then the something which was nothing, the light form, has dissolved into nothing nothing, and out of that nothingness something arises, thoughts, feelings images, colour, whatever it is. It’s at that point that one wants to recognise that all that arises is the form of Guru Rinpoche, that is to say, something-as-nothing. Whatever is arising is just nothing,

is just the play of nothing. I don't need to be attached to it or frightened of it, I don't need more of it or less of it, because it is just nothing, it's just play like clouds in the sky.

Should you become aware that your mind has wandered off after some thoughts you want to start focusing just to recognise what's the nature of the thought that is most seductive for you, the most tempting for you. By becoming more aware of that you can understand more about the particular way in which the five poisons are operating through you and the ways in which you are most likely to sabotage your ability just to relax and be open.

Slowly these forms that are arising manifest in the familiar forms of this room and here we are. Now it is at that moment that we want to keep remembering that whatever is arising here is the somethingness of nothing, the form of emptiness. If it starts to get a bit solid and you find lots of thoughts are arising that are pulling you back into seeing something as something, you can just quickly close your eyes and imagine everything dissolving back down, back down very quickly, nothing, and then just let it arise again. And just doing that dissolving, arising, dissolving, arising, and just softening the tendency to turn something-as-play-as-revelation into something-as-something.

This is the integration of the two truths in the practice. Enlightenment is traditionally described as being the recognition of the inseparability of the two truths so this practice leads is towards this.

[End of day 1 teaching]

Dzogchen and the Two Truths

So today I will say a little bit more about the beginning attitudes in Dzogchen practice and relate that to the two truths again.

The Buddha's Dharma is often described as being the Middle Way and the middle way means a path that lies between extremes. The most famous two extremes that the Buddha discusses are the view that things are truly permanent and last forever, and the view that things exist only for a moment and have no trace at all. Yesterday when we were looking at the two truths and at the integration of the various positions in it through meditation practice, I hope we could see how the idea that something arises out of nothingness and is nothing in the moment when it appears to be something, is a path through these two extremes.

Form and emptiness is the way in which these extremes are expressed. The view of permanence is expressed in the notion of form and the view of annihilation is expressed in the notion of emptiness. Just as we use the deities like Padmasambhava, and Tara to help us understand the way in which form and emptiness are present together, in one place in one moment, we also use the view of the madhyamika, as developed to its highest point in Dzogchen, to understand the emptiness of the mind as not different from the arising of thoughts in the mind. The central focus of all the meditation practice is to try to open up the notion of objects as being strongly real in themselves, and to relax the mind that grasps at these objects that seem to be real – so that there is more play between these two points.

The two main tendencies that the mind has is to be too tight and too loose. The famous example that the Buddha gave was to liken the mind to a stringed instrument. If the string is too tight then the note goes too high, if the string is too low then the note gets dispersed. You have to tune an instrument to get the best note coming out. Yesterday were talking a bit about dancing to the world melody without having to think about it, just letting the music flow through us.

The sitar has strings on the front which you actually play, and then behind that you have the sympathetic strings which vibrate in resonance with the strings that have been played. These sympathetic strings have to be tuned quite accurately so that they will be able to vibrate in harmony with the main strings that are being played. We could think of our meditation as being like these sympathetic strings. What we have to do is subtly tune ourselves so that we are able to pick up the vibration of what is around us and resonate with that. We don't use an intentional energy onto the world, but we use the energy of the world to carry us forward.

So the main things that we have to avoid are being too tight, too rigid. This would take us into the realm of anxiety, of being an observer on our own life, standing back from situations – thinking our own thoughts are superior to other people's, or thinking our own thoughts are inferior to other people's – being cut off from the world by a kind of tightness. The other extreme is the situation of being too loose, being chaotic, being all over the place, having no boundaries, not knowing when we've had enough of something, tumbling through life without any direction.

The Dzogchen approach to meditation is not so much about observing outside things as about observing ourselves in relationship to the world. For example, you may have come here this weekend with some uncertainties about your own Dharma practice, your meditation, or about Tibetan Buddhism but you may find that you haven't asked your question and you are wondering whether you will be able to ask the question before the weekend is over. So there is a very interesting piece of research to do here. How do I sabotage, or block my ability to get my need met? What do I do in my own head to stop my mouth opening and the words coming out?

This is also part of meditation – watching how mental patterning blocks our easy play in the world. We may be anxious and in our anxiety we look at the world very carefully and see all these opportunities but in the very intensity of seeing the opportunity, we are somehow separate from the opportunity and so we don't make use of the opportunity. If you find yourself being like that then it is important to learn how to relax.

Relaxation means letting go of attachment to fixed ideas, ideas about ourselves, and ideas about others. We might think that other people are more important than us, other people are critical of us, other people are like our mother or father or school teachers, and so we have all kinds of fearful thoughts generated from the past yet which we continue to be attached to.

You can go to therapy, maybe spending a lot of money on this or you can use the Buddha's very cheap and simple method of Shamatha! Through Shamatha, through this mind-calming meditation of focusing on the breath, things arise which we may find very interesting but we practise not paying attention to that, just letting these thoughts go wherever they go and we return our attention to something very simple, very boring, to just the breath going in and out.

Thoughts arising in Shamatha meditation

When practising Shamatha it's very important that when thoughts arise that we don't pay attention to them, and we gradually, through the practice, dissolve any attachment that takes us in to situations of tightness in ourselves when thoughts arise in an interpersonal context.

We suffer such fears as fear of death, fears of rejection, fears of humiliation, fears of being thought stupid, fears of pain... The Buddha clearly said that all suffering arises from attachment, so if we accept that idea then it is our own attachment to ideas arising in our mind that create these fears of death, fears of pain, fears of humiliation. But you don't have to just accept it as a given; you can experiment with these ideas and check them out for yourself. The fear of abandonment is the fear other people won't like me, that they'll reject me, and I will feel lonely and destroyed in myself. Because of this kind of fear people put up with many situations they don't like such as oppressive situations at work and oppressive dead relationships, many many situations that crush the soul.

We all know that we were born out of our mother in blood and slime and that when we die our bodies will rot and smell and be eaten by insects and people will want to get rid of them because they putrefy. Plus when we wake up in the morning we have sticky stuff in our eyes, wax in our ears, snot in our noses, shit up our bums, and everywhere foul sweat coming out. This is the reality of all human beings. Even the people who might humiliate you, the people you idealise and give power and authority to so that they can make you feel small and stupid, these people too will fart and smell and ooze secretions. Reflection on old age, sickness and death is very very important in the Dharma.

Much of human culture is designed to disguise the realities of our embodied existence. So it can be helpful when you find yourself getting stuck in a situation where other people, or situations, seem very powerful and fixed, to remember that just below the layer of skin of these people, all these things are going on in their body. This imposing person dressed in a suit behind a big desk is just a skinbag of pus. With that awareness you can deconstruct your own projected fantasies about what this person can do to you. We can use the classic contemplations of the Dharma and the meditation systems of the Dharma to deconstruct whatever heavy, tight, rigid assumptions keep us feeling tight and anxious and keep the world seeming to be fixed.

On the other extreme we have movements into chaos where we don't really know what is going on at all. Chaos is usually in a depressive mode or in a manic mode. When we get depressed we become confused, we don't know what to do with our lives; all our thoughts just seem to return to the same thing, everything is just too much for us, we can't find a way out into the world, we shrink back from the world, sinking and sinking and sinking under the weight of thought. In depression it is very common for people to feel that depression is something that is happening to them. They might say, *"I don't want to be depressed, I wish I wasn't depressed, I don't know why this happens"*. It just kind of arrives and takes you right over.

But if we have been practising a little bit of Shamatha we know that this is telling ourselves a lie because we come to recognise that certain thoughts come and go and that it is possible to separate the thought from the thinker or the experiencer of the thought. In Shamatha when we get caught up in something, we recognise "Uhoh" and we go back to the breath. Although we get caught up in a thought and fused with it, we know we can wake up, taking the awareness like a thread pulling out of a lump of butter and pull it back into a focused attention on the breath for a while. And then it gets lost again... and then we draw it back...

So from the point of view of meditation it is wrong to say, *"I am depressed"*, since what one is actually experiencing is, *"I am attached to depression and cannot find a way of separating myself off from this experience to which I am attached."* If you've ever experienced a kind of confused depressed state, one of the things you probably tried to do to get out of it was to think your way out. *"Oh I shouldn't be depressed. I should try really hard, go for a walk. Oh but if I go for a walk and I am feeling like this and I meet someone, and I won't know what to say. Oh God, I'd better stay in here. Oh, but staying in this house is so bloody depressing I don't know what to do..."* The thought just goes round and round so thinking doesn't really help.

What you have to do is direct your attention away from the depressive thoughts that are arising, onto the breath. The breath is a very nice place. The breath may not ever be particularly happy, it just goes in and out of this dirty tunnel and it doesn't complain, but it does require a bit of effort. There is no liberation from samsara without effort so it is very important to practise whenever you can, so that you gain more confidence that practice actually helps you. Then when you get into trouble, you do this rather than phoning up a friend and telling them all about your difficulties so that you get some sympathy but nothing really changes except you maybe feel a little bit better and they feel a lot worse! They then have to go and phone another friend, and so you have a great chain of depression spreading all over. By doing this practice of Shamatha you will be developing wisdom, by attacking this habit of attachment, and you will also be developing compassion, by not spreading negative thoughts out to contaminate other people.

To go back to this image of the stringed instrument, if the string is too slack you have to tighten it. Depression is a kind of slackness, the energy is being dispersed, so you have to make effort at that time. The same applies with manic or excited forms of chaotic dispersal. For example, somebody might have a very hot temper and get into fights easily or they may find themselves drinking too much or doing too many drugs, or binge-eating or working too much. All these activities increase the number of thoughts that are occurring and propel one into a hungry devouring of the world so that one is feeding a system which has no boundary. You lose any sense of when you might have enough. The extreme form of that is a manic psychosis, where somebody has incredible numbers of thoughts arising which seem very exciting and they are going everywhere and spending a lot of money and pulling out all their furniture and they are going to redo everything because there is no barrier between thoughts and action into the world. There is no space to think about it.

What one needs to do in that kind of situation is to remain calm. How do you become calm when you are excited? First you have to recognise, "I am not excited" So how can it be that I am not excited when clearly I am excited? Because there is a confusion arising from the attachment to sensations of excitement as if they were oneself. So if you have done some Shamatha again in quiet peaceful times, you will believe and know out of your own experience that whatever arises passes away and that if you become attached to what arises, you will be caught up in it and that will continue for some time.

So it always goes back to these basic Dharma principles of non-attachment and understanding of impermanence. The desire to have another drink, the desire at 2 o'clock in the morning for more cigarettes, this is a desire based on an attachment to 'I would like to have this sensation. If I don't have this sensation I am going to be upset. I need to have this sensation otherwise I shall be disturbed.'

On the basis of the stupidity of believing that I am real and that this cigarette is real and that the connection between us is very real, there arises desire for this cigarette which can lead to anger towards those who take one's cigarettes, envy of those who still have some cigarettes, and pride at the fact that you have a little secret stash of cigarettes just for yourself afterwards! So in this way, on the basis of cigarettes, the five poisons increase endlessly and one wanders in samsara looking for a tobacconist. With all these conditions of dispersed manic excitement, the important thing is to learn to fix boundaries. You can only fix a boundary if you feel you have a choice and you can only feel you have a choice when you are not totally caught up in the addictive habitual habit.

So as we move into the area of Dzogchen meditation, the most important thing is to know yourself: to recognise when you are getting too tight and when you need to relax, or when you are getting too dispersed and need to fix some boundaries and tighten things up a bit. This is actually much more difficult than doing prostrations. That's why it is very important to go back to the basics to try to clarify the ways in which you confuse yourself and to try to recognise habitual patterns of thinking and to recognise that these are constructs. Yes, they appear given, they appear true, but they are actually just patternings, juxtapositions of thoughts; they are impermanent, they are social constructs.

As beginners we need to observe ourselves as if from the outside, we need to try to set up a place of observation so that we can interrupt the old patterns. For example in the Shamatha we want to be clear about the task, which is to keep our attention on the breath, so that when we go off and get caught up in into the thought some part of our awareness will say, "*Hang onto the breath*" and we return gently to the breath. One is using the return to awareness as a kind of antidote, or antagonist towards the movement towards ignorance and forgetfulness.

Thoughts arising in Dzogchen meditation

Now when we move into Dzogchen the position of this observing self shifts slightly, as we practiced yesterday with this dissolving meditation, when we come down and we dissolve down and down and down, and then out into this spaciousness. Then thoughts and feelings arise. However at that time, when we have movements into chaotic fusions of thoughts or movements into trying to control the thoughts, what we don't want to do is pull ourselves back from that by observing the thoughts as if they were other. What we want to do is stay with this openness and ride through the openness on the back of whatever is arising, and just gently let it resolve down into openness. Gently let it resolve down into openness, so that awareness is moving with the energy of the arising out of emptiness, back into emptiness and not taking up an antagonistic position.

One is moving from a situation of control into one of acceptance and playfulness, of being able to respond. This means that the one who is tuning the string is not outside, but it is as if the string is tuning itself through its own movement. Sometimes you are going to be in such a mess that you may not be able to find the string which is why it's useful to have a range of other meditation techniques to help you to get in touch with the string and then get back into working directly through that. The two main things that we would be focusing on would be firstly the Shamatha to calm things down and to increase the ability to stay with the separated observing self, and secondly tantric visualisation with mantra recitation which uses the generation of energy and focused excitement to provide another way into awareness.

Questions

We'll take a few questions and then take a tea break.

Question: [about tantric visualisation and emptiness.]

James: Unlike looking at an object, say in the room, if I am looking at my beloved and our eyes are merging into each other, there is this sense that this other is not separate. I am not observing the other, rather I am caught up in something with the other. That's the way of doing the visualisation, so you have this sense of Guru Rinpoche there, rays of light are coming from Guru Rinpoche, you try to get the image that his face is smiling at you, his eyes are radiant, when these rays of light come out of his heart this is the essence of his being; he is just giving you this pure love, this purification, it's just flowing into you. It's not like looking at an object, as you may do with Shamatha, but it's something very alive. A different flavour is being evoked and you are softened up by this. Tantric visualisation is an erotic practice but not erotic in the sense of some of these modern tantra-as-sex workshops, but it is erotic in the sensual sense of awakening the senses so that the senses dissolve the rigidity of the self – because it is our senses that pull us out of ourselves. By the time this beloved, this wonderful being has come to the top of your head, you are a little bit excited, going to have a good time, and this is coming down into you, it's very nice, it's very “mmm”. So you are already dissolving this whole thing. It's done with mood, with affect. By the time your body is merging into this ball of light and the ball of light is getting smaller and smaller, it's not observing something happening, it's just being caught up in, it's a feeling. It works on the principle of taking all the energy of the body in from the peripheries into the centre of the heart. The heart chakra is the centre where all the consciousnesses are, so everything is being pulled into one point. If you do these practices as meditation it is important not to just turn them into some empty ritual. It is something very very powerful and helpful, but in doing it you are a little bit crazy. It's like having sex. It's not a polite human activity.

Question: Now you have dissolved and lost your consciousness, but your consciousness returns, and again a thought arise. Now what do you do? Do you follow this thought and watch what this thought is doing, and what kind of things arise together with this thought and then go back to emptiness? Or in the moment that you recognise a thought is coming, do you go back?

James: There are two main styles of practice after this dissolving, when thoughts arise. When a thought arises there is also a consciousness of the thought. Now this is quite a subtle mental consciousness, but it is still not often a real open awareness because it is coming into a tight point. So you might want to work on the object by paying attention to the thought that arises and just watching it, just gently staying with it so that you are present at the moment that it vanishes.

You know if you have a small child of maybe three and you do a game, with a nut, putting it in your hand and moving it around. Then the small child doesn't know where the nut is and you open your hand and they get a little bit shocked because they can't predict it. So in the same way that if we remove the object then the mind gets a little shocked and it relaxes at that point because it can't grasp. It's confused because thinking consciousness is predictive. In order to do that practice you have to be able to track the thought or the emotion that's arising with an awareness which is not tight, otherwise you are simply developing more consciousness. If that is difficult to do than there is another practice you can do.

The other way it so focus on the one who thinking the thoughts, the one who is perceiving the thoughts, so that you track the consciousness itself. However the tracker of the consciousness is not the consciousness itself, otherwise it is a snake chasing its own tail. Now it is quite difficult to do that.

The most important basic practice is to focus on Shamatha and the dissolving practice because that gives you some sense of having an awareness which can be aesthetically in touch with what is arising without being conscious of it in a subject-object way. Without any experience of that, it is very difficult to do any kind of real Dzogchen, because that's the entry ticket.

Question: I feel stressed from life and everybody is demanding something from me. I am active and spontaneous but everything is just too much.

James: Is there anything you can give up? Why? Because you are saying you are fucked up, that's why! Either you purify on object or you purify on subject. If you remember, we said that when things are chaotic, what you need to do is to introduce some order. So either you can order your thoughts and your reactions more clearly, or you can order the object world more clearly. Probably it's best to do both.

Are these things dependent on you? Are people dependent on you? If you die today what will happen to these people? If you die you won't know, it wouldn't be your business. We can imagine that these people whoever they are, they will get some food and a place to sleep and something else would happen in their lives. They might cry for a while, but then life goes on.

So you can make yourself feel too important in the situation, and these activities seem too important. Maybe you have an attachment to the idea that you should be competent and able to do everything. Looking through your diary and thinking of some things you can score out may be useful. Sometimes that means working on the attachment to the word "Yes" so you have to lessen your attachment to "Yes" and increase your attachment to "No". Become so attached to "No" that you become very comfortable and saying it is just automatic. "No I can't do that" "No I won't do that."

At the same time do some Shamatha meditation. Follow the breath, but if you are too disturbed, then focus your attention on a small pebble, placed a few feet away from you, and just keep your eyes gently focused on that. And when you go off, just come back. You need to check for yourself, but for most people it's the case that if you are very disturbed and agitated, focusing on the breath is too difficult. It is too close and so if you have something that is out there and you are looking at it, that helps to give a clearer focus.

Why don't we do it if it is good for us?

Question: Yesterday you gave examples of how our feelings change at different ages when our parents want us to go on holiday with them. Some of us always find it difficult to make decisions for ourselves and we are used to discipline being imposed from outside, either at school or at work, or in our family life. If we never learned to make decisions, but now there is nobody to decide for us, what should we do? If we cannot do it ourselves, should we use the Dharma to give us a structure, for example by taking vows or commitments?

James: The more dualistic your perception, the more you feel separate from the world. The question then is, "how do I act on the world?" or "how do I act on myself as if I was separate from myself?" Does that make sense? Usually we talk to ourselves we deal with ourselves the way we deal with the world. Now you can make some rules for yourself, you can make your own contract saying, "I promise to do Shamatha meditation for ten minutes every morning and ten minutes every evening" and write that down and you can put the contract roll it up and put it in front of a statue of the Buddha. If you want me to tell you that it's a good thing to do I am happy to tell you it's a good thing to do and you should do it.

A second, perhaps more interesting approach, is to ask yourself why, even when you know something is a good idea, you don't do it? In the Hinayana tradition the tendency is to try to push oneself into an alignment with doing things the proper way according to the rules. In the Mahayana we try to adopt a more enquiring attitude: "Why, Why is this happening? This is something very interesting. Why don't I do this practice?" Now we know that people go to the doctor with bronchitis and the doctor asks, "Are you smoking?" and they say "Yes" and the doctor says, "You should stop smoking" and they say, "Oh that's very good advice" and on their way home and they go and buy more cigarettes.

One way to think of that is that we don't just have one stream of karma, but we have many different karmic impulses coming through us and these have been intensified through our early experiences in childhood so that it is as if there are two movements. One is the desire to do the practice and get enlightened and all of that, and the other is to lie in bed or party and get drunk or whatever it is and not do any of these things. For many of us these kinds of thoughts or attitudes are structured like a railway system. Most of the time the trains run along the tracks going in opposite directions and they don't hit. When they hit we say it's an accident and it's on the front page of the newspaper. When they don't hit we say it's 'normal service'. So psychologically our normal service is to hold these completely opposite opinions and to let them rush by each other at high speed without ever hitting. But sometimes they do hit and then you think, "Oh shit, you

know, I said I would do some practice, now two months have gone by and I haven't done anything. I must try harder." And the Ego Newspaper headlines, *"Terrible tragedy. Enormous guilt generated many tears falling!"* Then the next day, as always with newspapers, there is some other story coming in, *"The toast is burned", "Late for work"* Central railway control, also known as repression and ego defence mechanism, straightens out the train tracks and these conflicting views just keep running by each other.

So you can stage some intentional train crashes for yourself, very slow-speed crashes. Let these ideas hit each other and crash and you then engage in a conscious psychological struggle to integrate the conflicting parts of the self. If it is you who is staging the crash, you are not on either train. And if you are not on the train you don't feel guilty, you don't feel bad, you just get interested. Part of this exercise is starting with an acceptance that I am a complex human being with many many different conflicting desires and through the conflict of these desires I experience anxiety, pain, suffering, confusion. In that way you transform a resistance to doing the practice into an enquiry into the nature of thinking and attachment, which is actually a practice in itself.

A third approach to your question is that if you recognise that you are a very busy or distracted or lazy person, then you know that doing formal Dharma practice is going to be difficult for you. Dzogchen practice is very good for you then because the view of Dzogchen is that everything is the path. Lying in the bath is the path. Looking at the flowers grow is the path. Gossiping with your friends is the path. Watching nonsense on TV is the path. What one does is just taking the world as it ordinarily appears and opening up a very small shift, opening up the idea of this is the display, the revelation of emptiness. With that one enjoys things just as they are, but without being so trapped in them.

So long as we have an attachment to a notion of the Dharma and what doing the Dharma is, then if we are not able to meet that, we have an attachment to ourselves as a person who is not able to practise the Dharma. Then even the desire not to practise the Dharma becomes part of the practice of the Dharma, by being interested in the way that it arises. So there you are lying in bed in the morning and the thought arises *"I should get up and do some practice"* The next thought is *"It is very warm in here"* the next thought is *"Oh"* Looking at the clock 15 minutes have gone by, *"Where did it go?"* So in that way, by being able to recognise the arising of these thoughts as simply revelation of the nature of the mind, rather than being attached to the content of the thought, it doesn't matter if you lie in bed. Likewise getting up.

That may seem a bit abstract at this stage, which is why it is helpful to do more of this dissolving meditation whenever you can, with the support of other people, and try to get the flavour of that moment of openness. You had a second part to the question?

Question: The fact that you have to die is so terrible that it makes you totally mute, totally immovable. You are like a small baby looking at a big snake. You cannot do anything. The fear stops you from moving any more.

James: The fear of death is very important because it wakens us up. If we don't have any fear of death we spend our time doing nonsense things for most of our lives. So maybe one time it is worth sitting down and really facing the fear of death. Sit down with a bit of paper and imagining what it will be like. A great deal of Dharma practice is formulated on the basis that we have rebirth, that we are born again. If we don't believe this, or if we have confusion about that, then it is important to ask questions and struggle to get an idea on this. But even if you believe *"When I die there is nothing"* – although this nihilistic view would be in breach of these two polarities I was talking of earlier, let's just go along for the moment with the idea that when you die it is the end. So if when I die there is nothing, that's fine, there is not going to be any pain after I die. And there is not going to be any life after I die, so I'd better get on and enjoy myself now. Then comes the question, *"How can I enjoy myself?" "What makes me happy?"* A lot of Dharma is exactly about that subject, *"Where does suffering come from, what is the nature of happiness?"* So you can still practise the Dharma, but practise the Dharma free of the fear of dying, because when you die it is all over anyway. However if you are frightened of dying because you are frightened of what might happen after death, then what could protect you from horrible things that might happen to you after death? So then the Buddha has said lots of things about how to make what happens after life more bearable.

So it's very very important to accept that we will die, however we want to make sense of it. The body will turn into food for worms. That's the reality. That's the reality of what happens and it's very important that we don't forget. But we live in a culture that is dedicated to making it impossible for us to know these things. So the fear of death is not just your own fear of death, it's a cultural fear of death. Many of have never seen a dead body. Or maybe we have seen somebody dying in a lot of pain, not wanting to die. Or perhaps there has been so much emotion around death that it is becomes difficult to experience when living things die.

In Tibet or India there are many opportunities to see bodies being disposed, perhaps burned, or laid out for birds to eat or even chopped up. Maybe you might even see a dog grabbing a bone and running away with it. All that can be very helpful and we should really try to engage with it because the acceptance that "*I will die, this body will be nothing*" helps to shift our sense of self identity. We imagine our body is a safe little house that will keep us safe and cosy forever, but this is not true. When we believe that our body is this safe little house, then we spend all our time and energy making it as comfortable as possible – nice clothes, warmth, all of these things.

Imagine you have booked a package holiday for a week and it turns out that the hotel is horrible. You decide to go straight into the town and at the furniture shop you order a new bed, tables, chairs. Then you go to the decorator's shop and organise for people to come immediately to paint the room, put up wallpaper and lay down some good carpet. You spend lots of money "*because I am worth it*" and anyway "*I have worked very hard all year and I am entitled to some nice place.*" But at the end of one week you have to leave and all the energy and effort and money is gone. This is how ordinary beings spend their time in samsara, decorating hotel rooms.

That's why you have to save up all your good karma and put down for a mortgage to buy a permanent home in buddha-land.

Question: Why don't we make it quick and easy by doing Phowa? I find all this effort of visualising very tiring.

James: If you do Phowa because you are frightened of samsara you will go down to hell. The only reason for doing Phowa is out of compassion. Otherwise it's just a kind of suicide: it's saying "*this world is too much I can't bear it, I want to go.*" From the Buddhist point of view it's not somebody else that made this world too much, it's you yourself. So if you haven't changed the tendency in yourself to make a mess of things in this life, why do you think popping into another life you would suddenly have transformed your qualities?

[Break]

Ethics and responsibility: when 'good' teachers behave 'badly'

OK. I want to briefly take up the question of ethics and responsibility.

The view of emptiness is that all things are empty, nothing is real and this is also the view of wisdom. The view of compassion is that although nothing is real in itself, sentient beings, due to ignorance, are attached to both their own bodies, reputation and possessions. We need to always combine wisdom and compassion, and this relates back to what I spoke about yesterday regarding the inseparability of the two truths – that one attempts to act from the view of absolute truth and also as if what was happening in relative truth was real, out of compassion for beings.

Now, very often people do things in the world that disturb us. We have ideas about which behaviours go with which functions and roles. Sometimes it is easy to see when something is 'appropriate' and at other times it is more difficult. For example an English dentist was recently in court accused of having interfered sexually with his female patients after he had given them general anaesthetic. This is not something that dentists should do, as everyone would agree, and as is spelled out in their professional code of conduct. Generally we would also say that parents should not hurt their children and if we heard that a parent had done that we would probably want to inform the police. But if the parents decided to sell their child's

bicycle because the child has not been doing their homework, is that hurting the child or not? The child might feel unfairly persecuted and if they told their friends the other children would probably say, “Yes, *your parents are being really cruel.*” Although the child could feel quite persecuted it is more difficult in this example to work out whether the child was actually being persecuted or not. We have no courts to decide on that and people usually struggle with these little torments in the privacy of their own homes and sometimes on the street. The child might say, “*You are my parents, I need a bicycle, it’s your job to give me the things I need so why don’t you give me a bicycle? If you don’t give me a bicycle it’s a clear sign that you are not proper parents therefore I don’t want to live with you any more.*” Here you have the situation that the child has one particular set of assumptions about the parents’ responsibility and the parents have another set of assumptions and it can be difficult to reconcile these assumptions.

Now, as I mentioned yesterday, there are many many stories around about the behaviour of Buddhist teachers. Typically one might have a situation where a teacher does something and the student wonders about that behaviour and thinks, “*Why is the teacher doing that? Maybe that is not a very good thing to do. I don’t like that. I don’t think a teacher should do that.*”

We are told we should have the ability to make use of whatever teachers do and here is a teacher who is lying to people in order to get money or who is exploiting his students in a sexual way. We wonder why this is going on? We might think that this person has been practising meditation for ten or twenty or even fifty years and still they are behaving like that, so this is very bad. We might decide then that obviously the practice of meditation doesn’t help at all and so I’m not going to do it. As citizens in democratic states we know that we are entitled to ask “*Why?*” and it is always quite a useful question. It is also fair enough to say that someone who sets himself up as a spiritual teacher should not exploit other people.

Obviously we make judgements about this in terms of our sense of ordinary morality, of what is right and what is wrong. I certainly think we are entitled to these thoughts and in fact we should have these thoughts and if we are unhappy with peoples’ behaviour we should ask them, “*Why are you doing this? What is the purpose of this?*” However I think if we are wanting to practise Buddhist meditation with an interest in understanding something of ourselves in the world, we have also, *not instead of, but also*, to look at things in a different way.

Can a Dharma view help us understand this contradiction?

The first question that one would want to ask from the point of view of a meditator is, “*What is going on?*” and then we also need to think that if we are asking the question “*What?*”, how can we use the Dharma to help us to understand the nature of what is going on? “*What?*” is determined by your view.

Now if you are looking at things that appear in the world as being real – in the relative truth sense that we discussed yesterday, of there being both something actually there as well as something that I am attached to – then with that view, subject is acting on to object with a definite intention and understanding and is able to clarify things on one level, the horizontal level of subject-object interaction. That is to say, you can work out whether something is a good or bad thing to do within a particular socio-cultural frame of reference. However at the same time as being able to get this horizontal clarification, you are intensifying the subject-object split because you are saying, “*I know what is what.*” and so you make subject more real and object more real. So acting from that view simply intensifies your own addiction to samsara.

If we take the Mahayana view, informed by the idea of emptiness, the person that we hold the opinion about is empty. We, the person holding the opinion about that other person, are also empty, and the opinion that we hold about the other person is empty too. Subject, object and the connection between them are all empty. If we are meditators our primary task is to recognise the truth of this. It’s very difficult to recognise the truth of this if we have a strong opinion about something or about what someone has done. So when we are in a situation that is emotionally charged, it is very difficult to be able to relax enough to recognise that this object is not real. That it is the display of emptiness, that it is pure because it has never been born as a real entity. This is the most important thing.

Then, in order to maintain this understanding of everything being empty, you can use all the Dharma techniques that you know, impermanence, reflection on suffering to loosen your own attachment, use of Shamatha, dissolving meditation, whatever.

If you practise the Dharma from the position of being a child you will get fucked. You must take responsibility for being in the world. If you have been able to find a good papa or mama who will take care of you always, send me their address, because I am also looking for one!! The reality is that the practice of the Dharma is practised by the practitioners of the Dharma. And the practice of the Dharma is hard because the practice of the Dharma is essentially the struggle with your own assumptions and your own fantasy dreams that someone will make the world nice for you.

As I said yesterday, the belief that some good papa will come along and save you is ignorance. But if you free yourself from attachment to the fantasy that some good papa will save you then you can make use of somebody who might well be a good papa, as if they were a good papa, as part of using an intentional method to free yourself from attachment.

That's a very very important difference. If you don't recognise that difference you are confusing attachment to samsara with liberation into nirvana. When people say that the Dalai Lama is Chenresi they are completely mad. Whatever the Dalai Lama is, he is emptiness and you don't understand that he is empty by calling him Chenresi. You don't get an understanding that he is empty by praising his good qualities or being charmed by his smile, or seduced by his sweet words. You understand the emptiness of the Dalai Lama, not on the basis of the Dalai Lama, but on the basis of your own bum being on your own meditation cushion for a long period of time!

If looking at the Dalai Lama would give you the experience of emptiness and enlightenment then everyone in Tibet would have been enlightened. You only get enlightened through your own struggle. There are no magic magicians of Tibet who will come and breathe up your nostrils and wash out your brains. So when gurus abuse their students, if you think about that in terms of *'there is a real guru, there is a real student, there is real abuse going on'*, then you are simply cultivating the dualistic perception which is the origin and maintenance of samsara. What you have to do is – on the relative truth point of view – when you find that teachers behave in a way you don't agree with, then you should try to speak to them and challenge them and not collude in keeping secrets of disgraceful behaviour.

What you need to remember is that whether the guru is enlightened or an asshole, your enlightenment will come through you and not through the guru. Your enlightenment comes to you *via* the guru, by making use of the guru, by using the guru as a method. That is why having a very bad-tempered nasty unpleasant guru is very useful, because that guru's behaviour will so shock you that it will give you very strong dualistic views and then you should take these very strong dualistic views to your meditation cushion and try to dissolve them in emptiness. Because if you feel your guru has betrayed you and you are able to dissolve these feelings of betrayal into emptiness, then your guru has given you a great blessing!

But of course your guru didn't give you the blessing because he was enlightened. He gave you the blessing because he was an asshole. That's why it doesn't matter if the guru is enlightened or an asshole, your enlightenment will come from your own work in trying to understand the Dharma and put it into practice.

So it's very important to practise on these two levels, on the level of an ordinary being having clear thoughts about what is right and wrong, and on the level of a meditator to take whatever occurs into meditation and dissolve it into emptiness so that it doesn't tie you into a tight knot and waste hours and days and months thinking, *"Who is the real Karmapa?"*, *"Why did my guru touch that woman's fanny?"* Who cares? You can echo that kind of dualistic thought forever. Why people do what they do is a great mystery and the world is full of stories and reasons to help us understand why other people do what they do. But when we are busy thinking, *"Why did Sharmapa say this?"* or *"Why did the Dalai Lama do that?"*, we are taken out of ourselves, and we lose energy and we lose our own focus and we lose ourselves and this is not helpful. *[James was giving these teachings at a Kagyu centre, hence these examples.]*

But if we are meditators it is much more interesting to ask, *"Why am I so attached to the question of what Sharmapa did?"* *"What is so interesting about gossip for me?"* Looking at things in that way we understand

more about our own attachment and the way that we go into solidifying the split between subject and object, rather than dissolving into an open empty awareness. One of the things C. R. Lama said to me was *"You don't have to pretend that you are employed by the CIA to investigate the Buddha."* I had been working on two texts and each said different things about Buddha Amitabha and so I was asking him for clarification: *"But which one is true?"* C. R. Lama told me, *"When you read this one it's true, and when you read that one it's true"* This is because what is important when you are reading a text, is for you to have some faith. If you have faith it will help your meditation practice and it will help you to get enlightened. If you, as a scholar, can prove that one text is more real than another, what will it do? Give you a job, maybe in a university.... But it won't get you enlightened.

Should we intervene?

So, on the one hand we want to develop wisdom by taking the most strongly dualistic experiences of the world, the things which are most troubling to us, and try to dissolve that in meditation. For example you could imagine watching a child being tortured and saying to yourself, *"This is emptiness, this is emptiness."* However at the same time we have to practise compassion, so that as soon as we see someone even beginning to hurt a child, we would stop them. It's clearly very difficult to integrate these two things.

It's often said that wisdom should be as vast as the sky – that is to say that it accepts everything just as it is without trying to correct or improve the world in any way – but compassion should be as sharp as the point of a needle, able to go quickly and accurately into situations in order to transform them and remove suffering and increase happiness. How these two are to be integrated is one of the great mysteries. When we understand that we have the three kayas. In our own practice on the path sometimes we have to focus on developing wisdom, and sometimes we need to focus on developing compassion. So we need to be able to act in the world to help beings and to stop the abuse, and at the same time, do this without taking the situation seriously, so that even when we say to someone, *"Stop it! What are you doing?"* our words are empty, we and our intention are empty, and the person we are addressing it to is empty. This is difficult to understand and it does take quite some time to develop these qualities.

Our main enemy is hypocrisy. So it may be that in some situations you see some injustice being done by a powerful person – it could be your boss at work, it could be your guru, it could be anyone – and you might feel too afraid to confront them. If that is your actual situation at the moment, then you have to accept that *"I am too afraid to say anything."* But even if you are too afraid to say anything you can still take the question to your meditation room and look at it and try to understand *"Who is the one who is so afraid? What is the basis of my fantasy that turns me into a coward?"* In that way we can turn our own cowardice and our fears of rejection and abandonment into part of the path. If you are able to understand the nature of your own cowardice, that it is arising out of emptiness, that understanding will give you a profound courage which will let you move on to be more honest in the world.

So the path of the Dharma is one of struggle. This seems a reasonable place to end our teachings! Have you any questions or thoughts about that.

Why are we told to have devotion and what use is it?

Question: How does this fit in with having devotion to the guru? Is devotion to the guru only my projection then? Do I have to take back this projection?

James: So when we are told to have devotion to the guru we have to understand what that means. The guru is emptiness in the world embodied. The guru might forget that that is what he is, forget that's he's got ignorance like everyone else. But *we* have to remember all the time that he is empty. Devotion to the guru is devotion to the living presence of form and emptiness. That's what devotion is.

Gurus have to be allowed to make mistakes. What on earth would it mean to be right all the time? If you please one person you don't please somebody else. Since the beginning of time not one person has been alive who has pleased anyone and I don't see any evidence that modern-day Tibetans are likely to break that tradition.

If we have devotion to some historical figure or to some particular person on the basis of their historical story then this sort of devotion may make you stupid. You can read a big book about each of the Karmapas over sixteen lifetimes, what they did but that book can make you ignorant. However seeing Karmapa, visualising Karmapa, taking Karmapa into your meditation, visualising Karmapa dissolving into emptiness and arising from emptiness, recognising that Karmapa is emptiness when you say, “Karmapa cheno, Karmapa you are empty, save me take me into the emptiness that is you” – that has got nothing to do with the socio-economic-cultural status of the Karmapa or with the books written about him. A lot of devotion to big lamas is on the basis of a public relations story which hides the reality of who they are. This is why devotion is often completely nonsense. Devotion to the guru can be very harmful when it stops you making use of the guru.

Question: Can everything not be used as the guru?

James: Yes. By making the guru very special you are using the guru to intensify dualistic thinking. You are actually interrupting the world by saying that the guru is very good, and ordinary people are not very good.

Externally the guru should disturb your mind and internally you should dissolve your guru into emptiness. The more disturbed the guru makes you, if you can dissolve that disturbing bastard into emptiness and keep him in emptiness, even when you are talking to him, then you have a real realisation. Because you are talking to somebody and you are thinking, “*This guy’s a tosser. How come I have spent all this time with this really weird person?*” At the same time you are able to recognise that this thought that is arising full of anger, potentially making subject and object separate, is actually empty. That is the real use of the guru.

Question: So does it not work then to use devotion as a method?

James: Yes, it does work. You are using the guru as a kind of a koan. You believe that something is of value there, but that you haven’t understood it. Merely to say, “*The Dalai Lama is enlightened*” doesn’t do anything for us, it does not stir anything up. But if you were spending time with the Dalai Lama and he was annoying you and you were trying to understand, “*How come this annoying bastard can also be enlightened?*” and you struggle and you struggle with this, then you may get something and you recognise “*Ah!*” Then you have really got something. Merely to say, “*He’s enlightened*” doesn’t make you do any work. That’s what it is about; devotion and the guru is to transform you. Now, whether the Dalai Lama is transformed or not, that is his business.

Question: I am totally devoted to Chhimed Rigdzin who has the sweetest face you can imagine but I have heard stories about his behaviour which are the exact opposite so I feel a big split.

James: If you spend your time saying on the one hand he is very very nice but on the other hand he is very very bad, then all you do is continue to develop dualistic perception. Whether he is enlightened or is an asshole is not really important, except to him. It is a method, to use him to try to understand that he is enlightened yet behaves like an asshole. Then that is work *you* can do. What *he* does is his business. What you do is your business. When the text says, “*Whatever the guru does is pure*” it means that this is not just whitewash – this is struggle! This is an invitation to psychic warfare in your head. This is very hard work. It is not easy but if you really realise something for yourself that doesn’t matter.

Question: Is death an illusion or is death no illusion?

James: According to the tradition in the Dharma, if you have been able to live your life with life as an illusion, then death will be an illusion too. If you have lived your life as if life is very real, then death will also seem very very real.

Question: Is there nothing then which exists?

James: No. There is existence without essence. Western philosophy is usually torn between two positions. One says there is an essence, or essences, which give rise to existence. For example God is the source of all things, God is the essence of everything, out of God things manifest. Then there is the more

existential belief which says that all we have is existence. The fact that here we are doing something and out of this existence we generate, we create for ourselves, what appear to us to be essences, but they are created by us out of the nature of existence. So for example a philosopher like Sartre would say that suffering was an essence of life, because through existence in the world we are limited in our lives by the experience of pain. So the essence, or the delimiting factor of our possibilities in existence is the essence of suffering. Now Buddhism is different from this because it is saying there is no essence to anything, what there is, is an existence, which is the manifestation of non-essence. So you have non-essence as the illusory play of non-essence. The distinctive thing about Buddhism is that this is not just a dogma but it is a particular attitude to the world which can be realised, which can be made an ongoing aspect of experience through particular meditation practices, and that by experiencing emptiness, the world is transformed for us.

Question: After meditation I now am finding that my ability to enjoy is much greater. I might be eating an apple and it seems much tastier. Is this a new attachment, or what?

James: If you become attached to it then it is a new attachment! But if you enjoy it without being attached to with, and you allow it just to pass then it is very helpful. One quality that should arise through meditation is joy. But it is important not to be attached to it, because then you turn something which is an opening into a closure.

Question: How can the devotion method you describe work if there is a break in the lineage or if the guru has not realised the transmission?

James: Tibetan Buddhism, rather than history, has what in English is termed 'hagiography'. That is to say, the tradition has taken up the importance of recording all the people in the lineage as being great and wonderful people. What is not recorded are most of the other things these people did. I've been around in Tibetan Buddhism for more than twenty years and I seem to have heard nothing but bad gossip by one lama about another lama. So I am very clear that there is not a secret history, but in fact there is a very public history of knowing the faults of each and every teacher. So you have a public life and a secret life. If the secret life is not known because it doesn't get recorded in writing, it vanishes.

The histories that do we have are culturally-defined histories; they are a particular kind of literature. They are often written in a way that we find very confusing because they are full of contradictions but they are contradictions which don't exist if you are inside the bubble of faith. For example Milarepa meditates in a cave. He hears some news and comes down from his cave and goes looking for his mother. He goes to his old home, now all tumbled down and there in the back corner is a pile of bones. His mother had died alone of starvation while he was sitting in his cave working for the enlightenment of all sentient beings. Now, having abandoned her care, was he complicit in the murder of his mother? These sort of questions are real questions. They are the sort of questions that we face in our lives. Is it better to get a job and look after my sick old mother, or is it better to do a three year retreat in India? That kind of question. Many people have these questions. On a beautiful weekend like this is it better to be taking the kids out to play in the countryside or is it better to come to something like this? I personally believe that the history of Tibetan Buddhism is full of questions like that, but they are not the questions which are very much recorded through the lineage.

So when we come to think of pure lineages or unbroken lineages, we are talking, for me anyway, not from the sense of ordinary history as we would understand, we are talking of fantasy, we are not talking of reality.

Question: So how do I know if the method I am given is efficient or if it works or not. I don't want to waste time trying this one and that one. How do I check?

James: That's one of the big problems isn't it? Either you pretend you are a small child and you trust the big parents, or you take up some of the responsibility, go to people, check out what they're about, check out if they are really honest or not. For me, honesty is always about struggle. Honest people always struggle. Western intellectuals, the ones who are honest, are always full of questions and doubts. Honesty is a doubt. I don't think honesty is the easy answer, but that's me.

In the tradition it's the other way round. Honesty is the easy answer, but we know that behind the scenes, that's where all the doubts are because Tibetan culture is an Asian culture, and so has the outer public persona and the inner tension. In the West we have turned it around. We put our doubts up front. So we are from a different cultural matrix. That is why I think that a particular danger for us is the fantasy projection that there are no doubts or contradictions in these cultures.

If you want, as the path, somebody to worship and adore, then it is probably best to have somebody who is a bit distant, like the Dalai Lama who you wouldn't see much or see close up. If you want a teacher who is a tool, somebody to work with you, then it has to be somebody whom you can engage with and probably somebody who also has doubts in some way.

We don't know what the past was, the past is a construction created according to different cultural myths. But what we can know is, we can know people. We have to check out if the person seems to be honest, we can observe their behaviour. This is what the traditional texts say, that for several years you should meet with people and enquire into their behaviour and check it out. Ask, see if they speak to you honestly, see if they tell you funny stories that make your head spin rather than explaining things, see if your life is made more powerful, more clear. Or, if you are disturbed, at least is it a creative disturbance rather than a negative disturbance? Through that I think we get a sense of whether the lineage is alive.

And now tea and cake!

First we will do our usual dedication and practice.

End.