

Dzogchen and the Five Elements

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The only way to get into enlightenment is through love. Love, tenderness and awareness are all very similar in quality, love for ourselves and love for others.

Five Elements	5
Space element	5
<i>Exercise to explore the space element</i>	6
Wind element	7
Fire element	7
Water element	8
Earth element	8
Consciousness	8
<i>Sitting comfortably</i>	10
Five elements and personality	12
<i>Earth</i>	12
<i>Water</i>	12
<i>Fire</i>	12
<i>Wind</i>	12
<i>Space</i>	13
<i>Exercise discussing one's balance of the elements</i>	13
Five elements and meditation	15
<i>Five elements and shiné</i>	16
Five elements and the ngöndro preliminaries	17
<i>Four reflections and the elements</i>	19
<i>Prostrations</i>	20
<i>Taking refuge</i>	20
<i>Bodhicitta practice</i>	20
<i>Mandala offering</i>	20
<i>Vajrasattva purification</i>	20
<i>Guru Yoga</i>	20
<i>Dissolving down into emptiness</i>	21
<i>Dedication of merit</i>	21
Understanding the function of a practice	21
<i>Devotion and emptiness</i>	22
<i>Refuge</i>	23
Tenderness is the first rule of meditation practice	24

From the very beginning our mind – the state of awareness out of which our experience arises – is unborn. That is the view of dzogchen, and the practice is to be able to recognise the unborn state of the mind and to find a way of resting inside that as it reveals itself. Having experience of this is key to doing the practice. In order to get the experience there are certain things that help us, but even after we get an experience it can be easy to lose because of habitual thoughts that arise or you might experience an altered mental state like drunkenness, psychosis or fever. When you get a fever, your thoughts become very cloudy, you drift off into dreams, and although every now and then someone may waken you up and ask if you want a drink of water, and you may say “Yes” but then you drift back into the fever. Our situation, in terms of dzogchen practice, is similar to that of a person with fever. It’s as if inside our being we have some kind of disturbance or foreign agent and we are struggling to handle this foreign agent. Our struggle to handle this generates the temperature of the fever.

In a similar way this virus of ignorance has come into our awareness bringing with it the five poisons of stupidity, anger, desire, jealousy and pride. These poisons are cooking inside us. As these poisons cook inside us a kind of fever develops. It's as if we are hallucinating – we are seeing the world in this distorted way. Every now and then, if we do some practice of meditation, we get a moment of lucidity or clarity; we come out of the illusion, but the power of the poisons takes us back into it again very quickly. So it's not surprising then that although we can get moments of illumination in our meditation practice, they don't last very long because the place where they are occurring is already ridden with fever; we are already highly disturbed.

There are two ways in which we can attend to this. One is by increasing the power of our meditation practice and that is likened to taking medicine, since it helps to calm the fever. The other way is to be careful about how we are behaving in the world, so that our actions don't feed into generating more heat in the five poisons. That is likened to withholding strong foods from somebody who has a fever since these will increase the heat in their body. Light foods are what they need. When the Buddha Shakyamuni first gave teachings he taught of the Four Noble Truths of the nature of suffering. In the fourth truth, which is the path away from suffering, he taught the Eightfold Path which includes our behaviour in the world, how we should live and how we should behave towards others. So the Buddha's first teachings focused on our behaviour in the world and how, by attending to our behaviour in the world, we shift from a very hot spicy diet that will increase fever to a careful diet that will help things cool down.

Someone told me about their friend who used drugs and spent three months in retreat doing yoga in a hindu ashram in India. When this friend came back from India she started to use cocaine again and told people, *“It's really wonderful because the yoga has made my body so pure that I really appreciate the quality of the cocaine!”* This is an example of someone whose primary focus is on getting wrecked. There is a push-pull movement where the energies do not integrate and operate together so there is always a tension between these two movements. Many of us lead such busy and exciting lives here in the West that we do meditation just to calm ourselves down and so get into a similar kind of oppositional movement. One activity is the antidote to the other. Today the world is the poison so I take the dharma as the antidote. Maybe tomorrow the dharma becomes the poison and I use the world as the antidote. The world is just turning.

From the point of view of dzogchen, we start with the idea that our real nature is very open and relaxed. It's an awareness that is unborn and which has a non-dual relationship with what is arising, which is not 'this-in-relation-to-that' but is an integrated moment of becoming. From this view, it is said that we naturally are open, relaxed and present in the moment.

So what is it that gets in the way of our having this experience? Primarily it seems to be some kind of fixity, some kind of concreteness of our body, our speech and our mind. This fixity gives rise to anxiety, anxiety in the sense of worrying about what tomorrow will bring. How will my health be? Will people like me? Will I get a job? What will the weather be like..? All kinds of concerns about

having a desire for a particular pattern of arising in the world and then the concern that we may not get what we want. Thoughts, feelings and sensations overwhelm us and act as a filter, getting in the way of our easy responsiveness to the world. All such thoughts arise from attachment. We become attached to particular thoughts, feelings or sensations, and we then either want them to be maintained or we want them to be removed.

A really key phrase in dzogchen that you will find in many different texts is, *'Whatever comes, comes. Whatever goes, goes.'* This is really what being relaxed and open means. Relaxed and open doesn't mean being kind of 'cool', hanging out in nice places, taking whatever you want, eating and drinking whenever you want, taking taxis when you are tired and looking nice in designer clothes. It's not that kind of cool, because such situations arise dependent on particular situations, like being young, being beautiful, being healthy, having rich parents. From a buddhist point of view we would see this as the momentary arising of a particular situation dependent on particular moments of karma that we had generated previously. When the beautiful young person in Goa skids off their motorbike on to the dirt track, falls face down on to the gravel and takes all the skin off their face and breaks a few bones, after the rough surgery they receive in hospital, then they don't look so cool back home. Then when the other beautiful young people see this person with an ugly face, all ripped and with terrible scar tissue on it, that new ugly person has a similar experience to what is described in buddhism when gods approach the end of their time in the god realm. The god has been in a place of delight for a long, seemingly endless, period of time but then seven days before the karma which brought them there is entirely burnt out, their body starts to smell bad, their flower garlands start to rot and everybody looks askance at them. They experience a great deal of pain and suffering. It is very easy when things are going well in our lives to be attached to happiness without even being aware that we're attached to it, because it just seems so natural. That is often held in place by choices we make which maintain these good situations around us that make us feel happy. We are subtly or unconsciously manipulating the environment to maintain our good feeling.

If we can understand this point clearly it is very helpful, because it is dealing with our intentionality. Very often when we make a decision we try to hold onto a particular thought pattern in the face of other pressures. For example, I have just given up one of the university teaching jobs I do. I gave it up because the syllabus that I had designed didn't have the support of my colleagues and I didn't want to stay there teaching what they wanted me to teach. I thought, *"What they are doing is not very good but I will stay here until the end of the summer term to finish the academic year with these students."* Now when I am in the building on Wednesdays I see some things that I don't like and think, *"Great, I'm glad to be leaving this place!"* Then I see some things that I do like and I think, *"Oh shit, I had some good times here and it's still quite nice, and the library's very good..."* According to different causes and conditions, different kinds of thought arise in our mind with different kinds of feelings as well. It is a bit like on a roller coaster, up and down.

From the point of view of the shamatha practice – focusing attention on the breath – one would want to calm one's mind and not be so disturbed by these sorts of thoughts. From the point of view of tantric practice one would be trying to experience all these thoughts, positive and negative, as the arising of Guru Rinpoche's mind. From the point of view of dzogchen, when a happy thought arises, *"Oh! Happy thought is coming"* Then happy thought goes. Then unhappy thought arises *"Ah!"* Then unhappy thought goes. One is not being made happy by happy thoughts and not being made sad by sad thoughts. Of course they still continue to arise, because we're living in the world and there are causes and conditions which will bring about these sensations. It's not that we don't want to be affected by the world at all, walking through the world as if untouched by anything. Unless the world touches us then we can't have the practice of compassion. In being responsive to the world, we are aware of whatever is arising without getting lost in it. This is not some distilled and abstracted point of intellectual reference like a Cartesian cogito, a sort of pure light that sees the world in a distanced and harmonising way. The view from dzogchen is rather different.

In dzogchen the concern is much more with the nature of energy than with the cooling distance of light. Light is seen as the energetic radiance of the sun and all thoughts that arise are seen as the energetic radiance of the open awareness. The illuminator is not a cogito or an intelligence inside our head, neither up in our brain nor in our heart nor wherever we think of it as being. It's not a point that spreads out. Rather it's more that in the totality – rather the infinity – of the interaction of the world and our situation, there is a revelation, out of spaciousness, and that revelation is not 'I onto the world' or 'the world onto me'. It is not dualistic, but it is infinite and ongoing, the process of becoming.

This brings us back to a point that I have taken up quite a few times in the past: the way in which we are “en-worlded”, the way we are part of the world. The view from dzogchen is that subject-experience and object-experience arise together in this open dimension of being. For example, although sometimes I am in the University of Westminster where I work there is the sense that I don't live in the University of Westminster all the time. Clearly I get on the train and I get off and I go in the front door and before I go in the front door I'm not in the University of Westminster, and then I do go into the University of Westminster but I haven't brought it here to Offenbach with me. However in the moment when I appear to be going into the University of Westminster it is as if it were a fixed place; it is arising for me as a moment of my experience. We have been doing some practice about the nature of impermanence and so we know that every time we go into the same place – such as me going into the University of Westminster – if we look with fresh eyes and we will see something different. It is never the same.

However when I substitute phenomenological awareness with a name 'the University of Westminster' I am not looking; I just assume that it is there, the same. I am then living in a world of dead assumptions and because the assumptions sort of fit what is there, I can go along absorbed in my own thoughts, despite bumping into things from time to time. I get off the train, go down the steps, along the path, in through a field where people play rugby and football, I walk up some steps into a car park. There is the University of Westminster. Now if I am doing all this with a relaxed openness, what is occurring is revelation of all sorts of things – the sensation of my feet on the path, the sound of the birds in the trees, trains going by, cars hooting in the distance, the clouds, everything. I am in a field, a glowing ocean of sensation, thought, memory. Out of that there arises a shape. I move towards the shape. As I move towards the shape colours change; a cloud goes across the sun, and the building goes from being white to grey. Somebody opens a window and I'm dazzled. Different sounds come. The whole world is alive and moving. But if I am walking up to the building thinking, “*Oh, what will I teach today?*” or “*Oh, perhaps I should not have resigned. Especially in the summer time, it's so nice, the birds are singing. Maybe I should go back!*” Then in my thoughts I am separated from the building, I am separated from the day.

So, dzogchen is always about trying to relax into a presence – not a presence of the world on top of the world, but a presence *in* and *through* the world, where one is immersed in the ocean of becoming that reveals itself in endless complexity. We are trying to practice dzogchen in the world as part of the world. The key issue is that if we want to maintain a state of awareness and not lose it through the various disturbances that arise, we have these two tasks: one is to strengthen our awareness through sitting meditation practice of various kinds, and the other is to be able to make the world less disturbing.

The world is made less disturbing in the hinayana tradition by avoiding the things that disturb us. In the mahayana tradition it is done by taking up the view of wisdom and compassion. By attempting to see all sentient beings as having been our mother, we feel compassion for them, and we then bring that compassion into our dealings with them and so in that way we minimise any disturbance of attraction or aversion that they might bring to our life. Tantra makes the world less disturbing by seeing the whole world as an aspect of the mandala, so that all form is the guru's body, all speech is the guru's or deity's mantra, and all thoughts are the guru's or deity's thoughts.

Each of these methods is intentional. In hinayana the intention is to avoid difficult and provocative situations. In the general mahayana and the tantric mahayana approaches, the intention is to re-frame the world, to shift our ordinary perception by actively taking up a new view. However in the path of dzogchen we are attempting a much more continuous and seamless, ecological adaption.

Student: Like a mimesis?

James: Not exactly. What we are attempting is to have optimum contact with the environment. It's not mimetic in the sense that we are not copying what is out there or adapting in a parallel way. We may be adapting in a contrary way, and I can say more about this. For example, when it gets hot in the summer, we get sleepy, particularly in the afternoon. Particularly if you are in a hot country where people attend to these things, everything gets sleepy, everyone gets sleepy, and so it makes sense to do some kind of sleepy meditation at that time. But if you are a very disciplined person and you go to India in the summertime and you still think, *"I'll get up in the morning at 7.30 and I will do my prostrations in the afternoon, because then it is peaceful and there are not so many people at the temple"* then you may find that you are operating against what the environment is telling you. In that time of the year it is coolest earliest in the morning and so it makes sense to get up at 3 am, do your prostrations from 4 am till 7am, then take a little rest and in the afternoon have a sleep.

Although the climate is warming in northern European the practice of siesta has not developed. In fact, as international corporations spread into the Mediterranean countries people are tending to give up on having siesta, and work busily through the afternoon. We could understand that as being people adapting to structures of thinking, like international capitalism, and global hegemony, internet communications, and all the rest of it. But by losing touch with their body they lose touch with the environment outside. Will an air-conditioned office somehow shift what is actually going on in the street outside? That is a general example of the way in which our western culture is dedicated to the notion of control – that we should control nature, and through science and technology invent means of changing the environment rather than being in it and aware of it. This is not to say that we shouldn't make use of science and technology and the concomitant comforts and advantages that it brings. However the danger is that we might buy into the metaphor of the notion of control and imagine that this can bring about a stable state in which we can eliminate all suffering from our lives.

Five Elements

One of the legacies of our Christian heritage is the sense that human beings are somehow apart from the world, having being made special by God and with a special right to control the world and use it for our own purposes. Tibetan buddhism sees our existence in the world is an existence of the world through the nature of the five elements. The five elements operate on a wide spectrum of levels from the very gross, the very substantial, to the very, very, very subtle.

Space element

Space in its widest sense is the most basic element, because without space nothing else can arise or exist or move. Space is a domain of openness and possibility, and in its purest form it has no location inside it. There is no north, south, east, or west, or anything like that. Even in modern science where physicists are interested in the nature of an expanding universe, there is a constant struggle to have any notion of space that can be as open as space. How can we imagine the infinity of the universe? If I were to ask you how far it is from here to Düsseldorf, you might have some idea because there is a 'here' and there is a Düsseldorf. If we were to ask how far it is from the earth to the sun then scientists can give us a distance for that, but if we try to think of space without any point in it to start from, then our mind can't really make sense of that at all.

We have two kinds of space really, we have infinite space, and we have relational space. Most of the time we are concerned with relational space, like when someone says, *“Don’t crowd me. I need a bit of space.”* Infinite space is like infinite time, and infinite time in the dharma is the time which is always present outside of ‘the three times’. Locational space is like these ‘three times’ – it’s a movement between points. It is always referential – this in relationship to that. A lot of the time we are involved in relational space. We are sitting in this place in this room, or we’re going our chair to the door, or we’ve got a perspective of me being here, looking at you across a kind of space....

Exercise to explore the space element

It might be useful to discuss in pairs whether you have a sense of these two kinds of space. Maybe as children you have had that experience, perhaps playing on the beach or watching the sunset, or suddenly your eye being caught by a bird flying and as you’re tracking the bird there is no sense of ... it’s like a whole experience. It’s often a very spacious kind of experience in which the self is not cut off from the world through notions of distance or location; it’s just one moment. Let’s take a few minutes to see if you can have a sense of the difference of these two.

Student: Can you explain it with an example?

James: For example, I remember as a child walking up a hill outside the town where I stayed and going up the path and seeing the top of the hill. So there is a me and there is a hill and there is a movement up to the top. And then I remember running down the path with my brother, but we ran off the path. My brother had been hitting me and I’m chasing after him and I’m very, very angry. I start running so fast that I couldn’t stop and I felt that my legs had become completely liquid and I couldn’t stop. *“Aaah!”* I was going faster and faster and I went off a very steep part of the hill and I was just somewhere else. I was out of my body and the whole world was moving along together and I had no sense of space. Much later I found myself at the bottom of the hill, but I had just been completely in that moment. Now that’s not totally infinite but it was a totally different kind of experience from walking up the hill one step at a time seeing things getting closer and closer. I wasn’t in relationship – me in relationship to another – but I was in the movement of something. The thinking goes into the body. The body is the whole world.

Or you might sometimes see an eagle or a big bird riding up on a thermal. If sometimes you follow it with your eye then it goes to a point where it is just vanishing and it takes you out like that. Or a child watching as a balloon floats away... you can see in their faces how they are just opened into this expansion.

The element of space is the basis of all arising, for ourselves and for everything outside. We also have earth, water, fire, air and wind moving inside us, but in moments like the above the focus of our attention is on the space element outside, and by relaxing and focusing on the space element outside we are merged with the space element inside. So the space element inside and the space element outside come into very profound alignment. That’s why we get ‘spaced out’, when there is just space element. Is that a bit clearer?

Another way that this experience can happen is through sex. When you first meet someone maybe they’re a bit distant. You don’t really know them and it’s as if they exist as a lump of matter ‘over there’. Then you start to talk to them and it becomes a bit fluid, so now earth and water are a bit playing. You like them, you get a little bit hot, so it’s more bubbly; you’re more interested and excited to talk to this person and you find you’ve got points of contact so you feel this warmth flowing between you. You feel this kind of energy and you feel free in your body and you’re laughing a bit more, and now the fire element is making the air element move. Then you get close to them and maybe you are just looking in their face and you feel their eyes getting closer and you feel close, and you get ‘spaced out’ just being with the person – you are just open to them. You don’t have any resistance and you just merge. Then you come out of that. That’s very much what the erotic field is:

it's this transformation of our solid separate existence into a warm openness to someone else, and through that we can find some space.

To recap a little bit on what we have done so far: basically, the dzogchen view is that our own nature is relaxed and open, revealing itself in the display of the world. This gets interrupted when we tense up due to the subject/object split which is returned to again and again when our attachments are arising. Attachment is not an intellectual or a cognitive thing: it expresses itself energetically through the presence of our body as an aspect of the world in terms of the five elements. We explored the first element, space, with the idea of the difference between the space between things – a space of relationship – and the space in which all things arise – an infinite spaciousness.

Wind element

The wind element is next in solidity. In its external form, the wind moves in an unimpeded way through the sky. When the wind is moving in the sky we never see it, unless through such movement as birds or trees or clouds. There we can see how the wind is very close to the sky, or to space. It's invisible in the way that space is invisible, and when the wind element is very still it merges back into space very easily. The wind also doesn't seem to have much sense of location. You can't really grasp it. Nor does it have much sense of direction, since it is moving and turning. If you are out walking in the hills you get a wind coming up the side of the hill one way and next you find your hair being blown all over the place and there is a sense of the wind just suddenly arising out of space and sinking back into space.

When wind comes in contact with the other elements it tends to intensify their state. The wind blowing over the hill will dry the water out of the earth element and make the earth more earthy. Wind dries fire. If you are lighting a little fire in the garden or lighting a barbecue it makes things very nice. It makes things glow very quickly. If you are smoking outside it can even smoke your cigarette for you!

It has many similarities to thought, in the sense that thought is invisible. Thought seems to move just like the wind, arising here, vanishing there, and so we find are our interests into this into that. Suddenly we are thinking of this and then we're thinking of that. You can't get a hold of thought. Thoughts can create many things just as the wind blowing pollen is spreading out little possibilities of growth. But the wind is also destructive, as can be thoughts. They are a sudden whoosh of energy that suddenly collapses back. Thoughts arise in our mind and pass away just like the wind slipping back into space. But the wind can be channelled and made use of in the same way that thoughts can be channelled. We can use the wind to drive machinery to make electricity, or to dry our washing on the line, for all sorts of purposes. In the same way we harness our thoughts for the service of our ego.

Fire element

Fire is usually visible but you may have noticed with an outside fire that you cannot see the flames when the sun is shining brightly and it's really hot. You may have noticed that. I remember burning my hands sometimes when I was in India and cooking chapatti on the flames because the brightness of the sun merges with the fire. The elements really move in and out in that way. Fire by itself is moving all the time and is very distracted because it is influenced both by the things that it's burning up and by the space that the flame is arising into and by the wind element. Fire when it is released from a substance tends to destroy the substance that it is released from. For example, a wooden table. The wood is a balance of all the elements, but if we burn the wooden table it will release quite a bit of heat and then the solidity of the wood will be collapsed down to a light grey powder. Fire, both in it's source and in what it goes on to, tends to transform objects.

If we think of the five poisons, stupidity, anger, desire, jealousy and pride, each of these five poisons can be influenced by the five elements and we can get into all kinds of complexity. But I'll link it particularly with fire now because clearly the five poisons are at their most dangerous when they are influenced by fire. If you imagine jealousy: a lot of the time you may have the potential for jealousy but it's not yet a developed form; it's just on the cusp of being born, it is potential.

For example, say I'm in a relationship and it's going OK and it's fairly kind of calm. It's earth and water. It's good joking along together. But then I see my friend's eyes going over to someone else and I spot a little sparkle in her eyes. I see a little bit of heat between her and someone else, and that fire element starts to come into me and I think, *"Hey, what's this? I thought what we had was very stable, and now some hot thing is coming."* Then the wind starts to move and I am getting more and more angry, more and more hot, and I'm looking in her handbag for her phone. Whose is this name? I press the re-dial button. *"Hey who are you? What is your name? Why are you phoning my girlfriend?"* Wind and fire are really blazing and my heart is in the middle of this conflagration.

These elements moving together create this huge transformation and we can see how the fire element, when it touches something, tends to transform it. A relationship can get burnt up in a jealous anger, or just through anger itself, or through desire or pride. If these elements get heated up, we burn and the world that we're connected with starts to burn. Fire is very, very unpredictable. Once it's ignited we don't know exactly what is going to happen. It usually only dies out when it has exhausted the thing it's burning on, or when one of its contrary elements puts it out. For example, if you have a bonfire in your garden but then suddenly notice that the dry grass around is starting to burn. That dry grass won't stop until it's all burnt up but by that time maybe the fence in your garden is on fire and your neighbour's hedge is on fire and then the whole house is on fire... You have to put water on it or put sand on it or do something to antidote it.

Water element

Then next most solid is the water element. The function of water is connecting, it links things together, there is a sense of flowing. It's very adaptable, it takes on the shape of its environment. Water element retreats from fire and advances towards earth. The water element is very adaptable. If you hit water with a stick it splashes and moves back. If you put your hand into a bowl of water the water will move back to receive your hand. If you put your hand into a fire your hand will get burnt up. If you put a blazing piece of wood into water it will put the fire out. So you can see how water is a friend of earth, in many ways.

Earth element

Earth is hard. Earth displaces space, and in its strong form, like steel, it displaces fire. It resists the intrusion of other elements but it can be attacked in many ways. It breaks down after a while. If we think of the five elements we rarely come across them in an absolutely pure form. Usually they are either mixed up together or are in an interactive relationship.

Consciousness

Indian and Tibetan traditions describe a relationship between the gross physical elements and the subtle mental elements. Just as consciousness, the organising mental consciousness, is linked through the five sense consciousnesses, consciousness is also related to the elements in a subtle form. When we die what happens is that the physical presence of the five elements, which has been held together in connection with the subtle five element connection of consciousness, starts to come apart. As we move towards death the earth element dissolves into water, water into fire, fire into wind and into consciousness, which is in its subtle form is most closely associated with wind. As the energy is moving out of the body the person who is dying starts to slump, they can no longer move their limbs and often water comes out of the eyes, out of the nose or they might dribble from the

mouth. The bowels may open and there's a kind of loosening, the earth element is falling away, the control is going. Heat goes from the body and the breath goes. Then the body starts to collapse, so that the wind element is moving out of the body, and space is starting to collapse, space is vanishing as well. If we think that somebody has died we take their pulse or check if they are breathing. Their pulse is a mixture of fire, water and wind; it's got the push of the wind driving the water round and it's also hot. When we see that the body is also getting cold, that is the fire element going. Often we hold a feather or something light over the person's mouth to see if it moves, or you hold a mirror up to see if there is any steam coming out, and then we know that the person's gone.

On a subtle level, the earth element has gone into water, water into fire. When fire then goes into wind, on an internal level that's when thoughts start to vanish from consciousness. As the person is dying, first they can no longer speak. Their eyes may close over but they still have some thoughts and feelings and sensation, and then as the wind element dissolves into space, they go out. It's as if they are going unconscious.

Then consciousness, which has been linked on the cusp between wind and space, goes on its journey into the bardo and eventually finds another situation where consciousness, again with its potential for merging with the five elements, manifests, and so do we manifest out into another life. So we come out from consciousness into the world of the five elements, and then go back from the five elements into pure consciousness onto another journey.

If we are considering our own present situation, at the moment we have these five elements as part of our being. A healthy person is one who has some kind of balance of the elements both in an outer physical form and in a more subtle consciousness form in what we would think of as personality. We have to remember that, at one level, this is just a cultural story. This is not 'the truth'; this is not 'science as truth'. Hopefully this is a useful set of concepts that give you some way of thinking about your life. It is a tool for thinking.

Our ego self is always caught up in relation to the five elements. For example, it is a warm afternoon now and some of us have just indulged in a rather vast lunch. So what happens? This food is a very rich compilation of earth element. Some of it when it arrived was hot, so it already had fire element. Some of the breaking-down of the material had been done through the cooking. We took in the water element as well. When we put it in our mouths the first thing that we had to do was to chew. If we chewed it well we broke it down into pieces and allowed the water element in the form of enzymes to start to work on the goo that was mashed around in our mouth. Then we had to swallow this and as it went down our throats towards our stomachs with this peristaltic action, this moving, was like a wind wave driving it down.

In the stomach there is this vat of water, acidic water, the digestive juices which then start breaking down the food. So this is mixture of water and fire, and this is burning up energy from the body. In order to digest the food which will give us energy we have to use energy for the digestion, so we have to concentrate the fire element in our body into our stomach to help the digestion of the food. That's why traditionally one should take a rest after eating and not make an external demand to rush around and be busy. If we think about it, what we call our body is an incredible moving dance of these five elements. As soon as heat rises in the stomach it is going to make a change elsewhere. Very often when people lie down for a siesta they drape a little blanket over themselves because they want to keep extra warm, they feel a little bit cool at the extremities.

One of the important things in the practice of dzogchen meditation is to pay attention to the balance of the elements both within your body and in the external situation. In this way we are working in harmony with our own state rather than against it. The balancing of these elements is done both externally and internally. Externally it means that if you get cold or if you get uncomfortable it is important to attend to these things. However the focus is not on control. This is in contrast to zen meditation where meditators are expected to sit still and not move and if they

move too much someone will come along with a big flat stick and hit them to waken them up. That is done because in zen practice the method is to be very disciplined and be working hard.

In dzogchen we are not so much concerned with control, rather, as I was saying earlier, to have this vast interface with the world. We want to be in touch with the world, responding to the world as it is arising. That is the rationale behind the dzogchen saying that the goal for a dzogchen yogi is to sleep when you're tired, to eat when you're hungry, and to walk when you want to walk. Well, how do you know when you are really tired? In our lives we have all sorts of things going on. Maybe we stay up late to watch something good on TV, or to read a book, or we go out with friends. We are paying attention to the environment in so far as we manipulate it to keep something interesting going on, to keep it hot, rather than being in tune with ourselves. To repeat, dzogchen practice is not driven or directed by alignment with external rules, but rather to developing an increased attention to, and awareness of, one's own physiological state.

Sitting comfortably

For example when I was first involved in Tibetan buddhism I would often be sitting alongside Tibetans through some long puja in a little temple. If my knees got sore and I stretched out my legs they might indicate, *"Don't do that! This is very rude. If you put your leg out and your foot is pointing at another person then this is very rude!"* In their mind it was more important not to be rude even if you are sitting there with a very sore leg, and your focus of your attention is the sore leg rather than any of the dharma things that are going on. Yes, we can appreciate that such an attitude is appropriate in certain kinds of practice and since people's minds go here, there and everywhere, then training people in discipline can be helpful. But the Tibetans did not know that since my body was conditioned to sitting in a different way from them, the balancing of the five elements inside my muscle structure and sinew structure was very different from theirs. When we take up a cultural opinion, it is important to remember that in order to align ourselves to a different cultural opinion we may do a damage to our understanding of our own state.

Hence underpinning all dzogchen view and practice is the key principle of freedom, according to dzogchen. Essentially it is saying that however we are, that is OK. This is what the buddha on the front cover of *Simply Being*¹ is indicating; Kuntuzangpo, always good, that's what his name means. The way we all were brought up taught us that sometimes we are good and sometimes we are bad. When we do things that please other people we are 'good', and when we do things that don't please other people we are 'bad'. It is very simple. If you want to get a job, if you want to have friends, if you want to please your family, this is the dharma to follow. Sometimes you may do what you like, but often you can only do that if you know that other people, who would be upset if they knew that you were doing it, don't know that you're doing it. Therefore we can say that freedom is a secret. And it is often a guilty secret, where we want to do something, we desire to do something, but we know we shouldn't do it, yet we do it anyway, and then try to pretend to other people that we didn't really do it!

Dzogchen is not interested in such concerns; it is a guilt-free zone. It's often said that a dzogchen yogi should be shameless. So long as we are worried about what other people think we are living in a dualistic world. Of course this doesn't mean that you should behave like a mad dog and do whatever you want, because the thing that regulates the behaviour of a dzogchen practitioner is the world, being open to the world. If you are open to the world then it means that your mind is not going into a little tight corner making a secret plan, *'I won't tell anyone, I'll just do this.'* It means that one lives a public life and people can then know how you live, and you live accepting responsibility for the consequences of your action. That is a big step away from following the rules in order to be a 'good boy' or a 'good girl'. It means that we have to find a middle way between being either compliant –

1 [Simply Being](#). James Low [CPI Antony Rowe, UK, 2013] ISBN 9781907571015

trying to be good in order to please other people – or being rebellious and saying, “*Fuck you!*” to everyone.

The beginning and the end of dzogchen is awareness. So we have to be aware of our own state and to deal with our state in relation to the world by trying to find a good balance with the world in its infinity. That’s why its very important to pay attention to your body and to move when you need to move, not moving so much that you irritate yourself, just enough to keep a harmony, so that your attention is focused in the world instead of on your knees.

To conclude out examination of the external elements, in terms of bodily health we have to learn to listen to our body. If we feel we are losing energy, we ask, “*Why?*” Is it because our body is becoming too heavy and the earth element is becoming dominant? Is there too much earth and water, and not enough fire and air? Maybe we then need to get some exercise. Doing exercise will pump the air element into the body and heat up the body, which gets the earth and water elements moving.

Similarly with depression. When people get depressed they often cut off from the world however when you’re depressed the thing to do is not to cut off from the world, but instead to go into the world, and allow the world to gently shift your mood. It is the same for anxiety. Anxiety is caused by too much wind and fire. So if you are very busy at work and getting stressed out you need to think what are the good antidotes for wind and fire? Doing things like having a nice warm bath with some oils in it, and just relaxing, that could be helpful. Watching silly nonsense on TV to distract yourself would not be a good idea. TV has flickering images all the time, and these flickering images increase our tension. If you watch people when they are absorbed in watching TV you may notice that they are doing upper chest breathing. They are not breathing from the belly any more and this is actually making them more tense.

Start to really live in your body and be aware of your own body and to be aware of what you can make use of in the environment to bring your own body back into balance. Try to do this in a subtle way, not using drugs or alcohol to keep your energy up when you feel you should really have a rest. One useful way to do is to go out into open nature, or just into a park, and be aware of the different colours and the different flowers. Breathe out the staleness of the dead elements in your body and breathe in the richness of the five elements into your body – the essences of all flowers coming into you, the essences of all spring buds coming out of the ground. In that way through visualisation you can generate the balance of the elements in your body. The more that we experience our bodies as the dynamic play of the five elements, the less we have the sense of the body as a dead thing.

That will also help us when we do the tantric dissolving meditation, because there is a link between the five elements and the five colours. When we see Guru Rinpoche’s body with rays of five-coloured rainbow light coming into our body and dissolving all our impurities, and our body filling with light, then his purified form of the five elements is merging into ours. We experience the five elements going from their gross form into their subtle form. Then that subtle form of the five elements goes down into a ball of white light and dissolves into space. So you can see how all these practices link together.

We’ll just take a break now, and in the break, keep the thought of these five elements in your mind, just keep watching whatever you are doing – sugar dissolving in your tea, taking a piss or whatever. Just be aware of how the elements are always changing. That’s quite a useful thing to do.

[Break]

Five elements and personality

I'd like to look more into the five elements in terms of personality and help you each get a sense of how you balance the five elements in yourself and where your own imbalances are. I will try to show how you can use meditation to get more of a subtle balancing of the elements.

Earth

So, I think about the five elements quickly, in terms of ourselves. If the earth element is very strong in us we tend to be sleepy, maybe a bit depressed, cut-off, rigid. Shyness can also be an aspect of the earth element, in that the earth element is frightened of being dissolved or heated up or blown around by the interaction that would come from other people. If the earth element is too dominant it can be very defensive, building up walls, and being rigid, is prone to fears, seeking isolation, separation. Nevertheless we need the earth element to ground us, so that we can be consistent and enduring and not get blown away.

Water

Then the water element. Water flows out, links up and connects other people. It's also moving and adaptable; it fits in. So water is particularly something you would see expressed through a person being charming, somebody who is able to make friends with a wide range of people and who is like a river, flowing on, and so is not obsessively caught up in the past. They are able to think, "*Oh well, tomorrow's another day. Something else'll happen.*" Because water flows easily this way and that, whichever way the slope is running, is a bit 'easy-ozie', not too bothered about things. Easy come, easy go, a bit of a slob. Friendly and sociable, but perhaps babbling nonsense. In that way, the water element resists the fire element of passion.

Fire

Somebody who has fire element strongly in them will be passionate, easily aroused and will get burnt up and excited about things. They may get burnt out as well, they may get over-exhausted because they're not able to set any limit. Fire just keeps burning, and once you get excited you might just keep ripping along. Fire, when it's burning, is not really concerned about the fuel that it's using. Sometimes when I get into talking about something, I get all very hot and excited about it, and perhaps the people around me are getting a little bit tired, but I'm still kind of burning away, very absorbed in this particular thing I'm talking about. I'm a little bit fiery in that way.

Wind

People who have a lot of wind element tend to have lots of thoughts, lots of enthusiasms, but unless it is balanced into the earth element, they often are not able to connect that energy in with the world. They blow over other people or past other people without actually get the meaningful connection they need. An advantage of the wind element are that it doesn't have boundaries, so somebody with wind element is able to be very adventurous and to put themselves into new situations. They're the kind of person who gets carried by an enthusiasm into trying something out. They are not held back by shame or reservation, they'll just say, "*OK, I'll try!*" Their hand is up before they've thought twice. Then, whatever happens, they just blow into it. "*Yes, let's go for it! Well, why not?*" So it can be very positive.

The wind element and the fire element can go together very well, so that somebody can have enthusiasm from the fire element – arising passion – but also be able to channel the wind element, this pushing, flowing intensity, so that they have a disciplined energy applied through time. It's like an oxyacetylene burner which has a wind element channelling into the combustion to make it hot and directed. When you have fire element without much wind, then you will have lots of short-term enthusiasms, perhaps in your relationships, or in terms of books that you intend to read, and even in your dharma practice where you think, "*Oh, I must get this initiation, this is a practice that I really*

want to do.” but then after a couple of months, somehow the interest isn’t there any more. You get these flaring burn-ups but without any enduring wind driving it to keep it focused on the task.

Space

Space is an open generosity, so somebody who is spacious is welcoming into the depth of their being; they are not putting up too many walls, there’s not too much resistance. Space has depth and endurance, but it can also be ‘spaced-out’. Someone with too much space element is not able to connect with other people, is disassociated and cuts off. One spaces out, like bored school-kids looking out the window, or people in a traumatic situation who go into an out-of-the-body experience. One is disconnected from responding.

Exercise discussing one’s balance of the elements

I suggest that now you discuss in pairs where you think you are with these elements in yourself. Which elements do you think you’re most connected with, and which do you think you have the least connection with in the general run of your daily life? What are the advantages to the pattern that you have at the moment, and what might be the disadvantages? The five elements are concepts which are used to explain a few phenomena, but can also be used as metaphors and be part of the whole discourse that they are embedded in. If you get interested in the concept of the elements and find it useful then it can lead you into more understanding about the practice. I remember some years ago how lots of people were doing the *I Ching* and talking about yin and yang all the time. (We have concepts in the West that are not so different from that.) Once you enter into it, it opens up and you can see a lot more in, for example, Chinese painting or Chinese poetry. It starts to make sense. I think it’s the same with Tibetan buddhism.

If these notions of the five elements really come alive for you and you start to understand how to use them, then your connection with your visualisation and puja practice will become more alive. So now we are doing this just to taste if you can use them in a way that is directly helpful to yourself, not as an abstract concept.

[Discussion exercise]

Any thoughts on that? Does it seem to make sense? Is it useful?

Student: It’s analogous to astrological system where you have four elements and leave out the element of space.

Student: What is the difference between wind and space. Can we think of the fourth element as air? Thinking about myself, I am not sure about the difference between water and space. The space element is the least clear in this system. Also water, which is making space and filling around things.

James: I had a friend who was into fly fishing and he would describe how he would cast the fly. You know, this little thing that floats on the water? He would just be sitting looking at it, and he would sit for quite a long time, not really aware of any thoughts, just kind of being there. Nothing much going on. So he had almost no thoughts in that time. Now, other people might be sitting by the river thinking about things. They might be quite pleasant thoughts, but thoughts would be coming to them. You could say that in this first case, he had, if you like, a bit of space element in that there was nothing much there. It’s open, it doesn’t really have any shape; it’s not form.

Whereas for someone else, it is as if they’ve got space with wind going through it. They are sitting there, looking at the water, not particularly troubled, and they find they’re thinking, “*Oh, maybe I have to go shopping soon and I’ve got to remember to pay that bill...*” It’s not making them anxious but thoughts are just coming and going. So that’s a bit like a wind blowing through the sky.

It's not disturbing anything, it's just blowing through, but still something is in movement. Whereas if you've just got space it's like nothing really is there at all.

Another example might be a fashion model who could be seen as being a bit like the water element. She's paid to wear different clothes and whatever clothes she puts on she takes that and smiles, and it's as if she's completely inhabiting it, like water flowing down; it flows fast over rocks and it suits that place, it flows slowly through a field, and it suits that place. But there's no particular own shape to the model, because she's just showing the clothes.

Then if you took a famous model like say, Cindy Crawford, who has made a name for herself – I don't know anything about her personality – but anyway, just the fact that she became a famous name shows the earth element, because when she's going down this catwalk, people think, "*Oh, that's Cindy Crawford wearing the clothes!*" She's no longer water, she is earth; she is always the same, and the clothes are decked onto her.

Would anyone feel like saying how they identified themselves in terms of these elements? Does it seem a difficult thing to do?

Student: According to the situation I am in, private life, job life or whatever, sometimes one element is more, sometimes another element is more. It's not always the same element dominating. It depends on the situation and what I need to do in that situation.

James: It might then be quite useful to think about what position you need to adopt to make the best impact. For example, if you have a fear of authority and authority figures appear to be very hot and burning for you, how can you protect yourself? Would it be safe to be naïve, to be like an open book? If you are likely to get burnt up, should you cover yourself over in some way? Or could you increase the water element so that things are a bit slippery, and you can't be caught?

The shifts that we make through these elements often have particular triggers. For many people fear is a very powerful trigger. For example, when I was a child I sometimes was very shy. When I was playing with my friends I wasn't at all shy however when I came into formal situations with adults, I would blush a lot, and couldn't speak and would get very frightened. This may have been because the adults around me were quite stern, quite serious kind of people. This was not long after the Second World War when people were still quite contained and wanted things to be done properly. Children were not supposed to make a noise. If I was out on the street on my tricycle making a noise, they might come up and ask, "*Hey! What's your name? What house do you live in?*" There was nowhere to hide, no invisibility. That was earth element grinding on earth element with so space or water in between. Then when I was thirteen or fourteen I would get on my bicycle and go out into the countryside, far away from people all by myself. Later I left home and went to India. It's only now, looking back, I can see that one of the things that I wanted was space, and to be in a country where people spoke languages I didn't understand, gave me space. Nobody was on my case. It was really an absolute relief.

That's an example of getting a kind of negative space if you like, a space of avoidance. I couldn't get this space to include other people, I couldn't bring other people into my space because when people got close, I felt, "*God, there's no space!*" So I had to run away to have a kind of schizoid, or non-social, space. It was only later, through meditation and therapy and just the process of getting older and more confident, that I began to feel a bit more spacious and could welcome people into my space without feeling overwhelmed.

By thinking in terms of these five elements we may recognise a bit of our own life history and how it's been a play of these energies. I would certainly encourage you to think about your lives in this way because I believe it can be very helpful.

Five elements and meditation

Now I would like to end by making some link with meditation practice. In the Tibetan tradition we learn many different kinds of meditation. It is possible to keep stacking up all these different kinds of meditation and doing as much of them every day as we can. Then we might get to a point where we wonder, *“Well, which one should I do? If I don’t have enough time, what’s the main one I should do?”* At that point you might ask somebody whom you trust, *“Oh, what do you think I should do? Is it a good idea to concentrate on this one?”* They might say yes or no and then give you some reason. That can be very useful if you can hang out with people whom you trust to be able to give you good advice however you may not have people like that near you. Not only that, but it means that you are remaining in a state of dependency and dependency is a dualistic relationship which is in itself inherently structurally antithetical to the practice of dzogchen.

In the practice of tantra one is often told to start with preliminary practices like the ngondro. You’d start with prostrations and then do mandala offerings, followed by Dorje Sempa purification and so on. So if you asked the question, *“What meditation should I do?”* you would be told, *“Start at the beginning and go on to the end, and when you’ve finished at the end, come and ask me, and I’ll give you another whole series to start.”* Very simple. If you do that kind of meditation, you’ve got a whole lot of things to do – a hundred thousand of this, then a hundred thousand of that, a hundred thousand of everything – and yet it’s nice and simple, because you just do as you’re told. *“Why are you doing this practice?”* *“I’m doing this practice because my big Papa told me.”* *“Oh, very good.”*

Student: No, I am doing it to get stable.

James: How to you know that will stabilise you?

Student: It’s trust.

James: Now, I’m not at all saying that it’s wrong to do that. All I’m trying to say is that in the Tibetan buddhist system, there are the nine yantras or paths and they normally focus just on the hinayana, mahayana and tantra.

Dzogchen is different. The real difference in the practice of dzogchen – it’s a very, very important difference – is, that once you have a moment of realisation of your own state, what you need to be able to do is to recognise when you are straying from that state, to realise as subtly as possible, as quickly as possible, in as many forms as possible – presented through bodily sensations, thoughts, feelings, your relationship with the world – and then bring yourself back into the state.

So when you find yourself straying out of this state, the thing you have to do is to use a practice which will be appropriate to getting you back into the state. Now, only you can do that. Your teacher can’t do it for you, because you’re the one who’s in the state. To use an example, imagine a child learning to ride a bicycle. The father is walking beside the child, holding her shoulder and saying, *“I won’t let you fall. This is what you have to do.”* He’s got one hand on the handlebars at the front, and the other hand on her shoulder and she’s doing the peddling. *“Don’t worry! You’re not going to fall!”*, he says, *“I’m keeping you safe.”* That can work well to get the child into the rhythm of it, but at a certain point, he has to let go. If her mind is still focused on him being there, she’s going to fall over. Her mind has to go from attention to her supporter into an attention to her own body so that she can feel the balance inside herself. No one else can feel that for her.

That’s why we have to learn to monitor things like these five elements in ourselves, so that we become very subtly aware of these micro-shifts in our own energy – not just in our thinking – and then we can rectify the balance. It’s all about being in harmony in ourselves in the world. Your point is quite right in saying that these other stages is very important for stabilisation. This is like a small child with a proper bicycle, but with two extra little wheels screwed onto the back one. If you practice like that you don’t fall over because you’ve got the balance. At a certain point the little person may ask, *“Mama, Mama, take these wheels off!”* and the Mama says, *“Look, when I see you*

cycling, you're wobbling like this! If these wheels weren't there, you'd fall over! We'll keep the wheels on until you're not wobbling so much." That's why you need stabilisation. When you have stabilisation then we'll take the wheels off, and then you don't fall over. So as long as your little bum's is wobbling, do the tantra!

Student: I was told that if you want to practise phowa, first you must do one hundred thousand Dorje Sempa practices. Nobody can just sit on a bike and start to ride. You need some help.

James: But the thing is, that that person who says you need to do a hundred thousand is not looking at *you* and knowing you and saying, *"You need to do sixty-three thousand."* Sixty-three thousand. Do you see what I mean? They're not reading your energy at all. What they're doing is referring to the rule-book, 'Ah-ha, Dorje Sempa. One hundred thousand'. At the end of a hundred thousand, whether you're any better or not, who knows?

Student: But at least you'll have the feeling that you have done it, and that it is very important.

James: That's like saying, *"When you're eight years' old you'll get a bicycle. You won't get one when you're seven because we can't have seven-year-old girls riding bicycles. Wait till your eighth birthday."*

Five elements and shiné

I'd like now to make a link between a meditation that we all know and what we've been talking about with the elements. The practice of shiné, observing the breath, is, as we know, to keep an attention focused on something very simple, so that when thoughts arise we won't be distracted. Let's now consider what are the elements at play if we get caught up in thoughts when we're doing shiné practice.

We may have got distracted because there was not much space. Suddenly we're in the thought, there was no space to think about it, we're just in it. No space. So for people who don't have much space it's a very, very good practice to do. By focusing on your breath or on some external object, you become aware of the thoughts coming and going next to you in space but you stay focused on the object. So you have the space of not being involved in the thoughts as they arise. In this way it is a good practice to do to give you space.

All of us sometimes have too much fire element, too much air element, too much water element. That is to say, we'll be all hot and excited, with lots of thoughts or worries and so we sit down and try to meditate to calm ourselves, but in fact all we're aware of is that more and more thoughts are coming. In that moment we don't have much space and we don't have much earth but we've got plenty of water, air and fire. We may try to sit thinking, *"I'm going to sit for a whole hour and I'm just going to really get into my breath and I'll control it."* We try to force a whole shift around in our energy. That approach, as I mentioned earlier, is used in zen practice and sometimes in shamatha. You are using the earth element and the space element in that tradition as the discipline, so you sit without moving until a bell rings, and then you may move. Do you see that? That the earth element is in the discipline? I will sit and not move, fixed. And the space element is that there is a space all around me. I cannot move, I am isolated in this island in myself. If one holds that in place externally held it helps to calm down the other three elements.

Alternatively, in the dzogchen style and if you are in touch with the element, what you might do is think, *"Not much point in trying to force myself into this. I'll have a shower and a cup of tea. Put the kettle on, pop in the shower, quickly come out, have a cup of tea."* That all takes fifteen minutes. *"Now I feel a bit more relaxed, so I'll sit and do the practice."* You've used a softer form of the external elements to shift your energy and as you've been shifting the energy, you've been working with that. In the shower you've been moving around under the water, bending, letting your body

relax, coming down, settling down into yourself, letting the stress wash itself away. Then you come out, and you do your meditation.

In that way you use something which is soft and which is out of yourself rather than trying to impose something *onto* yourself. It's a much more mature activity, it's a much more adult activity to work out for yourself what you need, rather than to go to some Papa-figure, whether within the tradition or not, and ask, "*What should I do?*" It means that we have to grow up, because the first rule in dzogchen is "Observe yourself". If you don't focus your attention on yourself, how will you know anything about yourself?

It might be useful, if you would like to, is to keep tracking for yourself how you perceive the world in terms of these five elements externally and internally, and as you're falling asleep, observe how it feels as you're getting more sleepy. How would you make sense of that in terms of the elements. When you wake up in the morning, find out whether you can get these concepts to give you a way of making sense of the world that makes you more sensitive to yourself and to others. That is a very important part of the practice.

OK. So we will break there and start again tomorrow morning.

[Next day]

Do we trust ourselves or do we trust someone else? In the dzogchen tradition we have to learn to trust ourselves. But we also have to be very, very aware of how we cheat ourselves. We become aware that we have these two aspects: a self that wants to be relaxed and open and a self that wants to be up-tight and in control. This is the nature of samsara and nirvana as it manifests in ourselves. By observing ourselves we get to know whether we are moving in the nirvana side and trying to be open, or whether we're in a frightened, self-protective, self-and-other separating mode. In that case we would be trying to manipulate the environment so as to have things on our own terms.

Five elements and the ngöndro preliminaries

I would like to go through the general ngondro preliminary practices in terms of the five elements to show you how they have an energetic function as well. If we understand that then we can notice the imbalances in ourselves. We will always be moving into imbalance, that's for sure! It's just like riding a bicycle. There is always a movement one way or the other. You turn a corner and you have to make a correction otherwise you fall over. It's like that. The correction is not because we are locked in a terrible pathology of samsara; the correction is simply because the world's a dance and you've got to keep moving. If you go like that and then stop, then you fall over. You have to stay in the dance.

We are not identifying a pathology but shifting our view so as to recognise there is no pathology. Rather, what there is are possibilities of falling out of the dance – because part of compassion means to be in the world with others and that means that our energy will definitely get disturbed by other people. Say for example, if you have children or if you work with children, when they are misbehaving you need to speak a bit sharply and that pulls you, for their sake, into a way of being that you may not feel to be. Then having done that for them you need to relax and get into something else. If we want to be close to others we constantly have to adapt to a position that fits.

I will recap the basic view of dzogchen. There are three aspects to open being: in Tibetan these are called *ngowo*, *rangzhin* and *thukje* and they are about the same as the three kayas. Ngowo refers to the state where awareness and emptiness are merged together. It is our real nature in which there is simply an open potential which is shining with awareness. Like in a theatre when they ring the last bell for the performance and the safety curtain open, you have the stage and there is a kind of

rippling excitement. You don't know what's going to come on. It's open, and you open to whatever might come out of it. That's really quite exciting.

Out of this open space there is a display, called *rangzhin*. *Zhin* means 'face' and *rang* is 'self', so it is the self-face of this openness, like the shine of a healthy complexion. It is like how the health in someone's body shines in their face and when you see them you think, "*Hey, you look well!*" because all that is rich and possible in that person is just displaying itself, shining out from them. So the rich potentiality of the open dimension of *ngowo* – you might call it the 'real nature' – comes into the display mode or the effulgent mode of possibility. This is indicated in tantric visualisation in the way that you have a clear blue sky and out of this clear blue sky, rays of rainbows light just appear miraculously in the depths of the clear blue space.

This is the same as the sambhogakaya. Sambhogakaya may be represented in a form and we say 'Chenresig Sambhogakaya' but the real Sambhogakaya is light, so we have to remember that the form of Chenresig is a form of light; it's a manifestation.

These five rainbows colours represent the five elements: earth, water, fire, air and space. Remember the two kinds of space we talked about? Infinite space is from the first realm, from the *ngowo*; then we have relational space and it encompasses things. That is the space in this five rainbow coloured light. These five rays of light manifest more precisely in definite forms.

First of all the clear blue sky, and then the rays of light which take up a particular form. What is the form they take up? This is it. We are the form of these five rays of light. When Guru Rinpoche was a small boy, King Indrabhuti asked him, "*Where do you come from? Who is your mother? Who is your father?*" and he replied, "*My mother is wisdom. My father is method.*"

I might think, "*Well, my name is James Low, I had my mama and my papa in Scotland, and I know where I come from.*" but from the dharma point of view that is not where I've come from.

If somebody tells me, "*Actually, you are not this person born in Scotland. What you are is a manifestation of rays of light coming out infinite space. You are the display of reality itself.*" that sounds a bit fancy doesn't it? That's why in the nyingma tradition we usually do tantric practice in between. In tantra we have the sequence of clear blue sky, rays of light, a mandala palace arises, in the centre of the mandala palace is a deity, we go into a relationship with the deity, the deity merges into us, we become the deity, and finally, the world is a mandala.

This is a transitional phase between my being born in Scotland and simply being the effulgence of reality. I can remember when I was very small being told that I needed to remember my address and telephone number but that I was not to tell this to strangers. There is a way in which all of us have been immersed in a cause and effect story of where we have come from and what has made us. This is a story of ourselves as separate beings in interaction with other concrete, separate beings – where we take the five elements as being real and solid and separated.

From what I've described of these three phases of *ngowo*, *rangzhin* and *thukje*, we are not talking about the five elements as something solid and separate. We are talking of the five elements displayed as the five colours as the radiance of openness itself. This third stage *thukje* – *thukje* normally means compassion, but in the dzogchen idea it is more like energy – is the energy of the way our bodies manifest in the world in our being with others, so that everything is seen as compassion, as an energetic radiance.

Because all the forms are manifesting from spaciousness, the task is, as I've said many times before, to be in the dance, to be surfing on the wave and not to separate oneself out as something apart from the general flow of becoming. The goal is not to be anything special, because 'special' means being different and apart, and in the dzogchen view our identity is part of the field of identity

we share with others. With this there is a recognition that everything is manifesting from that ground.

Why then do lamas and buddhas get represented sitting on a high throne, dressed with all kinds of finery, if the goal is not about being special? It's because their being on the throne is not special to them. It is just their job. If they think it's special they are not doing their job very well. For people who have not much understanding but who have some faith it is helpful to be able to idealise an object and believe that that person is special. Part of the lamas' kindness is to allow themselves to be used as this object of idealisation, since if everything arises from emptiness, every form of emptiness is empty. On an absolute level it doesn't matter if you are a kind, caring, enlightened person or a vicious murderer. However on the relative level, if somebody said, *"I can give you a liberation with a blessing."* and someone else said, *"I can give you liberation with one cut of my knife through your throat."* we would probably all choose the first person.

It is very, very important to recognise this, because everything that arises is method – if we are able to use it as method! Everything is method. For some people it is very useful to be able to idealise some great person and say, *"Oh, this person is great. I just want to be with them, I believe in them so much."* When they come to their meditation that energy of devotion helps them to focus their awareness on the lama as the deity and merge into them in the meditation. The idealisation then is helpful for the dissolving into emptiness.

I can remember that when I was a child the self-service cafeteria first came into Britain. So I would be going there with my parents and I would have my little tray and I would be looking at all these things I could eat. *"Can I have that?"* and *"Can I have that?"* and *"What can I have?"* and my mother would be saying, *"Well, you think about what you'd like to have."* She would talk that way. But eventually my father would get pissed off and say, *"I don't care what you eat. Put whatever you like on your plate but be sure to eat all of it!"* This is the same as the practice of dzogchen. It doesn't matter what you get into in the world, but you have to be able to empty your plate. You have to be able to take it back into emptiness. If you can't swallow it, if you can't take it down into emptiness, if you get hung up on things, then you have to be careful to adjust your practice to the world.

Kuntuzangpo, always good', is our hero, remember. He eats everything on his plate and then says, *"I'd like some more."* This is the ultimate attainment in dzogchen. But we say, *"I would like a little of this, a little of that..."* That's not quite enlightened. So at our stage in the practice it is very important to be able to balance our state of the five elements with the world and find a way of having maximum real contact.

Four reflections and the elements

Now, to speak about the general tantric preliminary practice. The first thing we have is the four reflections that turn our minds from samsara: impermanence, death, karma, suffering and the difficulty of getting a precious human birth. When we reflect deeply on these we may feel quite frightened; they shake us up a bit. They disturb our complacency. So, in terms of the five elements, here we are in our lives just getting along with things, having enough to eat, having a place to eat, somehow life's OK, summer's coming... But then we start to think, *"Oh, I'm going to die. Where am I going to go when I die? This is all very frightening, what am I going to do...?"*

So the wind element gets to the fire and we get a little bit anxious, *"I'd better do something!"*

Most of the preliminaries are focused on shaking up the earth element, because the earth element is a kind of solidity that stops us really wanting to change. The earth element keeps us in denial about the nature of impermanence. On TV we can watch horrors happening in the world news but somehow this is not happening to us. We can eat a cake and watch people being shot at the same time. It says in the dharma that we should practise like a person whose hair is on fire. So if our hair is on fire then something is going to be disturbed in our elements, is it not?

Prostrations

Imagine that we are sitting meditating quite comfortably and then we stand up. We put our hands together in prayer and then we throw ourselves on the ground. We get back up and we do it all again. We do it over and over again. These prostrations are really shaking up our system, they take us out of a sort of solid settled reliance on the earth element into a kind of flowing, into the water element. If you've done prostrations and really got into it you will know how it is just flowing. You're reciting the prayers and you've got some sense of the visualisation, so you've got water flowing through space like a stream down a mountain.

We are also attacking the earth-like quality of pride: *'I'm an intelligent, educated adult person. Why should I make prostrations to anybody? You mean the Buddha's dead? This is just some wierd cultural story! What's the point of me lying down on the ground groveling as if I am some kind of slave?'* So this solidity of the earth: *'I know who I am. I am an important person'* we then take and we prostrate this earth, this solidity, in front of the refuge tree of Guru Rinpoche arising in space. We are saying, *"Earth is subjugated to space, earth is subjugated to space."*

Taking refuge

The whole idea of taking refuge is *'I am not sufficient to myself'* so again it's opening up the narrow barrier I have around myself, *'I am an autonomous person'* to saying, *"I am a vulnerable, needy person. I am connected with the world. I cannot keep myself apart from it."*

Bodhicitta practice

In bodhicitta practice we take the water of compassion and we soften ourselves. Imagine someone is not well. I might say, *"Oh, I'm very sorry to hear that,"* but inside I might think, *"Ah! I'm glad I'm OK."* I might even want a bit more space to keep us apart because I don't want any of their germs to jump across onto me! But if I am practising with bodhicitta I'm practising an identification. I am saying, *"You and I are not different Whatever is your luck, that's my luck too. If you have to go into hell, if you have to go into hospital, when you die, I am there with you. I am not being separate any more."* So instead of being this earth separated off in space, I'm connected, I'm going into a flowing, mixing. That is why we talk of compassion as softening. It's like water flowing on to earth, it softens it.

Mandala offering

When we make the mandala offering we again have the sense of spaciousness. We take all of the solid things that we are attached to, all our special things, and we offer them up. We are loosening the possibility of control in the earth element into a flowing and spaciousness. It is wind, water and fire moving us into space and away from earth.

Vajrasattva purification

And then when we do Dorje Sempa, we have Dorje Sempa on top of us and out of his body fluid is coming down to our head and pouring over us and filling up our body and all the solidity and heaviness of our body is going out of our body as smoke and dirt and soot. It goes down into the earth and is burnt up in flames and goes into the mouth of the demon and gets destroyed.

Guru Yoga

In guru yoga practice, we pray to the guru as the representative of the whole lineage and merge with the guru. In this merging with the guru we are taking ourselves outside time and we are becoming part of a universal process. Again it's an attack on specialness, on difference, on me as being unique, and just saying, *"Yes I want to take my place as part of this historical movement; this great movement of people who've all been committed to the same ideal."*

We have attachment to the five elements as our body. Like our eyes, these little soft water-bubble things. If I stick my finger in my eye I go blind. It's very easy to knock out our bodies; it is so easy to kill ourselves. One little cut through the artery in the neck and blood shoots out and you're dead. It is very easy to destroy this place where the five elements are playing together. It's obvious that we will want to protect our body and the practice of the dharma is never to put your body in danger. This is not to say we should be attached to the body. What it's saying is that we try to be more open and responsive to the world, recognising that our protection lies in our connection with the world not in our separation from the world.

Dissolving down into emptiness

All of these practices up to now have been very much about dissolving the earth element and making us more loose, more free. At the end of most stages in it we have also done the dissolving down into emptiness. When we dissolve down into emptiness and we are shrinking more and more, that process of being able to relax and experience ourselves as light flowing down, as if it was shining water in a stream, flowing down into one point, and the point of light just dissolving like tips of flames... It is often described like the letter Hung ཧུང and on the top of the letter Hung there is a little nada, a little sound point, and it looks like a flame. That dissolves out like wind into space. We reverse earth, water, fire, wind and then space, and we dissolve out into space. Then, when thoughts, feelings, sensations – when our body in the world start to manifest – we try to stay with the sense that this is the manifestation out of space of the five elements as space, and with that awareness we integrate the world as the manifestation of openness.

You can see how we have these different practices which are acting as antidotes for different blockages in our elements. If we know these then we can use these practices appropriately when we see where we are getting blocked. For example, you may have been doing a practice for a while but then you start to get a bit bored with it and a bit blasé. When you sit down to do the practice you no longer have much energy or interest. No need to worry about this. This is not something bad. All it is, is that you have a shift in the five elements. The earth element is getting too solid, so you are sinking and there is not much energy available. If you think you are a bad person and you get guilty and blame yourself, then you will simply increase your amount of stupidity. What you have to do is recognise that you need fire. How do we get fire? We do that by increasing our devotion. Maybe go on a pilgrimage, maybe read some more stories about Guru Rinpoche, maybe get some more initiations, or, if nothing else, buy a big drum and bang it. Boom! boom!

That's why in pujas it can sometimes be useful to have arrows with five coloured ribbons waving about and for people to get up and dance. You can do many, many things. However, you have to have the balance. If you get too heated up, then when you come to do the dissolving you are so buzzy you can't focus your attention any more. If you are too earth element, you're like a dead pudding and you just sit there and nothing dissolves.

So, the real task is to balance these five elements so that they dissolve down into open space and arise up and you have this easy flowing motion. It's up to us to learn the methods that are appropriate, to observe ourselves, and to apply the methods as appropriate to keep the flow going.

Dedication of merit

We dedicate merit so as to provide no substantial point around which we will build up the earth element as the basis for pride and separation. By dedicating the merit we dissolve any point of fixity down through the elements and out into space, so that it flows out to all beings.

Understanding the function of a practice

It is helpful if you understand the function of a particular practice because they are all method, and we use a method for a particular purpose. Tibetan culture was structured quite early on in

monasteries on large-scale group practice. If we are doing this practising on our own we are going to do it differently from the more formal ritual way. In either case it is useful to know the basic chants. If you are doing this on your own then you may really get into some parts of the practice and do it for longer. Once you get to know a practice like this you will get caught up in parts of it, a bit spaced-out and that is fine because in your meditation you are not really in the world with other people. Nevertheless we can appreciate how in Tibetan buddhist culture the social liturgical form is about a lot of people enacting something together on behalf of others.

In my experience of doing practices with Tibetans, particularly the bigger practices, when you come to the part in a text where it says that everything dissolves down, they immediately go onto the next line, without allowing the time to actually do any of the meditation. I think that can be a difficulty. When you do this kind of meditation practice it is not like doing shiné, when the end can be indicated by someone ringing a bell. In shiné one has a focus and then you shift your focus from one object to something else. However when you are doing the dissolving, it is very important to practise coming out of the dissolving in your own time, because in that way you practise awareness. Therefore if at a certain point somebody were to ring a bell, it would disturb you and you would lose the experience of just gradually opening up. What you're trying to do is stay so open that the world arises inside your meditation. That is why I think that to have a bell ringing or some such interruption, you get a shock, and the world appears as out there. So you get shocked into duality, rather than arising with a non-dual incorporation.

If we understand the principles of why we are doing the practice then we can see that these are primarily practices to do on your own, to go into them deeply and to get the sensation. We use faith to intensify the fire sensation and to get us more and more burned into the practice.

Now we will do our Small Rigdzin practice together. Shall we start?

[Practice]

Devotion and emptiness

Most of the time when I am here I am talking about the structure of the dharma and the structure of the practice. I don't spend much time telling you stories about Guru Rinpoche or other teachers. Sometimes I say things that may sound a little bit critical of lamas. That certainly doesn't mean that I don't think that devotion is very important. As with everything in the buddhadharma we need to follow the middle way. On the one hand we don't want to go into a cynical, knowing-too-much-about-everything position. On the other hand we don't want to go into a naïve position of believing everything all the time. In the middle we can be aware of the dharma, be able to think clearly about the dharma and then be able to soften and move into a full devotion where our hearts open to Guru Rinpoche, or whatever deity we are meditating upon, so that we are able to merge in and enter emptiness.

When you see Tibetans in India it can be very moving how much devotion they show. They see some holy thing and they put it on top of their head. That's a very nice approach to life. It's very respectful and it's very open but is it supported by any understanding of emptiness? For us, wanting to practise the dharma and gain some direct understanding, it's very important to be able to use our devotion, the openness of our heart, to bring ourselves into emptiness. If I think this book is the holy dharma and I put it on top of my head, without an understanding of emptiness I am just a person with a book on the top of my head. This is the situation of duality.

Although this could be helpful as part of a preliminary attitude, but the main thing is to be able to dissolve into the object. If I believe that basically I am a bad person and that this book is a holy book, and that by putting it on my head good things will come from the good object into me, the bad object, then I am simply playing games of duality. It's very important to have neither the spiritual pride of being a special person nor the spiritual negative pride of being a worthless person.

Devotion is absolutely vital because through devotion the hardness of our heart melts. We can be in touch with all our fear and vulnerabilities – our fear of death, of sickness, of hopelessness. Out of that fear and tightness, which is the expression of the non-resolution of the five elements, we can open ourselves to Guru Rinpoche so that his light will dissolve that tightness.

This is how we use tantra as a support for dzogchen by using the transformation of these limiting situations, or poisons. We use fear to dissolve fear into emptiness. We use our sense of helplessness and loneliness to dissolve ourselves into emptiness. The more tight, anxious and worried we are, if we can bring this into the practice and pray with faith till tears come to our eyes, *“Oh God, it’s so terrible, I am suffering, all the beings around me are suffering! What can we do? Please, please help.”* And so we just open, and open our hearts and let the light come, so that every part of us is dissolved. This is a very good way to practise. We use the possibility of being small and helpless to find a point of identification with Guru Rinpoche.

In that way there is no part of our existence or anything we have done that cannot be transformed. This is the essence of the tantric path to transformation. If I have been cruel to someone, if I have cheated someone or done some dreadful thing, I can be in touch with that and pray, *“Guru Rinpoche, take this away! I cannot bear it. Open it up. Give me light! Give me light!”* Imagine as if your lover was leaving you and you were just crying and sobbing, *“Don’t go, I’ll do anything...”* That is how we should feel. We are completely shameless, we don’t want to hide anything in our life and in that way we are open.

But that is only very helpful if we have already understood the structure of the practice so that we understand the nature of emptiness, the nature of the manifestation of the world, and then our practice is not going to take us into some cultish dependency but rather to the uplands of openness.

Refuge

We take refuge in the Buddha, the dharma, the sangha because we believe they will protect us from suffering, and in general they do, but in order to be protected we have to both make use of them, and make use of them properly. An example I gave before is that taking refuge is like buying an umbrella. If you want the umbrella to keep the rain off, you have to hold it up. If you don’t hold it up, it won’t keep the rain off. That’s how refuge works. But if you have to walk through wind and storm then the umbrella might get buckled and the spokes bend. I once had an umbrella like that and it was an extremely dangerous thing because it had this metal spike that the cloth had come off, and it had bent round so that if the wind caught it, it could have taken my eye out. In that way, something that started as a refuge ended up being something quite dangerous.

It is the same with the dharma. The dharma can drive people crazy. We shouldn’t be at all surprised at this because for the dharma to help people it has to be quite powerful. And powerful things are also dangerous. Tibetans have a saying that the practice of higher tantra and dzogchen is like a snake in a bamboo tube. The snake can go up or down but not sideways. So what is it that makes us go down? It’s losing any sense of what we are doing and why we are doing it.

For example, in many practices including chöd and some parts of preliminary dzogchen, the expression Phat! is used. When we use this, this syllable is said to represent the act of cutting; it cuts a gap through whatever we are caught up in. Now, if we think of it in terms of the five elements, what Phat! does is it shoots everything back into space – earth, water, fire, air all back into space, only space. Given that we build our identity around ourselves as being a formulation of earth, water, fire, and air moving in space, in that real saying of Phat!, when we really get into it, we are knocking off or knocking out the normal basis from which we act. So we have to ask why would anyone want to throw away their body?

It would be the equivalent of someone blowing up with dynamite the house he was building. Maybe in the course of building he had many problems and got angry with the whole project. For a

moment, he feels quite happy, problem's gone, but then it starts to rain – no house, no umbrella. Now he stands crying in the rain. Clearly, that was not a good course of action.

However, if the builder had discovered that there was the makings of a gold mine under the building, then blowing it up might be a very useful thing to do. If he knew there was a gold mine down there, then what the heck – he could buy ten houses, twenty houses! So he's found a gold mine and he's blown the house up. He feels really happy, but he decides that first of all he will take along a sample of his gold to the Department of Geology in his local university. What they tell him is that this is not gold, it is fool's gold, iron pyrites. The gold he first finds is like understanding, *“Yes I believe in this ngowo, rangzhin and thukje. I believe my basic nature is spaciousness and that out of this, spaciousness manifestation always occurs. I believe this because the Buddha explained it in the text and because in the bits of meditation I've done so far it seems to be true. By examining the nature of the world, yes, it all makes sense. Therefore dissolving all that manifests down into space is very useful because I know that space will always give me something back, and what it gives me back will be even better than what I am dissolving, because what it gives me back will be light and luminous and ever playful, whereas what I've got at the moment is some dull stupid thing that I cling to.”*

There are at least two ways in which gold can turn into fool's gold, and the first way is by only having a conceptual intellectual understanding of the nature of this space. Merely doing a lot of Phat!! Phat!! Phat!! all around it, but never really launching yourself fully into it means that you start with a rubber bungee of attachment which you are never going to cut.

This can be the problem for all of us – we give up a beautiful weekend like this when we could be out enjoying ourselves in the open air, we come to a place like this, we hear all these complex things and then don't really practise them. So we blow up our house of having an ordinary life and fitting in our community and enjoying that and we find ourselves neither in ordinary life nor in a very enlightened way of being, but somehow accumulating all sorts of bits and pieces. When we take this fool's gold to the death bank they don't give us a ticket to travel very far. We can't even get a day trip to enlightenment! Instead we've got a cheap one way ticket straight down to hell.

That's one way in which the dharma can be dangerous: we can use it to create a false illusion that something is really changing and developing. We play at it without it actually transforming our life. That's not to say that we should expect instant results – clearly we have deeply rooted habits and we get confused easily and all the rest of it – but nonetheless we probably know when we are honestly really engaging with the task and when we're just pissing about.

The other danger is much greater. This occurs when, having blown up the house and entered the territory of gold, of space, instead of becoming the space, being present in and as the space, you become spaced out, ungrounded, spacey rather than present. This can lead to bodily disturbance, as in the energetic turbulence that arises when kundalini practice goes wrong.

Tenderness is the first rule of meditation practice

The first rule of meditation practice is tenderness. Tenderness is a form of awareness. If you are cleaning a small baby you have to be very aware of the nature of the baby's skin. It is very, very soft. It always helps to speak to babies with words of love but sometimes as parents we get angry with our babies because they won't sleep. They don't explain themselves, they don't seem to be in control of their body, and on a practical level they are just a bloody nuisance. That's why there's a great deal of violence against small babies.

The bit of us that is starting to do meditation practice is just like a small baby. Buddhism uses the image of as us being like the tender shoots like you get in springtime when the plants are first coming out of the ground. That's our stage, we are just these little shoots coming out of the ground, very soft

and tender. Just as these tender grasses are not to be chewed or stamped on if they are to grow, we also need a warm careful nurturing environment to grow. So the first thing is to learn to be tender to yourself. Observe yourself and find out through that very gentle, tender attention what you need.

This brings us back to the practice about Phat!, because Phat! is designed to knock us into space. If we are very anxious and uptight we should not try to knock ourselves into space because our anxiety is signaling our attachment. If you try to collapse an attachment by shouting Phat! at it, you simply make a mess. Sometimes you might hear parents saying, "Stop crying! If you don't stop crying right now I'll hit you, so just stop!". So if we are anxious and we do this Phat! kind of thing, it's like slapping ourselves. If we're somebody who's feeling like this, who's tight, what does somebody who's tight need to do? They need to relax, they don't need another big shock!

I think that's very important – looking at yourself, so that if you get uptight, if you find yourself maybe having a lot of energy and not being able to sleep at night, then you should be careful. Don't do a lot of dharma practice at that time. Go for a walk, have a bath, go to the cinema, go to see a silly, funny movie at the cinema. Go for a walk in the woods and look at squirrels in the trees. I think it's very, very important to be aware of this, because the dharma is powerful and we can get hurt if we mis-use it. It's not that the dharma's bad, it's that when we mis-use powerful things, we get hurt.

One cannot prove scientifically whether the dharma is right or wrong. All we can do is study it and understand it as best we can. However, I think it is very important, particularly for Western people, to do some background study of buddhist philosophy. The dharma's been going a long time and many scholars have thought about it, many yogis have thought about it, and all their different thoughts have been polishing it so that it is very, very clear. When you see the whole structure, everything fits together.

If we come along with an attitude of, *'I'll take this bit because I like it and I won't take that bit because I don't like it'* then we end up with the kind of dharma that simply reflects our own current taste. It's at that point then, that we can get lost if we don't have a very clear conceptual understanding of the nature of emptiness. If we haven't spent a lot of time thinking about impermanence, walking along the street, seeing impermanence in action all the time, if we're still thinking basically in terms of separate substances, real entities, if we're still clinging inside ourselves to a fear of the world and wanting to be loved and wanting to be important, then we should be very careful about using Phat! to try to shoot ourselves into openness. We are not living in a monastery and we haven't grown up in a village where everybody has the same buddhist beliefs. In fact many western buddhists will have gone to see many different kinds of teachers and so heard many different kinds of teachings.

Personally, I think that it is a very good thing to go and see different teachers but it does mean then that the one who will need to organise all the different practices you learn and all the different views you encounter is yourself. This brings us back to the basic question: given that I have come into the dharma because I suffer from ignorance and am foolish and confused, how will I decide which of the dharma paths is best to help me, given that I am stupid and confused. Because this is a very important issue we have been focusing this weekend on the five elements and trying to get some sense of how the elements are working inside ourselves. If we are not able to see what our imbalance is, then we will have to rely on other people. And who is it who knows us? We are not living all the time, twenty-four hours a day, with a spiritual teacher and even if teachers come to town, how much do they know about our life and who we are and how we are? Intuitive grasping of situations may be a good thing, but it's not the whole story.

To know your own state is really the key thing for the practice of dzogchen. That is, so to speak, its preliminary practice. On another occasion I will speak about the direct recognition of the nature of the mind and how to get into that state and to stay with it. However, in the interim, I suggest you use the time to get a clarity about the nature of the five elements and to observe how different

external situations shift your energy and how internal thoughts shift your energy. See that between the arising of thoughts – as it were, within – and the arising of phenomena – as it were, without – we ourselves are the endlessly moving tension between these five elements.

Remember the Buddha's example of 'the middle way'? Tuning a guitar, or a sitar. It is a good example, because you have your finger on the thing for tightening and loosening the string and then you're plucking the string and then you are listening. So you have an external sound and an internal sound, and you are balancing. This is what we are trying to do all the time – trying to find the way of subtly balancing and staying dancing and moving in the middle. You can't sleep yourself into enlightenment like some hibernating animal that goes into waiting for the winter of samsara to be over.

The only way to get into enlightenment is through love. Love, tenderness and awareness are all very similar in quality. Love for ourselves and love for others.