

Integrating Wisdom and Compassion

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Excerpts

...Essentially wisdom has to do with an understanding of the illusory nature of our existence...

...Compassion is to trust that being relaxed, open and connected allows a finesse of engagement which is both fundamental and ethical...

...Compassion is hospitality to everything...

...The Sanskrit term 'Dharmadhatu': here 'Dharma' means phenomena and 'Dhatu' means 'space', so it's the space within which phenomena arise. I have recently started translating it as 'infinite hospitality' because the space of the mind can be hospitable to anything, just as the mirror is hospitable to whatever image arises in it...

...'Now' is whenever 'now' is. 'Here' is wherever 'here' is. 'I' am whoever 'I' am. The mirror is showing whatever it's showing because of its hospitality and we are selfish, stupid and blind because we don't recognise and honour the hospitality of here and now...

...We have bubbles of hope and we have bubbles of disappointment. You can be hopeful for many years and then you can be depressed for many years and then you can be something else for many years. Each of these is like a particular room that we inhabit. Sometimes it feels good. Sometimes it doesn't feel so good. Then suddenly you're in another room – and another room...

...We need the breath of the world to come into us. We need the sounds of the world to come into our ears. We need the light of the world to come into our eyes because this is what replenishes us. Our movement into the world, through the world, is a movement of responsiveness...

...The openness of awareness is easily closed down by the particularisation of our judgement. That is to say we organise into 'This is good and I want more of it. This is bad or unpleasant or dangerous and I want less of it. I don't want it near me'...

...Tibetans have a word 'cha' which means like something like 'a share', 'a portion', or what your 'slice' is. Our slice of the world is revealed to us through our participation. We get what we get and working with what we get, keeps us alive and connected with what is vital. Imagining we should be getting something else means that we don't see what is on our own plate. To be always looking at somebody else's plate is not necessarily very useful...

Contents

Our being is revealed through our participation with other people.....	4
The building blocks of our identity are transient.....	5
Lingering traces from past events.....	6
Mental consciousness can be out to trick us.....	8
Being and knowing are not the same.....	9
Why do we hang on to negative ideas about ourselves?.....	10
Relax out of consciousness into awareness.....	12
<i>What does it mean to be alive?.....</i>	12
Session 2.....	14
Thinking about our environment.....	14
Difference between awareness and consciousness.....	16
About fitting in.....	19
Who needs protection?.....	21
Session 3.....	23
Emptiness is extremely practical.....	23
It is the emptiness of 'I' that makes it useful.....	25
Things reveal themselves in their vanishing.....	28
How to stay present.....	28
Nothing has gone wrong.....	29
Session 4.....	33
Questions.....	33
Moods in meditation, such as agitation and sinking feelings.....	34
Awareness is infinitely hospitable.....	35
The cemetery is full of indispensables.....	40
Session 5.....	42
The nature of compassion.....	42
Samsara is busy trying to apply meaning.....	43
Awareness is the true refuge.....	45
Modes of compassion.....	46
<i>Summing up people is to do them a violence.....</i>	47
Good people doing bad things.....	48
The open field includes everyone, everything.....	49
Power and knowledge.....	50
Session 6.....	52
Practice to bring wisdom and compassion together.....	52
Tonglen practice using the sound 'A'.....	52
Our connection with others.....	54
Three aspects of ignorance related to our three modes of existence.....	57
It is what it is.....	58

Our being is revealed through our participation with other people

How are wisdom and compassion activated in our own existence? Buddhism is very vast with many styles of practice and ways of understanding but essentially wisdom has to do with an understanding of the illusory nature of our existence. That doesn't mean that it's all an illusion, so nothing matters, because wisdom is inseparable from compassion, and compassion is to feel the immediacy of the link we have to everything which is occurring. Compassion, from this point of view, is not an effortful practice, an artificial practice in which we struggle to become a better kind of person.

By experiencing the inseparability of ourselves and others, we see directly that we are always in a movement of interaction and that what we call a 'self' is not a cocooned bubble. Our being is revealed through our participation with other people and it's the very absence of a precisely determined or an over-determined sense of self, which allows us to be in this free flow of compassion. The more tightly we define ourselves, the less freedom we have to respond and to participate to the world around us.

Of course many different kinds of definition are given to us. We get defined in terms of gender, of class, of the astrological sign we were born under... Out of all that we construct our sense of the continuity of ourselves based on the familiarity that we have with certain patterns that we repeat again and again. From that point of view we know that we are ourselves because we are familiar to ourselves. We recognise that *'I am me because I'm doing what I do, I'm saying what I say'*.

That can be helpful and reassuring if the patterns of our familiarity are relaxed, open, ethical and so on but often we have also internalised patterns which are full of doubt, full of anxiety, even self-hatred, in which we have become alienated from ourselves in terms of our potential because of our alignment with particular notions of who we are and how we should be. Very often these patterns were given to us many, many years ago and when we look around, we can see that there are many people who don't have these same beliefs about how one should be. Nonetheless, we cleave to them. We identify with them and merge with them and it is as if who we are.

The function of meditation is to open a space in which we can see the contingent nature of the building blocks out of which we construct our familiar sense of self. It's not that we are attempting to radically transform our personality, rather it is about not taking ourselves so seriously. If we are kind to ourselves, if we hold ourselves lightly, then we can start to hold other people lightly, which means we don't get pulled into their story-line. Having more room to maneuver we can then participate in the rising crest of the wave of potential. That is to say: new formations are always coming into being but a lot of the newness, the freshness, the unformed-ness of the emerging moment is hidden to us because of the projections of our habitual interpretation.

Our expectations of how things will be lead us to actively look for any signs that confirm our expectation and as a parallel move, to edit out information that would put our expectation into question. Buddhist practice is very concerned with the immediacy of existence. Of course, there are many aspects of the tradition which describe particular constructs such as the nature of enlightenment, buddhist pure lands and so on. These are methods of helping us to extrapolate our awareness and our attention from the foreclosure of our everyday expectation. For example If

you believe that you just have one life and then you hear that there is a paradise called Dewachen where you may be reborn in a lotus flower to the sound of sweet music then this may awaken you to the fact that there is more than one way of looking at things. All such buddhist teachings are like that. They are pointing you that maybe what you think is yourself and your world, is not the whole story. This is not to say that the other things are true either but they exist as possible interpretations, possible readings, possible story-lines and by giving yourself an alternative story-line you may start to see that, 'All my life, I have been following a series of story-lines. There was no particular truth in them. They just seemed a good idea at the time. It was what I was into then. Later, for some reason, I found myself out if it.'

The building blocks of our identity are transient

That is the key point: all the building blocks of our identity are transient. There is no substance to them. That doesn't mean that they are meaningless. It means that moment by moment we live in an emergent gestural field, that we are moving in a world which is moving. There is no stability and the fantasy of stability becomes persecutory. We start to think that we should be sorted. The years go by and we think we should have worked out who we are and what life is all about and how we should be with other people. Then something untoward happens and we think, '*Shit, what was that all about? Have I been wasting all my life? I was trying to do this but now I wonder why.*'

So, on reflection, I think we can see how we suffer from encapsulation, from giving ourselves into particular readings or identifications of situations. We inhabit one bubble for a while and then the bubble pops –and here's another bubble – and another bubble – and another bubble. We have bubbles of hope and we have bubbles of disappointment. You can be hopeful for many years and then you can be depressed for many years and then you can be something else for many years. Each of these is like a particular room. It has a colour. It has furniture. It has a mood and you inhabit that mood and you think, 'Well, this is it. I can't really get out of it. No doors. No windows.' You make the best of it. Sometimes it feels good. Sometimes it doesn't feel so good. Then suddenly you're in another room – and another room.

The key thing is not the particularities of the room but the fact that you are experiencing rooms. We tend to be very object-fixated. We tend to make sense of ourselves by talking about ourselves. Either we're thinking about our situation or we're describing things about ourselves to other people and this creates a triangulation. You have the immediacy of your experience, you have the qualities of what you are experiencing and you have your interpretation of it.

The interpretation is a culturally derived set of story-lines. Whatever stories we tell about ourselves, we can be sure other people are telling fairly similar stories about themselves because we have a lot of similarities as human beings: 'Something happened. This is what I felt about it.' We tell some particular story and that becomes who we are. What is ignored in that is the very nature of the experiencer. There is a presence, which is continuous and it is continuous because it has no content.

This is not normally how we think about ourselves. Normally we experience ourselves as an engaged consciousness. We know the particular things that we like and don't like and so we bring that furniture or that coloration, to our experience of everyday events. That is to say, we are already filled with ourselves when we meet the world. We meet the world 'out of our particular shaping or construct' but if we look back over the years, this furniture, or this set of structures, has undergone quite a lot of modification. The beliefs that we had when we were fifteen are

probably not the beliefs that we have now. The kinds of things that we do, the clothes we wear, the people we talk to, the things we talk about, have probably changed many, many times in the course of our lives.

So...what constitutes 'me' and feels like 'me' is a content of experience. It's not the experiencer itself. When I talk of 'my self', I'm talking about what – as it were – is inside me. In the same way; I've got a glass here and can say that the glass has water in it. The glass can be filled with many other things, and probably has. The potential of the glass is the fact that, being empty, it offers hospitality to many other possibilities. It is the lack of definition of the glass, in terms of its content, which allows the glass to be useful. For example, if somebody put petrol into it, every time you went near it to take a drink, you'd think 'Whoa! That smells bad!' because the trace of petrol lasts a long time.

So, the more the glass is carrying its history, the fewer possibilities we have with it. I would suggest, that's a very similar situation for ourselves.

Lingering traces from past events

These traces of past events are called, '*vasana*' in Sanskrit, subtle traces that linger from previous events or karmic traces. Whatever we call them, habitual patterns, unresolved neurotic schemas..., they bring a particular orientation which is in fact a taint in terms of the freshness of the new moment. Because a certain flavour is hovering around the glass, there are many things that you wouldn't want to put into the glass. It wouldn't make sense to put a fine wine into a glass that smells of petrol. In that way, the more we identify with the patterns derived from the accidents of our history the more we are blown hither and thither by the random nature of events.

The traces of our past events give us particular anxieties, particular kinds of avoidance, particular kinds of desires. Our busyness in pursuing these patterns, hides us from asking, "*Who is the one who's experiencing this? Who is the actual subject?*" That is to say: "*Who am I?*"

What is the nature of our awareness given that the world only exists for us because we are aware? If we don't register, it's not there. For example, you can be walking in the country with a friend and they say; 'Oh! Look! Look at that tree!' and you look and suddenly you notice that there's a bird in it, or the first blossom is coming. You had seen it but yet not seen it. When it was pointed out you're suddenly incorporating that tree into your world. The world was in your field of experience but invisible because you weren't attending to it.

That is to say, the particularity of our world, is what we attend to. We're very familiar with that. If you go shopping, your eye is drawn to certain garments, to certain colours and shapes. You see many clothes which look nice yet you couldn't imagine wearing them, so you wouldn't wear them but you can still see that they're nice. That has to do with the particular topology of yourself, the contouring and shaping of your sense of self, based on your own history.

The function of meditation is to create some space within which these particular shapes can be allowed to be as they are, yet without being over-invested as being the truth about ourselves. If we are over-identified with the traces of our history we are very vulnerable. Such a 'self-construct' can be 'bumped into' by new events and then we can feel gutted and torn apart because actually, a construct is fragile. For example in the area around Macclesfield I have seen factory buildings which once were thriving and now are fading. People were going to work there every day, building things. Now the money is not there. The energy's not there. The drive, the

vision's not there and so there is a collapse. A factory building has no self-existing truth. It exists in terms of its function and due to many complex economic and social factors, the function can be removed. It can just 'go out like the tide' leaving the building there as an empty shell. Gradually kids break the windows, graffiti goes on the wall, weeds sprout and so on until it becomes something quite other.

Everything which exists is held dynamically in place by the meeting of many different factors. We know this about ourselves. We have a body. Hopefully we're reasonably healthy but inside our body there are many, vulnerable organs which are prone to blood-clotting leading to strokes. There are cancerous formations. There's wear and tear on the spinal column. There are multiple ways in which this beloved body can fade and collapse as well as many sudden ways it can 'pop'. So although we may talk of 'my body' – and it's so familiar to us – it is not a possession that we can necessarily take good care of because, how will we take good care of it? On these cold mornings you see people out jogging. Is that a good thing to do? Wear and tear on the ankles. Wear and tear on the knees. I was reading in the paper yesterday that three cups of coffee a day helps extend your life. They've carried out some research in America. Other people are saying caffeine is not a good thing to be taking. Red wine. Good or bad? Actually, we don't know, because the factors that lead some people to have a long life even if they live in a crazy way, and other people to have a short life even if they eat very healthily indicate that something else is going on. I do not believe in the fantasy that somehow we could have a 'Little Book of Life' and turn to page 3 to read exactly what to eat.

My existence is something I experience rather than something that I have but the language that we normally use in talking about our self, is as if it were a possession.

For example we may talk as if we deserve praise if my body is well, whereas often it's the luck of the draw. There are plenty of nice people who have very sick bodies. Over the years people have made all sorts of correlations between ethics and physical health and that can be extremely punitive. It's the luck of the draw. That is to say, we participate in a field in which we have some degree of influence and 'influence' is an important word because it indicates a fluidity. It's about a movement into an evolving field. We don't have control; we're not actually in charge. We're not out of control either, but neither are we in control. There's a middle point, a middle way, which is being part of what is going on. Our embodied being and the field that's all around us are the same.

That is to say, although we experience our body as if we are inside our body looking out coming into a world which is other than ourselves, we're always in the world. And however the world is, is influencing us. What we take to be self and what we take to be other, are actually two moves which are always occurring at the same time. You cannot 'just be by yourself' because even if you close your eyes and put your fingers in your ears and try to cut yourself off, you still have to keep breathing, because if you block your breath, you're going to die. This is basic fact. We are part of the world.

The world comes into us with the inbreath and we go out in to the world with the outbreath. This is going on all the time. So...although we talk about 'I, me, myself, my individual identity, what I'm going to do, what I really believe in...'; it's a bit phony. That's not really how it is. Our being is dependent on access to the environment. If you get bad colds and deep bronchitis and have trouble breathing then it is terrible. Seeing somebody struggling for breath is horrible. You see that they're being cut off from what they need and that what they need is something which is other than them. They need the breath of the world to come into them.

We need the sounds of the world to come into our ears. We need the light of the world to come into our eyes because this is what replenishes us. Our movement into the world, through the world, is a movement of responsiveness. In buddhism this is a basic notion. There is no inherent self nature in the person. There is no definition that tells us who we are, because our identity is contingent. It is adventitious. It comes to us through the interactions that have been there, right from the moment of conception.

The moment of conception could be pleasurable or unpleasurable. The development of the foetus in the womb could be a source of joy or a source of anxiety, bringing all sorts of chemicals into the foetus. The birth could be easy or not. The baby could be coming out into a warm, prepared, receptive environment or into something quite scary and difficult. The baby could be destined for adoption with lots of tears and sorrow. All kinds of things happen. When you're small, you have no power. You're completely at the mercy of what's going on in the field. Gradually we build up more sense of separation and identity and power. We want to be self-defining and we struggle with our parents and siblings to 'get our space' and do things in our way. Mostly we're quite constrained by what's going on around. The world is always offering particular deals and we have to engage with these, so really all this is to say that identity is participative.

It's determined by the potential that we have in that moment and by the particular shaping of the environment at that moment. Doors open and doors close. Sometimes when a door is wide open in front of us, we can't move towards it. Sometimes when there's no door at all, we run straight into a wall, full of enthusiasm but there's no way forward.

I'm sure we've all experienced such situations. When life goes well, it tends to be because there is some harmony, some balance between what is arising for, and as, us, and what's in the world. Things go well when our shape and the shape available in the world around us, fit. What can we do to promote that? By not having established too tightly a notion of what our 'proper shape' is. That is to say, flexibility is health. Flexibility means: 'I will become, what is reasonable to become.' But what about 'me'? We start to see here how fixed notions of ourselves interfere with our capacity to be 'in connection' in the world. That is why a lot of basic buddhist practice – reflecting on old age, sickness, impermanence and death – it not to terrify us but it's to let us see how identity is formed in relation to events.

Mental consciousness can be out to trick us

Our mental consciousness, the way we construct patterns of identification and assumptions – the way we 'make sense of what is going on' – allows us to develop an intention of how we will make our plans proceed.

Usually our mental consciousness can lie to us in a very sophisticated way. That is to say, we all have a public relations department inside ourselves. Then when things go badly, our little spin doctor gets going and we reassure ourselves that it wasn't too bad, that the show must go on. However hanging in there involves a lot of editing, a lot of changing, but this is the nature of consciousness. It's a very busy department. It is the organisation of our mental structure. All the different thoughts, feelings, sensations have to be organised and evaluated as helpful or unhelpful and so on.

This is continuous work so it's not surprising that we get very tired. Some sudden new event comes and we think, "*Whew! I've had it up to here. I just don't need any more*", because we're in

the position of middle management. We're not the big boss, we're not the CEO but we are trying to get the people underneath us to do things and every time we delegate, the buggers do the wrong thing. You delegate a task to your memory but as you get older it lets you down. That can get a little bit scary.

So, 'it's all up to me'. This is the paranoid position of an individualised sense of self-identity because actually, what constitutes our consciousness is a stream of thoughts, feelings and sensations. Some of these thoughts seem directly relevant. They feel not only 'like me' but 'helpful to me'. Others may feel 'like me' because they are familiar, but they're not very helpful and yet others are just weird. All kinds of strange stuff comes to us, in sleeping dreams, in daydreams, in sudden thoughts that shoot across our mind. It's too much to make sense of and this is why traditional buddhist texts say that 'there is no end to samsara' – because the field of experience is too complicated, too complex to sort out. It keeps changing. It keeps changing, so consciousness, although it has a function of organising our participation, is essentially a dynamic, interactive movement. It's a function of engagement but it's not a stable identity.

So the question 'How can I know who I am?' is actually a false kind of question. You cannot know who you are. You can only be yourself. We fuse epistemology with the real task, which is an ontological one. That is to say, it's about 'being'. It's about being present as ourselves, whatever that might be. This is what we will be looking at.

Being and knowing are not the same

Being and knowing are not the same. Knowing about things especially is not the same as 'pure knowing'. For example, if you go out in late winter and you see some snowdrops, and they're very sweet, but then you get a double whammy, snowdrops *and* a robin. Oh! The heart melts! It's very nice, so you're looking at this gorgeous little event. In a sense you know it and there's nothing to think about. You just look at the snowdrops. It's a sort of wonder, this awe. It's a knowing but not a knowing *about*. That causes a little door to open and we have a sense of being fresh. We're replenished. We return to ourselves through these simple moments of beauty. Blackbirds singing in the evening. It's evocative, not just of perhaps memories of childhood or other good times but it's evocative of ourselves. We are evoked into, "Oh! Oh!"

So that's the arena of meditation, to move from knowing *about* things – which always depends on relying on thoughts as the messengers of meaning – to starting to trust direct meaning: the meaning which is given to us in the spontaneous revelation of the world as we open to it. However it's much easier for most of us to open to a snowdrop than to open to a screeching car-tyre. We retract from things. We don't want that in our field. Yes, it is just a transient event, like the perception of the snowdrop, but that is where we see that the openness of awareness is easily closed down by the particularisation of our judgement. That is to say we organise into 'This is good and I want more of it. This is bad or unpleasant or dangerous and I want less of it. I don't want it near me'.

Trying to get the good things and trying to avoid the bad things, is examined again and again in buddhist texts. If you look at my book 'SIMPLY BEING' there are many discussions of our effort to push away bad thoughts and hang on to good thoughts in our meditation, because if bad

thoughts come into our mind, it's like squatters breaking into our house – you know, they're going to shit on the carpet: *'I don't want thoughts like that in my head because I have a sense of who I am and if I am that person, I shouldn't have that thought. That sort of thought is an insult to my self-image so it has to be expunged, whereas these other thoughts are somewhat charming, make me feel OK. After all, I quite like being me.'*

So we want to hang onto thoughts like that, and again, we're back with gardening. Some are the flowers and other are the weeds. Get rid of the weeds and get more flowers. Busy, busy, busy... because the seeds blow in the wind into your garden. While you're sleeping in your bed, some little weed is starting to dig itself in and when we meditate, we encounter that.

So meditation involves two aspects: one is to relax into the open spaciousness of awareness itself and the other is to become aware of the incredible pull of our habit of identifying with thoughts since such thoughts seem meaningful to us.

Why do we hang on to negative ideas about ourselves?

Now, in the field of psychotherapy it's very common to encounter people who have become reliant on negative views about themselves. They may be convinced that they have something wrong with their physical form. They become convinced that they're unloveable, that people won't like them, that their life is meaningless, that the best thing they can do is kill themselves and so on. If your life is not too bad you may wonder why somebody would hang on to a belief like that. When they come for therapy you are expecting that they will make some progress since you have now given them a description of the patterns that they're in and they seem to have understood the nature of these patterns. You move into a period where change is going to be possible and another two months go by and you still have got the description of the problem but nothing much is changing. Why would someone want to hang on to a belief about themselves which is so awful, which restricts them, which keeps them in a frightened inhibited place. Because being frightened and inhibited feels like home. That is the domain that that person's particular structure has adapted to and therefore its familiarity becomes more powerful than the bitter taste of its content. That is really alarming. We see it with street drinkers. Their life is just crap but first thing in the morning, going to the little corner shop that's opening early, getting a can or two or ten. Why?

– *Because that's me. That's what I do.*

– *But look what it's doing to your life. Your wife's left you. Your kids don't want to speak to you. You're in trouble all the time with the police. You piss in your own trousers.*

– *Yes, but I want a drink.*

– *Why would you want a drink?*

– *Well, somebody's being a bit stupid. Anybody'd want a drink. Four o'clock in the morning's a very good time for a drink.' Open the can. Pshhhh!*

– *Ahh! My friend!*

We can see that often. It's very interesting. Why would the negative, the destructive, the awful, become home? That is because anything can be home. Anything can be home. We read these terrible accounts of child soldiers in Africa, people who are grabbed at the age of six, seven, taken into the forest and by the time they're twelve they've got a kalashnikov and they're going

around shooting people. Many people are helping the rehabilitation of these children and it's incredibly difficult work because they have taken on an identity which from the outside looks perverse but from the inside feels like them.

It's the same with people who have patterns of worry, OCD. If you have an obsessional structure and it's linked with a particular habitual behaviour, you will get feedback as you enact it and you will get feedback from other people who are asking you to stop, who are saying, *32This is driving me crazy. You've got the vacuum cleaner out for the tenth time today. There's no dirt on the carpet. Just leave it. I can't bear the noise anymore.* "But I just have to, I have to." Why? There is nothing out there that's saying, *"Come and clean me"*. There's something in your head that's saying, *"I have to clean"*. There's a human being asking you to stop but, *"I have to"*.

These are extreme examples but I'm using them to indicate that as human beings we can identify with anything. So when it then comes to meditation practice, we can see, in a softer version, the same sort of structure. We want to relax into open awareness but we go back into the thought again and again, because the thought seems useful.

So this is very important for us to understand since, if you feel you are not making much progress in your meditation, one real danger is that you start beating yourself up about it, either using meditation as a way to feel bad about yourself – which is always an interesting thing to do – or giving up on it, deciding that it's not going to work.

According to buddhist teaching this is the root structure of samsara. This is why we're here, because of the nature of attachment. Attachment in that sense is not a conscious kind of attachment like, 'I am attached to my watch because it's useful to me and I remember who gave it to me' and so on. Attachment is not about me and an object.

This more problematic kind of attachment is the immediate merging of our consciousness with what is arising for it. It happens because the basic structure of our world is non-dual. There is no real wall between subject and object, between the mind and the content of the mind. We can't set up a border post, a barrier that says, *"Oy! You can't come in here"* or *"Oy! You're very welcome here"*. There's no customs post checking things out. It's immediately here. It's immediately here, which is why you can't prepare to prevent it, because it's happened before you even knew it was happening.

Should you start to feel persecuted by your thoughts, and get into fighting with them and trying to control them, it's going to be very difficult for you because, if you're a drinker, struggling not to drink is very hard. Why? Because you're a drinker, and until that core definition of being a drinker, stops, if there's a can, you've got to open it.

If you stop being a drinker, you can look at the can and think *"Hmm, I'm not fussed. Someone else can have it."* Some space has opened up. Nothing's happened to the can. The object hasn't changed. The object is the object but the hook between the object and us has dropped. It's the same for people giving up smoking cigarettes. If you're a smoker, the packet calls to you. If you're not a smoker, the packet doesn't say anything at all. In fact, it says what it says on the label 'This will kill you'. However if you're a smoker, it doesn't say that at all. It says, 'Oh, that would be

nice!' That's how it happens. That's what we have to see. It's exactly the same structure with thoughts, feelings and sensations. As long as we are rooted as our primary self-definition, in an individual particularising consciousness, that consciousness will merge with thoughts, feelings and sensations. We will always be caught up in this interaction.

Relax out of consciousness into awareness

Therefore the heart of the practice is to relax out of consciousness into awareness. Awareness and consciousness are not the same. Awareness has no form, or shape, doesn't come from anywhere, doesn't go anywhere. It is uncatchable. That's why you cannot know awareness. It's not an object for the mind, but you can be aware. You can rest into a state of awareness within which consciousness will be moving around, consciousness as the individual personal subject and the experiences of consciousness as your perceptions of the world. Thoughts, feelings and memories, these will be moving together and you can know them as the energy of your existence but not the *ground* of your existence.

The ground of our existence is the inseparability of awareness and space. That is to say, awareness is uncatchable, ungraspable. It's not a thing, yet it's always present. That's why it can be filled with whatever is occurring. Consciousness is always taking on particular shapes, in particular moments. So, suddenly you feel thirsty, suddenly you want to go for a walk, or suddenly you remember, 'Oh, on Monday, I have to do that'. The body tenses, you start to become a bit preoccupied. That's consciousness at work.

A thought pokes consciousness and consciousness runs after the thought. It's an interplay of energy. The participative consciousness, that is to say, 'Oh, I remember what I have to do on Monday,' is two things: one, it's an object in the sense of being a flow of thought patterns arising in the mind, and two, it's the subject in that you are aware that this is what you have to do on Monday. So something is happening, a thought pattern, which is you. That's what's going on all the time. Does that make sense?

A traditional example is that awareness is like a mirror. A mirror shows what is there. What is there in terms of our existence is the ceaseless movement of thinker and thought, feeler and feeling, sener and sensation. One may look like a subject, one may look like an object but they are always happening together, tumbling together as the energy of our experience.

What does it mean to be alive?

This is how we participate in the world with others. If you didn't have any thought in your head you wouldn't have a very interesting conversation. If we didn't have feelings we couldn't be connected as human beings. *"Oh, so you went to the theatre last night. What was it like?"* If you want to keep your friends, you had better keep a wee bit of the old 'to-ing and fro-ing'. You have to have some remembrance of how many kids they have, what stage they're at in school and so on. Thus you start to weave your story with theirs. That's what a good conversation is, isn't it? It's an interweaving of moments. That pulsation is very stimulating when it works well.

That's the external form of our internal movements of being the thinker and the thought. It's an energetic formation and as such it needs a stage. The stage, both the external stage and the internal stage, is awareness. Awareness, because it has no form or colour or content, is the field in which all our experience is arising. It is hidden from us, not because it's secret or high or holy or special, not because we are unworthy or damaged or obscured, but because we are caught up in all this stuff. We're so busy looking at this interaction, being part of the interaction, that we don't see the field within which it's happening. We take the space for granted. We take being alive for granted.

So what does it mean to be alive? What is this freshness of existence, the fact that experience is registering for us, moment by moment by moment.

In the dzogchen teachings we talk of three modes or three linked fields. There is the open field, which is awareness itself, which is empty or '*Śūnya*' - '*Śūnyatā*'. It means it has no substance to it. It's inconceivable. You can't really describe it.

Within this, instantly, is the spontaneous revelation of this entire field of experience. Each of us sitting in this room has a unique world being revealed to us, our own particular take. Whatever seat you've chosen to sit in gives you, through your sense organs, a particular revelation of this room. Nobody else will have it, neither perceptually nor interpretatively. Each of us is the centre of the world in a particular way. There are some similarities but these are similarities established through language and concepts. So, the openness is this field, vibrant and changing.

Inside that there is the third field, which is our gestural presence, in which we speak, listen, move, stretch, hear, have thoughts and feelings. It is a responsive field.

So, the open field of awareness is unchanging. The richness of the field of spontaneous display, what the Tibetans call '*Lhundrup*', is immediate, always changing. Then inside that we have the particularity of ourself, whom no-one else is like. It's just this, just this, just this; you can't nail it down.

From the dzogchen point of view they would say that it's because we're not in touch with this open arena that we don't see the light playful illusory nature of what is displaying itself. That is to say, the given-ness of intrinsic meaning or value, relaxed, open and at ease. A forgetfulness of that pulls us into busy-ness and that busy-ness is the preoccupation that lets us avoid seeing the ground of our existence. It's as straightforward as that.

The main ally is not having friends and supports and so on around us, vital as that is. The main ally is to be able to relax into the unborn open ground, to re-source ourselves by putting the tap-root of our identity down through this bumpy rocky soil of concepts and habits and so on, right into the source – the deep, open fecundity of emptiness itself. Through that we can have ongoing replenishment.

Although I am using modern examples, that is a fairly traditional account of the basic dzogchen view. It's about integration. It's not about adding something new onto ourselves and it's not about looking for something that we don't already have. Rather, it's starting to explore what is

the nature of our forgetfulness. That we have forgotten being. We have forgotten aliveness in the blinkered fixation of 'what I've got to do in order to keep my life on the road'. Of course, modern life in particular presents many demands and you can't be too passive otherwise you get buffeted around. One has to be participating but the ground of the participation can be spacious rather than fraught and that's at the heart of the practice.

So...we could maybe do a little sitting just now. It's not a complex thing. We're not struggling to put ourselves into an altered state. Rather, if you sit in a reasonably comfortable way so that your skeleton is holding the weight, your muscles can relax. We tend to have our gaze open and into the space in front of us but you can close your eyes as well because the key thing about this kind of practice is that it's about you getting to know yourself, what is going to work for you, and you can only do that by making experiments. There are many rulebooks that can tell you what you should do but when these are founded on particular methods they only serve to align yourself with that method. However here we are wanting to integrate with ourselves, so it's not about knowing how someone somewhere else has described meditation, rather, it's being with yourself in a way that allows you to experience the 'going on being' of existence.

So... we're sitting. We can just relax into slow out breath and then you are sitting and whatever comes, just be open to what is coming. Be open to whatever is occurring without trying to interpret it. If you find yourself being caught up in chains of thoughts, just release another long, slow outbreath and relax into what's occurring.

End of session 1

Session 2

Thinking about our environment

Imagine that there are two sentient beings in the sea. One of them is waving their arms and hollering. If you had a rope with a big hook on it, you could throw that in and they would grab it and you could pull them to safety. That would be very nice but for some other sentient beings, had you thrown in a rope with hook on it and the sentient being was a fish, it would not so helpful because when the fish is pulled onto dry land, it's in the wrong place. Human beings don't do all that well in the sea. We may manage a few hours and some exceptional people may manage a few days, but after that, it's really, really hard. So, it's important to see what is the right kind of environment for us. What sort of environment do we flourish in?

This buddhist view which I am setting out is a pluralistic notion of our identity on various levels. On the level of openness – of being open – the environment that supports our practice, at least when we are beginners, is a quiet environment where we are not disturbed by other people. It's difficult to practise on the bus or in your office, until you get used to doing it, because in order to experience the openness, you have to keep turning your attention away from the involvement which is more familiar.

Think how much time one could put aside for sitting meditation practice. It doesn't have to be a huge amount of time but unless you go into a room, close the door, and sit and relax completely, it's going to be difficult because modern life holds us in a continuous low level of arousal. Most people carry electronic devices such as mobile phones which can interrupt their behaviour at any time. We have many demands on us and therefore we are primed for activity, primed to respond. Our biochemical energetic system is pumping. It's very different for practitioners in Tibet. It's a big country. There are not many people. There's no television, no radio, no comics, no novels... Maybe there's an occasional storyteller who comes around to your village. Most of the time, there's nothing much going on. Inside that, if you have a quiet room in your house, or go into a cave, you can be completely quiet. There's just the wind and a few birds moving around. We're not living in a world like that at all, so when we try to apply these practices in our situation, we need to think of a kind of detoxification.

That can be problematic because actually in order to survive in our world, the toxicity in the environment has to be met by a toxicity in ourselves. We need to be in toxic states of arousal which are suitable to the environment. Perhaps you have seen soldiers who have just come back from a war zone. They are buzzing because of the intensity of their experiences. Post-traumatic stress disorder work is increasingly about detoxification – to bring down the biochemical arousal, so that people can start to feel in resonance with the environment around them. Otherwise they're just buzzing in a little world of their own, which increases the feeling of alienation. Perverse environments require perverse behaviours. It is so normal if you travel on the London underground to be very close to people but not looking at them or speaking. You might as well be on another planet. Human beings are communicative. It is clearly against our nature not to say something to someone you're standing next to because we use language to mediate social distance but in the underground, you don't use language for that. That has gone. All you've got is a kind of dissociative state, which you find a way of easing yourself into to numb the vibration that you're receiving from all the people around you. People who can't do that start to get anxious and may even have panic attacks on the underground. That dissociation becomes vital because you can't really say to somebody, 'I'm not feeling very comfortable here'. So commuters are in this self-sufficient, 'anomie', this alienated mode. That is bizarre but it is the price of survival, the price of getting to your work on time. It's toxic, it's poisonous. It's wrong but it becomes necessary. The machine binds more and more people into looking at computers for long hours, attuning their energy into patterns the consequences of which are only becoming clear to us through modern research.

So in terms of this basic ground, the entry point is relaxation because it's described as being naked, that is to say it has no covering or any kind of protective layer; it's just open and available. Aware is aware is aware, like a mirror. The mirror has no bouncers in front of it. It's got no border guards. It's immediate. Float something in front of it and immediately the reflection is there. So on that level of openness there is no defence. In psychoanalytic language, people refer to ego defences. The ego, because it's linked to a dialogic movement, can defend itself since it's engaged in an interaction where you have two separated parts: the subject and the object.

However the mirror has the reflection *inside* it. Sitting here looking at you all, as I pan round the room, I see different faces. I'm here, and between me and you there is a space. If that space weren't there, I wouldn't be able to see you. We see each other across the space of separation

and this gives us a chance to manoeuvre ourselves so that we can go closer or further away. We can mediate our interpersonal distance in that way. However the reflection comes *into* the mirror. It's immediate. It's direct, unmediated by any conceptual apparatus. This is the same with the basic openness of the mind, so it has no protection. On the other hand, it doesn't *need* protection; it's indestructible because it's basic nature is space. It doesn't have a material basis.

Difference between awareness and consciousness

This is where buddhism is rather different from a lot of modern conceptualisation which speaks of the brain as being the root of consciousness. The brain is a site of energetic interplay and is part of the manifestation of consciousness, of being aware – conscious of this and that happening. From the buddhist point of view the brain has nothing to do with awareness because you can be aware of your brain but the brain finds it very difficult to be aware. Awareness is something other. That is to say, it's not resting on anything. You know clearly that if somebody hits you on the head with a hammer, you're going to have a problem. You go to hospital and they check you out and you are told "*neurological damage*". You may recover but it will probably be quite a long slog to come back into language and so on. Consciousness is vulnerable because it is linked in interactions with what is going on in the environment. But awareness itself – in Sanskrit it is referred to as '*Vajra*', meaning indestructible substance – is linked to a diamond. It's adamantine.

There's a story that the first vajra formation came with Indra, a hindu god, who meditated for a very, very long time and completely calmed his anger so that no matter what provocation was offered to him, he didn't respond. In that way, he became imperturbable, unruffled, and out of that he manifested this vajra formation. This story is helpful for meditators because it's a good litmus test to know where you are: if you're in the domain of reactivity, you're in the domain of consciousness. If you are very relaxed and spacious you have a sense of experiences going on – and of course it's going on in all directions, behind you, to the side of you, inside you, outside you, it's all our experience –this field of experience is arising and we are present with it.

This pure presence, in having no content, is invulnerable. This then is very important because you don't have to edit your experience on the level of openness. So when we are meditating we are not trying to edit good and bad. On that level, in relation to wisdom and compassion, compassion is hospitality to everything. So if you have a stream of negative thoughts or self-hating thoughts or cruel thoughts, envious thoughts and so on, you can welcome them. They are just thoughts. They are not going to harm you. They are transient, illusory forms that fill the space and then vanish and if they are allowed to just come and go, and if you remain relaxed and open, then they leave no trace, just as reflections leave no trace in the mirror. However, as we know, if you have a piece of paper and you make a mark on it with a pen, or a pencil or a paintbrush, there is a trace and the trace stays on the paper. Moreover, it's quite difficult to get it out of the paper without disturbing the paper. You might remember being back in school and making mistakes when you were writing and then you'd have your rubber – and you rub and you rub and you make a hole in the page! That's what happens isn't it? So when you try to rub bad bits out of yourself, the self from which you're trying to remove the bad bits, is also being marked.

Awareness itself is not marked. Consciousness is and it's very important to have that sense of the separation of these two. On the level of consciousness we need to be very, very tender with ourselves because we mark easily. We carry these striations, these scratches and indentations and they start to hold not just the patterns that we can bring forward but the *mood* of our existence. Too much pain is not good. It makes us anxious and fearful and then we want to turn away from life and that usually leads to a forgetfulness of our capacity.

So return to basic openness again and again; it's relaxing. If you find yourself getting caught up in patterns of thoughts and feelings, don't enter into judgment; or if a judgment arises, just observe it. It will go. All the contents of the mind are transient. They are not a reliable basis for establishing a stable identity and therefore there's no point to try to hang on to them but neither are they truly dangerous if they are allowed to be in that transient flow. If you let that move flow through then there is no trace. However if you resist what is happening, then you get a reaction. That is a key thing isn't it? If you roll with a punch, if you catch a cricket ball or a rugby ball, you catch it by moving with the ball. However if you catch it in a hard way, as if you're aggressing against it, then you'll feel the full force and it's very painful and you're likely to drop it. Allow that movement and it passes through. So in that way, collaborate with yourself by not going into resistance, on the basis of knowing that if you give space, you will not be harmed.

Now, this is true on the level of openness but it's not true on the level of participation in the world. In your interactions with others you are likely to get exploited if you give a lot of space. Someone else will come and inhabit the space and by not setting any limits, you may well be taken for a ride. Parents face this when they have to set limits for their children and most recognise that '*If I don't set limits, it's not good for them and it's not good for me*'. That limit is helpful because energetic forms have an impact, on the level of energetic manifestation. They do something. That's why it is important to know the difference of orientation in these domains when we are, for example, integrating the meditative state with being in the world after meditation.

Within openness many things arise. If you're meditating with your eyes open, you're not withdrawing into a private space and so there are noises, people, movements. Even if you're sitting in a room quietly at home, something will happen, a dog will bark, a motorbike will roar by, a plane will go overhead or whatever. These occurrences are just the movement of the field. The mirror and the reflection are inseparable but the mirror doesn't need to interfere with the reflection in order to be safe. This is one of the reasons why meditating with the eyes open is useful; you can move on the fulcrum point between the feeling of naked unborn awareness which is just open, and what is revealed in that openness.

That openness itself is not something you can catch in the same way that when you look at a mirror you cannot catch the mirror. When you look in a mirror you get a reflection. *Through* the presence of the reflection you can impute, you can come to the conclusion, '*Ah, this is a mirror*' whereas if you look at the wall, you don't get a reflection of your face, and if you look around at various other things you don't get a reflection. You look at the curtains – you don't get a reflection. You go into the toilet, there's a mirror, '*Ah! That's a mirror.*' Why? Because it shows reflections.

What is the mirror-ness of the mirror? We see that the mirror reveals itself through its function, not itself. The mirror-ness of the mirror is ungraspable. Awareness is not a thing that you have.

So, for example, you might try to remember, 'What is the capital of Peru?' You might have learnt that at school, in geography, a long time ago but suddenly you remember, 'Oh! Lima, that's what it is!' You are conscious of knowing that you know. There is a self-reflexive loop involved in that. Yes? However that is not the same as awareness. That is the movement of energy of being consciousness of something and being self-conscious, or luminous in the moment of that consciousness. In a sense, you can catch that. You can know the feeling of knowing something. *"Oh! I'd forgotten that. That's really good I've remembered."* There's an affirmation of the particularity of your intelligence or your memory. That is *something* but the mirror is not a *thing*. You can't catch the mirror-ness of the mirror. It can be a useful exercise to spend a bit of time looking at mirrors. In Chinese, Tibetan and Indian buddhism the image of the mirror is often used and there is a reason for that. If you really get this point, it's very helpful.

The mirror is shown by its reflection. The nature of awareness is shown by the content of the mind. The content of the mind is not showing *what* the mind is like, just as the reflection in a mirror doesn't show *what* the mirror is like. A mirror can show so many reflections and each time it shows a reflection one can say, *"Oh! It's a bus! It's a person! Gosh my nose is a bit odd..."* You keep getting a new content. You think, *"Oh, that's what the mirror is"* but no, that is what we are doing to ourselves. Something arises in our mind and we grasp onto it and think, *"Shit. This is me! I wish I hadn't said that. I'm a fool. I'm stupid. Oh! Oh!"* – but in such moments there's a sense that how I show myself, reveals myself. This is such an essential point for meditation.

The self that is shown in a social interaction, through a slip of the tongue, through an inadvertent disclosure of a secret or whatever it would be is an energy formation. A temporary pattern. A construct. It is not our true nature. It is not who we are, but when we grasp at ourselves as if we were something, the very intensity of that grasping creates an over-identification and then we merge into the thought.

So the key thing is, *'I am open. The source, the ground nature of who I am, the ground of my being, is not a thing.'* That's quite remarkable – to not be 'a thing' yet within this space many things appear, just as in the mirror many reflections appear. I'm indestructible, ungraspable, and rich because moment by moment, there's always something going on, always, and inside that field of richness, there are these particular forms. In terms of our precise, gestural presence, our being with others, we need to be very careful. Other people get hurt easily. We don't want to abuse them or create trouble for them. Life is better for others and for ourselves, when we have a finesse, when we have a fine-tuning of how we manifest.

Now, that is difficult if we are self-preoccupied, if we're full of something. You know, sometimes you get that with kids, when they're very excited and they just want to tell you something and they're full of this and it's just got to come out. You may say, *"Wait, wait, wait, we're doing something else just now. I'm just talking with my friend. I'll be with you in a minute".* But, *"No, no, no, I have to tell you now..."*, and there is no containment. It just has to express itself and of course then they are bumping into the world because they are not able to 'cook themselves' according to the situation. If you undershoot or overshoot your connectivity with the emerging

field, you're going to have ongoing, low level alienation. And when you have alienation, because you don't have the ductile quality, this conducive movement of these two parts, the articulation, the separation out throws you back on yourself. You *retroreflect* into more self-preoccupation. In group therapy someone may be feeling anxious and thinking about what to say and when to say it, so much so that they miss the timing and blurt something out and then wonder, "*Whaaaa! Why did I say that?*" Because they're speaking out of themselves on to the situation, rather than speaking *in* as part of the situation. These examples can show us why for dzogchen the integration of these three aspects of our existence is so important.

The open domain offers continuous hospitality to the richness of the field in which we exist. So, I'm here with you, talking with you. We are together in this. Each of us has our own experience but we have a shared field of having decided to spend this time together in this place, thinking together about these topics. The particularity of this field allows certain things to be said or not said. We wouldn't be saying these things if we were in another environment. So the more we have a feeling of being with each other, the more we can be in touch with whether this is meaningful or not. We can cook ourselves fresh into the moment, trusting that we don't need to know in advance what to say but that if we're present, the words will come. This is the gift of the uninterrupted spontaneity of the non-dual field. So, subject and object are not two different planets and by opening to the face of the other, we will come into being in a way that fits the other. That is something quite remarkable.

About fitting in

This level, in Tibetan is called '*Lhundrup*' [ལྷུན་གྲུབ]. '*Lhun*' means 'a heap' and '*Drup*' means accomplished, so it means 'accomplished in a heap'. That is to say, 'it's spontaneous; it forms the whole thing'. So, when you're in this room, everybody's here. We're here as we're here. Each moment, we're here as we're here, in our different shapes. Sometimes slumping, sometimes people looking a bit tired, sometimes looking a bit fresh, sometimes more interested, sometimes less interested... All kinds of pulsations are going on. This is what we're sharing, and inside this some gestures are possible and some aren't.

Can we trust that the world will show us how to be? Will we lose out by attunement? This is a central question because for as long as we have an individualised sense of self then there are going to be things that we feel we need in order to feel OK and things we feel we need to reject in order to feel OK. The idea of plasticity, of group belonging, then becomes very difficult.

Anthropologists have identified eastern cultures as shame-based and western cultures as guilt-based. In a shame-based culture, you're very concerned with how other people are seeing you and you don't want to be shamed. One of the things that shaming does is to isolate you, to separate you off from the body around you. If you have a social field which is very concerned with fitting in then there is a clarity but you also have to know the rules. In a guilt-based culture guilt is linked with a sense of individual responsibility: "*I feel bad about myself*". Of course guilt comes after the fact, so we bump into things and then feel guilty and bad that we didn't learn. So then we have a wee drink and then just do it again; that tends to be our modus operandi. When we're

guilty we feel we have let ourselves down. With shame the feeling is more one of a breach to the continuity of intercourse with the environment.

So for individualistic people the proposal that belonging to the emergent field is the most important thing is quite challenging since we've had a lot of messages through our culture that being true to ourselves, being our own person, dancing to our drum, is what life is all about. 'Be yourself.' 'Do it your way.' In HAMLET, Polonius says to his son, *"This above all things, to thine own self be true."* Of course there are costs to that but, *"Well, at least I have been true to myself."*

So what is the field? How does it operate and how am I going to link into this? Now from the Christian tradition we have a huge emphasis on martyrdom and sacrifice. We have the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross; we have the sacrifice of the holy martyrs who have their place in heaven; we have the sacrifice of all the early Christians who died for their faith being torn to pieces by lions and so on. In that tradition sacrificing this body for some higher ideal is seen as very noble.

Not in the buddhist tradition which would say that having a human birth, with all the senses intact and with enough leisure to enquire into your own being, is a very rare and precious opportunity. Other beings don't have this. So why throw it away for the sake of an idea? Rather, take care of your body because it's very important.

Sacrificing embodiment for an ideal is the precursor of the mind-body dichotomy to which Descartes and other philosophers addressed their attentions. The idea is that the mind should dominate the body, should master the body.

Remember the story of Prince Siddhartha? When he first ventured out of the palace he saw a sick person, a feeble old person and a corpse and he thought, 'Wow! That's going to happen to me too!' He awakened to the fact that his pampered life in the palace was not all it was cracked up to be and that, although people had been trying to protect him from its existential facticity, this was the outcome. If you were born with this kind of a body that was the way you go out – in a wee box. So he tried to find out if there was a way to avoid this terrible fate. He sought out yogis who were practising asceticisms, and he also fasted and did many kinds of yoga contortions, many kinds of strong practices to try to shape himself, to get himself into the right shape. He was essentially practising mind over matter. The Gandhara school of sculpting produced many beautiful statues of the Buddha and one shows the [Buddha](#) when he's been doing this practice and he's just skin and bones. It's incredible; he really took it right to the edge, where the body could have vanished. However the significant thing is that he turned back. In this story of his enlightenment he was sitting under a tree, not sure what next to do to achieve enlightenment, when this girl brought him a bowl of rice pudding. *"Ah! Smells good! This is not sackcloth and ashes anymore!"* He eats it and starts coming back to life. Then he sits under the bodhi tree and he becomes enlightened. That is to say he's entered into, or returned to, a sensory relationship with the world. He's back in his body, in embodiment.

So mind over matter, mind over the body is a very false move. Body over mind is also a false move. Mind and body belong together, as one integrated system and this integrated system is part of the integrated system of space, radiance, and precision which are the three modes of our existence.

So, being with other people is not about going into a mental sphere, developing an agenda and trying to see how our game plan can be implemented. It is not about how we can pull other people into our way of thinking and get them to go along with what we think needs to be done.

What is fundamentally important is to stay connected in the world, because we only have these three things: we have the openness; we have the field of our experience; and we have how we merge into it. That's all we have. Moment by moment, through our lives that is all that is ever going on, whether you're in school, in a job, in bed with your lover, wherever you are, you've just got your presence in a situation. One of the things that's greatly privileged in our culture, is falling in love. Falling in love is an experience that many people have, of feeling open to someone. They just feel open. They're willing to not protect themselves, and that's a delicious feeling. Now, that quality of aliveness can become more constant in our lives by not protecting ourselves against the world.

Who needs protection?

So, who is the one who needs protection? Hopefully through meditation this will become clearer. The mind itself – awareness – doesn't need protection. What needs protection is our 'shape' but our shape is always a shape already in the world. Isn't it? In the world? People worry nowadays about cybercrime and identity theft. Well of course if you've put it out there why wouldn't people steal? Why would you trust that 'out there' is OK? Countries are busy hacking into each other's information and train people to do that. The idea that you can have a private space in a public sphere is nonsense. There's public and there's private and they're not the same. There's a huge amount of computer information which is accessible to people who have a bad intention and there are a lot of people with bad intentions. This is very important. It is a category confusion: not understanding the difference between public and private. So, if you're in the world in interfacing with other people, who are these people? Well I'm sure they're very nice... I mean, they're all buddhist, so they are probably quite nice people I think. Each of us has to look into ourselves. Are we always nice? Perhaps not. So, if we know that we're not nice, maybe *you're* not very nice either. Or have got a wee bit nasty inside? That's a fact isn't it? To act as in a naïve way, in a naïve trust, is ridiculous. It doesn't mean that people are bad. Nor does it mean that people are good. It means that you're working with the phenomenology of experience, with the direct manifestation. If I say things about my bosses, it's not because these are 'bad people'. They're people who are hanging onto their job under a lot of pressure and they're thinking about their pension. They have ordinary human motivations, and a terrible pecking order and one needs to know that. One needs to know that we manifest in a world of shape and so how we manifest is constrained by the field around us. In a time of high employment, when you can get another job easily, it might make sense to speak out to your boss. In a time of high unemployment, when you're trying to hang on to your job, it's a bit foolish. Bite your tongue. That would be called 'common sense'.

So being with the world is not about just being open to everything. Open is the natural state of the mind but when we, as an energetic formation, come into the world, it's an interplay in which we're getting information all the time about where other people 'are at'. We can move our position; we're not stuck and in fact it's very good to be flexible. It keeps you alive. It keeps you in the freshness of existence. Fixed positions of any kind are a danger: people who believe that

they are bad, or hopeless or useless, people who believe in love and kindness to all sentient beings, That's also, from this point of view, very foolish because that's an orienting view. But then you have to think, how to implement it, because each situation has a particularity, which will not be 'mopped up' by some abstract idea such as 'I love everyone!' *"OK, if you love everyone, can I have your money? Can I have your house?"*

In Tibet, at the time of the formal dances, monasteries often host a popular performance based on an Indian story. Once upon a time there was a prince, and the prince decided that running his kingdom was not a good way to become enlightened because it involved him having power over other people. So he renounced his claim to the throne and set off with his wife and two children. He had decided to be a bodhisattva, to be completely for other people. So, there he is going along the road and his children are there with him. They're quite young. The daughter's about twelve. The boy's about eight. Somebody asks them for some clothing and they give them the clothing. Somebody asks them for food and they give the food. Then they meet this old man, not very nice-looking, and the old man says, *"Oh, my life is so lonely. I never was able to get a wife"*. So the ex-prince says, *"Have my daughter; you can marry her"*. Then they go on a bit. They meet somebody else who appeared very angry and he says, *"I've no friends. Everybody doesn't like me. Grrr, grr, grr"*. *"Oh, life must be lonely for you. Have my son. He will look after you."* says the father. He walks on with his wife and next he comes across a really repulsive person who says, *"Ah, this, my life is terrible. I've never been able to have anyone near me."* *"Please have my wife."* the husband says. Then he goes on further and he meets a blind person. He cuts his eyes out and gives them to the blind person.

Some people are moved by this story and find it very beautiful. However from a Western point of view we find it a bit crazy because he doesn't own his children and he doesn't own his wife. It's actually a story showing the fantasy of power and control, that he never actually left his kingdom because he was still acting as the boss. In being kind to other people he was not being kind to the people for whom he had a primary responsibility. So, it's a very useful story for thinking, 'What does it mean to actually help someone?' That's where it gets difficult.

Big ideas are ten-a-penny. It's in the nitty-gritty of everyday dilemmas that most of us get moved around. 'Should I lend my friend some money? Should I look after their kids yet again? What will I do?' You can't solve these things by going up in your head. It's not a problem for accountancy. You can't do an audit and say, 'It doesn't square up'. That would be a very rational approach. It's more like, 'Can I be in myself, with this field?' Am I free to say, 'Oi! I think you're taking the mickey here' and stay 'in conversation', because it's connectivity, its conversation, its interaction that keeps the wheel alive even if we're saying more difficult things such as 'No, I can't do what you want because at this moment, I have to look after me'. That's not selfish. It's not, 'putting me above them'. It's just pragmatic because if you're in touch with yourself, you can feel your capacity. Capacity is a very important notion in dzogchen, because capacity is variable. To 'nail your colours to the mast' and declare that 'under all times and all conditions, this is how I'm going to be', you make yourself a hostage to fortune. When other things happen to you you're torn inside because now you have this responsibility to your words and you've forbidden yourself to say, 'I'm sorry. I can't do it'.

It's very important thing to be able to say, "*My situation has changed. I am a co-emergent phenomenon as part of the emerging field – now there's something to say to your boss – and therefore on the basis of this, I am no longer able to do what I said I would do*". But it's absolutely true and that's how we remain alive.

The lunch break is coming up now and so you can just gently observe how you are in different situations, with different people. See how you move towards some people more, away from other people more. See how you find some people easy to talk to and not others. This is not about having a negative judgment about other people. It's just allowing your belly to give you information about how the world reveals itself to you. It's not that other people are 'not nice people' or 'not good people'. It's just that somehow you probably find you 'click' more with some people than with others. This is very, very important because it has to do with your embodied capacity and if you listen to that, you can try a little bit to relate to someone who's not so easy, whilst also being aware of what that limitation or difficulty is. The world is full of doors opening and closing but if you only experience it as a wall that you keep banging into, then you're not being in touch with what is there. It's not about accepting or rejecting. It's about being with the phenomenological field as it reveals itself to us and working with what we've got – with what's actual, rather than taking some idea and imposing it on the situation.

Then we start to see and directly feel, the unique specificity of our world, the actual contouring of our existence. You can feel the growing edge of where you are with the world, the actual pulsating interface which is not conceptual but it is direct, and that 'how you can be' is a co-creation with the environment. Otherwise, even if your intention is very good, you've likely to get caught up in a particular kind of violence because you are imposing some pre-formed image onto the situation.

So, being subtly attuned is an important part of the practice because it brings us back into the body, into what is actually here, and into our relaxation. It's not all up to us, you know. Our life is given in this shared field. We are part of it and you then find then what your part is. Tibetans have a word 'cha' [ཇ] which means like something like 'a share', 'a portion', or what your 'slice' is. Our slice of the world is revealed to us through our participation. We get what we get and working with what we get, keeps us alive and connected with what is vital. Imagining we should be getting something else means that we don't see what is on our own plate. To be always looking at somebody else's plate is not necessarily very useful.

End of session 2

Session 3

Emptiness is extremely practical

From the Mahayana point of view, emptiness is the heart of wisdom. Mahayana, the 'great vehicle' is characterised by being inclusive. It says that all sentient beings are included in our prac-

tice, whatever kind of practice we do. We're not trying to get enlightenment or liberation just for ourselves but for all sentient beings of whatever kind, because if you just get something for yourself, then yes, you do have this marvelous possession but you also have a little bit of worry.

For example, when I was coming here by car from Manchester we passed through some quite wealthy-looking suburbs and you can notice that as the suburbs get more and more exclusive and wealthy, they have higher and higher fences round them. They also show alarm systems on the house because if you've got something, you've also got something to lose. In the same way, if you get enlightened there are still all these other weird buggers wandering around causing trouble. Who wants that? So...unless you're going to live in a kind of buddha-gated community to keep out the rabble, it's best to take everyone with you when you go. That's the general view of the Mahayana. It's quite pragmatic in its altruism.

That generosity of spirit or compassion or love or altruism is grounded in the idea that there's enough to go around. Of course, if we live in a world where the resources are perceived to be finite, then we're immediately in competition for ownership. The more you get, then obviously the less there is available for me to get. But if the basic field of experience is infinite, then by definition, there will be enough for everyone. That is why the notion of universal awakening or liberation is inseparable from the understanding of emptiness, which opens up the experience of the infinite nature of our own mind.

I'll say a little bit more about the concept of emptiness because sometimes it can seem a bit daunting or a bit abstract whereas in fact it's something extremely practical. As we get older we become increasingly aware that many of the things we have been in our lives, we no longer are. Identities that we once held, that we were completely committed to, somehow have been washed out. They've vanished from our repertoire. Whether these are physical things like climbing trees or wanting to go out on your scooter – they no longer have any 'pulling power' for us. Things that once we were committed to, we are indifferent towards now. Every thing, which comes into existence, passes out of existence. There are no enduring phenomena in the world at all. Houses are built and fall down. Economies grow and shrink. People grow from children into being powerful adults and then if they're lucky, they become old and frail until eventually they die. Universities expand and do well and then they implode due to internal politics and so on. Buddhist groups expand, get their own premises and then lose their premises and so on. All sorts of changes are going on. Nothing that we can cling to is going to be there forever.

That is why our attachments are always contextual. The things that we relate to tend to be a means to an end; we're making use of something at a certain period in our time and then...not. In the same way if you're in the kitchen cooking, there are certain knives that you use for chopping vegetables but you wouldn't use these knives to put on the table to eat with because they're too sharp or too big. They have their place. They're taken up and they're put down. Taken up and put down. This tends to be the somewhat pragmatic relationship that we have with the world, which means essentially that we make use of things and we make use of people.

Perhaps we don't feel too comfortable with the idea that we make use of people. It may not sound nice but it's actually quite true, if you hold it in a neutral way. 'Making use of' is not the same as exploiting. Is there anyone in this room who would like to be useless? If we're not use-

less, then we're *useful* and if we're *useful*, then that means other people can make use of us. In fact, if they don't make use of us, we feel a bit 'spare'. Maybe this can give us a sense that the world is mutual engagement. It's a wonderful thing if we have some value and our value is revealed by other people partaking of it. If no one partakes of what we have, then it kind of remains hidden in our pockets, because we can't really reveal ourselves just to ourselves. It's through interactions with other people, perhaps when they ask us to do something, that a bit of ourselves is given an invitation to manifest. Without the invitation, without their needing to make use of us, we wouldn't have that opportunity.

For example, some people here may have had the experience of becoming grandparents. That has advantages and disadvantages but it does mean that qualities embedded in the grandparent, which have been quiescent for some years, since their children grew up, can be reactivated and get a new lease of life. All that knowledge, which had become kind of redundant in the field of their operation, is allowed to express itself in a way which can be useful. So there there's a sense of being called into play, aspects of ourselves being called into play. Is there any continuing 'self substance,' which is always there? From the buddhist point of view, there is not. There is no continuity in the precise shaping of the subject or the object.

There are three things which, according to the buddhist abhidharma teachings, continue through time and there is one thing, which *appears* to continue through time. The three things which truly continue through time are: enlightenment, the moment of enlightenment and the sky. The thing which *appears* to continue through time is ourselves, because we think, 'Well, I'm still alive. I was around some years ago and I'm still here now.' Who is the one who is still here? 'I am!' This 'I' is a conceptual presentation. What is continuing is our capacity to use the first person singular but the content of the first person singular has changed. I'm still here, but not as the 'me' that I was. That's a bit weird isn't it? So...the 'me' that I was before I no longer am, but I'm still here.

Now, of course, when we talk of 'me' we tend to be talking of a more objectivised, narrative notion of ourself. 'I' the first person singular, is kind of the naked bit of us that moves out into the world. 'I ... ' and then you can announce whatever you like after that; but the 'something you should know about me', gives much more the sense that it is truly a construct. In fact 'I' and 'me' link together because 'I' can always identify or misidentify with 'me'. That is to say, we can deny ourselves. We can pretend that we are other than we are. Why? How? Why, because we want to stay ahead of the game. How, because 'I' is empty.

It is the emptiness of 'I' that makes it useful

It is the emptiness of the empty signifier of the first person singular, that allows 'me' to say whatever I like about how 'I' am. 'I am this. I am that. I am the other.' Just like the mirror. Some signifiers, or some signs, are very tightly construed. At the moment right in front of me there is a sound recording machine which, by the look of it, cost a bit of money. Therefore, whoever is the owner of this will be presumably quite protective about it. However, it is made out of metal and if a nail was sticking out of the wall and we didn't have a hammer, then we could make use of that object. It has some hammer-like potential, but that would be strongly argued against by the owner of the said object, who would insist on a very tight construal of the nature of this article.

'It is for recording sound and for no other purpose.' Many objects are like that. They have a specialised function and although with our creative imagination, we could turn them to other purposes, that would be unwise because we would be running against the definition that this is, what it says, or rather, what we say it is.

However with the first person singular it's a different story: the 'I' is always empty. It's also very incomplete isn't it? You actually only need three words. 'I am hungry'. 'I am tired'. 'I am sleepy.' That would be enough, or if you're a child, you can use just two; 'I go'; but 'I' by itself isn't going anywhere. It's not doing anything. 'I' has no content. It needs something linked to it to give it content. That is its wonderful potential. It doesn't foreclose or overdetermine the sphere in which it operates so it's like an amazing universal tool, which can immediately link in with whatever environment it is meeting. Again, it is the emptiness of the first person singular, that makes it useful.

This sound recording device in front of me is very useful, for its defined purpose. It has a very specialised technology behind it and thereby has a very restricted remit of things that it can be used for. 'I' can be used for anything. So we can say that 'I' is empty of fixed, internal content, or 'I' is 'open', an openness which allows it to be filled by the 'not I' which becomes 'I' by being linked with 'I'. Emptiness in terms of the person, is to say clearly that 'there is nothing fixed about us'. Not in our body, because our posture, our gestures, the need for sleep or the insistence on being awake, is all changing according to the circumstances, to the time of day and so on. With our voice as well; our voice comes into being in relation to the context, who we're speaking to, their age, their gender, the kind of things they want to talk about and so on. This will affect the rapidity of our speech, the kind of vocabulary we use, the timbre and so on. In the same way with our mind; what our mind fills with, will depend on particular circumstances. If we're doing something that requires great care and attention then we're focusing our mind in a way to allow our body to be very precise with what it's engaged in; and in other circumstances we're kind of free associating, just letting our mind wander hither and thither. So, neither the body, nor the voice, nor the mind, has a fixed content.

The constituents of our self, change and yet we appear to continue. The false signifier of a continuity is embedded in our being able to say, "*I am still me*". That is a delusion, an illusion. We are deluded by the illusion that just because we say something is the same, it *is* the same. I have been in Macclesfield before, but the Macclesfield that I was in before, in what way is it the same Macclesfield as we have today? Only in as much as on a map, or at the boundary of the city, we have signs that say, "*Macclesfield*", "*Welcome to Macclesfield*". Before you cross the boundary, you're in non-Macclesfield and you take a step across that boundary and you're now in Macclesfield, which shows the arbitrary nature of the signifier. Probably some of the people living outside the town boundary think they're in Macclesfield, because it's quite a big town, isn't it?

In such ways we can see that these are constructs. By relying on the abstraction, it is as if the abstraction is identical with the phenomena. Although phenomena are always changing the abstraction seems to be continuous because it is maintained in the refrigerator of the mind. It's in the freezer. The word comes out of our mouth and it goes back into our mind and every time you take 'Macclesfield' out, 'Macclesfield' sounds the same. You might say, "*I hate living in Macclesfield.*" You might say, "*I love living in Macclesfield.*" You might say, "*I used to hate living in Mac-*

clesfield, now I love living in...” or vice versa. There are endless permutations you can make around that but each time you say it, it is as if the other person will know what you mean when you say “*Macclesfield*”, which of course they don’t, because they don’t live in the same Macclesfield as you. Your Macclesfield, is what is revealed to you through your embodied participation. You may even have gone to an evening class on the history of Macclesfield and learned lots of facts about Macclesfield which other people who’ve lived in Macclesfield all their life don’t know. You would then have an over-enriched somatic Macclesfield, which could be good or bad.

The point here is that we only have our particular experience. This could be very lonely because it means that nobody else actually has my experience. That is a fact. This is why we need to communicate. We can’t take it for granted that other people know what we’re on about. Therefore our speech acts should be tentative and attuned. What is important in that? Is it the meaning content, the knowledge content of the communication, or the fact of communicating? In school you probably studied a lot of things and you had to memorise them to get through exams. Is it fair to say that a lot of that information has not been enormously useful to you in your life? But you also were learning how to be in a group, how to take your place and how to take your turn. Maybe that has been quite useful. This is the key thing here; the ‘stuffness’, the ‘thingness’ of learning facts is not what it’s all about. It is really about the game. It’s not about winning and losing. It’s about how we find our way into connectivity, that actually I need to talk with other people, to work out what I’m on about’.

Examining yourself is not easy. If you’ve got a problem and you’re wondering what to do, we often have an urge to talk to a friend because through the talking about it, you are laying it out and their questions – or even if they don’t ask a question, just the look on their face – somehow helps it to ‘unpack’ in a more open way than you can have done on your own.

How you tell that story about yourself will depend on circumstances. Working as a therapist, and seeing some patients over quite long periods of time, they often tell me about the same event many times over. And each time they tell it, it’s slightly different because each telling is triggered by other events that are happening in their life. That is what communication is. It is the revealing of nuances in the service of making the bond of having shared experience. There’s nothing really ‘to get’.

So to come back to the idea of making use of other people, we make use of other people to find out who we are, because we are who we reveal ourselves to be and if we can’t reveal ourselves, it’s very hard for us.

In the early days of buddhism practitioners in India spent a lot of time looking at the structure of phenomena. So they might look at a building like this and observe that it’s a nice space, it’s quite warm, the colours are not so bad, there’s enough room for everyone and so on. In that sense this building seems to exist and in fact over the front door is carved ‘1939’ so it’s been around for a long time. However, we can see that various changes have been made to it; there are marks on the wall that indicate alterations have occurred at various times. These walls are painted, or in some places, wallpapered. We know that behind the paint, there’s plaster, Behind the plaster there’s brick. Each brick is something in itself, linked with cement, so, this building is a construct held in place by the good design offered by the architect but more importantly, held in place by

the concept that we have of this building. We ourselves, are the co-constructors of this building because we are telling the building what it is. The stone plaque above the entrance says “1939”, but the building itself isn’t saying that. Somebody said that about the building when they put that keystone in the arch. It meant something for the people who built it. However there is no inherent self-nature in this building. It is held in place due to the particular constellation of social factors that are operating at this time – that there is a need for this hall. I heard that there was a brass band practising in it last night. That is to say, there’s enough community left in this town of Macclesfield for people to want to have a community hall. Maybe in ten years time, people will have less sense of community and won’t want a hall like this. Maybe someone will decide they’d make more money knocking it down and building flats. All sorts of things can happen. There is no internal truth in the building holding it in place.

Nowadays many churches are adapted for other purposes, often turned into flats. Think back to the time when a church was inaugurated and they performed a blessing ceremony to transform the empty building into a consecrated church. Could these people have imagined that some years later other people would deconsecrate it and that people would move in to live. It would have been impossible to imagine such a thing: ‘Why would people live in a church? It’s ridiculous. A church is a church, is a church’. However it is dependent on the socio-economic situation. People stopped going to church so much but the building still needs to pay its running costs. There’s heating and lighting and all the rest of it. The Church of England made some very bad investments in the late 1980s and lost a lot of money and so they had to start selling off churches. It’s continued existence is held in place by factors meeting together. When these factors get scrambled, like somebody twisting a kaleidoscope, a whole new world opens up.

Things reveal themselves in their vanishing

So, we have no internal defining essence and this building has no internal defining essence. Macclesfield had no internal defining essence. What we have is a field of experience of phenomena showing themselves and these phenomena are transient. The question then is, ‘*How shall I participate in this evolving field and who is the one who is participating?*’ Emptiness means that whatever you see, whatever you hear, whatever you touch or taste, is essentially ungraspable. Say for example, you open a bottle of very nice wine. You pour some in a glass and you swirl it around and there’s a fine bouquet but once you drink it, unfortunately, it’s gone. As you know, we can’t have your cake and eat it. That is profound. It’s always vanishing. You see someone with a new baby and you look at it and it’s already vanishing, because if you see it again in a week’s time that baby will have changed. Perhaps you don’t see that baby again for six months and, ‘*Wow! How it’s grown!*’ It’s like that isn’t it? So, every moment which is arising is giving itself fully and packing itself, dissolving back in. Like a wave coming out of the ocean and then falling back in the ocean, it is appearing and vanishing.

How to stay present

The way we experience the world is primarily through presence and what we’re looking at this morning is how we avoid being present by residing inside assumptions, judgments, memory, plans, predictions... That is to say, the mental apparatus that we have, our capacity to construe, construct and interpret, has us tracking across the three times. We move to the past. We move

to the future. We're momentarily in this conceptual present. The actual present is always fresh – always fresh. Moving through, and very often covering that actual present, is this conceptual movement.

During the lunch break I had a short walk with some people along the banks of the nearby canal and I was remembering that as a child I used to go and play on the banks of the canal near my home on the outskirts of Glasgow. But that canal is not this canal so I'm back in a place which I haven't been to for a long time, which I have no special desire to go to and even if I wanted to, I couldn't be there because that canal, in that form, doesn't exist. So the very presence of this moment, here, with this canal, triggered a 'hook' whereby I absented myself from where I was, to be somewhere where I can't be, and yet I was. I'm sure that's a familiar experience for us – that we easily slip away from this moment into the future or into the past. It's not that these are necessarily wrong, because we *do* need to plan things like shopping or holidays, book flights and so on. If you don't book in advance you usually pay quite a bit more. It is the fact that whatever is occurring, whether it's a memory or a plan, is now. It needn't remove us from now. It can be the way in which 'now' is showing itself. That is to say, you can be present, with your memory, or you can fall into your memory. Does that make sense? And when you fall into it. It takes you off on a little riff; you go here and you go there and it all kind of links and then something happens and you're back here again, but that journey was kind of nowhere. It's a sort of cyberspace. It doesn't truly exist at all. You can't get a handle on it. So...how to stay present?

Nothing has gone wrong

The openness of 'now' is the very basis for it being filled with thoughts of elsewhere, which are actually only now. Does that make sense? You look at a photograph of last summer and you go into memories of last summer, but the photo you're looking at is in front of you now. The memories are happening for you now but it is as if you have gone somehow into that realm of last summer. You haven't gone anywhere! You've been now but not now. For meditators that is very important because it means two things are present simultaneously: the openness of the present awareness – which is actually the host that's offering hospitality to what's occurring – and the arising thought, which is denying it's nature by pretending to be something else.

It's like a child pretending to be Batman. They get their little costume for their birthday and they go about in this little thing saying, "*I'm Batman*" or "*I'm Spiderman*", and they want to have a duvet cover that's got Spiderman on it and a pillow as well. The whole thing. So, '*this is me and this is my world*'. They are Spiderman but they're not Spiderman – but they are – and they're not. Simultaneously, they both are and aren't and there is no real division.

In the same way, when we get lost in meditation, we haven't gone anywhere. This is very important because it means, if you follow the logic, that there is nothing to be corrected. You don't need to do anything to improve or make reparation, for what has happened. Nothing has gone wrong because you are still where you want to be but, if you think, 'Shit! I can't meditate at all. This is just a waste of time. I don't know what I'm doing.' then having got distracted in the meditation, you enter into another distraction by beating yourself up with the thought that you're not doing the meditation. You can 'loop' these and fill the whole of your life doing them: in which thought is chasing thought, is chasing thought.

Where is this occurring? Here and now. Where is here? The space of awareness. Where is now? The space of awareness. There is nothing outside now. That's all there is. Every memory that we have, we only can access, *now*. Can you remember your first day in primary school? Remember what that was like? Going up to the playground. You have some memories. You can have these memories – *now*, and if you indulge them, it brings up a feeling tone. It is as if you were somewhere else. You were there but that 'there' and 'then' is always here and now. The futures that we can imagine are also only here.

In the dzogchen tradition, they talk about the 'one tige'. 'Tige' [ཐིག་ལེ] means a sphere or a ball. It's visualised as a ball of rainbow-coloured light; and it represents the infinity of existence. Now, this moment, is like an infinite ball which includes everything. It includes all the past and it includes the whole world. We could have a little conversation about New York. We could have a conversation about Paris. All of these words, memories, plans, hopes, would be – *here and now!* You have never been anywhere other than, here and now, but 'here and now' just like 'I', just like the mirror, are empty, because anywhere can be here. We're here and then later today, we won't be here. We'll be in another place, which we will call 'here'. We're here now, but this evening, *"What're you going to do now?" "Oh, it's two o'clock in the afternoon." "No, it's not. It's seven o'clock at night."*

Now is whenever now is. Here is wherever here is. 'I' am whoever 'I' am. The mirror is showing whatever it's showing because of its hospitality and we are selfish, stupid and blind because we don't recognise and honour the hospitality of here and now. We stick whatever we want into it. We take it for granted and we fall asleep in our stories. But it's amazing, quite amazing, that the only place you can ever be – is here and now. That is mind-boggling! It should stop us in our tracks because what it's saying is that the status of the semantic content – the interpretative content that you put into any place – is an implant. It's a transient filling, like, 'We're here in Macclesfield together.' This is where we are and then we'll be here – some of us, if we go to a restaurant tonight – we'll be here, in that restaurant. Both will be in Macclesfield but they'll be different 'heres' in Macclesfield and there will be different moments of 'now'.

The freshness of 'here and now' that allows these different experiences to arise is ignored because we are caught up in our stories. Something's in front of our nose but we don't see it because we've locked onto our story-line: 'I'm like this'. It's like people who have health problem and refuse to take their medication. The NHS has huge bill every year for people's non-compliance with treatment. They go to their GP. They say, *"I'm not very well"*. They get a diagnosis. They get a medication. They go to the pharmacy. They get the stuff. They don't take it. Why? *"I didn't feel like it." "I don't think I really need it." "Why should I?" "I'm not going to be defined in who I am by someone else."* Many people do this. Knowing that we have got this capacity what I'm suggesting is that we're activating this capacity, in a subtle way, all the time. The basic fact is: we're here, we're now.

That means we're present together. What is most vital is just – we're here. You look in each other's eyes. You're there. I'm here. Hello. And that's it. This is it. However the intrinsic meaningfulness of shared co-emergent presence is hidden from us by our individualistic demand to ourselves to make sense of what is going on. 'Unless I'm telling the story about my life and making

sense of it on my terms, I don't know what's going on.' So we fill the space of here and now with a story, which obscures us to the freshness and the connectedness of here and now, because the actual here and now, is us. It's us; but in 'my story' it's me. Does that make sense? In the story in my head I am looking out at you all from the inside, but if I relax that, 'we' are here together. In traditional buddhist language, and also in the hindu tradition, this is where duality and non-duality start to go asunder.

The actual basis of our existence is non-dual. That is to say, there's no fundamental wall between self and other; good, bad; right, wrong; heaven, hell or any of these binary oppositions, because actually, they only have meaning in their intercourse. It's only by knowing what is bad, that you can work out what is good. They are co-emergent. They have to arise together to create the field in which discriminations are possible, so there is no real barrier between them.

Emptiness is seeing that everything we experience is movement, is alive, is dynamic. Even our tendency to tell stories about what is going on, which seems to fix it inside particular frames of reference, is itself an activity. So, if I think "*Macclesfield used to have a lot of silk stuff production*" I've locked a fact about Macclesfield but it establishes nothing. I might have spent four seconds establishing that. Four seconds are gone. Now what? Our whole life is 'Now what, now what?' This is impermanence. You cannot establish anything through construction because it just washes away.

'What will I do then, if everything's empty, open and ungraspable. I'm drowning.' Well, the fish doesn't drown in the sea. You drown because you conceptualise yourself as somebody who has to hold themselves together and make sense of what's going on. The one who is worrying about making sense of it, is itself simply a flow of thought. There is no inherent self-nature.

—I'm worried about my future. Well, I'm over sixty now. Worrying is quite a pleasant pastime until I get really sick. What will happen?

—Que sera. We don't know.

—What will I do?

—I don't know.

—Shouldn't I be worried? Will I need a stannah stair lift?

—I don't know.

—But I should prepare.

—For what?

—For every eventuality.

That's too much. I better prepare for nothing.

You've got to find a middle way. But how will I choose? What will I do? That is a game. It's an illusion. You can play it with anxiety, or with lightness. Better to do it with lightness, because none of us know what the future will be. So, how to release the anxiety? Well, if the only place that I'm standing on is my familiar set of representations about who I am, I'm going to get worried pretty quickly.

In terms of the practice, the practice is to release identification with the thoughts, feelings and sensations, which are the ingredients out of which we construct our familiar sense of self. We're not pushing them away but we're not gathering them together to construct something. If, for

example, this building were made of Lego, we could take all the pieces apart and lay them all out on the ground. The building would have vanished but nothing would have been destroyed. All the parts are still there but the enclosing environment has been collapsed. There is now more space. No destruction was required. What you had was a de-construction, in which the weaving together of our mind into the fantasy that this shape is internally defined, is relaxed.

So in the meditation, thoughts come. You don't have to push them away, but also don't fall into them. They're just there and they're gone. There is no mental arising which stays for a long time, even moods which can seem quite insidious are subtle, a bit like the morning mist in a valley. They change their subtle texture. If you wake up in the morning feeling a bit depressed, try just lying in the bed and opening yourself, stay with the depression as it presents itself, without over-conceptualising it, and you'll find that it presents itself with many different flavours. However if you move away from the immediate experience saying, 'Oh shit, I'm depressed again. I can't bear it' all you've done is wedded yourself into a concept which will then, like a sponge, mop up the gravy of each moment and subsume it into your definition that 'I'm depressed'. It's blinding you to the flavours and changes in depression. It's the same with chronic pain. If you've got chronic back pain, the phenomenology of the pain, how it actually presents itself, shifts. The fact that you have a painful back continues as a concept; so if you sit in the concept you can feel completely persecuted because the bloody pain is always there. The pain shows a thousand different forms in a day but you haven't attended to the difference because you've sucked them into being the proof of the validity of your definition that you have chronic back pain. We do the same with people. 'Oh, this is John. John's a builder. John's a this. John's a that.' John can be many things. We, in our knowledge of John, don't receive John, because the 'John' in our head is over-defined and may offer no space for the 'John-ing', the presentational quality of John, to reveal new aspects.

This essentially is what emptiness means: the ungraspability. You can't say anything definite. You don't get anything but – you get everything. Nothing is destroyed, it's just that you see that you thought they were entities, you thought they were things but there aren't any. What there are is ceaselessly flowing processes which emerge as the patterning of our existence, moment by moment. Nothing opens everything, within which we are this particular form in this particular moment.

We have a lot of freedom because the field that we can draw on as our resourcing, as our repertoire of possible moves, is a field shared with other people. That is to say, if I experience no real difference between myself and you, then how *you* are can also show me how I can be. But if I think, "*Well, you're very different from me. I'm not like you.*" then that separation means that all which you are showing is completely useless to me if it's just you showing you, since I'm not you. However if we're in this shared field and you are like that and I think, 'Ooo, interesting, how d'you do that?', then I could try that. In this way everyone becomes your ally. Everyone you meet is showing you new possibilities of you being you, which is incredible.

The 'otherness' of the other is an invitation to the self to 'other' itself. Being touched and moved, I'm taken out of myself and by losing myself, I find myself in a new form; whereas if I seal myself in my self-definition, I have a problem.

Essentially that is what emptiness is all about. It's not something abstract or vague or theoretical or esoteric. It is simply the non-duality of the experiential field: that we're in this together, that we see other people and we see bits of ourselves and we feel our body internally but we don't feel other people's bodies internally – so there are different phenomena operating in the field, but all of it is 'my world'.

If it's 'my world', why am I not at home in it? Why am I afraid of other people? Because I'm having thoughts about who they might be or what they might do and so am separating myself off from that which I cannot separate myself off from. You know how some teenagers feel anxious and hide in their bedrooms, but the world is still going on. If you do that for some years, by the time you get out of your bedroom all that has happened is that you're four years older yet with the same level of social skills you had when you were younger. You haven't protected yourself. You've actually made yourself vulnerable. The only way to learn – which is painful for most of us as teenagers – is to participate and if you participate, you make mistakes and you get lost and you get embarrassed but that's what life is.

—But isn't there a rule book that I could sort of just read and then I'd know what to do. If I say that to a girl, does that mean she'll go out with me?

—No.

—Well, how will I know?

—You won't know till you ask her.

—But if she doesn't want to go out with me, what will I do then?

—Oh, you might blush or you might get pissed. I don't know.

—Couldn't it be easier?

OK, so, we will do a bit more practice now. One again just observing the dynamic nature of our experience. Nothing fixed. Nothing set in stone. Just allowing experience to arise and pass...

...

Now, in your own time, move into having a break and when we meet back we can take some questions.

End of Session 3

Session 4

Questions

Question: [not clearly audible] about moods, such as depression

James: We were looking earlier about how consciousness always takes an object and the more precisely the object can be defined, the more precisely consciousness itself is able to define itself. That's why when you get a problem which you can really get your teeth into and chew on, you usually feel a bit stronger and clearer as a result of that process. However when consciousness encounters something as vague as a mood it can't actually do very much with it.

This is why you can't think yourself out of a mood, such as depression. You have to be able to develop – as you were indicating – a narrative of depression and then you can think about your narrative and hope that clarity about the narrative will change the clarity about the actual state of depression.

Moods in meditation, such as agitation and sinking feelings

From the point of view of dzogchen, the main thing would always be not to merge in it but not to resist it either. Don't stand away from it. Relax into the spaciousness and allow the mood to be there and then clarity runs through the mood. You know the most famous self-help book, 'Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway'? It's a bit like that. Feel whatever it is and allow other aspects to come through.

It's when we feel that a mood is pervasiveness and has taken over the entire terrain of the self, leaving us nowhere to stand, that we get collapse. Where else can you stand, in something which is so vague? You won't find a position of opposition because it's essentially an all-pervasive mood therefore you don't have duality. The strategies of duality won't work whereas the strategies of non-duality, which would just be to fully open to it, would be there. So, it's fine to say, 'feel the fear' for example, but who is the one who feels the fear? If I feel the fear, I may be scared shitless in which case I won't be able to do it. So, feel the fear as something in the field, but not in your heart. There is a feeling of sinking, of hopelessness, of awfulness. To be present with that requires having some taste of the openness of awareness.

The Tibetan tradition identifies two main moods of energy which are problematic in meditation. One is 'Göpa' [གོཔ་] which means wild, agitated, a bit manic. It's when there's a lot of stuff going on and it carries you away. You can, of course, surrender into a manic state and that can be quite exciting, but you can also anticipate what's coming because manic moods tend to have a particular form. You may want to get drunk, to spend lots of money, do this or that – so you get a lot of thoughts in your head to which you can stand in relation. The other mood refers to what you're talking about and is called 'Chingwa' [ཤིང་བ་], which means 'sinking'. It is likened to a tired swimmer who just feels that they can't keep going and is about to merge under the waves. They don't even have the will power to pull themselves back up because that will be even more exhausting. The one who is sinking is an experience inside the ocean of the mind so what to do is just trust that, as you're sinking, you can be present with sinking.

Sleep yoga or dream yoga can be used with this feeling. As you're falling asleep at night – you may do it sitting up or lying down; there are many ways into it – visualise a small ball of white light here between the eyebrows. You can also visualise a letter in the heart but having a bright focus of attention as you're falling asleep leaves some trace of focus which goes into the dream state so that you can find yourself in the dream, because these moods are a bit like dream states. They don't have a beginning or an end; you can't get a handle on them. So it's how you inhabit them, not by control, not by submission but always that middle way of 'the experiencer is not participating'.

The energy of the experiencer is participating in a field which is arising from the open spaciousness of the experiencer. So, always relaxing and opening, relaxing and opening and just being however it is. 'Whatever comes, comes'. In the tradition they say 'If you go to hell, then go to hell. If you go to heaven, then go to heaven.' Just sit present with whatever, not falling into it, not pushing it away but allowing it space to be the current content of your experience. It's not dualistic because there isn't a 'you' that's standing in relation to it. You're in the state of the mirror

and the mirror is without any editing, fully showing whatever state, be it terror, fear, anguish, confusion, loss-ness.... You just stay. Of course every now and then you will fall into it and that will have its particular ripple but whenever that happens, don't try to push it away. Don't blame yourself either for doing it but just very gently pull your awareness back to being present with it. We always have to remember that the reflection is in the mirror but the mirror isn't contaminated by the reflection. That, in a sense, is the act of faith in this kind of practice. There's all this crappy stuff inside 'me' which 'I' don't like and both of these are arising. If I say, that which I don't like is 'me', then I'm back into a dualistic struggle trying to control something I can't control.

Now, both the unpleasant experience and the negative reaction can be allowed and in that state, be just what's there. But of course, on a Monday morning, when you've got to get yourself to work, you need to get yourself in gear, ready for work and that's not an optimal time for practicing like this. Perhaps on the Sunday night you could try to induce the feeling of the Monday morning – which of course you're probably trying to avoid over the weekend – and just be with that: that the freedom of the weekend is over. *'For the sake of keeping body and soul together, I submit to being a wage slave.'* I am intentionally reducing my existential freedom. I am constrained. That has certain consequences and one can inhabit these consequences. If you have very busy work, very demanding work, very boring work, whatever the flavour of the work would be, that's the flavour.

"But, I don't want my life to be like that. Surely there's more to life than this?" That's the discourse of the ego and from the ego's point of view, that's a very fair thing to say. *"I could have a better life if I was to change my job and do this and this and this. I could have a place in the sun!"* Yes, but the thing about the sun is that it gets up on one side of the sky and moves across to the other side of the sky and then it goes to sleep. The place in the sun is always temporary. Good times don't last. Bad times don't last. So, without martyrdom, without putting yourself forward as a victim, without trying to go into control, when you're depressed just be depressed. Which is to say, the experience of depression arises in the space of the mind and then it will go.

Awareness is infinitely hospitable

That is the great generosity of the spaciousness of the mind. We have this term in Sanskrit, *'Dharmadhatu'*. *Dharma* there means phenomenon and *Dhatu* means 'space', so it's the space within which phenomena arise. I have recently started translating it as 'infinite hospitality' because the space of the mind can be hospitable to anything, just as the mirror is hospitable to whatever image arises in it.

So, the question then is, *'Who is in charge of our mind?'* No-one. The ego's not in charge of the mind. From the buddhist point of view the ego is not in charge of the mind, nor is awareness in charge of the mind. Think of a mirror, the mirror's not in charge of who stands in front of it. We are so obsessed with the notion of individual mastery, that we think we should be able to live life on our own terms but clearly that is an illusion. Even people with huge computer programmes, trying to predict economic futures, even with that huge amount of intelligence, people can't predict very far. We should start to collapse the fantasy of control and that would allow us to collapse some of the universal salvation fantasies of what we're going to do. *"End poverty now!"* These slogans make people crazy because actually as fast as donations and foreign aid are amassed, wars break out that impoverish people. Samsara is a difficult place and even if all the wise people got together and thought big thoughts, it wouldn't solve the problem because the answer doesn't lie inside thinking.

In order to take on personal responsibility we need to work out, 'Who is this person?', which is what the meditation would be. St Francis of Assisi developed a prayer which is used a lot in the 'twelve step model', *'May we have the courage to change the things we can change and the patience to accept the things we can't change and the wisdom to know the difference'*. Personal responsibility means that I can remember to clean my teeth at night and in the morning, but there are many other things I cannot control and if I try to take personal responsibility for things that I can't control then I'm likely to diminish my own sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem, which is likely to make me pretty inefficient in the world.

Question: Are you saying that all of us should be responsible for our own actions?'

James: Well, that would be fine if all our behaviour was truly rational and we were able to be present in the moment with everything that we do. Given that we're prone to distraction and confusion and loss-ness, it's actually quite difficult to be responsible in that way. However, you can make a gloss on the word 'responsible' as 'response-able' which means that we are able to respond, not in a top-down, big shoulders, *'I am responsible'* way but *'I am a participant and I will do my best to stay in a responsive mode, without controlling the other and without trying to over-control my own situation'*, which means I am a field phenomenon.

Question: Is there a distinction between a thought that arises out of awareness and a thought that arises out of something else?

James: All thoughts arise in awareness. Awareness is the source and the field. It is the arena within which everything is occurring and it is the source, in as much as it's inseparable from the *Dharmadhatu* or the 'ground-state'. How it particularly arises depends on the interactive field factors. The mirror is not choosing what it shows, which seems very radical for us because it indicates the de-centering of the individual.

Perhaps you know that famous drawing of Leonardo, the man in a square and circle with arms outstretched? It is a study of the proportions of the ideal human body illustrating the renaissance belief that the human body is an analogy for the workings of the universe. We still have the sense today that this is a 'man-sized world'. The Renaissance gave rise to modern European humanism which has pervaded every aspect of our life. We believe that human beings are most important, which is also consecrated through the Christian and Jewish traditions. They state that God made the world particularly for man and that he gave us dominion over it.

Buddhism is saying something different. Being human is described as being just one of the six realms of samsara. Humans however do have the chance to open themselves to unborn wisdom, to the nature of the mind. This is an energetic form and has no essence, hence it cannot be the 'owner' of awareness. This is not in charge. I'm not very important. Human beings, believing that they're very important, are destroying the world. They're chewing it up, destroying species after species, burning down the rainforest in the belief that we come first, that we are the most important.

From the buddhist point of view that is just an illusion. Over-privileging ourselves, we seek to dominate the environment, to turn all its resources to our purpose without thinking of the consequences. This is a kind of madness.

So, the deconstructive move here is the hubris of humanistic centralisation of our privileged position. It's a fantasy, a thought which arises due to causes and condition and which hides from us the fact that we are gestures. We are moments of energy manifesting out of awareness, which is

without form or colour. When we die this form – which we are so attached to, so in love with that we spend so much time taking care of and filling it with ideas and images and information and so on – will be emptied out like a sausage-skin and there will just be a dead body lying there. At first it will be of some interest to the relatives but if left sometime, it will become abhorrent as insects start to crawl out of it. People will then want to bury it, or burn it, or throw it in the river, or get rid of it somehow and that's the fact; it's just a temporary show.

Question: As a practitioner, who is meditating in order to observe my mind and to be aware. Why be aware? Does something emerge from awareness that is different from thoughts?

James: No. You see, there are many different kinds of buddhism and I think you are relating to a different kind of buddhism.

In dzogchen the practice is an end in itself. This is a journey that isn't going anywhere. Dzogchen is just about being present. Most of us, most of the time, are involved in strategic and tactical thinking. We are concerned with things being a means to an end. For example, thinking that I want to develop my compassion so that I'll be more open to other people and help them. Or thinking that I want to develop my wisdom so that I won't make so many mistakes and won't cause trouble to myself and others. This is a very nice intention, but it's still locked within 'me' as the definer of the frame of reference.

When you look into emptiness the habitual frame of reference is dissolved. So it's not about deciding to develop mindfulness in order to become a better person, or a better parent, or a better bus driver or whatever. It is about being mindful because being mindless arises from the aberration of having lost the direct sense of who I am. The mind is naturally luminous; it's not that we have to become brighter, because the brightness is already there. It's just that we have to stop making ourselves stupid, and one of the paradoxical ways we make ourselves stupid is by trying to be brighter! That's what's very challenging.

Question: There are states of mind that I find difficult to stay with and often when I am on my own I have a feeling of abandonment and emptiness. Even if the mind is spacious feelings like that are overwhelming and the normal thing is to want to be distracted away. Can you talk about compassion in relation to the spacious mind.

James: Being overwhelmed is very interesting. The end of real hope for French colonial success in Indochina was the big battle of Dien Bien Phu when the French outpost was overrun by Vietnamese soldiers. It's not good in war to get overrun because the bad guys come in and kill you. On an individual level too people can feel they need to defend themselves, like a fortress under siege, staying put and sitting it out. A lot of people's lives are like that, feeling unable to cope and without much resilience. Often people have a very diminished notion of themselves, plus feelings of outrage that these things should be happening to them, a kind of disbelief which is also very ungrudging and unsettling. The ego self will always have limited capacity and as an ego, as an individual person, we will often be overwhelmed. Open awareness is the ground of our experience, which we can open to directly in our meditation practice, but to bring it into the hurly-burly of life as the immediate ground of our being is very tricky indeed, because we get caught up in the maelstrom of stuff.

So, to answer your question about compassion, it's important to think what you can cope with. Sometimes people have horrors thrust on them, through attacks, rapes and so on. Sometimes we take too much onto ourselves because we're out of touch with our own capacity. So compassion would be to know that the body is limited, speech is limited, and mental formations are lim-

ited. The mind itself, or awareness, is not limited but if you're going to interact with someone, you're interacting, not as the mind itself, not as an open mirror, but you're interacting with people in terms of your mental formations. If you have an impulsive nature then you are quite likely to leap into situations beyond your capacity, because you're not looking before you leap. You just have to leap.

Compassion with someone in that state is to help them get an overview of what their situation is and to be careful. Just to be careful, because many aspects of our being are completely disconnected with the body. We all take risks. I know when I was young, I did many physical things, up in the hills and so on, where death is quite easy. You can slip on the scree slope or on a ridge and it's good luck that you got safely to the other side. Some people don't get out the other side. People die on the hills every year. In some ways we live and enjoy our lives by not being in touch with our capacity. The middle way, which is the essential thing in buddhism, can be very tricky to find. If we're too fear-ful, if we're too filled with anxiety about the world, then we retreat and we hardly participate in life. If we too fear-less, we are not able to judge what is our capacity in this particular moment.

The primary function of being relaxed and open is, in practical terms, to open us to the entire undivided field, that is to say 'me and you'. Living in London as I do, it's a dark night and I'm coming home late. If I turn into my street and see a bunch of people there, I will get back out of the street and walk away, maybe go into a pub, or into the underground if it's still open. I would wait there for some time and then go back, because I don't want trouble. Now, if I take the position, *'This is my street. I am entitled to go down it any time of the day or night. Nobody's going to tell me what to do...'* then that's probably not very wise in a big city. So there is a field awareness that says, *'I'm part of this'* then what is this, because *'this'* includes me?' But if I live in my separate space with my own positions and ideas about this and that, how will I know, how will I get the full sense of what the deal is, at this particular moment?

Dzogchen would be saying that the safest way is to open to the field of experience and taste what's there. If you formulate something in your head, you will be privileging the map over the territory. That has its own advantages because the map you drew yesterday, you can read again today. If you're having to read the territory, you've got to be on the ball because the territory's always changing. Part of the territory is one's capacity and if I'm tired, or if I've got a cold, or if I've had a shitty day at work and have had it up to here, then I'm not going to be a hero. At another time, I might be more "chipper" and then it would make sense to be more adventurous. But it starts with, *'What is the relation between these two pulses in the immediacy of this situation?'*

So, being overwhelmed has often occurred because people couldn't extricate themselves from situations. They didn't have allies. They didn't know what to do. In terms of a practice, meditation is very useful but all of us can encounter situations where aspects of ourselves are being overwhelmed. And yes, what often happens then is that we dissociate. We vanish. That may be aided by alcohol, by outrageous behaviour, by watching the telly, listening to the radio or whatever. From the point of view of this practice, dissociation would be very unhelpful. Imagine 'my self' cannot cope with a situation, so I'm going to collapse most of me and hiding it away to keep it safe. But it's not safe because, *'Ha! You can't see me!'* That doesn't make much sense does it? Because I can't see you I then think that you can't see me. When we're hiding, we're actually unbelievably vulnerable. The safest place to be is with your eyes open. *'But if it's scary out there, I don't want to know.'*

This is why relaxing and trusting basic spaciousness allows a systemic release of anxiety, which allows us to look clearly, not with 'will-to-power' courage, but just with the clarity of, *'This is my world. My world is not in here, it's in the interactive'*. Staying present with that. But there isn't a magical solution. Being overwhelmed is always linked to capacity and underestimating or overestimating capacity is a common problem.

Question: If I'm understanding you right, what you're saying is that it isn't possible to be there all the time.

James: Well, this is a particular way of reading the mind, so it's not always clear and maybe I'm not describing it very well. If you think of a mirror, let's imagine that this thing in my hand is a mirror. If you look in the mirror, you will see reflections. Now, the mirror is not a machine. It's not doing anything to produce these images. If it were a camera instead, the camera would have some apparatus inside that would be fixing the light that was coming in to make the image appear, but the mirror's got no hidden fancy mechanics going on. It just reflects. It is both passive and active, but its activity is the activity of showing what it has passively accepted. Does that make sense? Consciousness is active in a different way.

Consciousness is participative, so I'm speaking to you at the moment I'm looking at you. My body is moving in gestures towards you. I am aware. Awareness reveals that this is going on, as me. That awareness is passive. It's not doing it, as it were. I'm doing it, but this 'I' is the energy arising from the awareness, like the ray of light coming out of the sun. So, awareness is not an active agent but it is the ground of experience. It is a showing, a revealing rather than an act of involvement. The act of involvement is in the manner of a dream, within the field of reflection in the mirror. So, because you've asked this question, I, for whatever reason, am giving a very strange, rambling kind of answer to it, which is probably not as clear as I would like it to be. And it's happening at this time on a Saturday afternoon, in this particular circumstances. If you ask me the same question at another time, I might well give you a different reply.

Question: Is that because of the differential in energy?

James: Well, yes. It's because our communication is contextual. We're talking about a 'take', a description, a gesture of something which verges just on the very edge of being conceptualisable and being expressible. You know, that's why we use an image like a mirror. All of us are here. We experience the room but we experience ourselves in the room. So, we experience ourselves and the room together. This is the quality of awareness. Being ourselves in the room – doing our postures, gestures, turning, backache, whatever it is – this is movement inside the mirror. The mirror is not moving. Awareness doesn't move. That's what I was trying to say earlier about the dog and the tail. It's not that I have an awareness that I can fine-tune and build up. It's non-developmental. Dzogchen texts say that it's there from the very beginning, it's complete. The word 'dzogchen' in Tibetan means 'the great completion, the great perfection'. It just is. The mirror just shows

Question: Are you saying that the problem, for example with suicidal or self-harming people, is that they have mistaken their reflections? They've bonded with their reflections, when really their reflections are nothing?

James: Yes.

Question: So, if they stayed in the process of just being with these very sad feelings, they'd just watch it disperse, like anything else, like other thoughts do. So would your answer about

compassion be that even with those dark, dreadful, ghastly thoughts, you treat them like the reflections in a mirror. They are just reflections, so they don't get treated in any differently?

James: Well, they are reflections for the mirror but they're not reflections for the person. That's the problem. If you were suffering, say post-traumatic stress symptoms, you are biochemically wired up. Your system never relaxes. You're buzzing and like an alcoholic with a hip flask topping themselves up throughout the course of the day. You find that people who've had a lot of trauma often somehow end up in more traumatic situations. The benign or 'vanilla' reading of that situation would be to see it as bad luck. The more pessimistic reading would be that they're wanting to keep their adrenaline level up, because that's become 'home-base' for them, so they look for chaos, to keep themselves buzzing. So, in order to calm down and access your capacity to open, you've got to let go of that. This one of the reasons why Dialectical Behavioural Therapy became popular, because it was focused specifically on the refractive rate for excitation in young girls who are harming themselves. Once you're aroused, how do you bring that level of arousal down to a point where you can have rational thought? Because if you're buzzing, you don't have any rational thought. Now, you need to be a very great meditator to stay relaxed, open and buzzing simultaneously. It's extremely difficult. If something gets to you, you go into these defensive reactions so compassion would be to just simply be with the person in that state and offer them the calmness of your roundedness as a way of trying to let their system re-harmonise, because our bodies communicate directly through their energetic structures. If one person is calm, it's likely to bring the other person down. But if you get worried, *'Oh, my God, what am I going to do to help this person because they're getting a bit "out of it?"'* your excitation will start to feed theirs and it will all become more difficult.

As everybody knows, if you get yourself in a tiz about something it can a very good idea to take a hot bath rather than trying to think your way out of it. Go through a door that's available and the 'door' of the body, is more available in that moment than the door of your mind which has been 'knocked out' a bit by anxiety.

The first teachings I had from my teacher were to eat regularly and sleep regularly. Eating well, going to sleep regularly and so on...these structured behaviours really help the whole system to calm down. On one level our habits are predictive so once you have set up a balanced, repeated habit, a bit like a metronome – everything starts to relax, because your body knows what 'the deal' is. It knows what's going to be required of it. But if you have randomness you are likely to bump in to the world. This applies to all of us – look at setting up structures of ease, of release.

Release is enormously important. We live in a culture that privileges arousal, being 'on the job', being able to mobilise and get on with things; but because we're so over-tilted in that direction, it is better for our health to learn to relax and release and let go, and think, *"Never mind, never mind, it doesn't matter so much"*. However you can only do that if you have recognised that the importance you're adhering to, is an investment from yourself and that you can also divest it of your investment. You can take your energy, your libido, your life-force, whatever you call it, back into yourself, because it is you, that makes the world shine.

The cemetery is full of indispensables

Last autumn in Italy I was being driven to the seminar and we drove past a cemetery. The driver told me that Italians use this expression, 'the cemetery is full of indispensables'; and I think that's wonderful. People who in their life felt they were completely indispensable. The guy who'd set up a factory and stipulated exactly how everything had to be done. People who write a

will forty pages long telling all their relatives exactly what's what. And then they're gone! People do whatever they want. None of us are indispensable.

So the illusory nature of life means 'hold it lightly'. Of course things are important, but not that important. Learning to lose, learning to fail, learning to retreat, to reverse, is incredibly important. That was not on the curriculum when I was in school, it was all about pushing forward and overcoming difficulties, but we do have the saying, 'He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day' and this is very, very good advice.

We live in a time of hubris. We have an inflated sense of value, whereas actually, we're not all that important because we are empty. This means that the crossroads is always with us. Our life can go in this way or that way. Whenever it starts to feel over-determined, when we feel we have no choice, we have a bit of a problem.

Question: Isn't there a case for ignorance being bliss?

James: For a while but not forever. Acceptance is based on the loose construal of self. It means that the self-matrix has some room to manoeuvre inside it. The ingredients of myself are there but it's a bit like a pontoon bridge in that there's some capacity for movement since it's not clumped together. The looser the construal of self, the more possibilities there are. The more tightly you construe the self the more punitive it can feel. So, allowing life to happen means you're rebalancing the active-passive fulcrum. Many people need to be more passive rather than more active. Some people do need to be more active but for a lot of us, it's about accepting that this is how it will be.

How then can I inhabit my life as it is, rather than struggling to get another life? Now that may sound terribly defeatist if you think you should be able to impose your will on the world. But that is a combative stance, a position of violence. If you're going to collaborate with the world and with other people, there has to be a place for both their pattern and your pattern so that both can co-exist. You win some and you lose some. Yes, you do lose some but losing is also very important because when you die, for example, assuming you're lucky enough not to have a sudden death, it will be a process of loss. Gradually you become immobile. You're lying in a bed. You might start to have paralysis, so when your hair falls across your face or you feel an itch you can feel it but you can't lift your arm to do anything about it. You wet yourself and somebody else has to clean you. The carers are coming round. You don't know their names. They don't know you. They're pulling down your pyjamas. How do you position yourself?

This is going to be the fate for many of us, having gone from being very much the agent – the one who makes things happen – to being the passive recipient. So if we say that active is powerful – a kind of phallic positioning – and passive is inferior we set ourselves up for a very sad story.

Comment: Sometimes this is interpreted as grief.

James: Indeed. So, in the tantric tradition, you might be visualising a mandala. Out of emptiness comes a whole construction of a world, inside which, through mantras and so on, you participate in the qualities of this divine realm. Then it dissolves down, dissolves into you. and you dissolve into emptiness. Then out of the emptiness, you come out into the world again. These practises are about generation and dissolving, about arising and dissolving. To only do the arising is priapic, over-assertive. It is important to dissolve down into emptiness, into nothing at all, open and spacious and then again for thoughts and images to arise. Here we are. A new world is beginning. And then again, down. This is the pulse of our life. Awakening. Sleeping. Ex-

panding. Contracting. The contracting is vital for the expansion. We wouldn't be breathing if our lungs were only taking in air and not breathing out. We wouldn't be alive if our heart was pumping out the blood but never letting the blood back in. It's the balance pulsation. That is why the ego's desire to be 'on the up' all the time, is completely unbalanced. Meditation practice can be very helpful in enabling us to appreciate that knock-backs, pains, disappointments and difficulties are just one of the many tastes of life. For almost no-one is it the sole taste, because even if you are very frail and very sad, you can still hear the blackbirds. The capacity to be touched and moved is not taken away if you stay open.

So, I think acceptance is very much at the heart of practice and tomorrow we can do more meditation and look more precisely at the nature of compassion as the effulgent radiance of the mind itself, in a non-dual understanding. Any last questions before we end for today?

Question: Does contentment arise from awareness?

James: Contentment is a quality of awareness because it's an end in itself. It's not desiring anything to complete it. Our consciousness tends to be hungry; it is always asking, "*What now? What next? What will I look at? What will I do after I stop what I am doing now?*" It's forward-looking. Awareness, in contrast, is passive-receptive. It is just accepting what comes and there's a contentment that goes with that. Contentment is not the same as happiness; it's not the same as bliss; it's more just a basic satisfaction, a basic 'good enough', an 'okayness'. Indeed the founding Buddha of this particular lineage is called Kuntuzangpo, which means 'always good', it doesn't mean 'high, highest good' it means 'OK good', 'life goes on'.

Okay-dokey. Enough. Basta così. We will meet again in the morning.

End of session 4

Session 5

The nature of compassion

So, this morning we'll look a bit more at the nature of compassion. I will link it in with a brief summary of what we were thinking about yesterday: how the mind has these aspects which are not separate phenomena but whose integrated aspect is the field of openness in which basic awareness is devoid of any content. It has no shape or colour or form and yet it is inseparable from the field of radiance. That is to say – this field of ceaseless ever-changing experience is going on all the time and within that we have the field of our participation, as we find ourselves moving in the environment with particular responses and gestures. It's the inseparability of these three which creates the balance.

If we go too much to the notion of being a separated individual, whose ground is somehow a personal essence inside ourselves, then this isolation makes us overburdened. If we lose any sense of the particularity, the unique specificity of our own situation, we can go to the other extreme and become very vague and spaced-out and 'all over the place', not able to hold it together. So, it's the functional integration of space – the field of experience – and our own particular arising which is precisely what it is moment by moment. It therefore can be a site of delicacy, of grace and poise, of a subtle balance with others whereby we are neither so internally

preoccupied that we are cut off from others nor so open and porous that we are invaded by others. It's a ceaseless pulsation, moving between these polarities of active and passive.

Meditation can help us experience the flow of experience and really see that everything is dynamic. Stasis is a concept which we superimpose on movement because movement is experienced as overwhelming if you try to compute it, if you try to make sense of it. Samsara is Therefore the difference between samsara and nirvana, or a state of confusion and repetition, compulsion and endless reiteration of the same sort of patterns; and nirvana or a state of openness – that is essentially whether we find meaning in events by the activity of interpretation with its consequence of control – making sense of what is going on, which is samsara because it's endlessly busy and it's a task that can never be completed; or relaxing into this openness, we experience the given-ness of intrinsic meaning, the basic facticity of 'just this' and 'just this' and 'just this'.

It is what it is; and within that you can respond and move but prior to the gestures of participation there is the basic facticity of what is arising: that it is empty of inherent self-nature. There is no substance to it and yet it is here. It is undeniably here.

Samsara is busy trying to apply meaning

Stasis is a concept which we superimpose on movement because movement is experienced as overwhelming should you try to compute it, to make sense of it. Samsara is a state of confusion, compulsion, an endless reiteration of the same patterns. Samsara is trying to find meaning and sense in events by the activity of interpretation, with its consequence of control; samsara is endlessly busy since it is a task that can never be completed. Nirvana is a state of openness and relaxing into this openness, we experience the given-ness of intrinsic meaning, the basic facticity of 'just this' and 'just this' and 'just this'. It is what it is; and within that you can respond and move but prior to the gestures of participation there is the basic facticity of what is arising, that it is empty of inherent self-nature.

There is no substance to it and yet it is here. It is undeniably here. When you start to get a cold, it's undeniable. You've got sneezes and a runny nose. There are signs and symptoms. You have to deal with them. You have to get your Kleenex ready. So it's not that we can magic things away and say, "*It's all illusion, it's not there*" but what is there is a pattern. Having a cold has a particular kind of sequence. It lasts maybe a couple of days and then it usually gets better or it can deepen into something else. It is a dynamic unfolding. Before you get a cold, you're in one state. Even that state is not your true state because since you've been small you've probably had all sorts of colds and scratches and infections of various kinds. There is not a stable home base; even when you're healthy physically, sometimes you're more tired, sometimes you're more hopeful and so on. There isn't a 'real me'. There isn't a 'my true self' as a form which can be established. What we experience is multiple forms through which we arise.

How can we offer hospitality to our life as it is? This is the real question. Usually we're trying to correct ourselves, to modify ourselves, to make things right because we have some game plan, some map, some image of how life should be. We want to transform maladaptive procedures into adaptive procedures to reduce the interpersonal stress and so on. Most psychotherapy is concerned with that kind of issue. However from the point of view of our practice, the key point of integration is in space rather than through alignment with a map. So, instead of trying harder, instead of contorting ourselves to fit a particular image, we stay with how things actually are and then work with that, because actually, that's all we have.

The maps don't really exist. These are abstract concepts which have the truth that concepts have but it's a truth which hovers several metres above the earth. It's not actually here. What is compassion? Generally speaking, in buddhism, compassion means living within connectivity with the intention that there should be universal happiness, free of pain and suffering for all beings. Now what kind of happiness would that be? As an idea it's very sweet, but there ain't nobody who's free of suffering.

Integration means that problems are there and spaciousness. So, say you're feeling unwell, that presents itself in terms of sensations in the body or thoughts or emotions. You are aware of that. That is to say, this is being registered inside the field of experience. Something is happening. The bridge between the openness of mere registering, the naked awareness, and the arising of these phenomena is that our consciousness, our active interpretation, sees these sensations as signs and symptoms of something and comes up with an interpretation. So, we're sitting here. We might hear a sound outside, 'Brrrrrr'. We think, "*Oh, it's a motorbike*". What we hear is 'Brrrrrr'. That arises and passes in space. We don't have to do anything with it, unless the driver's completely drunk and storms in through the window, it's nothing to do with us. It's just something – but we feel something has to be done. "*Now I know what's going on. Clever little me!*" This is what consciousness is doing all the time. It's reassuring itself of mastery of the world on the basis of knowledge, so if I encounter a situation, that I can't explain I invent an explanation even at the expense of myself.

For example sexual abuse by parents is enormously disturbing because the child's developing capacity to make sense of the what is happening is collapsed due to a category error. The person that should be taking care of you, is now exploiting you. These two can't be coexistent, so you get a kind of implosion of meaning and that leads to a polarised choice: blame the other or blame myself.

This bridge of consciousness, our mental capacity to work out what's going on, feels usually like our greatest ally. It's what we rely on because unless we make sense of the world then there won't be any meaning. In existentialist writings, that's taken as basic, that we're thrown into a world devoid of any meaning and it is up to us to generate meaning through our particular kinds of conceptualisation.

Buddhism says something very different. It says there is a given-ness to pure meaning or natural meaning. There is a value which is intrinsic in the facticity of awareness, which our presence, our aliveness, the registering of experience, is itself fulfilling. Experience and the registering or the revealing of that experience is a simultaneous non-dual move, which is complete.

Yesterday we were looking at the metaphor of the mirror and the reflection: the reflection appearing in the mirror is what it is. It's enough. Nothing needs to be done with it. So, again, what we have here is a triangulated situation in which the moment of arising, and the awareness of that moment of arising meet the third point, the interpretation, the incorporation of this moment into a pre-established narrative. This narrative is inserted as the seeming guarantor of meaning and value. So, the busyness of mental activity seems to keep us safe in terms of our ordinary existence and if somebody is not able to do that, they start to fall apart. If you don't open your letters on the day they arrive and you don't pay your bills and you don't want to go out of the house then other people are likely to think you are not holding your life together. They might suggest that you get professional help. That sounds very compassionate. It sounds like a way of helping someone, and it is. It's helping the person to return to the normal mode of functioning, of being human.

However as buddhists we are concerned with helping people to recognise that they are buddhas. Buddhas are not primarily human. What does that mean? It means that the whole frame of reference in buddhism is very different from a materialistic one. Buddhism points to the fact that the mind is infinite, that it doesn't have limits. When you look to find awareness, it hasn't a top or bottom. It doesn't have sides. It doesn't have a beginning or an end. It doesn't come from anywhere, and it doesn't go anywhere.

This is something you can investigate for yourself. You simply sit and investigate for yourself, 'Where is my mind? What is it? What is this?' As you are investigating it, thoughts, feelings and sensations arise, presenting solutions to your question. Just stay with the question and the solutions will vanish by themselves. Keep doing that. Solution after solution after solution, until you start to think, "Uh-oh, this can't be right, because every time I get the right answer, the bugger vanishes!" It can't be the real thing if it doesn't hang around. I'm looking for the mind itself and this ersatz synthetic thing –this conceptual answer presenting itself as something natural and given – is very seductive.

We are mugs. We've been taken in a lot in our lives. We were born with a little ring in our nose and everything that arises just hooks it leading us this way and that way. We give ourselves into all sorts of projects and beliefs and ideas because consciousness seeks an object. Consciousness needs to be seduced. It needs to get into something but each of these solutions is an evanescent moment. It arises and passes.

If we keep investigating these questions you start to be aware of the nature of being itself, which is luminous: that is to say, vital or alive. There is a presence. We are here. We're not dead. We have not gone away, but it's also not the presence of something else.

When we talk of presence in dzogchen, it doesn't mean the presence of something else. It's a pure presence. It's 'just this', the immediacy of being alive. It shows the infinity of our nature which is something amazing. The body is not infinite. The body is very definitely finite. We're all going to die. The body is susceptible to outside dangers and to internal diseases. There are many ways in which this body can get knocked out. Every gesture that we make with our body is finite. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. Every speech act is finite, finite and contextual. But the mind itself is infinite. The Buddha said that all beginning things are ending things. Therefore everything which is finite will go towards dissolution but the mind itself, awareness, doesn't do that.

Awareness is the true refuge

That's why awareness is the true refuge. We take refuge in the nature of our own mind, entering into the practice again and again, relaxing through the layers of stickiness of our habitual identification with thoughts, feelings and sensations into this infinite awareness. Infinite awareness means there is no end. Beginning-less. End-less. This has huge implications for how we understand death. The forms of the energy of awareness – our physical forms, our memories, thoughts, intentions and so on – these energies start to collapse down at death and merge back into space, but space is the ground of awareness. Awareness continues. Awareness is not consciousness, as we were discussing yesterday. Consciousness is focused on the particularities of experience. Awareness reveals everything.

So when we say, "May all beings be happy", we are saying, "May all beings rest in the ground of their own being". We're not wishing that they get some nice experiences since nice experiences will necessarily be ephemeral. Things in the world change. People want to have a secure place to

invest their money. They put it into property. Prices go up and down. They put it in equities. Prices go up and down. They start to trade with foreign currencies. Values go up and down. Nobody can predict how investments are going to go. The stock market shot up recently. It'll probably go down again soon. It's like that. It's a moveable feast. There is nothing secure in the world of manifestation.

Therefore, to wish happiness to all beings, is not to wish them some-thing. Of course on a relative level we hope that people have a safe place to sleep, are protected from violence, have food and kindness around them and so on but all of these situations are vulnerable. If you've got a house, problems arise with it. Every problem starts as some good idea. People buy a car; somebody scrapes their car or a stone chips the windscreen. How could that happen? If you've got a car, you get problems. If you've got a house, you get problems. If you've got a body, you get problems. Problems go with the territory because all phenomena are impermanent; they have built-in obsolescence, just crumbling away all the time. So, real happiness comes from awakening to the contentment or satisfaction of residing in the natural condition of awareness.

Modes of compassion

Mahayana describes two modes of compassion: the compassion which is like planning to go on a journey and the compassion of actually going on a journey. So, the intention, '*May all beings be happy*', is beautiful thought, an expansive thought that can open the heart and make us feel connected with all beings, but then we have to actually go on the journey; we have to actually do something which will bring about that happiness.

In the tantric tradition it is believed that by using visualisation practices, which open up a luminous world that includes all beings, there is a direct immediate benefit for others. We can't prove that scientifically, but the belief is that the practice itself makes actual change to the condition of beings. And then because beings choose to get lost, these practices have to be done again, and again and again.

There's also a third notion of compassion which is called 'compassion without an object', '*Migpai Nyinje*' [དམིགས་པའི་སྤྲིང་རྗེ]. It refers to the mental experience of reification and objectification; you see an entity and you see it as something you can get hold of. If you are going into hospital for an operation, you hope that the surgeon is very good at reification and objectification because you want them to know which is a nerve, which is an artery and which is a vein and cut in the right place. So, particular knowledge is not bad in the domain of particular knowledge, however, from the buddhist point of view, that is a dream-like experience. It is an illusion.

Illusion in this sense is not referring to the difference between fantasy and reality, where reality is true and provable and fantasy is just like a daydream. Illusion here means that even in the precise particularity of its formation, which is undeniable, there is no essence. So, this recording machine in front of me has no essence. It is operating on the basis of the interaction of many factors. There's a supply of electricity coming into it and there are many pieces inside, metal and electronic components which through their collaboration, function in a way that will lead to the recording of sound. It operates through juxtaposition and interaction. If the pieces are put together in the right way and the flow of power coming into the machine allows the connected pieces to operate, then the function is performed. But if you open the machine, you won't find some little essential form which is doing all the work, just as, inside us, there isn't a sort of homunculus, a mini-man or mini-woman who is our real essence.

Summing up people is to do them a violence

So when we look at sentient beings we tend to conceptualise them. If we know their name we stick that on top; the naming of a person is a bit like inserting the keystone in an arch. It locks the arch in place. You know someone's name, you put their name on them, 'Ah!' Now we know where we are. Our habitual picture of that person can be summoned forth, evoked by their name. It's as if their name represents some essential form, but of course the name is contingent. For whatever reason, our parents gave us the names we have, or we may have changed our name in the course of our lives.

It may seem that we are being kind and attentive by remembering the details of someone's life. However what we remember of their life is only a minute slice of all the things that have happened to them. So to sum them up according to our experience of them is to create an incomplete false image of them. Human beings are unfoldings. We're moving. We're changing. All sorts of things happen to us. When we engage with people, it is one changing living system engaging with another living system. Moment by moment, somebody is revealing themselves in particular ways and if you can respond energetically to how they present themselves, unmediated by any story about who they are or what they need, then you get a real meeting. You have some authenticity. So, *migpai nyinje*, the compassion which is free of over-fixation, opens up the way for a real spontaneous contact with other people. It prevents you getting caught up in a dramatised reading – a map of the situation which over-determines what moves you can make – and opens up the possibility of being authentic and genuine in the moment. What we do or say in the moment, applies to the moment. We cannot sum other people up. That is a violence.

If you're responding in the moment, where is that response coming from? When you have a stored-up notion of the other person, although you may think you are not activating it, it is going to be activated and what you're going to do is whack the other person with an impulsive rather than a spontaneous response. Impulses are always preformed. They are story-lines that have been run before. Out of the freezer, into the microwave. Open your mouth, "Oh shit!" If it's been in the freezer for a long time and you're cooking it in a microwave there are not many vitamins in there. This is not fresh food. It's just something I happen to have handy, so we whack the other person with that. Not very useful.

Spontaneity means being relaxed and open. We have huge banks of memories about other people and their capacity. Like chess players, we're planning several moves ahead, especially so in family dynamics. We anticipate what others will say and do. By betraying the freshness of our being alive, we also deprive the other person of actually encountering our energetic presence. Mutuality is the name of the game and whenever that breaks down, you're into some kind of role-play such as the victim, the rescuer and the persecutor endlessly chasing each other around. So, that's was a brief illustration of the dangers that easily get sucked into and to the practice of a compassion which doesn't rest on elaborated story-lines but is opening itself as fully as possible to the lived presence of the phenomenological field.

By being present in the moment you will then be able to respond. That's very different – and of course, it will have consequences. The other person may not be happy at you. They may be upset but then the question is: 'Am I supposed to not upset other people?'. If compassion means acting in a way that causes no grief to other people then we should close our hospitals because in hospitals people stick needles in your arm and take sharp knives and cut into you! They poke around inside your body; and then they stitch it up as if to pretend they hadn't done anything. In that way we can see that all things are possible if there is a clarity of intention. Surgeons don't get arrested for grievous bodily harm. Yes, they might get punished if they make a lot of mis-

takes; they might get struck off the register but they're not doing it out of a bad intention. So it comes down to really being in the ethical freshness of our existence.

Good people doing bad things

People, often 'good' people, do bad things and there are different explanations for this: nature or nurture, a fall from grace, original sin... Buddhism says that our original nature is buddha nature but it is obscured by this patina, this veneer, of habitual intoxication with ideas, judgments, evaluations, memories, intentions and so on. A whole maelstrom of mental activity is going on and while we're invested in that level of turbulence there is a lot to be done. Because we are so busy 'hoeing our garden', we're not aware of the potential of the soil. In this way the buddha nature is hidden from us, even by our very efforts to stop ourselves being bad people! That's terribly, terribly sad.

So one of the functions of meditation, in relaxing into the unborn open dimension of the mind, is to taste the fundamental goodness of our being. Remember, the primordial Buddha of this lineage is called Kuntuzangpo. 'Kuntu' means 'always' or 'always already' and 'Zangpo' means 'good'. There is a basic goodness, or a basic health, which is fundamental. Difficulties are adventitious; they arrive. They had a beginning. They are not intrinsic. They are functional and so they have to be dealt with in some way. We can look into different ways of dealing with them but they are not our true nature.

Part of practice includes examining core beliefs we have about ourselves. Perhaps we hate ourselves, or don't believe in ourselves, or distrust ourselves, or think we are a bad person, or greedy or lazy. It is as if there is a voice in our head telling us, "*You are no good.*", "*You will not succeed.*", "*You are lazy.*" and it is as if these statements are defining us, are summing us up. From the buddhist point of view and from a general point of view these are deadly: a) because they're not true and b) because they're very, very powerful. We do not need to get rid of these thoughts but we can re-situate them as contextual. We can never finally define ourselves. Everything that we say about ourselves is perhaps true contextually but in terms of the wider picture, it is untrue. Or rather, it is both true and false. It's true about the moment but it's not true about any core identity. If we start to understand that such beliefs can be both true and false, then we start to have some freedom. If we say that it is completely untrue then we might start doing positive affirmations and other such techniques to redress the belief but I don't think we should go down that road at all because the limitation is there and it will have an impact on how we are with other people.

Our limitations, because we are energetic forms, mean that we will let other people down. We will not provide other people with all that they want. As Donald Winnicott famously said in his short paper, *LOVE AND HATE IN THE COUNTERTRANSFERENCE* therapists show their love by giving attention, by remembering what the patient says, by not judging and so on. They show their hate by starting on time, ending on time, charging money and by going on holiday! "*I've got a life of my own. I care about you and also you're just another punter.*" It's not said quite as crudely as that, but it's true: you do have to have both. When you take care of yourself and decide, '*I need this.*' then that will inevitably carry a rebuff to the other person. If you don't feel able to say, "*No*", to another person then your over-porosity – which may be held in place by some fantasy of wanting to be kind and loving and taking care of other people – means that when their tide of sewage flows towards you, it soaks right into you and you are covered in shit. Not a good place to be!

So, having a limit is also an aspect of compassion, because we are responsible for the field and the field includes ourselves, In '*metta bhavana*' loving kindness meditation, we include ourselves

in the aspiration, “*May I be happy. May all beings be happy. May all beings be happy. May I be happy*” because there’s no real difference between self and other. If you over-privilege the other, that’s not good and if you over-privilege yourself that’s not good either. It’s the co-emergence of self and other in the field which is the liberation of duality.

The open field includes everyone, everything

The open space of the mind, the ‘field’, is... everyone. It’s everyone in this room, everyone in this town, in this country, in the world, all the worms in the soil, the birds in the sky, the ducks in the canal – all possible living forms are within this open field. Nobody is a stranger to us.

In the mahayana tradition, the narrative support for this idea is that since we’ve been born in many previous lives, in every life we’ve had a mother. The mothers have taken care of us, fed us, clothed us, done difficult things in order to keep us safe. Whenever we meet another sentient being, we meet them from the place of obligation and indebtedness. ‘In previous lives, you have been my mothers, you have done this for me. It’s my turn to repay you.’ That’s a very powerful notion to have. It serves to undermine the notion of ‘me first’, of ‘what I’m entitled to.’ The task of my life is to pay off my debts, therefore, every time I do a good thing, is not that I am going ‘one-up’; I am going from ‘one down’ to ‘neutral’. ‘Neutral’ is the middle way. It’s equanimity.

It’s a very beautiful kind of practice. The ways in which these practices have developed over time are so exquisite. They’re so finely attuned and balanced and so good for the heart. They’re really good food.

In the dzogchen tradition however, there is less reliance on a narrative reading and more trusting that basic goodness will give rise to the good. Our nature is good, not as in ‘good versus bad’ nor as in ‘right versus wrong’, but it has the goodness of being completely empty of any content. It doesn’t have bombs in it. It doesn’t have bandages in it. It’s just empty. And because it’s infinite, whatever occurs, occurs within the open field.

That is to say, ‘all experience is the energy of awareness’, or is the energy of the dharmakaya or is the radiance of the dharmadhatu, of all encompassing space. Buddhist texts have many, many technical terms to describe this but basically, infinity has no limit. Therefore, if anything is occurring, it’s occurring inside the infinity from the infinity, because there’s no supplier outside. There are no imports because there’s nowhere to import anything from. Whatever is occurring is the illusory radiant manifestation of the dharmakaya, of our buddha nature. The more we trust this, the more we see the light, radiant, luminous quality of what’s around us, which in the moment of our manifestation within it, takes on particular shapings according to our patterning.

We are all sitting in this room here, seemingly in the same room but the room is revealed to us in different ways, according to our particular nature. The particularity of how we arise is compared in the tradition to light going into a crystal. A natural rock crystal will have all kinds of textures inside it, which you could call impurities but they are just the variations. As the light goes in, it hits the particular refractive index of that crystal – but of course the crystal is not only of one quality. It has many different aspects, so you get rainbow-coloured light spreading out in different directions. The spreading light depends on the amount of light coming into the crystal. If you’re in a dark room and suddenly the sun shines brightly in through the window, you get a particular of the rainbow light. If you’re outside and the day is very bright and a lot of light is shining into the crystal, you won’t see the rainbow so much. So it depends on the context.

It's just like that for us. Each of us is a crystal and the potential of the situation shines like light through us, which we refract as our particular 'take' on a given situation moment-by-moment. This happens before conceptualisation, so whatever we do is going to be occurring in the integrated responsiveness to the field. In my own experience of this practice life gets easier; I don't seem to bump into the world so much because I have less and less agenda. This is the beauty of the practice, in order to keep safe and to be reasonably useful to other people, we don't have to plan so much.

We start to see that we are safer by relaxing. Relaxing is not the same as being self-indulgent. Being relaxed is grounded and at ease; and in that state of ease, arousal of whatever kind shows itself, because you are going from zero to a hundred. Even if that is happening quickly, you've got a kind of space over which it's spread out. It's a bit like doing chromatography when you spread out a chemical over paper and you see the various ingredients showing themselves in different colours. A spectrum is set out. Whereas when in a state of arousal, you have got various things that you're 'on about'; you're heated up already and so we go from eighty to a hundred! We bring the acceleration and the sense of direction of zero to eighty (which is our stuff); we bring that into the experiential field and we 'do a number'. We're being ourselves. We're giving you a bit of 'what we're on about'. This agenda, which belongs in our history, in our own preoccupations, becomes the basis of engaging with others and we whack them with it!

So, I think that the heart of compassion here is to trust that being relaxed, open and connected allows a finesse of engagement which is fundamental and ethical. That ethics then feeds relaxation because you start to find that basically you're 'on the beat.' That's how musicians would start to jam isn't it? They hear each other playing and get a sense of what's possible and then they're in a groove and it's taking off. Nobody's leading, nobody's deciding, but somehow the 'field' is the organising factor, rather than the individual.

That's the basic of dzogchen ethics. It's not about trying to be better. It's not about trying to help people with your notion of what they need in order to be helped. It's responding directly in the moment to what's there. In terms of evaluation, it won't always be right, if your method of judging rightness is for other people to be happy or pleased with you – but it will be fitting. It's a 'comma', not a 'full stop' and you can apologise; you can always apologise.

Power and knowledge

Patriarchy and hierarchy is a problem in religious structures and one basic rule of power positions is, 'never apologise and never explain'. I think it is vital for dharma practitioners to apologise a lot and to learn to explain, meaning giving a clear description of their experience, rather than a justification. *'This is what I saw. I'm sorry if I bumped into you; it wasn't my intention to harm you but...this is where it was.'* That's neutral. You're not betraying yourself. You're not abasing yourself: *'Oh my God! I'm so sorry. That's just like me, I fucked up once again.'* You're also not 'sitting it out' saying something like, *'Well, if that what you feel, that's what you feel but I'm me and I feel differently'*. Sitting on the fence doesn't work either because it's about staying in the ongoing pulsation, staying on the beat, in which there's space for the other and space for ourselves.

We have power to do things and power to participate but that can get 'clotted' into power over other people. There's a kind of profit that goes with power over others; after each moment of being powerful, you 'scrape the cream off the top' and you use it to create a power edifice, from which increasingly you are looking down on other people. All of us, as we age, develop a bit

more expertise and we can use that to feel that we 'know what's what'. That again is the wrong direction of knowledge. Knowledge in the service of the moment is useful. It is like an array of ingredients to be taken up as required for this particular dish, for this particular moment. But knowledge as a protection, knowledge as a way of proving that I'm right and you're wrong becomes very dangerous.

So knowledge as a useful tool is endlessly deconstructed from its tendency to wrap itself into power structures and positioning, because from the point of view of dzogchen, every time you take up a position, you enter sclerosis. You enter into developing a carapace, a rigidity, a lack of movement. Once you've got a position, you've got to protect it. Other people, oddly enough, have minds of their own! Other people will make of us what they will and all one can really say is, "*Good luck to them*". We can't control other people's minds. You can stand on your head. You can bend over backwards. You can do 'the right thing' again and again. However the other person will continue to have 'a mind of their own'. Mind boggling isn't it? How can that be? Because they don't see the world the way we do. That's very important.

We're sharing this field of experience but it is a field marked by difference, so communication is communication into a sphere in which we cannot really know other people. People will reveal aspects of themselves in this moment. Say you've got two people: you've got two carousels or roundabouts. One has different horses on it and the other has fire engines, a tractor and a little bus or something. Children are sitting on them but they're going at different speeds, and so every now and then, you get the fire engine level with the red horse; and they have that communication. But then it turns a bit and you get another communication and another communication. Each of us here will have different communications with different people. In this room we are about fifty. That's fifty potential communications but the communication you'll have with that person will be different in the beginning of the day, in the tea break and at the end. Multiple worlds. A pluralistic experience. That means we meet the other and we find ourselves, due to many complex variables, well beyond our computational skills. That's how it is. That's my view anyway and you can investigate it for yourself and see if that seems true to you.

You can have a 'game plan' and a narrative and a map that might, if you focus your attention on them, deflect you from that, but actually people are available or not available. Sometimes you can just see it in their face. They want to chat a bit. Other times they're not quite there. We step back. This what we mean by a world of pulsations. The only way to be at ease in that pulsation is not to fill yourself. That is to say, if you have a pre-positioning, if you're 'on about something', if you're 'up to something' it will be difficult.

It's a problem that occurs a lot during supervision in counseling and psychotherapy, particularly for new trainees. They go to supervision. The wise and generous supervisor gives them all sorts of ideas. They wrap them up very carefully and they go into the next session with the patient. They unpack these wise ideas and the patient says, 'Well I'm not interested in that, what I want to tell you about is this'. So you've got to meet the person where they are. What then is the point of supervision? That's a really interesting question. Maybe it's to prepare the person to be more open to the other rather than to work out in advance that is 'the right thing' to say to the other. Therapists can abuse a clinical diagnoses in the service of power and authority. Labeling someone as, for example, OCD, is a way to avoid meeting the person as they are, since it feels too difficult and naked. A naked encounter in which I'm as naked as the patient? *'Ah! No, I don't want that. They want an expert to sort them out. I'm giving them what they need. See how happy they are now? They know what to go and do.'* Of course, it's great if the patient knows

what to do but when they leave your lovely session, but they won't do what they know now, what they know how to do; they'll get blown away by life.

For the therapist to practice being open and responsive in the session is actually helping the patient find their balance in the eddying currents of existence. That vision of compassion is one of relaxed spaciousness, of openness to the field and to attuned participation. It's not being held in place by a particular agenda, by particular techniques or methodologies. It's trusting that the natural clarity of the 'field' will reveal what is required, if we are able to receive. What it also is doing is dissolving the tight nexus of ego-agency.

Opening to this mode of compassion is also the practice of the wisdom of dissolving the over-privileged position of the ego. It's only by dissolving that over-privileged position of the ego that you can relax enough to open to the ground to allow the flow of compassion to move through. That's why, wisdom and compassion are united together. They're not two separate modalities. Now it's time for tea!

End of session 5

Session 6

Practice to bring wisdom and compassion together

Tonglen practice using the sound 'A'

I'll now describe a practice we can do, which brings wisdom and compassion together. It's a practice which stabilises itself through the use of the sound 'A'. In the Tibetan-Indian tradition 'A' is considered the most basic sound, because it's the core vowel. All the other vowel sounds are seen as variations of 'A' and it is also the energiser of all the consonants in their alphabet, which is a different alphabet from ours. 'A' therefore is like the mother sound because all other sounds are seen as variations of it. All the other sounds are the children of 'A'. The 'A' is just open 'AAA'. There's no activity required by the throat or the lips to modify it and so it represents emptiness itself. It's the ground potential which can reveal many, many different forms. The mind itself is open and empty and when we make the sound of 'A' that is, one could say, the closest symbolic representation of energetic manifestation that we can have.

So we start and maintain a continuous stream of the sound 'A' which is supporting us in staying relaxed and open. With this we imagine all sentient beings, beings wandering in samsara, each with their own karmic inheritance, their neurotic patterns, their limitations, their hopes and fears – all the turbulence of their individual identity. Each of them caught up in their little bubble of self, and so we want to make contact with them and release them, as it were, from that bubble of self and open them to the spaciousness within which they have always been living. The bubble is an aspect of the radiance of awareness – it's simply a particular vibration and manifestation – but because it is so intriguing and mesmerising and fascinating that we become preoccupied with it and thereby lose touch with everything else.

Eastern traditions locate the mind in the heart. The heart is a site of awareness and compassion. The love, the openness of the heart that connects with all beings, is infinite. There is no limit to it and therefore there is no limit to its capacity either to give or to receive. It's not like our wallet

or our bread-bin which gets empty and needs to be refilled. We're used to resources like that which are finite and therefore have to be managed, but the openness of the heart is infinite. It's an infinite source of love.

There's no end to it because loving is its nature. I don't mean that in a sort of romantic way, or an idealistic way, but the simple fact is that the field that we're in, is not something apart from ourselves. So it's not that I'm in my world with my necessarily limited resources which I'm giving out to other people, and therefore their gain is my depletion. Normally we give and receive keeping balance sheets like an accountant until at a certain point our generosity twangs back like a rubber band and we ask ourselves, *"Hang on a minute, how come I'm always buying the drink? What are you up to?"* Our normal generosity is tempered by a sense of 'fair's fair'. What we want to do in this practice, is step beyond accountancy because keeping track of all the transactions makes us small and anxious: *'Oh my God! I'm giving more than I can afford. It'll all get out of control!'*

So, out of the infinity of our heart we imagine rays of light flowing ceaselessly towards all sentient beings. You can imagine these rays of light in whatever way you like. Some people find visualisation very easy, others don't, so just imagine this in whatever way you can. It is traditionally described in Buddhism as rainbow-coloured light – white, red blue, yellow and green – representing the wisdom of the five Buddhas. This is spreading out and out, touching all sentient beings. You can imagine gods in the skies, birds, creatures on the earth, humans, animals, fish in the sea. You can imagine beings trapped in hell realms or hungry ghost realms if you're familiar with that. Otherwise you can just imagine all the different kinds of living creatures who are vulnerable to attack or being devoured by others.

The rays of light ceaselessly bring the radiance of wisdom out to them, dissolving the bubble around them and connecting them into their own space. When we do that, we put our hands in a gesture of open-handed giving, sharing this out. So we have a movement of sharing out from the heart, out to all beings. We do this for a while; you will find your own rhythm. Then we imagine that all these beings have many obscurations, many places of confusion and limitation that they're caught up in. So, we invite all the pain and difficulty and suffering and confusion in all beings, to come into us. Now that's quite radical but it's not harmful because the heart is infinitely hospitable. The heart is not like a little pot and then you think, 'Whoaah! Too much. Full up! No, thank you. Closed for business.' You can imagine this in any way you like. Dark clouds coming. Poison streams. Difficulties. Pain. Like rain falling on a vast ocean. Or just flowing into your heart and dissolving into space. Dissolving into space. Space is big enough to take everything. The ego is very small, it gets overwhelmed and can't cope. But our heart is not our ego; it's this infinity of space.

As we are imagining the pain in all beings we're making a gathering gesture, just gathering in this pain. As we're doing that we maintain the continuity of the sound of 'A'. Everything is empty. The virtuous sharing of good fortune is empty. The gathering of pain and misery is empty. This is the drama of samsara being dissolved into its own ground of emptiness. It's like with small children; when they get upset you bring them in and 'kiss it better'. Then they relax a little bit. At the moment they got hurt they were agitated and so can't self-soothe. They can't bring themselves down because it's all too much. So, what we're doing is taking this agitation out of others and dissolving it into spaciousness. We're able to bring this in, to welcome it. What appears to be toxic for the ego, is not toxic for space, so here you have the unification of wisdom and compassion.

Wisdom is present in the openness of the heart, the felt sense of spaciousness and the sound of 'A'. Radiant beautiful light going out, healing and helping all beings. Difficulties, obscurations, suffering... pouring into emptiness, pouring into emptiness, pouring through. Nothing is left behind in the heart. There is no taint. The heart isn't made better by giving out all this love. Neither is it made worse by absorbing all this difficulty. Rigdzin Godem composed a prayer which includes the lines, 'My mind itself is unmade, easily present without effort. It is not made by the good deeds and qualities of the Buddha, and it is not bound by the prison of sinking, fogginess and wavering.'

Infinity is not affected by any finite formation. Yesterday we were looking at the image of the mirror again and again. If the mirror has something beautiful placed in front of it, it shows a beautiful reflection. If it has something ugly, or disgusting or cruel enacted in front of it, it shows that. The mirror doesn't break down or crack open if something horrible is in front of it. It doesn't smile and grow bigger if something good happens in it. It's open. Open is just calm, present, with this. That is the heart of the meditation and it links to the other practice which we've been doing here – just sitting with whatever is. However in this practice we are now activating it in these two directions, giving out and gathering in.

This practice of giving and receiving is called '*Tonglen*' [གྲོང་ལེན] and there are many different ways of doing it. Ours is a particular one. If you feel that you don't want to do it, then you're welcome to just sit quietly. If you feel that you only want to do the part of radiating positive light, you can do that. If you want to practice and explore both, then you could just make the change from giving to receiving in your own time. We'll do it for about ten minutes or so. We usually do this standing up. You need a bit of space around you to spread your arms. You don't want to hit your neighbour in the course of saving all sentient beings! Start and end with radiating light out from your heart; your arms are going out to the front and round and round. The light is not just going out in one way but in all directions to all beings.

[Practice]

This practice is grounded in this central mahayana idea that, '*Whenever I am happy, I will share my happiness with others. Whenever I am sad, I will gather all the sadness of others to me*'. Again, that's kind of counterintuitive. If I'm feeling sad, why would I want more sadness? On an outer level, of course there is a solidarity among the sad. If we have bereavement, or sicknesses or whatever, in our environment or in ourselves, we're not alone in that. Sadness is one of the flavours of life. It's going to come to everyone, so when we're in it, instead of dissolving into it and shrinking into a small ball, we can be with it, in connection with all other beings. On an another level, if we develop this bodhisattva orientation to turn our lives towards the task of universal awakening, it means that twenty-four hours a day, there is always an orientation in our life, that we are 'for the other'. This then means that there is no need to have a space for yourself, because the benefit of others, is also to benefit ourselves.

Our connection with others

It's a strange sort of paradox but many people find it true in their life: that in being focussed on the 'other' you find yourself, and that when you focus on yourself, you get lost. The more you try to be for yourself and work out what your life is, the more you enter into a labyrinth of thoughts which goes nowhere, because there is no end to unravelling something which is coming into being all the time. Whereas just that simple thought, '*May all beings be happy*' shifts us from a sense of ourselves as a particular form, to the openness of our potential.

So these three modes of existence that we've been looking at in various ways, the openness, the radiance of the field and the particular openness of our participation, are all integrated in this practice. We have the openness of our heart, which is infinite. We have the non-differentiation between self and other, which is the unified field of radiance or experience. And we have the gesture of our energy – expanding and receiving, giving and receiving – going on all the time.

So, it's a very useful practice and particularly so when you feel lonely, isolated, unmotivated, without energy. Even if, because of some particularities of our life, we feel alone the fact is that from the non-dual point of view, we're with all sentient beings all the time. If we're open, who is coming towards us when we walk down the street? Is this a stranger? We don't know their name. We don't know anything about them but this is a living, vital force. You may choose to make a bridge to them by imagining they're your mother from a past life, but in that moment, without adding any narrative link, they *are* your world. When we're sitting here together, we are each other's world. This is what we've got. You are not some kind of theoretical construct for me. You are what I've got. Later today I will be in the railway station; I'll see people there and then I'll be on the train and doing some work. I'll see people there as well and in each situation, that is my world. That is my world. We don't need knowledge about other people or information about other people in order to be connected with them.

The view of this practice is that the contact we have arises within a connection which is prior to cognition. We are *always already connected* and it's our cognitions which allow us, or don't allow us, to live with that.

We are sentient beings. As sentient beings we share a lot but anyway let's take human beings. Two arms, two legs, two eyes and so on... You know, as Shakespeare writes in THE MERCHANT OF VENICE where he has Shylock ask, "*If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh?*" However, he's also pointing out that, '*You see me as a Jew and therefore you put me in a separate category, which is dissonant with yours, and so you feel that different rules apply to me, because I'm in that other category*'. That's such a powerful thing, because we can see all over the world, how that is going on. All these murderous attacks, all these dreadful things happening because people, who are incredibly similar, are saying to other people, "*Oi! You're not one of us!*" These 'cuttings' that we make occur on so many bases: gender, age, religion, nationality, appearance, sexual orientation. Beings, who just like us are human, get cut off, excluded, rejected and even annihilated, as in the ghastly term 'the final solution'.

This links in with Melanie Klein's theory of paranoid-schizoid splitting. She says that the baby encounters fluctuations in the mother's availability. Sometimes the mother is finely attuned and present and other times not. So in order to protect the feeling of there being a good mother, the baby constructs the notion of a bad mother and thereby drives in a wedge to keep these two apart. The baby then 'ring-fences' the good and tries to avoid the bad.

We have looked at how Buddhism says something very similar in regard to thoughts. We identify some thoughts which we feel confirm to us who we are and we want to hang on to these thoughts. Then there are other thoughts which we feel dis-confirm our sense of who we are, or who we want to be, and so we seek to exclude these. That splitting and projection, that editing and manipulation, goes on all the time.

The Mahayana Buddhist schools all teach us that everything arises from the ground. Everything is movement in space and therefore, any division which is introduced is not inherent in the ground but arises due to intoxication with conceptualisation. We have to be aware of just how powerful that force is. In the news we are hearing about countries where people who had been

living peaceably together, had gone to the same school, had eaten in each other's houses, had played in the same football teams are now fighting and killing each other. Once the arising of the concept of 'you are other' gets embedded, then this person, whom you've known for forty years, who plays every day with your kids, now becomes an enemy, to be removed and possibly destroyed. Removed anyway. We don't really care what happens to them, as long as the buggers aren't here!

That is incredible isn't it? It shows that all one's lived experience that these neighbours are actually OK, is vulnerable to being wiped out on the basis of intoxication with a concept. You can feel the intensity of that thought formation, how blind and stupid and blunt but also how incredibly powerful it is because it takes us back to a kind of infantile clarity, that there is good and there is bad. Of course, as complex beings, we have to deal with the depressive position, with the inseparability of good and bad. In the pluralistic complexity of our existence, everyone we meet will have some good qualities and some bad qualities, just as there will be some things I like and some things I don't like. If we stay with the phenomenological freshness, then it's just, '*Oh! I have a response to how you are at this moment.*' but if I flip that into my narrative, '*Oh! I don't like you because you are like that.*' then the weight of that sense has been greatly increased, hasn't it? The emphasis has shifted from 'I' to 'you' and 'I don't like you' is implying that 'I'm OK and you're not OK.' Once you intensify that, the other gets more and more defined until the other is defined so strongly that there is nothing they can do to step out of your definition of them.

You can see how in such extreme situations as genocide or 'ethnic cleansing', the quality of the other person doesn't matter at all. They can be incredibly talented. They can be incredibly intelligent. They can be doctors, nurses, kind, good-hearted people, all sorts of things. It's all irrelevant because '*We know what you are and we don't like it and we don't need it and you're going to vanish.*' Violence towards the other, arises from the limitation of the self and its inability to make sense of what's going on. When things are all too much then shrinking the variables just makes it easier. Labeling the other as being 'one of them' is very simple. No need to think.

The history of samsara is full of these grievous attacks that people make on others and also make on themselves. The path leading up to an individual's suicide may be embedded in a similar tracking: '*I hate myself. I'm worthless. Life's not worth living.*' These little one-liners, fully invested with power, lead to the annihilation of the self. A similar formulation about another, leads to annihilation of the other.

So, it's through relaxing, opening, resting in spaciousness, that we start to see how it's not just an *idea* that we're part of the field, but that the field arises in its integrity as the display of the ground. That's why divisions are adventitious. They are artificially introduced and they don't belong and they're unnecessary. They are vibrations of excess mental activity. We don't need these strong judgements. We don't need final definitions. We don't need defining conclusions because if the world is as we've been exploring, then it's about being an unfolding field in which final statements are impossible. We'll soon be coming to the end of the financial year [March], which means companies have to prepare their books, get the auditors in and prepare an annual statement about how their business. By the time these results are published the markets have moved on, and a company that had a good outcome for the previous financial year can now be moving towards bankruptcy.

This is always the problem with concepts. If you catch the moment, you've cheated yourself. It's like that song where Donovan sings "*I may as well try and catch the wind.*" You can't. You can't catch time either. Time is always flowing through. What you catch is a concept. The concept may

be about racial groups, religious groups, about companies, about the nature of capitalism or communism, or whatever it is. Once you've summed something up and you're using that to make yourself feel safe, you've entered into very dangerous territory, because this is at the heart of the nature of samsara.

Three aspects of ignorance related to our three modes of existence

Samsara is traditionally described as forming as three levels of ignorance develop.

The first level is where there is a kind of momentary disjunction. There is a kind of bump into the natural integration of the flow of the three modes (space, radiance and precision). It's often compared to a drunk person falling down the stairs, "Oh!" There's a kind of shock and instead of relaxing back into the flow of experience, there is an "Oh! What happened?" There is a flip into trying to clarify a situation by using conceptualisation.

Once this starts you move into the second stage, which is called '*Kuntu tagpai ma rigpa*' [ཀུན་ཏུ་བརྟགས་པའི་མ་རྟོག་པ་]. '*Tag pa*' means to put a sign or a name or an identification. '*Kun tu*' means 'all' or 'everywhere', so it refers to opening up a semiotic field. It is to say that the world is interpretation hence the development of an increasingly sophisticated mental apparatus, filling the world with more and more names. Once you've got a noun, you're going to have adjectives, adverbs and so on describing the huge, complex identification of particular entities. In the flow, there are no entities; there are only moments of experience, of appearance and so on, which are changing. However with the first level of ignorance, you got retractive solidification, the reification that 'I am real' and 'This is real'. Once you'd got that, you then have, 'So what is this? Who am I?' producing the manufacture of thoughts and concepts to endlessly keep telling new stories.

This leads into the third level, where you're caught up in activity but not quite understanding what it does. This is called 'the ignorance of the stupidity of not understanding karma'. That is to say, we're just bopping along in our lives doing this, doing that; and we think that each sequence of events is what it is. If you get away with it, you got away with it – which is fine because everything has a shape so, if I've stolen something and the police don't get me and nobody's seen me, that event, that thing is finished. Whereas actually, because our lives are energetic, in the movement of going to steal something, there is a particular orientation of ourselves. We've got a bit of anxiety. We're kind of wary. We've got something. We're hiding it. Afterwards we're worried, '*Did I get away with it? Did anyone see? Do they know?*' All of that agitation creates a kind of vibration, which is pushing us into experiencing different patterns in the future, and that's really what karma is. As you shape yourself towards a particularised activity, that shaping sets up a particular form, which then reverberates as an energetic vibration, which will have another manifestation in the future.

So these three aspects of ignorance, continue all the time and so when we do the practice, we can see perhaps, how these three forms of ignorance relate to the three modes of our existence. In the first level of ignorance, because there's forgetfulness, we lose touch with the open nature of our mind. In the second level of ignorance, the natural radiance of the display of the field of experience, which is just arising by itself, unfolding and changing, is now appropriated into being a sequence of entities, which can be moved around, according to my definitions and mobilisations of energy. The level of participation – the unique, precise participation in this moment by gesture, posture, tone of voice and so on – has an impact but the immediacy of the impact is denied, because the ego is using the field of experience as a means to an end.

Last night some of us were fortunate (or unfortunate?) enough to enjoy a delicious banquet in a restaurant which is dedicated to the development of the pension plan of the owner. We were very happy to sacrifice ourselves, in order to ensure that the owner's bank balance increases like summer clouds filling the sky!! It's like that. These staff were thinking, *"A bunch of punters"*. They were not thinking, *"We're the hosts and we want to feed these people well"*. They were not caring for us in any way whatsoever. They were just thinking, *"Bums on seats. Get them in, Serve them very little and get them out the door quickly and charge them a whack"*. That was their orientation – and that is not unusual. Why would we expect people to be loving and kind and considerate? Instead people are living in their individual bubble. *'Why should I care? I'm taking care for my family or my friends. These other people, they're just a means to an end.'* And that's at the heart of this. As soon as you see people as a means to an end, you make use of them in a way which is disrespectful of their sharing the space with you. If you see people as an end in themselves, as something to be valued, then of course, you can enter into mutual interactions, which hopefully bring mutual benefit but that's very different from using them as, *'I am the subject. You are the object'*.

So, to free ourselves from these three levels of ignorance, rather than starting on the outer level, we go straight to the inner level, through our meditation practice. We relax into space again and again. In order to do that, we have to confront the habitual desire to be preoccupied by busy activity. That was the point of the example in the first level of ignorance of the drunk man falling down the stairs. It stirs up an agitation.

The root of samsara is agitation and anxiety. Relaxation is the fundamental cure but relaxation is trust and that allows formation to be integrated with emptiness. There is nothing to protect. Patterns arise and pass and change. They will always do that. There is no way to stabilise the level of manifestation nor do we need to, because our identity spans these three realms. It's open, it's part of the field and it's *this*.

Being 'this' never lasts long, participation is always moving and changing. The field also is moving and changing. The field is moving and changing. We are going to die. It's not a big tragedy, relaxing back into the openness. At night, when we go to sleep, we can sit quietly, relax into openness and gradually we fall asleep. In the morning we wake up. Open, and then life starts tumbling. The tumbling of life is within the openness. Life is like a dream; and inside that, many things will happen, none of which can be fixed or truly predicted. So, in this way, we go to the openness and integrate the field and the participation.

It is what it is

You have the unravelling of these three modes of ignorance and this, from the dzogchen point of view, is resting in the natural completion of life, the perfect fulfilment of things being just what they are. It doesn't mean they're perfect in terms of a judgement. It is not about evaluating 'this is better than that'. It means, 'it is what it is'. Each thing is perfectly what it is. So, last night in the restaurant we lucky few had a perfect example of modern English cuisine, which was queasy and sleazy and it was perfect! Now you may say that it was shit. That it was a 'rip-off', that it was this or it was that; but it was what it was. It just was what it was. We can see in that experience, the temptation to put judgement on top: *'It was wrong. It's not fair. How can they serve that?'* A lot of mental activity, like vultures flying around. They smell the corpse there. We don't need that. It is what it is. So, again and again, the temptation to mental elaboration is going to be there. But keep it simple. It is what it is. A train arrives. It's on time – or it's late. It's busy – or it's quiet. You get a nice seat – or you don't get a nice seat. It is what it is. On the tube, everybody's pushing.

You get a seat or you don't get a seat. Things go well at work or they don't. Things are easy in a relationship, or they're not. It is what it is.

How can we inhabit this situation? What we have always is 'le plat de jour', the dish of the day. There isn't really a menu. The fantasy is that there's a menu, that you can ask a waiter to bring you what you want. In our lives we don't do that; we actually get it. Our plate is being filled moment by moment and the question is, '*Can we eat it?*' Can we just be with what it is?

Mental activity is of course wonderful at changing what is going on. Modern machines are incredibly skilled at manufacturing new things. Electronic devices are being developed to make the interfaces between humans and machines tighter. It is what it is. What makes it difficult is the fantasy that doing a lot of that extra activity and being more capable to make things happen 'the way I want them' will actually be helpful.

So, you go to your local MacDonald's and say, "*I'd like my burger this way*". "*Yes sir!*", says someone on less than the minimum wage. They put on your extra slice of cucumber – and you think, "*I have exerted my individual agency, my autonomy and my right to be seen and heard in this world*". "*That'll be two pound ninety-five thank you.*" Is this as good as it gets? This is the fantasy that's being sold: individual choice. But there's very little individual choice in that. In fact, the main choice is to inhabit your existence, or not.

Inhabiting your existence means that pleasure and pain come together. Good and bad. Success and failure. Happiness and sorrow. Loneliness and connection. A lot of different flavours. If we become picky eaters and mobilise all our intelligence towards being a 'picky eater' and being entitled to be a 'picky eater', then yes, we can indeed spend our whole life eating exactly what we want, but to what gain this lonely pleasure? Every time we have an experience, we are not alone. If you have a bereavement, or a sorrow, or a betrayal in your life, or confusion, the world's full of people having that experience too.

So you can integrate the mahayana view of infinite love and compassion and connectivity, with the dzogchen view of opening to life as it is. It may sound a very odd way of proceeding – that you are having to give up a lot of power and control – but if you examine your own life to find out how much power and control you actually do have, you may see that it's actually just a seductive fantasy and that our lives are endlessly reactive. Certainly in my years of working in the NHS, it's been gone through so many changes, changes which I've been running to catch up with – reading all the policy documents, doing all this online training and all the rest of it. We're just kind of hanging in there, as the whole world is moving and moving and moving.

We're not in charge. If you've had kids, you're not in charge. They come home from school. You've no idea what state they'll be in. They go up to their bedroom to do their homework, you've no idea whether they're doing it or not. It's like that isn't it? So removing the fantasy of control and mastery and seeing the ethical quality of real participation – which isn't being a mug or being taken over but is actually being in contact with the living situation as it evolves – is more powerful, but it's a power which is *within* the system, rather than on top of it. It's the power to participate, which involves us in staying flexible, connected and truly interested in other people. The benefit of being interested in other people is that they take us out of ourselves. Life gets very sad inside a wee bubble but really feeling the existence of other people... 'Oh, Oh'. Sweet joy!

We offer any merit from our study and practice together, to all sentient beings. You can imagine rays of light, spreading out from you, to all beings in all the different realms.

[Dedication]

GE WA DI YI NYUR DU DAG
OR GYAN LA MA DRUB GYU NAE
DRO WA CHIG KYANG MA LU PA
DE YI SA LA GO PAR SHOK

By this virtue may I quickly attain the glorious Guru's stage. Then may I put all beings without even one exception, on that same stage!

So, that brings us to the end of our brief time together. I'd like to thank ... and all the other people who've helped in various ways, often modestly and unnoticed. Thank you all for attending with such focus to what we've been doing together. It's a pleasure to be here.