

# *The View and Practice of Trekcho*

*How Dzogchen and Trekcho fit in to the Buddhist structure*

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*James Low*

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*Transcribed by Vera Neuroth*

*Edited by Barbara Terris*

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### Excerpts

*...It is very important to appreciate that the yantras are all just different ways of construing the world, of making sense of the world. They are a kind of ethos and are described in the tradition as 'a view'. There is a view, which leads to a meditation, which then leads to an activity, which finally leads to a result. These four factors are used to organise the practices of all the different levels or yantras that one can engage with and is why it is important to understand what is the view.*

*...When you lose your way, when you get caught in the spiral of continuity, it is not that you have gone from awakening into samsara; it's not that you've got lost by going somewhere else. You are in the same place, but not awakening to where you are. If you want to awaken to where you are, it has to be simple.*

*...Why do we take refuge? Because we are lost. If we are lost, we are not the boss. Most of us have experienced having a boss who is lost. The thing is that if the boss is lost, you can't tell the boss that they are lost. Not a wise move in any organisation! So you have to learn to manage the lost boss. This is the function of meditation. The ego has to be placated, to be put to one side, so that you can do the practice.*

*...Devotion dissolves reification; it dissolves the solidification that comes from believing in entities. Belief in entities is dissolved by belief in a nonentity! That is to say, if you believe in emptiness – which is not different in its nature as a belief from the belief in substance – the belief in emptiness will dissolve the belief in substance, so that emptiness and emptiness meet together, sky meeting sky, out of which everything is transformed. This is the basis of the practice.*

## WHAT BRINGS US TO THE DHARMA?

Over the next three days we have a chance to look the dzogchen practices connected with *trekcho*. Dzogchen is a very old system connected with Tibetan buddhism but it also has lineages independent of that. It translates as ‘the great completion’ and it points to the fact that whatever is required is always already here, that there is a natural completion or perfection in existence.

This point of view is not one shared by all the buddhist paths and so first of all I’ll try to locate this kind of practice in relation to the general buddhist structure and hopefully show that these different paths are all addressing the same issue.

The fact seems to be that we are drawn towards different paths according to our own tendencies – you could call these karmic tendencies, the propensities of our own personality and history and so on. Some people are very committed to the idea of struggle, of giving themselves a hard time, of focusing on difficulties to be overcome. Dzogchen is not likely to appeal to people with that orientation because it seems too easy. Other people are maybe lazy stupid people who try to avoid difficulties in life and who would be very attracted to dzogchen! My own teacher always said that it’s better to be simple and stupid, because if you are too intelligent, then you can always find something to think about and so spend your whole life in the labyrinth of your mind, chasing one idea after another.

Generally speaking, we come towards dharma or some kind of practice because we find ourselves not fully at home in ourselves or satisfied with our situation. We feel that something is wrong. Something is not quite working in the right way, and therefore we need to do something different. Usually this manifests in terms of a sense of either lack or excess. We feel something is missing in ourselves – we lack something and therefore we want to get something to make ourselves complete. Or, we find that we have an excess of something, maybe an excess of emotion, an excess of anxiety, of blaming oneself or other people and so on, and therefore we want to diminish that excess.

Finding the middle way between these two tendencies is the central teaching of the Buddha. However that middle way is not going to be achieved in a stable manner if one is constantly adjusting one’s own situation. It’s not as if we can see ourselves clearly as all of a piece, that we can just look in a mirror and see who we are.

The fact seems to be that we are revealed to ourselves situationally. So for much of the time you might get on quite well in your life, you seem to be successful, you have friends and so on, and suddenly the place where you are working is closed down. You’re unemployed. You have less money, you can’t participate in the things you were doing before and you find that your life is shrinking. In the economic climate that has happened to many people across Europe.

In such moments we can see that the sense of who we are, which felt like ‘me’ – it felt like a kind of internally defined presentation, a manifestation of the essence of myself – is actually contingent. That is to say, it’s dependent on the interaction of causes and circumstances. The ‘me-ness’ of me, what feels like the truth of my own existence, is not something inside me, but is something which emerges in relation to the environment. Therefore who we are is revealed to us through our participation in the environment, which is changing. So, bad events can make us very sour and bitter or angry and we

think, *“Five years ago I wasn’t like this! Five years ago I was happy and friendly and now I’m depressed and I don’t want to see people. How can this have happened?”* Very easily. Because five years ago, when things were going well, they were going well because of a patterning of circumstances, which gave rise to these experiences. They were temporary phenomena. They were not who we really are. Causes and circumstances change and we find ourselves manifesting as a different form.

So this is the beginning of the buddhist understanding of the nature of impermanence – that whatever we take ourselves to be, is not stable or reliable; and therefore we have to live with a sense that our identity is fraudulent. Fraudulent in the sense that although we inhabit it as if it is the presentational truth of who we are — that I am myself, obviously, it’s not obvious at all. Because how I am today is not how I was yesterday. The fact that we have moods, that we have different kinds of thoughts and sensations, that our relation with our body shifts according to hormonal cycles, to vagaries of the weather, to getting cold, sicknesses, illnesses, and so on.

The fantasy of the stability of personal identity is one of the things which blinds us to the actuality of our co-emergence with many different factors. That we are called into being by the environments that we are relating with. That we don’t exist prior to the situation. That we never know what’s going to happen. If you go to work in the morning, you don’t know how you are going to be in the course of the day. Maybe you open the computer and there is some really shitty e-mail and your day is ruined. Before, you didn’t feel like that. Just a few words appearing on a screen and then — *“Oh! My life is not so safe.”*

How come we are so sensitive? How come our mood is changing? We can look on this as some kind of psychological problem, *“I should be more authentic. If I was authentic, if I was true to myself, then I would be reliable and predictable in how I manifest into the world.”* But is this true? When we look at the politicians, they are changing like the wind, moving this way and that way, because their agenda is to stay in power.

We have a similar kind of agenda; we’re not flying in such a big space, but in the small spaces of our lives we seek to maintain the continuity of our sense of self and the structures of our existence. Friendships, relationships with family, work, feeling okay about ourselves and so on. This structuring of identity is always at the mercy of the winds which are blowing around us. It’s not something which we can stabilise. So from the buddhist point of view, the effort to stabilise your identity is essentially a waste of time. It’s a cul-de-sac, it’s a dead end road.

For example, there are many kinds of personal development groups you can go to, to find out more about your personality and develop yourself in all kinds of ways. There are many forms of physical development and groups you can join. These can put you more in touch with your body; you can join a singing group, be more in touch with your voice, you could learn to understand your mind more... All of these can be useful, but still we will fall over events. Things will happen which we hadn’t predicted; which we don’t like and we don’t like them, because we can’t fit them into what we feel to be our shape. These events which come are events that we want to reject, because if we offer them hospitality, they will cause us to change our shape. And changing our shape at the mercy of events often gives us a sense of insecurity, of anxiety — *“I don’t know who I really am!”* For some people, the experience of becoming a mother, for example, is extremely traumatic; it completely un-grounds

them. They lose their connection with how their life was before and for years and years they can wander in a wilderness of not really knowing how to relate to themselves, or the baby, or the people around them.

The same thing can happen with redundancy, with losing your job, with sickness – but it can also happen for no apparent reason. One day you just wake up and you are no longer quite at home in the life that you thought you had.

### *What does buddhism suggest we do?*

So, what is buddhism proposing? Generally it is to understand that the investment that we have in our identity, in our felt sense of who we are, is a misplacement of our energy. That is to say that our potential can go in two main directions. It can go in the direction of wisdom, to understand the ground of the basis of who we are, and it can go in the direction of compassion, to allow us to be more related to the people around us, to our situations, to be more flexible and responsive. But when this potential that we have, this richness of our creativity, when this is harnessed and gathered together in the function of maintaining our own sense of self, then it's very easy to have no sense of wisdom and no sense of compassion.

If, in the face of these constantly turning events that surround us, we are trying to hold ourselves together, then clearly the central concern that we have is the maintenance of a self-image, or a self-construct. This is very preoccupying and very diminishing. If our attention is turned out onto the world and focusing on other people – on how they might be and how we might relate to them – this also blocks us from looking more directly into ourselves and examining what it actually means to be 'me'.

We have many ideas about who we are. We have our history, our stories, where we live, what kind of work we do, what kind of pleasures we manage to extract from the world around us, and so on. It may seem as if this formation of identity is the totality of our existence. Moreover this is confirmed by whatever education we got, the kind of work that we do, the family expectations. If you become a parent, then children want you to be their mother or the father; that's their main interest in you. They are not really interested in whether you are happy or not. They might be interested in whether you've got some money to spend on them, but mainly they are interested in you fulfilling a function towards them.

It's the same when you go into work. You get some money for what you do, but it's inside the template, inside the framework of other people's expectations. Somebody has an agenda and a notion of what you should be doing. So as soon as you enter into the workplace, you are formed into a particular kind of identity and you are expected to fulfil that while you are in that building.

So – all day long we are getting reaffirmation or encouragement to give more of the same, to present ourselves as being more of the same. It's quite unusual to meet somebody who really invites us to inquire into who we are. Once we start to inquire into who we are, that will make us less predictable to the other person. Which means that the other person then has to be more thoughtful and attentive when they interact with us. Imagine if we were meeting together on the basis of being aware! That would be very different. I don't get that when I go to work in the morning nor, I imagine, do you. The whole structure of the clinic where I work is a choreography written a long time ago by

nobody remembers whom but we are all still dancing to this particular kind of tune. And that's usually the case in institutions. You cross the threshold, you start to hear the music that's playing and if you don't get in step, you start to get trouble. So the possibility of inquiring into the nature of our existence and identity doesn't occur very often. Especially the inquiry as to what is this world that surrounds us.

Buddhism essentially begins with an invitation to put our assumptions into question, assumptions which act as the glue that holds the shape of our world together. Now, why would we want to bother doing this? If you hold your life together, and you live in a wealthy country where there is reasonable healthcare and plentiful food then life is not so hard. Why shouldn't you just have a pleasant life? Do a bit of work, get some money, enjoy yourself...? Why would you not do that?

Well, from a buddhist point of view, it's because the very act of trying to fulfil oneself through sensory enjoyment, through fitting into a system, generates a kind of alienation. No matter how we try to fit in, even when we are very willingly offering ourselves – *"Give me a job!" "Give me a place to be!" "I want you to say you love me and be with me forever!"* – even when we are trying to find a niche, a little corner that we can occupy and stay safe in – in finding that refuge, that site of identity, we are alienated from our own potential.

That is to say: in finding *this*, we forget *that*. In signing up to this package deal, there is a whole lot of ourselves to whom we are saying, *"Stay in the shadow", "Don't trouble me."* Some of us *are* troubled by these things. We think, *"Maybe there is more to life!" "What's the purpose of doing this?"* We work away, we try various occupations and activities, but something is missing. We start to see that the lack is not a lack for something different, something special – the lack is the lack of a particular way of inhabiting our existence that allows us to be at home whatever is occurring. Because if you look for the special – whether it's a special relationship, or a special occupation, or having special children, whatever the special is as a particular formation – it's going to be limited. And that limitation is going to make it more difficult to engage with other aspects of life experience, because you have committed yourself to something small.

Whereas if we see that actually my lack is that having created this structure of myself – much of which was created by our participation in a family matrix when we were small – we didn't know we were creating ourselves. We were just trying to hang in there and survive and not let our brother beat us or whatever it would be. We learn these various moves in order to find a way forward but this particular shaping of ourselves is not something which is not really viable. It's a wrong turning. So letting go of who we think we are, of the habitual assumptive structure of our existence, is something very important.

### ***Take refuge***

This leads us to the first level of buddhist practice, taking refuge. Traditionally we take refuge in the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha. Why do we take refuge? Because we realise that we can't trust ourselves. It's very scary to realise you can't trust yourself. You can't trust the content of your own mind. You can't trust your feelings. Most of us have made mistakes in life through our feelings. We think something is going to be good, we start some love-story with someone, whatever, and after a while it goes wrong, and then we wonder, *"How could that be? It seemed so right but now it's gone"*

*wrong. I was sure this would work, but actually, it's not working out at all. The feeling that I had, which said, 'This is right', is clearly not correct; it's unreliable."*

So I can't trust my feelings, I can't trust my thinking and I can't trust my sensation. All of these lead me into fragmenting paths. What will I rely on? Well, one can rely on the Buddha. Why do we rely on the Buddha? Because he is far away and won't cause trouble. We rely on people who are alive, whom we meet but they always cause us trouble. However to the Buddha we say, *"We completely trust you! We are not going to meet you, so we trust you."* We rely on the dharma, the teaching, because it's radically different, it cuts across the trajectory of our life; it offers a *re-vision*, a new way of seeing what we seem to be caught up in. It's almost like if you were out camping and you are going to put up your tent and you spread out the tent and lay out the lines and peg it down and then you put the central pole in the tent. As soon as the pole goes in, the tent rises up. The dharma teaching should be like that. They should open up a space. However a lot of the time we are in the collapsed tent. Our life is sticking to our face; it's too close, we can't see very much, we're caught up in it. We lack perspective; we don't have distance from our events.

Taking refuge means that there is more to life than I have at the moment. I lack something, but what I lack is not more of the same, but a better version of it. It's not that I need a better job or a better partner or a different kind of diet. Although all of these factors can produce some temporary relative improvement, they are not going to bring about a fundamental or structural change. Refuge means needing to find something which will be reliable under all circumstances.

When I look at my own mind, sensations, feelings and thoughts are all transient. They are all situationally arising. Therefore they are unreliable. We have enthusiasms for different times and when something seems very real, very true and we give ourselves to it one hundred percent. Some time later the energy ebbs out of it and it flows away. The thing that once was shining and bright is now dull or even vanishing. This is our experience. It's not an illusion. It's just how it is.

In taking that kind of refuge, we want to orient ourselves towards something, towards a new possibility, a possibility of awakening to something else. What is it from which we should awaken? A reliance on our own mental constructions to establish a sense of the reality of our situation. To renounce this means not to rely on cognition. It means freeing one's mind from the semiotic web, from the interpretive matrix of reliance on language and interpretations according to particular thought-structures, and starting to see directly what is there.

Essentially refuge is about peeling back the excess of mental activity which we have used defensively to generate a sense of meaning and thereby to start seeing whether there is any natural or intrinsic meaning already present in the situation. So long as we feel that we, in our individual ego-sense, are the makers of our own lives and that our existence is all up to us, then clearly we have to make our existence.

What are the ingredients available to us? We don't have bricks, we don't have cement. We don't have flour or water to make this. What have we got? The ingredients are memories, hopes and fears about the future, thoughts, feelings, sensations, things we've read in books, things people have told us, things you see on the television, things on your computer – there is a lot of stuff. How will we know the right things to choose? What are the right proportions of the right things to choose? Well, we

don't know and that's why we get in a mess. It's very obvious. We know this is in our lives. We think something is really the most important thing and then we find out that it's not.

### *Human beings are unreliable*

So, looking at what we are made of is a central path and, for as long as we are 'making ourselves', we will use the habitual ingredients which are to hand and this will lead us astray, according to the tradition of buddhism. In order to look in a different direction, we need to organise or reorient ourselves in a different direction. This is the function of meditation. Meditation is primarily concerned with the detoxification and disempowerment of the phenomena which arise as the contents of our experience.

That is to say, when we sit in the meditation, some thought arises and catches us and carries us away. We start to think, *"Oh! This is important."* because in our daily life the content of our mind is what we are. We are thinking about this, we're doing that, we are looking at that, we have things to do, we make some phone-calls – it all seems very important. Certain thoughts and feelings are invested with an ultimate meaning. *"I have to do this."* *"Listen, I have to be there."* *"I have to do this, don't interrupt me just now, this is really important."* If we didn't do it, the world wouldn't end, but we would feel bad. We would feel bad. If you get to school late for the kids, someone else will be looking after the kids; they might be pissed off with you, that you're late, but anyway, they are not going to let the kids just wonder off in the street. So, *"I've got to be there!"*

Yes, it's a good idea to be on time if you can, but the extra anxiety which is added on, is usually not so much the anxiety about the external event, but the anxiety about the collapsing of the image that one has about oneself: that one is both efficient and reliable. Efficiency and reliability are the joint curses of consumerist capitalism which is grounded in the nature of factory production, of machine production. Efficiency means that there should be no wastage. Everything should be functioning without any excess or deficit; it should be on the point all the time. Reliability means that if you've done that on Monday, you should still be able to do it on Friday. This essentially means that you should become a machine. Machines can be programmed to do the same thing endlessly.

Human beings don't do very well under that. Human beings are unreliable. That is why it's a very important thing in life, as much as you can, to tell other people, *"I am inefficient and unreliable!"* *"Do not depend on me. If you want to depend on something, depend on your buddha nature. But don't depend on me."* Otherwise you bind yourself into a prison of constantly adjusting yourself to the socially viable form which other people expect you to inhabit. This is a function of alienation. There are many problems in the application of Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels's analysis, but the analysis itself is very, very accurate: the machine culture is deadly.

From a buddhist point of view this is especially true because we are concerned on a general level with dependent co-origination. That is to say whatever is arising, is arising in relation to other aspects of the experiential field. There is nothing which stands alone, nothing which is defined in and of itself.

For example at the start of today's teachings, somebody came in and switched on the electric light. It's better that we have a light now and so we can look at everything. But the light is only working because there is the wire which goes into the wall to get the electricity, which only works if people



here pay the bills to the electricity company; and the electricity company can only continue to produce that if it has some kind of fuel running the generator, whether it's wind power or coal or nuclear, whatever it would be. The coal depends on there being coal deposits, the wind depends on the wind blowing and the nuclear depends on the decisions of the government.

So everything is dependent on something else; it's not existing by itself. When you carry out that analysis, we see that there is no truth in the light being a light. The light functions in relation to the electricity. It functions also in relation to somebody switching the light on. So it is a function which comes into play due to the interaction of causes and circumstances. It's not a true thing in itself. It has no truth. We also have no truth. We arise as we do, in various ways, according to the circumstances of our life. These circumstances change and we manifest in a different way. This is not a sign of some moral weakness in ourselves. It's not a sign that we should try harder. It's a sign that this is how things are. Our mood is affected by what we hear.

A few days ago, various people sent me e-mails about the murder of Akong Rinpoche. I knew Akong Rinpoche many, many years ago, in the early days of Samye Ling, before it was even Samye Ling. It's very sad. So when I got this e-mail, I felt sad. Why would I not feel sad? I didn't *want* to feel sad. I didn't send out e-mails to people saying, *"Hey, I'm getting a little bit happy, maybe even a little too high. Perhaps you could look around – is there any bad news? Please send it to me, to help me drop my mood."* You know, the whole world is not a psychiatric clinic just for me but something happened far away in China, people found out about this, the information was sent and I read it and I'm sad. Oh! What a tragedy to happen! That mood runs through my day a little bit, because it makes me think again about impermanence and the way that people with a good intention can be attacked by people who have a bad intention. It tells me again that virtue is no protection. This is very frightening for me.

I don't know about you, but I like to live in a fantasy that if I'm a good boy, good things will happen. And I see that this is not the case. Shit! Then I remember, *"Oh! Karma!"* Maybe although I've maybe been a little bit of a good boy in *this* life, my past lives – uh-oh!... not so good. So, many bits of shit are going to fall from the sky. This is very scary. My life is influenced by circumstances. No, that's a wrong formulation. My life *is* the experience of the influence of circumstances. It's not that I have a life apart from circumstances and they bang into it. What we experience in being alive *is* like being a marketplace where these various forces are setting up their stalls inside us. We find ourselves saying something or not saying something. We don't quite know why. We miss our chance to say something. A door is opened but we don't go through it. Or a door is almost closed and it says, *"Don't go through here"* but we still push our way through. This is what we find ourselves doing.

What would normally be seen as a problem for surviving in life, like not being efficient and reliable, is actually something very interesting. We see that the structure of modern life is an extreme form of alienation from the opportunity of seeing how things are.

Even now, when the farmers have all kind of modern machinery, they are very much still committed to looking at the sky. It is much easier getting the harvest in when it's dry. You can bring the harvest in wet, but then you have to get machines to dry the grain and that costs extra money and puts up your price and then it's not competitive to sell it. So farmers know about being at the mercy of circumstances. Sailors and fishermen out on the sea – they know about winds and storms; it really

makes an impact. For someone running a little shop – they know about economic downturns, because it affects their profit-margin and whether they can stay open.

### *Make friends with instability*

A lot of our experience of life is quite unstable. This instability is not the sign of a mistake – it's actually how it *is*. The excess of consumerist capitalism has created the fantasy that you can have simple production. When the Chinese economy was doing very well and pumping it out, we had an endless flooding of the shops with cheap Chinese clothes.

Just now I am wearing these cheap Chinese trousers which cost me four pounds, not very much money. They last for about six months and then the dye starts to wash out. I'm not very concerned with looking smart, so it's okay for me. It's cheap, it's really cheap. If you want to wear a pair of Levi's you pay almost ten times that or more. The Chinese economy was making that happen, so in the area in London where I live, which is a poor area, everybody is looking kind of hip, because they can go to a shop called Primark and buy a complete set of clothing for about thirty-five euros. It's amazing. It's all done on the basis of some big hall with five hundred people working away on sewing machines for ten hours a day and getting paid very little. That's how we get cheap clothes.

This is dependent co-origination and it arises due to conditions. The economic condition in China changes and the price of the clothes in Primark goes up. It's like that. It's not stable. Instability is the central thing to understand, because if you see that instability is not a mistake and not a punishment, but is the actual nature of our situation, then maybe we should make friends with it. If this is how it *is*, then we've got to live with that, rather than constantly seeing it as a problem, as something to be solved or removed.

## DIFFERENT WAYS TO CONSTRUE THE WORLD

### *The hinayana path of control*

In the theravada or hinayana path, there is a lot of concern with trying to stabilise situations by avoiding immersion in turbulence. Renunciation is the means to simplify life and vows are taken to simplify your food, the time you go to sleep, the sort of clothes you wear, the contact you have with other human beings and so on. This slows everything down and creates a lot of space around you. Even then there is still turbulence. One of the things that monks and nuns have to do is to make public confession of their faults, because they still make mistakes. Why do they continue to make mistakes when they live in a monastery and they have nothing to do but dharma? Because it's very easy to make mistakes. Mistakes are what we do. So again and again they say, *'I will not make a mistake'* and again and again they have to say, *"Oh, I made a mistake, I'm very sorry. I will try harder."* Then again, *"Oh! I made a mistake."* We spend our whole life doing that.

Why do we make mistakes? Because we are not in control. But you *should* be more in control. So the path that is set out in the hinayana is a path of control. It says,

*—Here are the rules; if you follow these rules you will not get lost.*

*—I'm not doing very well.*

*—That's because you didn't follow the rules.*

*—But the rules are very hard to follow!*

—Yees... *but you must try harder.*

So you spend your whole life trying to be somebody who you are not.

If you do that, you can make some development, but what you will *not* do, is find the space and the time to see who you are. Because who you are is shit. And who you should be is gold. So when you are looking at the gold, the shit smells bad. But if you start to look at the shit, you might find you can turn it into manure and you can put it into the ground of your existence and beautiful flowers can grow.

So essentially, if you start with judgement, if you start by importing fixed dogmatic knowledge, that may give you a strength and a clarity, but it brings with it a kind of mental dullness. Because essentially you are an agent of the machine, you are trying to implement a preordained understanding of the world. The fact is that if you want to awaken, you can't really do it by becoming a clone. It's a very precise and unique and direct experience to awaken.

### *The mahayana path of circumstantiality*

In the mahayana buddhist tradition – it's called the 'great path' or the 'broader path' – there is much more concern with wisdom and compassion. Here the issue is to try to see the empty nature, the ungroundedness, of all phenomena. There is no essence in anything that we see, in ourselves, or even in the constituents of ourselves. Not only is the sense of self empty, but our thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories and so on are also empty. Empty here means that they are not things; they are temporary configurations. They are the coming together of various possibilities which create a pattern.

So for example we are sitting here just now. Every thirty seconds somebody moves a bit, so the pattern of how we are changes in its precision, but generally speaking, people are wearing particular clothes and they've got particular kinds of postures. Tomorrow morning when we come back in, people will probably be wearing slightly different clothes. They might even be sitting in slightly different places. So we could say: we are here today, and we will be here again tomorrow morning. *How* we are here can be hidden or disregarded by our commitment to the fact that here we are again.

When we look around... oh yes, everybody seems to be here. Here as what? As themselves. But they look a bit different from yesterday... That's irrelevant. They are the same. But maybe they are thinking something different from yesterday? Maybe they feel different in their body. Maybe they found the mattress too soft or too hard; maybe they were in the dormitory and someone was snoring; maybe...? All kinds of things have an influence on how they feel that morning. So although on a formal, abstract level we are still all here, in the lived, experiential actuality we are not the same. This is a vital, vital point because most of the time we live our lives concerned with abstractions. With assumptions, with cognitions. That is to say: by thinking *about* things we create mental images embedded in language, which we move around as if we were establishing true meaning. But when we look at the actual phenomenology, what we actually have – and we have nothing else – what we have is colour, shape, sound coming in the ears, smells in our nose, taste in our mouth, sensation on the body, all of which is interpreted. The means whereby we interpret these is also changing. Not only is the sensory input changing according to the way the sun is going down, and how the balance

of natural light coming in the window is meeting the electric light in the room, but the kind of thoughts which are arising for us to make sense of what is going on – this also is not predictable or reliable.

So the outer field is always changing and the interpretive matrix is always changing. That is to say, in a buddhist language, they are both empty. 'Empty' doesn't mean they are not there at all; it means they are devoid of inherent self-nature or self-existence. There is no truth in them, except the presentational truth of the fact that they arise and pass.

Therefore the truth of phenomena is not to be established by analysis, but by aesthetic appreciation. If you are here, you get it. If you are not here, if you are away off in your head, you don't get it. What you get is a thought. You catch the thought. No. *You* are caught by the thought. Thoughts catch you and take you on a little journey going here or there. That's not what's *here*. What's here is colour, shape, smell, taste, the experience of the body and how the senses are interpreted. This is all we have. We may have a lot of knowledge that we can call on to make very sophisticated patternings of interpretation, but this is something after the fact. *After* the fact.

So from the mahayana point of view, the essential point is to see that we are always implicated in our own experience. It's not like when you are at home and you hear a noise and you think, "*Oh, something has come through the letterbox*", and then you look, "*Oh, here is a letter. A letter has come to me.*" There is 'me' and there is a letter, and the postman who brings the letter. It's not like that. As if they were three separate things; the subject, the object and what is connecting them. Actually – what we have is experience, which is a unified field in which subject and object emerge together.

So in the buddhist tradition they say that consciousness is not permanent. Consciousness is situational. That is to say, most of the time we are not very connected with taste-consciousness. Then maybe you feel hungry and you become more aware of saliva in your mouth and there is some taste to that. Or maybe you have a bit of food trapped in your teeth and it comes loose; now you have something to chew on and you get a moment of some taste in your mouth. But if that's not happening, the mouth is usually fairly neutral. Taste, which means the consciousness of taste, arises in relation to the object of taste. It's not permanent.

It's the same with hearing. If you are reading a book and you are very absorbed in it, somebody may start speaking to you and you say, "*What? What?*", because your attention was in the book. The ear-consciousness was not being activated, because the focus of attention of consciousness was blocking the impact of the sound of someone else's voice.

This is very important. Because it means that the consciousness out of which we build the sense of the continuity of our sense of self, this consciousness, the mental consciousness, which organises these five sense-consciousnesses, is itself contingent. That is to say – it arises in relation to circumstances. It's not self-existing. Consciousness, mental consciousness, arises and passes. If it's a very beautiful sunset and you are out just looking at the colours, you might have no thought about it at all. You are just touched and moved. Maybe you find yourself crying, it's just very beautiful. Oh! ... Or you are listening to music. Oh!... And then afterwards you enter into some evaluation of some comment or judgement about what has occurred. But in the moment of being fully at one with the

music, the mental consciousness is not activated, because there is no processing of the experience. What you have is the most simple, direct manifestation of hearing-consciousness.

Okay. So I *feel* that I exist, I am me, and I continue through time, and I can tell you stories about my past, so I have a sense of the continuous shaping of my own existence. This is what appears to be the case. When we start to look at it, we see that events or moments are discontinuous; the consciousness which registers these events is discontinuous – and yet we have a continuity. So the continuity of ourselves is not the object of our consciousness, neither is it the consciousness itself. Maybe it's something else. What could this be? This is the area of inquiry which arises particularly with the *yogacharya* school, where they say that it is the mind; But this mind is not the same as the transient consciousness, the situationally evoked consciousness. This mind is the ground-mind, the basic awareness, which illuminates everything. This theory strongly influenced the development of the tantric practice.

### *The tantric path of aesthetic continuity*

In tantra one is concerned with the continuity of experience, revealed as an aesthetic unfolding. That is to say, the immediacy of the manifesting of what is our existence, moment by moment, is not organised by an interpretive matrix of cognitions and feelings, which would necessarily happen *after* the fact, but it happens in the immediacy of the arising through the recognition that everything we see is the body of Padma Sambhava or Tara or Chenrezig or any of the deities, that everything we hear is the mantra or the voice of the deity and that all the thoughts, feelings and sensations in our mind *is* the mind of the deity. It's just this. We don't have to make sense of it. We don't have to work out what it means, we don't have to find a use for it. We are here present, trusting. This is as good as it gets. This is the divine mandala of all the buddhas. You don't want to improve it. What would you improve? It's fine as it is.

This is a radical, radical transformation of our orientation. And, if it's going to occur, it requires the dissolving or the transformation of the ego matrix, because our ego makes sense of the world in relation to our felt sense of our own personal identity. That is to say, we look around the world and we choose the items that we like and we connect with them, we want to bring them towards us. And we see the items we don't like so much and we want to push them away and have as much distance as possible from them. The ego is editing. That is its function. It's continuously trying to do a triage, a sorting-out of what is occurring, in order to maintain the continuity of patterning which it is. It is only a pattern which is maintained.

However it's a very invested sense of patterning which is organised after the moment of occurrence. So the ego-consciousness is indeed a form of consciousness. This is why our sense of self is discontinuous. Why we are labile, why we move from one mood to another. When we are happy, our posture is in one way, the kinds of gestures we make are in a similar way and so on. When we are very sad it's different. Our face looks different, our breathing changes, the skin-tension changes, the posture, the gestures all change. Where was the person who was happy before? They don't exist anymore. It's not somebody's true self – *“Oh, I'm so glad you got over your depression; it's good to see you back in yourself again!”* This is a sort of crazy thing to say, it's madness. But this is a normal kind of speech.

That happy one is gone. The one that comes back is happy plus sad. If you've ever been really depressed, then the basis of your sense of self is – krrk – it has a crack in it. It's not going to be a simple circle any more because you now know, *"Oh!... Boof... I can't trust that I'm in charge of my life."* This is very, very important.

In tantra to dissolve the ego-self we take refuge in the deity and develop devotion towards the deity, trust in the deity, and we put all our energy into the deity. This is why, generally speaking, it's not a good idea to do many different tantric practices, if you are using it as a practice as a path of liberation, because that will disperse your energy.

If you start to do practice as a means to an end – *"Oh! I have some obstacles, so I better do some Vajrakilaya practice!"* – that's like having a problem with the drains and phoning up the drain-company to come along and clear your drains. This is actually a quite a conflicted way of approaching dharma because it is saying that the one who is in charge is me. *"I have an obstacle, I'm going to overcome the obstacle... [humming mantra-style]...Ah! The obstacle is going now... [more humming]... Oh, thank you for giving me this holy practice. Now I can kick this shit out of reality..."* Who is in charge? The ego. Nothing has been transformed. You can go mad doing this kind of approach.

Much better to say, *"Holy mother Tara, I am the size of a peanut. You are the whole universe. Please save me, please take care of me. I know nothing, you know everything!"* The more small you become, the more big she becomes. Then you have the miraculous transformation wherein the small becomes big and the big becomes small. She shrinks herself into your body, you merge into her and then suddenly you are the infinite expanse of the dharmadhatu. This is the heart of this kind of practice. The essential point is that if you want to open, you have to let go of what is closed. The closed cannot get openness as if it was a fashion-item. It's not a Gucci handbag. The ego dissolves because the ego is the energy of awareness – it's up its own arse.

When you lose your way, when you get caught in the spiral of continuity, it is not that you have gone from awakening into samsara; it's not that you've got lost by going somewhere else. You are in the same place, but not awakening to where you are. If you want to awaken to where you are, it has to be simple.

The problem with a great deal of Tibetan buddhism in particular is that the tradition has been going for a very long time and each generation has produced wonderful people who have visions and develop new practices, and in this tradition they don't like to throw anything away. However we live in a modernist culture where we are always throwing the past away, because our interest is in the future. In buddhist traditions they hold on to everything. So in the early days there were four or five big deities whose meditations were practised. Two thousand years later there are thousands and thousands of practices, all of which are very helpful and very special, but which one will you do? Maybe you should try to do as many as possible? Because they are all good... ?

But what is the point of the practice? The practice is designed to develop wisdom and compassion. Wisdom means to recognise that your own mind is empty. That is to say, you are not a thing, you are a potential which keeps manifesting. The potential manifests out of nothing. This is a mystery. This is not something that the analytic mind can understand. We have to taste it. So we have to enter into the practice to taste it.

Compassion is the manifestation which arises from the wisdom which is the recognition of the empty nature of the mind. So wisdom and compassion are not two things, they are inseparable. They are always joined together. Joined together as not two things. Space and clarity or emptiness and manifestation – these are always together and this is what tantra is concerned with. This is the antidote to what we ordinarily experience, which is that I exist, I am me. That is to say, something is here, somebody is here, this is manifestation and not non-existing, *and* I am me. The ground of who I am appears to be myself. I am standing on my own ground. *“Don’t you tell me who I am. I am going to tell you who I am.”* You know how indignant we get if other people start writing our stories for us. We say, *“Hey! I’m me. Hey, don’t ...! I am the basis of myself.”* This is samsara. This is all it means.

What is the actual basis of your existence? If you observe your mind, moment by moment – here we are! This is amazing! Ever-changing creativity, which is unfolding... Where does it come from? It’s not coming from the postman, it’s not coming ‘special delivery’. It’s *here*. Where does it come from? This is what we will be looking at later in the meditation so that we start to see the nature of our own mind. Then we see that the manifestation arises out of – and yet still within – the empty, open basis of existence, what is called the *dharmadhatu*, or the infinite hospitality of the buddha’s mind.

This doesn’t mean that you have to change anything in your life. You still go to work, you talk to your friends and avoid your enemies, and so on. You can have all the limitations of existence, but as they are arising, moment by moment, they are fresh. That is to say: you see them as immediate in this moment. And if they are in this moment, you can change them. If you want to change your life, it’s much easier if you think that this moment is happening for the first time.

In tantra the focus is on aesthetics: on returning to the phenomenology of sensory experience, the vitality, the vividness of what is coming directly through the body. Essentially it’s a return to the body. It’s not about purifying the mind, because the mind is functioning through the body. The body *is* the mind; it’s an aspect of our existence and in this encounter that we have with the world, this is what’s happening. Moment by moment, this is what’s happening.

So, if we want to know who we are talking to, we have to look at them, we have to see them, and their face will show us. The face shows many, many things. It shows whether people are interested or bored or confused, it shows whether they are happy to continue the conversation or not – this is what we get. And if you attend to it, maybe it’s enough. If you then add on to this all your stories about who the person is, maybe you don’t see *how* the person is. Because it’s the ‘how-ness’, the presentation. ‘Who’ is always a narrative. Does a person need a narrative? We are telling the person who they are in the very moment that they are speaking to us. Now if a lot of our attention is concerned with the interpretation of the other, out of *our* interpretive matrix, we are likely to lose the other.

### **The otherness of the other**

The modern Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, had a major impact on modern European philosophy by radically critiquing Heidegger’s notion of being, in particular. He said that what we face is the otherness of the other. There is a fundamental alterity, a fundamental otherness, to other people. To claim to know who another person is, to ‘catch’ them, this is a huge crime and is the basis of the loss of ethics.

If you want to be ethical you shouldn't know about other people at all. You should attempt to open to the other in their otherness and let their otherness reveal itself to you. Now, that is fundamentally radical and it is very much the view of tantra – not to layer the world with our projections, which is our way of incorporating what we meet inside our mental structure, but to try to be of service by allowing all the potential of our self-constellation to arise in a pattern, which somehow meets the other in their otherness. The implication of this is that self follows the other.

That's very interesting. Think how often, when you are having a conversation with a friend, you've got something you want to say to them. You really want to let them know what you think. You come first and they should listen. Then maybe you will listen to them ... if you have to...! Getting your own point through is very important.

From this point of view, what you have to say is a construct. Now, it may be, between parents who have kids and so on, that there are things to be talked about and sorted out, or at work there are things to be sorted out. But a lot of what we want to say to someone is a package which we have created inside our self. And if we give this to the other person, what are they going to do with it? They are chewing our dinner! That's maybe not what they want to eat. *"No – but you really need to listen to what I have to say; it's very important!"* Who is it important for? Not the other person. It's important for you. *"But it's important to me that you hear what I have to say."* Why? So that I have in me what's in you. But when it was in you, you were not happy with it. So – instead of you letting go of your unhappiness, you've given it to me. And when I now try to help you with your unhappiness, you tell me I haven't understood it and so you have to tell me all over again! Couple-conversations are often like this.

In tantra the practice is to try to stay open to the immediacy of the moment of unfolding by not infecting it with identity. That is to say, we try not to infect it with the construct that we have about who we are. We trust that the field of experience is not one of an exchange between me as a separate self-entity and you as a separate self-entity, but is the immediacy of a co-emergence of the entire field which, in the tantric language, is the mandala of all the buddhas.

## **TAKING UP A VIEW (OR ETHOS)**

I have briefly set out some aspects of the hinayana approach, the mahayana approach and the tantric approach and now I would like to say something also about the dzogchen approach, because it's very different. However before I do, it is very important for you to appreciate that the yanas are all just different ways of construing the world, of making sense of the world. They are a kind of ethos and are described in the tradition as 'a view'. There is a view, which leads to a meditation, which then leads to an activity, and finally leads to a result. These four factors are used to organise the practices of all the different levels or yanas that one can engage with and is why it is important to understand what is the view.

Why do we view the world in this particular way, and what is the meditation that goes with that view? You need to understand that if you are going to do a practice, you adopt the view. You take up that way of viewing and you inhabit it. You don't mix it up with something else. Because that is what it is.



It's a bit like as if you are an actor and years before you have had a great success in one particular play. That was your moment of glory but now you are on hard times and you have to act in many plays you don't like. However you remember that moment of glory and halfway through reciting the lines in the tedious play you are currently stuck in, suddenly you want to be Hamlet again. That's not very helpful, because the play that's on now, even if it's a crap play, is not *Hamlet*. So 'the view' means that when we understand a view, this is how we view. It's not something we add alongside our ordinary way of thinking.

In order to adopt a view you have to displace your ordinary structure of conceptualisation and replace it with this viewing. So what I was beginning by describing: the impermanence of the actuality of our ordinary assumptive way of living, is very important. Because if you realise there is no self-substance to what we believe, or the habits that we have, and if you can see also that all these formations are impermanent – then why shouldn't you drop them?

### *En-roling and de-roling*

If you are an actor, when the play has finished, you have to go home as yourself – because you are only acting in that play when you are on the stage. It is a situational identity. For so long as you are on the stage, it's very important that you remember your lines and remember how to place yourself on the stage in relation to the other actors. That's the choreography of that identity. But when the play finishes and the curtain closes, you de-role.

So one way of thinking about dharma practice is to understand it as a ceaseless movement of en-roling and de-roling. En-roling and de-roling. In an instant I become Arya Tara. Now I look like this, now I say this kind of mantra, my body is moving in this way – now the meditation dissolves, now I'm James Low, doing what I do. Then I'm doing this, then I'm doing that. En-role, de-role. En-role, de-role.

That is to say – it's not that when you do the meditation you go into an altered state, into some different reality, and then you come back to yourself. To practise in this way is a waste of time. It will get you nowhere. What we want to understand is: when I en-role as myself, this is just a role. It's not true. I'm not who I think I am. By thinking, "*I am who I am*", I get into a role. I am en-roling. It's just a role. It's a game. It's not true. It's an illusion. Like a rainbow in the sky, like an echo, like a mirage – it's a role. We enact it out of compassion. But it's only a role.

There is no true personal identity. This is the fundamental work of all the dharma paths. Because as long as you stay committed to 'I am me/myself' and 'this is who I am', then everything else will just be different kinds of clothing that you put on and underneath you will be yourself. The dharma won't help you. You have to not only take off your clothes, you have to take off your *skin*, you take off your *flesh*, you take off your *nerves*, your *arteries*, you take out your *heart*; you dissolve everything. There is nothing. And then – here you are. Form and emptiness – emptiness and form. Tara is empty, Tara is manifesting as form. James Low is empty – James Low is manifesting as form. Form and emptiness. This is the heart of the dharma work: to fundamentally put into question what is the basis of my felt sense of personal identity.

## *The three pot faults*

### **Pot fault 1**

Buddhism generally identifies three basic faults which can occur in studying or listening to the dharma. They are called 'the three pot faults'. The first fault is to be like an upturned pot. Since the pot is upside down, nothing can go into it. The second fault is to be like a pot with a hole in it, so that whatever is put into it leaks away. The third fault is to be like a pot which already has some dirty old food in it and so every piece of new food that goes in, no matter how fresh or good, will be contaminated by the old food.

These are very, very helpful notions. Because the first one, the upturned pot, is about being impervious, being nonporous. That is to say that instead of being like a sponge which can receive, we are more like a ball of steel. The more established we are in our own belief-systems, the more we have a dogmatic attachment to a particular sense of ourselves, the more we seal ourselves off from what is new.

In dzogchen the classic image is the mirror. The mirror has no protection against what is put in front of it. Whatever is put in front of the mirror, it reveals inside itself. This is the very opposite to being impervious. The mirror is not even porous, it's not absorbing something – it's exactly showing the reflection of what is there. So it's very important for us to think: what are the points of resistance?

Let's again use the earlier example of an actor en-roling and de-roling. An actor is somebody who has to act in order to be an actor. Is an out-of-work actor an actor? Actors often spend a lot of time not acting and this is not very good for their mental health. So, actors really become themselves when they are acting. This would indicate that we have a tendency to be in a role, that we are always looking for a role. It is important is to allow ourselves to be in the role which is given to us by the situation. So to be impervious is to be like an actor who won't listen to the director. The actor who – maybe because they are stupid or very famous – says, "*I am myself and I will do what I do.*" If they are very famous they might be allowed to get away with it, but generally speaking it's not a good idea.

To take direction means to allow someone else to see something you don't see. The actor is concerned with their own particular script, with the lines they have to say, the gestures, how to be embodied in that particular character but the director is holding in mind all the characters, the dynamic of the play, the various scenes that go on, the props, the lighting... The director has to have all of this in mind. The individual actors don't need to do that.

So when we come in touch with the dharma, we are inside this bubble of our ego-identity in which we have all worked out ways of making sense of what is going on, we have our evaluatory systems, our beliefs, our habits, and so on. This is what we have to put into question. And if we don't put them into question, we will not absorb anything new because we will enter into judgement with what is there. I am sitting here, looking over at you sitting there, and I am thinking about you across this perspective. You can do exactly the same thing in *your* own head. Somebody says something to you, "*Hm! I'll have to think about that.*" Sometimes of course that's a very wise thing to do. We have to stand in relation to this new proposal, maybe in a work-situation or whatever, but it means that I'm going to look from my existing position at what you are proposing and in terms of the framework of

interpretation which I'm going to apply, I will see whether I will give much status to what you are saying or not.

Again, this is the centrality of the self-existing ego. So we are going back to the basis: we take refuge. Why do we take refuge? Because we are lost. If we are lost, we are not the boss. Most of us have experienced in our life a boss who is lost. And the thing is that if the boss is lost, you can't tell the boss that they are lost. Not a wise move in any organisation! So you have to learn to manage the lost boss. This is the function of meditation. The ego has to be placated, be put on the side, so that you can do the practice.

Something new has to be given space. However if the new is always going to be judged and evaluated by the old, by a pre-existing structure, you will be engrossed in mental activity for a very long time since there will always be some new thoughts to be had about it. So the whole purpose of faith and devotion in the dharma is not to become a clone. Don't become a mindless member of some sect which is going to dominate you. Rather, give yourself the chance to experience something new, be fresh into a new situation in which you wholeheartedly offer yourself. Try it out and you see what happens because you can't know until you engage. If you sit inside your pre-existing knowledge and think, *"Well, I'm not like that."* Maybe somebody says, *"Listen, I grew up in a catholic family. I had this stuffed into me when I was a kid; I'm not going to do any devotion any more. I don't believe in that."* This is a hurt reactivity. This is not a place of wisdom. It may well be that you have changed your orientation, that the beliefs that were fed to you as a child no longer seem very relevant. That's one thing. But to then say, *"I'm never going to believe in anything, I'm a rational person. I'm going to evaluate everything for myself,"* that means that you are the measure of all things and that's a choice. You can live your life like that, but maybe, when you look at your own existence, it's not going so well. So if you are the measure of all things, you are not doing very well. Maybe then you could have some other way of evaluating something. Which is to think, *"I will take in some new information and I will act in accordance with that and see what happens."* This is what is called practice. We practise in the mode of doing that. Then gradually we start to do it.

For example, let's say you decided to learn to play golf. You go to the golf-course and you are introduced to these various kinds of clubs. This is a metal shaft with something on the end of it. And you are told, *"This one you use to hit the ball a long way; this is what you use if your ball goes into the sand pit, and this is what you do when you go onto the smooth bit of grass we call the green, in order to put the ball in a hole."* So there are different clubs for different functions. What do we do with them? You pick up the little putter, the thing that puts the ball in the hole, and you hit it, *"Whack!"*, and the others say, *"No! This is very gentle...hmm... you have to caress this stuff, like that...!"* Then you pick up the driver, the one that sends the ball a long distance, and you go *"Hoop"* and they say, *"No! You have to go fully back like that...!"* In this way you are introduced into the practice of golf. You practise through a relationship with the club. If you look at the club it will show you what to do with it. The delicate little putter – you don't hit something hard with it. Why would you do that?

So the practice of golf means allowing the way of doing golf to come into you, so that you become a golf-er. And you become a golf-er by doing golf, and you do golf the way people do golf. You don't do your own way of doing golf. *"I'm not going to do it this way, why should I?"* Because then it wouldn't be golf.

Golf is a social consensus activity. It's a contract. All the people going on to the golf course agree to hit the ball in the proper direction. Were you to decide to hit it in another direction and think, *"OK, I'm on the first hole but I'd like to have a drink now, so I'll knock it straight over to the sixteenth hole"* – then of course the ball would slice across and hit someone on the head, because you are not going in the right direction. It's very simple. It's very straightforward.

It's the same with meditation practice. What is the practice? The practice is learning to enter into the practice. The practice is set out as something to be learned; we learn it and we apply it. We don't apply it on our own terms. And this is where it gets difficult, because if you are not applying it on your own terms, your own terms are redundant. But it's by applying your own terms that you exist. Therefore there is resistance to doing the practice.

Most people who decide they want to practise meditation experience resistance. They don't actually do as much meditation as they would like to do. Why not? Because they don't like to meditate. Why not? Because there is nothing for me to do when I'm meditating. I'm watching the breath going in and out. Hey! I'm an educated, sophisticated person. I can do rather more in life than watch the breath go in and out! Now you are redundant. None of your qualities are wanted on the voyage. *"But I exist. I'm entitled to assert my own existence. I will do it my way."* This is what we face. This is why it's called a pot fault – because when we don't absorb the practice and do the practice, and we mix it with our own idea, we get very lost. Particularly for western people, since we are learning something which is a cross-cultural experience, there are many cracks in the transmission due to language and culture and so on, many cracks into which we can insert our own idea. It's not that your own ideas are not valid, but they are valid for something other than the practice of meditation. Just as they are valid for something other than the practice of golf. Practicing golf doesn't require you to invent a new game.

## Pot fault 2

So the second pot fault is to have a hole. You forget things and let them leak away. Why is it leaking? Because you don't hold on to it. Why don't you hold on to it? Usually because of distraction. Something else seems more important. For example in Britain, there is a huge amount of non-compliance with physical and mental health treatment. People who have asthma, who have diabetes, who need dialysis for kidney failure, who are on beta-blockers and so on, don't take the medication. People who are on psychotropic medication often change the dosage according to their own idea. Why is this? Because they don't want to. Because they have an idea about themselves which is not the same as the idea of them that the doctor is expressing. The doctor says, *"Now you have diabetes. You have to change your diet and you have to make these injections. This is what you have to do."* The person thinks, *"I am me! I don't... why am I... why have I got this condition? I don't want to have diabetes! And if I don't want to have diabetes, I won't have diabetes! If I don't want to eat cabbage, I won't eat cabbage."* So I won't put the insulin into my body.' All this costs the health-system a lot of money. It's the same with the prescription of antibiotics. Many, many, many millions of prescriptions go out every year and the course of treatment is not completed. We all know that unless you complete the cycle of the antibiotic, it sets up further reaction and resistance against it.

So why do people act like this? Because to hold on to it is challenging to our sense of self. We don't want something to be the case. In Britain men don't go to the general doctor very often. Women go

much more frequently. Men have a big resistance to the idea that they might be sick and as a result male cancers are picked up much less frequently. Prostate cancer has much less research funding going into it than say, cervical cancer, because women's group get together and they really push for funding. They run campaigns, they do sponsored activities, they generate funds and it's a very big public thing. But prostate cancer or testicular cancer don't exist very much at all in terms of funding and public knowledge. And so men don't check themselves and they don't go to the doctor and if they get some sign they ignore the sign. This is not to say anything is wrong with these people – this is our human nature.

However if that applies to a health condition that could threaten your lifespan, why would the same resistance structure not apply to meditation? So this is what the pot fault is pointing out. It's not saying, *'Just don't leak!'*. It's saying, *"You have to keep an eye on your self and learn to work with your resistance. Work with the fact that you are divided against yourself and a bit of you says 'yes' and a bit of you says 'no'. A bit of you says, 'I want to do it', but another bit is going to pull back and avoid it."*

This is because we are split internally. We are dualistic creatures. Self and other are dualistic, but self and self, or internal subject and object – they are also dualistic. Inside also we fragment into many voices, and so we betray and upset ourselves. That is why it's very important to think, *"What is it that I'm not hearing? What is it that I'm not attending to?"*

Impermanence, one of the ideas set out, is very challenging. We don't want to know about impermanence. We don't want to know that we are going to die; we don't want to know that children are going to grow up and leave home; we don't want to know that we are going to get old; we don't want to know that all kinds of situations that we have will not continue. We don't want to know this. But it's a fact. Old age, sickness and death is a fact.

So how can I prepare myself to know that impermanence is the case and stop myself believing a fantasy? Why is fantasy more interesting to me than the actuality? Because if I go into a mental world – a compensatory delusion that I will live forever, that I will never be sick and so on, the way that many of us live – it's a way to maintain our happiness and the unimpeded trajectory of our own desire. If I want to wake up from that, it's painful. You have to know that what you think is secure, is actually *insecure*, and therefore we progress one step at a time. Whatever big plans we have, whatever hopes we have, may or may not arise. The best way to make the plan come into being is to be careful with this step and this step and this step... If we want a career to develop, we have to be careful every day. If we want a relationship to survive, we have to be careful every day. Just having a big plan is not going to solve the problem if each day there is quarrelling and fighting.

So it's exactly the same with the fault of having a hole in the pot. Each day we have to observe how our intention leaks away, how our knowledge leaks away and is replaced with our egoic habitual formations. If we are not construing the world, if we are not making sense of the world through the framework of dharma, we are doing it through our own habitual constructions. And if we decide we want to change our habitual constructions, we have to remember to do something else. It's like that. If you decide to stop smoking, then you have to stop sniffing the air when someone else is smoking. You have to think, *"I don't smoke."* And the main thing that helps people stop smoking is to have a new identity, *"I am a non-smoker. I don't smoke."* If that is what you sit in, then why would you

smoke? *"I don't smoke."* Whereas if you think, *"Ah, I used to smoke... I like to smoke but I don't, because of my health"* then there is a tension inside that position. What we need is a radical re-birth, which takes us back again to the basis, to refuge.

It is said that if you take refuge in the buddha, dharma and sangha you shouldn't take refuge in anything else. Now this might sound like some narrow-minded sectarianism but what it actually means is that you shouldn't take refuge in cultural things outside. It means you shouldn't take refuge in the shit that's in your head. So every time you want to follow an obsessive pattern, you have to say, 'No!' I work a lot with people who are suffering from obsessions and it's very hard for them because the feeling is, *"I have to do this! I have to do it."* The obsessive thought links into a behavioural compulsion. *"I can't stop my body doing this"*, whether it is washing towels, washing hands, checking the door, or checking the fridge. Whatever it is, *"I can't stop myself doing this, because I think I have to do it."* So the obsessive thought, 'it must be done' hits the body and it's unimpeded. Should somebody try to stop the person doing it, they become very agitated, because it feels so necessary to them. It's not necessary, of course. There is nothing in the outer world that demands that this be done but it takes people over.

It's very helpful to study a little bit about psychopathology, because we all suffer from it, some people in a gross fashion, some in a more subtle fashion. As soon as you start to meditate, you realise that you are fairly mentally unbalanced; that you have very little control over the content of your own mind; that you are subject to whims, to fancies that carry you hither and thither all over the place. And this is very dangerous because it means then that you have no protection. What are you going to hold on to?

This is why in buddhism taking refuge means, 'I want to hold on to something.' Then when these winds of karma or these winds of habit are blowing, you can say, *"No, I don't do that. I am not a smoker."* – *"Yeah, come on, you used to smoke."* It's one of the things that happens when somebody who uses heroin, then decides to stop. They don't phone the dealer for a week then the dealer comes round to see them, gives them a little bag for free, *"Come on, you're my friend."* Why? Because the dealer wants the business. The dealer is trying to hook them back in. It is very difficult when someone offers you a free bag of smack to say, *"No, I don't use any more."* You have to be re-born. This is why in the twelve-step model for addiction they talk about relying on a higher power. The ego is divided. The ego says, *"I'm going to stop drinking."* but the ego also says, *"I want to have a drink."* And in this internal battle, if you've been drinking intensively for a long period of time, the drinking bit of you is usually going to win. That is why it helps you to think that there is a higher power or a higher force.

It's very similar in the dharma. We think, *"Oh, I rely on the Buddha. The Buddha is my friend. Tara is my friend. Padma Sambhava is my friend. And I am going to pray to them or visualise them or say their mantra. I'm going to hold on to that."* Then when these stormy winds blow around us and we are carried into our habitual formations, we recognise it, *"Oh!"* This is the basis of the dharma practice. If we are under the power of very gross formations, it's quite difficult to resist them. It can be done, and as the dzogchen texts that we'll go through set out, you don't have to simplify your mind to do the practice, but you do need to really commit yourself to the practice.

### Pot fault 3

So the third pot fault is where the pot already contains some dirty food. Now, everything you learned at school is 'dirty food'. Everything you know is 'dirty food'. We are nothing but a toxic porridge! It's a fact. Some people believe in Charles Darwin, some in the European enlightenment, some in Voltaire, some believe in democracy, and so on. My own teacher always called democracy 'demon-crazy', because he said that with the 'demos', the ordinary people – in charge, it would be worse. Whether democracy is good or bad is not the question. Like all belief systems it is a mental construction, which reveals some things and conceals others. Every revealing is a concealing; this is a fact. Wherever you position yourself, some things are revealed and some things aren't. In this room, we are quite a few people. Each of us is sitting in a particular position and so the room is revealed to each of you in a particular way. Nobody else sees the same structure as you see. That is to say – your positioning reveals certain aspects of the room and conceals others. We don't see what's behind us, for example. Whenever you bind yourself into a belief-system, you bind yourself into blindness.

The difference with the buddhist belief-system is that the goal of the belief is to deconstruct the nexus of belief. It's a self-liberating belief. It's a bit like homeopathic medicine. We use the poison in a modified form in order to bring relief from the symptom. So, we are devoted to our own beliefs, to our neurotic formations, to our assumptions. We believe in them. They seem to be true for us. The practice then is to develop a conscious intentional belief in something else, so we believe in this goddess Tara. Tara, you are green, you are beautiful, your heart is only compassion, hold on to me, protect me, please save me. When you believe that, she is good and I am lost. So I now have something to hold on to. This is the first part of the practice.

#### *Devotion dissolves reification: belief in emptiness dissolves belief in substance*

The second part of the practice is to use the belief in emptiness to dissolve the belief in substance. We are visualising Tara, we are reciting the mantra, and we imagine rays of light are coming from Tara into our body. As the rays of light come into our body, all the ingredients of my self, all my habit-formations, all my concepts, my feelings, and so on, are being transformed into light. Now my body is full of white, blue and red light moving together. Then Tara comes to the crown of my head, she dissolves in light, her ball of light goes down through my central channel into my heart, so there is a ball of light in the middle of my body of light. My body of light dissolves into her ball of light. These two lights are merged, because there is no difference between light. This ball of united light of Tara and me, our inseparability, dissolves smaller and smaller and smaller, until it's one tiny point, a little *tigle*. That point vanishes into emptiness. We sit... no front, no back, no top, no bottom, no past, no future, no name, no language – just open. If we do the practice with great faith, this openness can last quite some time. Then gradually sounds, feelings, thoughts start to arise. They arise inside the mandala of the goddess. This *is* the mandala of the goddess. Light, purity, beauty – this is it. Not something else. This is a function of the practice.

The devotion dissolves reification; it dissolves the solidification that comes from believing in entities. So, belief in entities is dissolved by belief in a nonentity. That is to say, if you believe in emptiness – which is not different in its nature as a belief from the belief in substance – the belief in emptiness will dissolve the belief in substance, so that emptiness and emptiness meet together, sky meeting sky, out of which everything is transformed. This is the basis of the practice. So when we hold on to some pre-existing belief and we don't let go of it, we don't allow it to go, then we can't get the full blessing.

We can't fully taste what it means to dissolve into emptiness, because we are hanging on to some part of our self.

That is why the tantric practice developed. Although the general mahayana system they had the fantastic analysis of Nagarjuna which really showed in a very clear way the emptiness of all phenomena, this is cognitively based. It is based on the application of a mental analysis, and it happens *after* the fact of the experience. However if you want to do it into the *immediacy* of the experience it has to be aesthetic. It is mood-generated, so for example when we experience Tara in front of us and we pray, we are praying like little children. The hairs on our body stand up, tears come from our eyes, we feel small, we feel helpless, we feel stupid. Everything vanishes. *"Just save me, save me!"* Like a small child crying in the middle of the night who has nothing else to hold on to, they want their mama – *"Mama! Mama! Mama!"* – *"Tara, mother, save me, save me!"*

In that moment you have left all the sophistication of your thinking and so on. All your identity is washed away, just *"Ooh...! Haa....! Oh..."* – just like that. Very simple. But it's only for the pure of heart. Pure of heart means 'Don't have a dirty pot.' It's really simple. Jesus says, *"Unless you become like little children you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven."* It's completely true. Little children are desperate. They are desperate in their joy, desperate in their pain. Like this. Desperate. This is what is very important. Unimpeded desperation. Nothing else matters.

Now, this is the practice of tantra, not the practice of dzogchen but it's also very useful. The key thing for our purpose is to start thinking about what is the dirty food in our pot? What are the assumptions that we cling to, that we believe in? Some people believe they are very special, other people believe they are very un-special. Some people believe they have no value at all. Some people will believe that their value as a human being is in their beauty, some people believe it in their strength, in their intelligence, in whatever it is. This is a construction of your self. This is something which is held in place by your own continuity of memories and identification.

The work we have to do is start to recognise what it is we are attached to. What are the actual functioning constituents of ourselves? When we go later to eat food, how do you interact with other people? Other people show you your capacity to move forward and make connection or avoid connection. I want to suggest that after the food we won't meet for any further practice tonight, but you take some time and you sit, and you really try to observe and recall how it is you construct yourself.

When you present yourself to other people, when you introduce yourself, *how* do you introduce yourself? When you are with other people and they recognise you, what is it that you like to be recognised as? What is it that you don't like to be recognised as? How do you stand in relation to receiving criticism from other people? Are you very sensitive? Are you open to other people having a different point of view about who you are and what your value is? This is the loosening-up activity that we have to do with ourselves. So long as we are holding on to these, it will be very difficult when we come into dzogchen to relaxing into openness. Because the anxiety that arises is, 'If I let go of this, I will not be who I am'.

Hopefully you are now understanding that it's not who I am, but it's who I *think* I am! So if I let go of this, I won't be able to use it as an ingredient of the construction of this confectionary of who I think I



am. This brings us to the fundamental crossroads, the place where the higher tantras and dzogchen separate out from ordinary mental activity – where we let go of identity as a construct based on patterns of thoughts, feelings and sensations, and we open ourselves up to the direct experience of being. Of being present, here. And that our being is filled with an endless succession of contents.

These are the contents which we take to be our identity, just as the mirror fills itself with an endless sequence of reflections. These contents are not who we really are. These are the transitory, temporary, contingent, relational, dialogic manifestations of our energy as part of the world energy. But if we hold on to them – if we believe that they are not energy, but rather are something solid that is who I actually am and that letting go of them will be the collapsing of myself, the destruction of myself – then this anxious resistance is likely to make practice very difficult.

It's about examining ourselves, getting to know ourselves, and observing directly: what is the function of maintaining these particular beliefs and assumptions? What sort of a self or identity do they create for me and what is the fear about who I would be if I let go of them? And I would suggest to you that if you really look at these beliefs, you will find that you haven't had them forever. That there have been periods of your life when you were alive and you did not have these beliefs functioning in you. So they are not intrinsic, they are not innate, they are not born into you, they are not the ground of your identity. They are the temporary structures of your identity, but the way you make them function as your identity is to trick yourself into believing that they are in fact intrinsic.

This is called ignorance. Ignorance is taking something which is dependent co-origination, which is a manifesting from many different factors, and to say, *"No! I reject cause and effect, I reject this complexity, it is what it is and it's me!"*. We just don't get it. We are holding on to *"This me, how could I be other than myself? I don't want to change!"* In this case we have a lot of work to do because we have to loosen this up a little bit and start to see that this is just a pattern and I haven't always been like that. When I was five I wasn't like that. When I was ten, I wasn't like that. Even today I haven't been like this all the time... But under pressure I return to this as a kind of core position as if it were the real truth about who I am.

The more we see the dynamic, moment by moment manifesting, of the infinite rich diversity of our experience, we start to see that this narrative of self-definition is bullshit. It's a cover-up. It's a persona. It's a false passport and actually we don't need a passport because here we are. And when we are here, we have all our potential. However when you are existing in your self-construct you have very little access to your own potential. So the more defined the self is, the more narrow the spectrum of access we have to our own existence.

That is the invitation – this evening you take some time, you can come and sit in here if you like, you can sit in your room or go for a walk and reflect, but just start to observe the particular patterns of self-identification you get into. It's also helpful to have a look at other people and listen to what they say. And then you think, *"Hey! They are not me! They are not me! They have two legs, two arms, a mouth – but they are not me! They don't believe what I believe, they don't eat what I eat, they don't say what I say. And yet they are alive! How do they get away with it? How come they are not arrested? Because I have to keep doing me being me in order to continue! If I wasn't doing me, where would I be? Well, hey – I might be like them! But they also have two feet, two arms, one nose..."* Life goes on, even if you are somebody else.

*Comment:* How can they live when they are not and I am?

*James:* Exactly! I think it's outrageous! This is another problem of democracy!

[End Day One]