

Buddhist 'tools' and how to use them in our meditation.

Examples from the toolbox are illusion and emptiness.

Extracted from the evening and day one teachings on the Six Bardos

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Excerpts:

Just observe and try to see the point where you get identified. The quicker you can see that you are caught, the quicker you can let go. Yes, we are always going to fall into things. We couldn't be in the world with others if we weren't falling into our shared dreams. That's what our communicative world is. But how do we get out of it?

The self-liberation of the pattern is what allows us to see it as illusory. We're in it — it's empty — it's gone, but we still go into it. At what stage of being in it as empty, can we let it go? I'm in it — it's real — then it goes by itself, but it kicked you in the head first like an angry horse. That is what these things do; you get disturbed. The whole idea of self-liberation is that when things go they leave no trace, like writing on water. They just go, and we have more calmness and clarity. What we want to observe, as quickly as possible, is this moving *into* something.

The basic instruction is not to blame yourself, because that is just another push. Just be very neutral: *'Oh, it's my nature to get lost. I will get lost. But how do I get lost?'* If you know *how* you get lost and you are *present* as you get lost, you are lost without being lost, which may be as good as it gets! ...

What emptiness means is that if everything is empty, then there is nothing outside empty. Everything is inside empty, which is why it is sometimes described as a great circle. This big circle may be called the *dharmadhatu* and in this context *dhatu* means space or dimension, and *dharma* means all phenomena. It means that the space in which everything arises — which is emptiness — is like a big circle and there is nothing outside this. Nothing is being imported from anywhere else. There isn't a reality factory outside. True entities are not being smuggled in across the border and sold for lots of money. It's not like that. There *are* no real entities. There never have been any real entities. There never will be any real entities — because it's empty, which means that the factory that makes entities is empty. That is the basis for understanding that samsara and nirvana are inseparable, *'The factory that makes entities is empty.'*...

Tibetans have a saying that if you keep butter in a leather bag, the leather bag will dry out and become brittle. If, however, you take butter and massage it into the material, the leather will become soft. It's the same with the dharma. We have to take the dharma and massage it into ourselves through the meditation practice, and then we become very soft. If we hold onto it as if we are holding the truth, we become brittle and defended...

Tantra is about the integration of wisdom and compassion grounded in the central understanding of emptiness. It's very important we see that the power of a tantric deity lies in their being absolutely free of solidity, and that we see that the blessing of the deity is to free us from any sense of solidity. The tantras give historical and mythological accounts of how each deity mandala came into existence and faith is very important in order to do their practice. But to have faith in the *forms* of emptiness is very different from having faith in substantial forms. The goal is always to deconstruct, to dissolve, to let go of whatever one is fixated in...

How can we speak without being intoxicated by language? Without falling into the dream that the language is describing real, true entities and that our speaking is being done by a personal subject who is real and truly existing? This is really at the heart of it. How can we experience the playful movement of language as an energy interaction, as part of the arising of the world, rather than as something which is following after, trying to catch up with and describe phenomena?...

Contents

'THE WORLD IS LIKE AN ILLUSION.' WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?	3
A tender attention	6
Always and already	7
<i>Questions and comments</i>	8
Evening practice before sleep	10
How to observing ourselves	11
The function of chanting	12
EMPTINESS AND BEING STUPIDLY INTELLIGENT	16
EMPTINESS AND DEPENDENT CO-EMERGENCE	17
Karma: the theatre of the mind	18
EMPTINESS: THE HINAYANA VIEW OF THE FIVE SKANDHAS	22
EMPTINESS: THE MAHAYANA VIEW OF THE FIVE SKANDHAS	27
EMPTINESS: THE TANTRA, MAHAMUDRA AND DZOGCHEN VIEWS	28
<i>Questions and comments on emptiness</i>	30
Tantra: the theatre of experience	37
Dzogchen: things are as they are	38
<i>Natural purity: kadag</i>	39
<i>Effortless manifestation: lhundrup</i>	39
Compassion in dzogchen	40
The view	42
CHOOSING A PRACTICE THAT SUITS YOU	43
Three Aa practice	45

Some of you may be rather new to buddhism, others of you are very familiar with it and so we'll go over the material in various ways. There will be plenty of time to ask questions and to discuss things and we will also do a lot of practice. For me it is very important, whatever our study of buddhism, to find a way to apply it into the practice. Simply to know a lot about buddhism, unless you want to become an academic, is not really going to do you any good. All these ideas, all these concepts..., yet what do they mean in the immediacy of this moment?

Buddhist theory or 'view', as it is traditionally referred to, is like a set of tools. Carpenters have to look after their tools very well and pack them carefully so that chisels, for example, keep their fine edge. They do very precise work. Plumbers on the other hand have cruder tools like hammers and spanners and they can jumble them all up together in a bag. During this retreat we are going to be doing brain surgery on ourselves so we need very sharp little tools! Nothing too crude. And we need to understand what these tools are for and how to use them to unlock the various knots, misapprehensions and *mis*-takings out of which we assemble the basis of our confusion.

'The world is like an illusion.' What does this mean?

'*All phenomena are illusory*' is a concept common to both hinduism and buddhism. Buddhism often refers to the illustration given by Buddha Shakyamuni. He said that this world and everything inside it including our own selves — all that we create and believe ourselves to be — is like the reflection of the moon on water. If you are out on a full moon night and you see a pond, you can see very clearly that there is the moon. You can see the details of the moon on the surface of the water; it is there but it's not there. If you say it's not there at all that would be false because it is there. If you say it's truly there that wouldn't be correct either, so it's both there and not there. That is what an illusion is. Another example is how sometimes in summertime, when we are driving along, we see the road

shimmering in front of us looking like water; it's a mirage, something is there but it's not there. Clearly we experience that something is going on.

We are sitting in this buddhist shrine-room together and maybe for some of you it's the first time you have been in this room, others of you are rather familiar with it. As soon as we enter the room we start making sense of it; we put names onto the phenomena that we see. If we don't know the buddhist names for some of the deities we at least can say 'statue,' or 'painting', we can say it's got a lot of red in it or that we like that shade of blue. We always have something to say about everything. This is our human nature. We put our knowledge out into the world and through that we make the world ours. If we notice ourselves doing that then we may think, *'Oh, I am making the world.'*

That is to say, the world that I experience is a world of participation. Something is there but it has the status of being like the reflection of the moon in water, it's not strongly defined, we ourselves bring the strong definition to it. We bring the definition in terms of: *'I like or I don't like,'* or *'It's something which intrigues me and I'm curious about it'* or *'It's not my cup of tea, I don't like that.'*

That is the way in which we bring value and meaning into the world of our experience, and yet because these processes are happening so quickly it feels as if we are standing in relation with something which is already fully formed. We take it for granted that our prejudice is the truth. That's really the quality of ignorance; to forget your own dynamic part in the creation of the world.

In the Bible, in the Old Testament in Genesis, there is the idea that God creates the world and then after a while human beings get created. Human beings are coming into a world which is already there and they wander around in it and use it for good or bad purposes. Buddhism has a very different notion. It's saying that at the centre of existence there is not a strongly defined, self-existing material world which you can know more or less about, but that our subjectivity is the co-creator moment by moment of the quality of our existence. Existence is an experience and to be fully alive we have to take the responsibility of being the creator of that experience. Most of the time that's a very big burden. We just think, *'Oh, life is just like that. What could I do? Nothing for me to do.'* It's out there and it's determined and fixed by other people.

However we ourselves are taking it as real and that's a story. Who is holding that story? We are. The illusory nature of the world is all about recognising the centrality of our own subjectivity. We can have no idea what other people see because if we really attend to what we see, we can't say. For example, in front of me is an interesting object and we may agree that it is orange in colour but orange is a word. What is this? Now we get used to putting the word 'orange' on to this object so that it is as if this is 'orange', and that somehow this linguistic signifier and whatever is here in front of me is the same thing. But is that true? When we look at it we see all sorts of shadings, and if you really open to it, the energetic pulsation of the phenomena. What has this term 'orange' got to do with that? It floats around and, of course, different languages don't use the word 'orange.' We can see the conventionality of the linguistic definition **and** the unspeakable, ungraspable nature of what is there.

Something which is very present and yet beyond being fixed is constantly being fixed by us, and we do it as a dynamic activity. It's an amazing thing that without our dynamic activity the world wouldn't seem so fixed and static. It's the very busyness of our mind that freezes the world into fixed, separate phenomena.

One of the functions of meditation is to slow down and separate out the movements of the mind so that you start to experience that it is indeed your own energy which is creating all these things. Of course these things are created by the flow of your energy; their 'thingness' is simply a temporary construct. That's essentially what the phenomenal quality of illusion is about. So now we can all go home!

The question is how to live it? How not to be trapped by the rigidities of our own conceptualisation? We fall asleep in the dream of the story lines running our own heads: *'This is how I want to live my life...'* *'If only I was better at...'* *'Why can't I be like other people...?'* There are many such stories that run in our head, and these stories themselves are illusions. But they continue to run and as we engage in them something seems to be there – and then it's gone; but while it was there we fell into it. That 'falling into it' is just a little bit too heavy so that when we come out of it there is a kind of shock, and then we fall into the next... and then the next ... and so we are impacted by life. There is a lot of wear and tear and it's all very exhausting. It's like trying to swim in a sea whose waves are being blown up by the wind. You can't really enjoy the swim since you can't feel the movement, the glide, or the flow of your own being because you are being confronted by all this stuff.

The Buddha's teaching says there is no stuff. Everything is emptiness: form and emptiness; colours and emptiness; happiness and emptiness; clarity and emptiness. Emptiness is one of the sharp tools which is used for cutting into the appropriation or the objectification, the materialising activity of our mind, so that we start to feel directly the energetic radiance of our existence moment by moment. This is at the heart of buddhist meditation practice.

It's not really about trying to be a better person because in some ways that would imply we know what a person is. *'I already exist as a person, but I'm not a very good person — if I take out the bad bits of my person and put in some better bits then I'll be a better person.'* Of course at the most ordinary level of buddhism that is true, but you could say the same of any religion.

The difference between buddhism and christianity, islam or judaism, is that buddhism is concerned with the illusory nature of the person: you don't really exist, and yet you do exist. If you spend a lot of time trying to be good on the level of existence, you will not be able to attend to the non-existence of your existence. Your non-existence is not a nihilistic 'nothingness' non-existence because you also exist, but you exist *in the manner of a dream*, like the reflection of the moon on water.

We attend to the details of our behaviour by being precise, so that we don't spend all our time in lying, cheating, stealing and so on because these crude behaviours are very materialistic. Ethics and clarity are very strongly linked together. I would suggest to you that it is when we fall asleep and fall into dreams — dreams of envy, hatred, intolerance or selfishness — that *that* is when we behave unethically. When we awake into the lightness of ourselves, into the freshness of our being, there's a kind of softness or plasticity in that. We feel able to move and therefore being 'for' the other is very easy because we are not so solid. It is when we feel hurt or afraid that we want to protect ourselves.

From the buddhist point of view, to become goodhearted involves an understanding of illusion. We are often a bit mistrustful of illusion: we have this sense that you have to take life seriously. If we look around the world politically and ecologically we can see so many bad things happening. We can feel very strongly that we know what is good and what is bad. From a buddhist point of view we have to be very careful about that. Of course terrible and unnecessary things are happening to people but if we make it too solidly real it becomes a hook for all sorts of thoughts, feelings and disturbances. Our good halfheartedness has merely made us very turbulent.

Is righteous turbulence worth anything? Not from the point of view of meditation, because what helps us to be effective is to be able to relate and if we want to relate we have to be flexible. You can only be flexible if you have the capacity to move in yourself.

The work that we do in meditation is examining the positions we take up and observing how we have these concrete positions, these definitions, these assumptions, these limitations. We observe how we proceed from these towards the world, seeing the world in terms of what can be seen from that position. This means that we have a partial take, a partial illumination of what is going on. However we take it as the whole because it's so familiar to us. In our practice we try to move out of our familiar frame of reference and see ourselves differently, see other people differently, and see all

phenomena differently. Why? Because samsara — this cycle of birth and death that goes on and on — is generated out of fixed beliefs and the tradition tells us that we are actually born into different realms according to our fixed beliefs and interpretations. We are born in the human realm because we have a dominance of pride and desire, and these two function give us a particular human reading. One way this manifests is how human beings feel that they are in charge of the world and are entitled to do whatever they like with the world. Human beings are actively involved in the destruction of other species on the planet. Year by year species of birds are annihilated, whole species just wiped out. Human beings have been involved in species genocide for a long, long time. We are very good at it and we will undoubtedly continue to do it until there are no whales left in the sea, and no cod either, for that matter.

Because we have desire and pride we find it very difficult to say that we made a mistake. Instead we say, *'We'll try harder. Yes, there is a problem with global warming but our scientists will fix it.'* What is actually the cause of global warming? Our scientists! Yet we trust them to do more, to make more machines which will undoubtedly have more byproducts which will have a huge impact on the environment. This is part of our human situation. We are very intelligent and we have many thoughts, but our thoughts tend to be in terms of us as a thinking subject: 'How can I act on the object world to turn it into what I want?' 'This world is for me and I will make it serve my purposes.'

Buddhism has a very different view of who we are and what the phenomenological field is that we encounter, and we will gradually start to get more sense of that.

A tender attention

During the next few days you may find it useful to observe your relationship with your body. You don't have to sit in a very formal position, in fact in this kind of practice it can be useful to move your body. In general this body is a field of sensation that is arising and passing. Some meditation instructions say that it is only if you keep your **body** very still and allow the sensations to come and go that you will realise their illusory nature. Yes, you may realise their illusory nature but you may also give yourself chronic knee pain which will never go away! So that is something to think about.

Collaborating with your body is part of collaborating with the world. If your body is in pain please move, but as you move observe your movement. Why are you moving? Because there is a pain. The pain arises — you move — the pain goes — the movement stops. Then something else arises and you move and that sensation goes and the movement stops. Your existence is this sequence of moves. You feel thirsty, you have a drink, and after a while you need to have a pee. You have a pee and then you feel thirsty again so you have another drink; this has been going on since you were born. One thing is chasing another round and round. This is the nature of activity; this is the body as activity. Our body is not a fixed thing, it's an infinite series of processes: blood circulation; the endocrine system; the electric movements in the brain and so on; there is constant movement. The body is nothing but movement. Every cell in the body is dynamic and alive, exchanges of information and oxygen are occurring all the time. This is not a 'thing' — this is an incredibly subtle process. Everything we have is dynamic.

So it's not about conquering the world. It's not about the hero meditator who is going to push through, but about a very attentive, close and tender attention to what is going on. How am I? What is the 'how-ness' of my existence? Coming and going, coming and going. Observe how there are some things I don't want to know about and other things that I am very interested in. Editing is always going on — a pulling in of the things I like and a pushing away of the things I don't like. Observe the 'how' of that. How do I develop and maintain a story about who I am and resist changes to that story?

Instead of maintaining an open panoramic vision I reduce it to a narrow little frame of reference and I only want to attend to what fits in the frame. My ego-policeman acts as a border guard, letting some things in, keeping other things out, in the interest of what I have already defined as my self-

identity: *'I know who I am, and because I know who I am and I know what I like I have to protect that. There are many things in the world which are no use to me — I don't want them and they are nothing to do with me.'*

But they are *already* part of your world. When you go into a clothes shop and see many items hanging on a rack, you go through the rack saying, *'No, not this, not this, maybe this...'* You've already put your hand on the very thing that you're saying you don't want, so you already have a kinesthetic contact with this it even while you are thinking, *'God, I could never wear that!'* You are already touching it; we are always in touch with, *'Oh, I don't like that.'* It is already coming in through your eyes and is in you. *'But I don't want it.'* Our resistance is after the fact. We're saying, *'No, no, no,'* when it's already there.

Part of the function of the meditation is to stop the resistance and to think that if everything has been coming into me for a very long time and I'm still alive, then these things can't be as toxic as thought, so maybe I can just stay with them.

In the dzogchen view, which originally was particularly in the nyingma and bön traditions, the founding Buddha is called *Kuntu Zangpo*. *Kuntu* means all, or always, or everything, and *Zangpo* means good; it means everything is good. We make discrimination on everything, even though it is always and already good. Because of these discriminations we are kept very busy since we have to protect our integrity, but it's an integrity after the fact of the invasion.

When we study history at school, we study all the people who have invaded our country. This is our history; it's a history of invasions by all the people from outside who have come and influenced our country. We are always already invaded. Our senses are completely open so when you walk down the street and a car going by screeches, or someone on a bicycle comes too close, you are startled and think, *'What was that?!'* It's already happened so the reaction is building up after the fact. What we're in outrage at is not the moment, because the moment's gone, but our interpretation of the moment. *'That shouldn't happen. How can they do that?!'* I am sure you have had this kind of experience. It's all very solid and inside ourselves an opinion, a set of ideas, is banging away at another opinion. Then you meet a friend – and of course they wouldn't be your friend unless they had the same prejudices as you – so you can really enjoy retelling your irritation about whatever it is.

Always and already

In the dzogchen meditation practice we try to accept that we are part of the world and that this is why everything happens. The gatekeeper is redundant because it has always already happened. We are always and already connected with everything. The question is how to live with that fact? If everything feels very big and we feel very small we are going to feel overwhelmed a lot of the time. So are we very small? As long as we imagine we are small we will encounter a world that is very big. We are going to feel overwhelmed and in trying to protect ourselves, we keep editing, controlling and resisting. But if we are not small, maybe it's fine.

Non-dual meditation is to relax and integrate into space, and to be open to everything that arises in space. Things are coming and going and we're still here. This body is still here, but we are not inside the body, like a little peanut. Awareness is open without beginning and end, without any top or bottom. The welcome to everything continues, and this includes welcoming our own narrow-minded prejudices and bigotry, our own likes and dislikes.

Now what is that like? It's not that you have to say 'yes' to everything and, for example, walk across the road believing that the cars won't hit you. You can see that cars are real and know that you don't want your poor lovely body to die, so you are careful crossing the road, but open. Well that's what we have to practise in the meditation, not blocking the object but being able to deal with the energetic qualities of everything that arises. That is why the Buddha taught so many different kinds of meditation practice, because we have different structures of likes and dislikes, but also because

the world is constituted from many factors. If you live in a time of war and the causes of your anxiety are external and about life and death, you probably need to do a different kind of meditation than if you have a rather comfortable, easy existence, when the tortures are in yourself. Nobody is giving you a hard time except you.

Understanding the illusory nature of things is to understand that the separation of subject and object is not strongly real. The felt sense we have of fixed, secure, material phenomena is not strongly real. The sense of our familiar self as already existent, always there — I, me, myself — this is also something of an illusion. To help you relax and be more playfully at home in movement, ask yourself what is the inter-penetrating nature of these illusions? Bodily movement can help here, so try letting yourself experience the dynamism of the movement as you stretch and as you turn. Every time you turn, you see a different room. It is central to see that this room is nothing but experience. Yes, on the level of abstraction, we can think about this room. However, we encounter many different rooms because we are moving and looking from different places. What we actually get, is what we are actually getting now. We don't see the whole room; 'the whole room' is a concept. We will always simply have particular takes, just as we have particular takes on everything. That is all you ever have. You can explore this for yourself. Just turn your head and different stuff is happening.

You can solidify and organise all these different takes into, '*Oh, I am seeing different aspects of the room.*' but that is to use an abstract concept to organise this ungraspable, inexpressible nowness or immediacy of what is here. Through meditation we are trying to re-centre ourselves - to give up reliance on abstract concepts as the guarantors of meanings and value and to start trusting our own belly, our own heart. To ask ourselves what it feels like. Dzogchen is very concerned with being present in the moment and allowing yourself to be there; to move as your body wants to move. If you feel you want to lie down, you can lie down. If you feel you want to get up and have a little walk outside, you can do that. You don't get 'brownie points' for sitting still!

Questions and comments

Question: I can see a cushion and when I go out of the room I see other things, so where is the cushion in that moment? Is it just an idea, or where is it?

James: That is a very old question in Indian philosophy. If a tree falls in a forest and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound? It's a similar thing. Is the cushion still there? If a mouse comes into the room does it see a cushion? If a dog puts its head down on it, is it a cushion for the dog? It's a cushion for us because we have that concept. If you remove the concept, what is it? We get so used to the fact that having known it as a cushion, that that is what it always is. Our perception is human-centred.

Response: But if I say to my friend, '*Please bring me the cushion*', then I believe that he will bring me this object. This working together is stabilising my belief in the permanence of this object, and we have to believe in this otherwise we could not work together.

James: Of course if we share this space and we live in this culture we have this concept of 'cushion.' I came here according to things that were mapped in my diary because I am the servant of my diary. Where have I come to? I have come to a buddhist centre. When I say, '*I have come to a buddhist centre*', I am releasing energy out of my mouth — it's coming in the form of sound waves. Because you have an understanding of English, you think that I am telling you something but I am just making sounds come out of my mouth. I know how to turn this sound into, '*I have come to a buddhist centre.*' You have learned to take that sound and turn it into something meaningful. We are both engaged in a choreographed activity together.

Response: But it's functioning.

James: Exactly. It's functioning but is it describing anything which truly exists? That's the difference, isn't it?

It's very helpful that you raised this because everything we do is movement through time. It's the revealing of ourselves as breath, as sound, as gesture and so on. Each of which in its moment-by-moment form is ungraspable, but the way we make sense of it is to stabilise it as something real, true and enduring. If you come back in here and someone else has arrived and is sitting in your place, you might say, *'Oh, you're sitting on my cushion, that's my cushion.'* It wasn't your cushion two hours ago because it was in a pile by the wall, but now it has been blessed by your bum so it has become your cushion!

That's exactly the sort of thing we want to observe: our speech as a flow of energy, as a kind of language game but not in its semantic sense. For example, if you are sitting having food with someone and you say *'Please pass me that spoon'* one form of energy impacts the other person and their body moves. That's what is happening all the time; this interchange, this communicative texture of the unfolding of our existence in which there is nothing solid to hold on to.

Therefore, the quality of our existence is determined by our capacity to participate. The more openly you can participate and allow yourself to move with these currents, the richer your life becomes. Then we can observe: how do we get knotted? how do we get frightened? how do we diminish our capacity to be in the world? This is the dilemma. We can't help but be in the world but we act as if we are not, and then it becomes very hard because we live according to a pseudo-problem. How can I protect myself from the world? But we *are* this world; it's already happening to us.

Comment: I have builders in my house drilling every day. I keep telling myself, *'OK, sound and emptiness,'* but it is really impacting my body and so I have this reaction to get out. If I can't go out, I have this reaction and I feel angry.

James: Isn't it a question of how we think about it? If you think, *'Oh this noise is driving me crazy — it's spoiling my day,'* it then becomes incredibly structured and that's because you have your abstract notion of what you need to do. You think, *'My day is mine and it extends in time in front of me, and there are all the things I have to do today because I put aside Fridays to do my paperwork. Now this bloody noise has started again and it's spoiling my day.'* But we didn't have a day; the day we get is the day we get. It's the ego's fantasy of control and dominance that is at the root of a lot of anger because it feels attacked by this noise.

Response: Yes, but the question is where does this feeling of unpleasantness come from? It really feels physical. I cannot see the mechanism for this process of making it unpleasant.

James: Well, maybe it is unpleasant, and then there is the question of what do you do? You could moan or release your energy into the field of disturbance. You stand in resistance to this and think, *'Oh, I just wish they would shut up...'* but it's already there.

Response: This is when it gets difficult. I can leave the house. That's not a problem. But what if you can't do this and you really have to stay with these intense, unpleasant experiences?

Comment: It's like a kind of torture ...

James: That's right, and that's what they do in Guantanamo Bay — they play this noise all the time.

Comment: I think your nervous system will generate signals to indicate that there is something wrong with your complete environment, so you have to react in some way in order to protect your life. For me, it's essential that if you want to stay healthy you have to do something otherwise it will have a sharp impact on your health.

James: It's very interesting, isn't it? On pain research you find that people can tolerate very different amounts of pain and it often has to do with the concept that you have of pain. Pain arises and passes and it may be a signal to stop doing something. However, if it's like a constant back pain, the pain is not a sign that it is getting worse; it's an irritation in the nervous system and you can learn to live with that. If you construe it as, *'This is terrible, this is going to destroy me,'* what's persecuting you is your own concept of damage and danger. I think that's often what is happening when we say, *'This is intolerable. I can't bear it.'* The question then, in terms of meditation, is who is the one who can't bear it? Actually, what is usually happening is a constellation of interpretation, which makes it into this experience that cannot be fitted into the box of myself.

I remember when I was first in India, I got on a train and it was so completely full of people that there was nowhere to sit. I was amazed. I had my bag, the doors had closed and the train set off. It was a long journey and for ten to twelve hours I stood cramped in front of the toilet. Every time the toilet door opened I was pinned against the wall and there were these bad smells coming; it just went on and on and on. I wanted to hit someone. Who could I hit? Who was responsible for this monstrous attack on me? Years went by and I would continue going on these very long train journeys. I'd just become like a cow in the field. It's a long journey, not very pleasant but that is just what it is. To get into a reaction against it is simply self-persecutory. I was having to learn to change my frame of reference. Of course if you insist on thinking, *'Why should I? This is wrong,'* –which would be our normal way of thinking – you just stay hard and wired up with a lot of friction.

OK, maybe now we could do a little bit of movement just to loosen up?

[Movement practice]

Evening practice before sleep

Tomorrow I will speak about the relation between consciousness and awareness however now, just before we do our evening practice, I'd like to touch on this a little. When we do practice in the evening, one of the things we are also doing is preparing ourselves for sleep. In sleep, we try, as much as possible, to keep a low level presence with whatever is going on. This is different from strongly observing something since it doesn't have an intention towards a specific content. It is more an availability towards whatever content is there, whatever is arising.

In the focussing practices we are developing a quality of consciousness, we are trying to remain conscious of the particular object of our focus. This gives a clarity of direction and also intensifies the sense of agent, of the one who is doing it: 'I am doing this.' When we go into the more spacious practices, as we'll do tomorrow, we want to dissolve this sense of 'I am the one who is doing this.'

However when we're falling asleep it's very helpful to have a kind of meeting of both of these. You need to be focused enough not to get dispersed yet if you're too tight you'll become agitated and won't be able to fall asleep. So it's about collecting yourself, but the collection held very softly. When we practise focusing the mind in our practice before sleep we are not trying to stave off distracting thoughts, we just have the sense that if I get lost, it's not too bad.

The image is more like sailing in a small boat, a little dinghy; you are always having to tack, to change direction so that you get the wind in your sails. You're collaborating with the energy that's moving in order to progress, because unless a small boat has got its own power engine, it's not going to go in a straight line. Even if you have an outboard motor or a power engine, you will experience the wind as taking you off course. Tomorrow we'll be opening to a more open perception in which there is no course, it's whatever comes, but here we want to have a sense of gentle direction. There is no mistake. When you get blown off course, although you could be interested in how and where you have got to, the main thing is just to come back. I think this is particularly important if we carry a strong sense of right and wrong. Many of us will have an internal field of voices and memories such

as: *'Try harder. Do better. You can do it.'* What we want to do is soften these voices so we don't listen to them so much.

Because there is no mistake in meditation, all that is happening is that you are seeing just how dynamic your nature is – and the reason we are dynamic is because there is no inherent self-nature. To be sentient is to be impacted, to be touched, to have experience, and experience takes you this way and that. Machines go in a straight line. If you are working with a power tool and drop it by mistake onto your hand, you may shout at the machine to stop but it won't stop. However if your friend hits you by mistake with his hammer and you cry out, he'd say sorry and stop, because he's sentient. Things which are sentient don't go in straight lines, they wobble.

So observe how you move and wobble. This is not you getting lost – which is one kind of story you may put on it – but your nature is to move: stillness and movement. This is the movement... return to the stillness... this is the movement... return to the stillness... so that these two become more connected and integrated.

Sit as before: spine erect, skeleton carrying the weight, chin slightly down, eyes closed slightly. It helps if you put your tongue on the top of your mouth, on the hard palate, the hard ridge just behind the teeth. You can sit with the left hand on top of the right with the thumbs touching. Some people prefer to sit with their hands on their knees. Focus either on the breath going in and out or on some point in front of you. We will sit like that for a while.

How to observing ourselves

Observing yourself refers both to observing yourself in the moment of experience as it occurs and to observing yourself in relation to all that you know about yourself. A lot of the time what is arising is old and familiar patterns and when we recognise this we may ask ourselves *'I have run this thought many times before. What advantages do I get from this?'*

Many people have repeated negative thoughts or worries. They are like white noise, chains of empty signifiers which are invested with a personal, emotional energy. They may seem to be full of meaning and each time you activate them you re-invest them with some importance so that they become libidinally enriched. They start to glow with the energy of your own life and so when they knock on the door again, you open the door, because they feel very meaningful. So our task in observing ourselves is to think, *'I've been cheated by this before.'*

For example, close to where I live in London there is an Indian take-away shop. I like Indian food, so every now and then I go there and buy a take-away. Every time I eat it I get a bad stomach. Sadly there isn't a good Indian restaurant near me but sometimes when I am hungry I have memories of living in India and I think, *'Oh, I need a curry,'* so I go there. So what is stronger here? The memory, the identification, or the phenomenological immediacy of having an upset tummy? That's what happens, isn't it? We don't learn from experience.

To think that we learn from experience is a big illusion. I'm involved in a therapeutic community where many of the groups are run on the basis that people just meet together and talk a lot, and then the therapist tries to help them reflect on what happened. Often the therapist isn't very sharp, and the group is very resistant. Essentially, it's a recycling of neurosis and a mutual wind-up. A great deal of bad group therapy operates on that basis. Without clarity of intention, we fail to notice when we get blown off course and follow things because they seem to be interesting. They may be interesting in the moment, like me wanting to eat a curry, but it doesn't go anywhere except a pain in the stomach. What is this temptation? What is this sweet, honeyed world of Mephistopheles? How do we get caught? That is one of the things we have to observe. We know it's nonsense but we do it again and again. What is that? In buddhism it's called attachment, but just knowing the word doesn't really help us. We have to observe in ourselves how this slipping, or sliding, or jumping, or falling asleep into occurs. This is the function of observing ourselves.

Where we *can* learn from experience is where we remember what the experience was. In the moment, experience itself won't tell you very much because you have to link in order to think, and when you are in it you are in it exactly because you *can't* link yourself out of it. If you could, you'd be reflecting on the experience while you are in it, which is the normal, western, intellectual, analytic or psychotherapeutic way of dealing with experience.

In meditation, we are trying to do something different. We are trying to see how these knots are moving and to untie them by just pulling the libido back and staying contained. That's why buddhas are often depicted inside a nimbus of light – they are like a ball, they don't leak out. But we leak all the time, we flow out into things, or experiences flow into us. We are constantly in these fusional identifications. Observing ourselves is just seeing these flows of movement: *'I am this. This is mine. Wow! Oh, what was that?'*

Just observe and try to see the point where you get identified. The quicker you can see that you are in it, the quicker you can let go. Yes, we are always going to fall into things. We couldn't be in the world with others if we weren't falling into our shared dreams. That's what our communicative world is. But how do we get out of it? The self-liberation of the pattern is what allows us to see it as illusory. We're in it — it's empty — it's gone, but we still go into it. At what stage of being in it as empty, can we let it go? I'm in it — it's real — then it goes by itself, but it kicked you in the head first like an angry horse. That is what these things do; you get disturbed. The whole idea of self-liberation is that when things go they leave no trace, like writing on water. They just go, and we have more calmness and clarity. What we want to observe, as quickly as possible, is this moving *into* something. The basic instruction is not to blame yourself, because that is just another push. Just be very neutral: *'Oh, it's my nature to get lost. I will get lost. But how do I get lost?'* If you know *how* you get lost and you are *present* as you get lost, you are lost without being lost, which may be as good as it gets!

Have a good evening and we'll meet tomorrow.

The function of chanting

We will start with the refuge and bodhicitta, reciting it three times:

SAN GYE CHOE DANG TSOG KYI CHOG NAM LA

JANG CHUB BAR DU DAG NI KYAB SU CHI

DAG GI JIN SOG GYI PAI SO NAM KYI

DRO LA PHEN CHIR SANG GYAE DRUB PAR SHOG

To the Buddha, Dharma and the best assembly, I go for refuge until enlightenment is gained. By the merit arising from my generosity and other virtues, may I attain buddhahood in order to benefit all sentient beings.

As I'm sure you'll be aware, chanting is a very important part of the Tibetan tradition and maybe it's worth thinking a little bit about its function. When people in the West first came in contact with Tibetan buddhism it seems we did not much like doing ritual practices and pujas. In some ways that's fair enough, maybe it's just the karma of our time, but let's see if we can understand what that resistance is about.

In fifteenth century Europe was the period often referred to as The Age of Exploration. The Spanish and the Portuguese, then the Dutch and the British went out into the world in little boats to find what were for them, new continents. It was also The Age of Discovery in science. It was the real beginning of the modernist period, a time when people turned away from Christianity to humanism. There was a return to the ethics and the understanding of the Greek and Roman philosophers without, however, the hierarchical stabilising infrastructure of Greek and Roman political forms.

Humanism said, *“Man is the measure of all things and because this is a human-centred world we should do things on our terms. We should make the world work for us.”* We have seen this accelerating century by century and it has brought many wonderful developments. Thanks to modern medicine many people’s lives have been saved and people generally have longer lives. However one aspect of this world view is an attitude that says, *“I need to find my own way. I need to do things on my terms. There is a uniqueness about my life and that uniqueness will be best fulfilled by finding my own way.”*

Performing ritual is the absolute antithesis of this; a ritual involves submitting yourself to a form in the world. Traditional cultures were, of course, largely ritualistic with their initiation ceremonies, their differing dress for different ages and sexes, their different linguistic signifiers for blood relations and so on. All these were enormously important; people took their place in a world that was already formed. We, however, take our place in a world which is forming.

I don't know about your German education system but in the British one children have to find their own way. In primary schools the children sit around little tables and discuss things together. They are encouraged to have and share their opinion about what they are learning. In some ways this is very nice and it brings a lot of excitement and enthusiasm, but it is accompanied by the sense that no single person is the authority on what is what. In this view, finding your own way and making your own choices is the most important thing. One's own shape becomes the determinant of value.

From a buddhist point of view this is a very big mistake. All the energy that we put into exploring the outside world and being fascinated by things is time spent not exploring your inner world, not working out who you are. Although we may have all sorts of opinions about the world and its contents, the one thing we don't know is who *we* are.

People get fascinated by many things nowadays and build up bodies of knowledge. From the point of view of meditation all of this knowledge and information is mere distraction. The very busyness of the mind, gratifying though it be to the ego and conferring as it does mastery over things, brings with it an intolerance of boredom: unless something is personally meaningful to me and immediately exciting and interesting I don't want to do it. Why should I? Who knows any better than I do? Once you enter a tradition it's not like that all; someone does know better. Padmasambhava, Kuntu Zangpo and all the great yogis of the past, they knew very well. They set up these systems which have structures and meaning embedded in them, a meaning which will be revealed by aligning yourself with them.

Freedom through conformity is a very interesting concept. It may sound like a fascist slogan, but perhaps in order to explore our own nature, in order to attend to our mind, certain facilitating factors *do* have to be there – a degree of calmness, a degree of trust and a degree of freedom from the burden of feeling that ‘it's all up to me’. When we take refuge especially, we are taking a place inside a system which is already there. We are saying that somebody has already worked this out – that what I have to do is align myself with the flow of this pure understanding and I will fall back into shape. The Buddha is like the great chiropractor; he can get your spine aligned. Most of us are very off balance and distorted but when you get that alignment everything flows freely again.

Often, however, we find that our mind wanders off from the chanting. Other things seem more interesting than giving full attention to the practice. Afterwards we may stop and wonder, *‘Were these little journeys I made in my mind bringing me back gold and treasures?’* When the Spanish went to South America they brought back shiploads of gold. When you're sitting in your meditation and your mind goes off on a journey, what riches do you bring back? Myrrh...frankincense...fresh mangoes...anything at all? Maybe not. Maybe nothing. If that is the case it's really quite frightening because it means that we are very easily caught. Like runaway children hanging out in a railway station, any predator can take them. We are the same. When our mind is grounded in distraction any stray thought can come entice us away, *‘Sweet boy, come with me. I have chocolate for you...’* You go

off wandering here and there and when you come back the meditation is over. You haven't done any meditation. There's no chocolate and death is getting closer.

So, distraction is not helpful. We often don't even realise that we get distracted, because distraction requires having something to be distracted from. In some of the deeper dzogchen practices this is to be understood very carefully because without a fixed frame of reference understanding when you're distracted and when you're clear is much more difficult.

Dzogchen is letting the mind ramble wherever it goes; it's not like going on a walk. If you want to walk to the shops from here you know the path to take but if you take a different path you may never get there. If you are just going for a walk in the forest, it may not matter where you wander as long as you are not lost. That's the practice of dzogchen: whatever is happening you are aware, you are present, and you are grounded.

As a preparation for that, simply developing the capacity to say, *"For the next ...[so many]... minutes I will devote my intention in this direction and I will summon all my attention to follow my intention. This is what I am going to do."* Such discipline is very important. It doesn't need to be a very big heavy thing. You don't need to do huge amounts of the practice but when you **do** do the disciplined practice you need to really try it, both because it strengthens the capacity for attention, but also because you can then see when you're distracted. Not to know when you are distracted is highly problematic because the thing about distraction is that it feels like freedom when, actually, it's not.

In the practice of psychoanalysis, for example, patients are encouraged to free associate and allow whatever is arising to express itself, initially in the space of their mind but eventually in their speech. That is very hard to do. Most of the time what happens is that people say the same sort of thing. Repetition-compulsion — the investment in the neurotic pattern — feels so tempting that something may feel fresh even although it's stale and old. To get to a point where you can really free associate is very hard. Another example is from the early surrealist writings when they were following William James's word associations. At first it's fresh but then they fall into patterns, with the same themes. Although the content looks a bit different the structure is the same. That's what we can see in our own distraction. It's tempting and tantalising when it arises but basically it's the same old song: *'What about me? Am I winning or am I losing? What can I get? What might I lose?'* Round and round and round.

That is why chanting is useful. It is a way of focusing the mind and it is also important for the breath. If we are reciting we can recite very slowly which both stabilises the breath and gives us a time to stay with the meaning of the words. As you do the chants more often, you build up an understanding of the individual Tibetan words and they can just linger...slowly arising and passing. It's like listening to a piece of music which you know very well — every time you hear it start there's an energetic alignment and the familiarity allows a settling.

We don't need to find new things to be satisfied. In fact it's the reverse; new things bring excitement and excitement is often the opposite of satisfaction. Satisfaction in dzogchen is linked with the idea of resting in your own nature. It means being at peace, not needing anything to take you out of your state. It's because we are unsatisfied and discontented that we look for new and exciting things. To be confronted with boredom can actually be very useful. Boredom is the quality of wanting the object to stimulate you: you want the object to take you out of yourself because you're bored. *'Mum, this is so boring! Can we leave now? Can't we stop the car? I'm really bored. This is taking for ever. Can I eat some chocolate?'* Children are endlessly in this situation of feeling that stable situations are persecutory. Because children are physically vulnerable they also feel their mental vulnerability unless they are making a noise or making a mark, or saying, *'Look at me! Why don't you talk to me Mum? Why are you talking to your friend? Talk to me!'* When that desperate need to be the centre of attention isn't met, it creates a boredom which is a fear of annihilation; nothing is happening and nothing equals death.

For meditators, however, nothing happening opens a gap in which you can start to see who is the one who is wanting something to happen? What is this excitation that we take to be ourselves? Maybe this is just energy, and this energy is moving like that and seeking to hook onto something. By not giving it something to hook on to it can start to settle.

When you get a skin irritation you want to scratch it. If you go to the doctor, the doctor will tell you not to scratch it but the itch is saying, *'Scratch me!'* Your body is telling you to take your nails and pull them very hard over your skin. You feel you just have to scratch but then the nerve endings get even more irritated and you end up with a wound because you have torn through the skin.

It's exactly the same principle in meditation. The agitation arises and tells you, *'I am important and you need to do something.'* In fact, this is not true, but in order to face that we have to be settled enough just to let it arise and pass without us being involved. That is very hard because the nexus or the siting of our energy — the nodal point of our ordinary sense of self — is *'I am somebody who develops meaning and value in my life by acting on situations'*. I am somebody who creates things, protects things, does things, and now something is happening and there is nothing for me to do.

It's like being made redundant at work; it's very bad for your health. People who are made redundant often develop physical ailments in the first year. They often have depression and anxiety as well because they no longer know who they are. The practice of meditation is about a redundancy hence it is going to bring a resistance. This is why people who begin to meditate more find that their meditation often gets worse. At that point they can draw the conclusion that meditation is not for them or that they are going to spend their time differently. It's important, however, to understand that this is just part of the process. It is the deepening resistance from all the parts of you that want to be individualistic, deterministic, active and engaged, and they are crying out for something to do.

There is this old saying, *'The devil finds work for idle hands to do.'* In meditation you put your hands down; they are idle, they are not doing anything at all. So naturally the devil thinks, *"Ah ha! Wonderful! A room full of people not doing anything. I'll come and cook their minds a little bit."* You have to be aware of that and to know what to do when your mind gets agitated. Relax, you won't die. It's like saying to a child, that they don't have to scratch:

- *Yeah but it's sore.*
- *It's not sore — it's just a bit irritated — this is called 'itchy'.*
- *No but it's sore...I want to scratch. If I don't something will happen.*
- *If you don't scratch it will settle down. It's not a sign that something is wrong.*

As soon as something feels uncomfortable we feel that something must be done.

This is where meditation is rather hard, because in many ways meditation is the discipline of 'not doing.' That's why there are formal practices such as Ngondro which comprise a lot of boring 'doings' — as a way of 'not doing'. Doing a hundred thousand prostrations or a hundred thousand mandala offerings, it may seem mind-numbingly insane to do them. There is, however, a reason and the reason is to help you start to dissolve 'doing' into activity *per se*, so that you are just doing. You're doing it in a way that you might sometimes find if you sing or play music or dance — you're just dancing or just singing and the singing is flowing through you. You're not an individual agent any more. That's the reason why the Ngondro practices are done a hundred thousand times, in order for you to just become part of this flow — it's just going on. You take your place as part of the universal flow. It's not up to you and you don't have to determine it individually, but you find yourself on a deeper level.

All the movements of agitation can settle, and when they settle you find yourself in a world which is completely different. You start to experience the natural movement of the world. You start to experience yourself as the spontaneous form of what's called 'the dharmakaya'. The Buddha's mind flows out as you. Of course it's very difficult to feel that as long as we insist that *"No, I am 'I, me,*

myself; I know who I am." As long as we know who we are on an ordinary level, we are not going to experience this transformation.

So, that is one of the functions of doing chanting and repeated practice.

Emptiness and being stupidly intelligent

We should never doubt our own intelligence, nor should we doubt that our intelligence has been captured by stupidity. We are 'stupidly intelligent'. In buddhism, stupidity refers to not recognising your own nature. All our intelligence is turned towards something else. The more we learn how to name the objects in the world and the more we learn about things, the more power, status and money we have. However, from the point of view of awakening, this kind of knowledge, is a kind of stupidity and it's a terrible curse because there is so much more to renounce. You may have spent a lot of your life developing your intelligence through study and learning from school to college or university. The mind is always at work, making sense of things, pulling together information all of which is based on things truly existing and about which a lot can be known. This is the basis of our whole education system.

Emptiness, however, means there are no things. That doesn't mean that you can't know things about these 'no things,' but it does mean that the things that you know about these things have a very different status. They are no longer standing in a true relation to what is there; they are a kind of dramatic play. For example, if you study English literature you can learn a lot about King Lear. If you go into a university library you will find thousands of books just about King Lear. Now, King Lear doesn't exist — King Lear has never existed — but there are many things to say about King Lear. This is exactly the nature of our world. Nothing really exists, but boy can we talk about everything for ever!

Before asking what emptiness means, let's think about what the understanding or exploration of emptiness is trying to antidote? It is the sense of inherent self-nature. In Sanskrit, that's called *ahamkara* and in Tibetan *dagdzin*. '*Dag*' means 'I' and '*dzin*' means 'to hold on, to grasp at'; so it's 'grasping' and an 'I'. That 'I' is not just a personal pronoun for a living subject, it also refers to things. For example, when we see this glass which I am holding up, we see an entity; something which seems to exist in itself. The glass is the glass. In that sense there is an 'I-ness' to the glass. The definition of the glass seems to be inherent in it. That is to say, there seems to be an object which is there, and is there prior to language because as we know, different languages will put different words on to this.

Clearly, this thing [*James taps a glass*] is a thing which exists in itself independent of your mental functioning. You can think whatever you like about this; you can use it for whatever you want. You can fill it with all sort of things, you can put it on top of your head like a little hat, you can try to hear better with it, you can do all sorts of things with it, but it is what it is. That sense of 'it is' is what is meant by *ahamkara*, our holding on to the implicit, innate 'being-ness in itself' of the object. And that refers to anything, be it a colour or a cloud or a passing thought; it seems to be something. We don't yet know what it is or we spend a lot of time busily putting our associations onto it, but all our ideas, thoughts and feelings are about some-*thing*.

It is the 'thingness' of the some-*thing* which is analysed in emptiness. If you're not worried about the 'thing-ness' of some things then emptiness will have no value for you. Most people are not in the least worried about that, it seems completely abstract like a vague, weird philosophical reading:

- *Well yes, but life just goes on — it's just a fucking glass — leave it alone.*
- *But it's not.*
- *But it is, we all know that!*
- *Yes, we all know it because we are stupid, wandering in samsara.*
- *No, it just is a glass. There's nothing more to say.*

On this level there is a kind of anxiety because emptiness is looking at the very bedrock of samsara; it is looking at the structure that keeps you stupid. A bit like that movie, *The Matrix*, where everybody is bopping along inside something that seems to be very real to them but at a certain point they wake up and realise it is all one big fantasy. This is what emptiness is concerned with.

Emptiness and dependent co-emergence

The first stage in looking at emptiness is the idea of dependent co-existence, or dependent co-emergence. It refers to *'on the basis of something'* or *'bases which link together to cause an arising'*.

We assume things and when the things that we assume to be truly existing come together they create something other. For example, how do you make a cup of tea? You take some tea leaves, some hot water and you put them together in a certain way. You leave them for a certain amount of time and then you have tea. You could just take the tea leaves and chew them but it probably wouldn't be such a nice experience. We take tea leaves, we heat the water, we know how to heat water, and then we put these together to get tea. Things interact together to make other things. This is what dependent co-origination is: it is the interplay of entities as causal forces which give rise to other forms.

Now the tea leaves have arisen in the kitchen from a shop. They got to the shop from the processing factory, and they got to the processing factory through the importer. The importer brought them from the producer. The producer was concerned with the land on which the tea was grown: the climate, the workers and so on, all of that affects the nature of the tea. The tea is probably coming from India or Africa or China, but it comes mainly from India and Africa. Five hundred years ago they didn't have tea there. These are imports due to colonial expansion. It's the same with coffee. Coffee is grown in many countries now due to the arising of commercial trading. You can take any phenomenon and trace its historical social development – that on the basis of this, that develops. People like tea and coffee and so it has expanded a lot in the world.

If we accept for the moment that there are things, these things are always dependent on factors. Causes brought this glass, for example, into existence. At a certain point people worked out how to create such tough glass that can be used again and again. Factors brought it into existence, in terms of its size and its design, and it will exist until it is broken or until something new happens.

In our kitchen the large plain white cups which were here last time are now largely gone. Instead there are little cups. I like bigger cups so I'm looking to see where the big cups have gone. Someone, somewhere has decided, *'No, let them have little cups.'* Maybe they wanted to make more profit in the café. I don't know. Anyway what was there was OK; I don't think all the cups broke or that there was an earthquake here. Somebody has decided to change them. Just as when you read Vogue magazine, the designers' minds change and the hemlines go up and down; the décolletage goes in and out — red is in — black is in — whatever. Things are changing all the time in that way.

The value of the bigger, white cups which used to be in the kitchen was determined by certain mental fields around them. When these mental fields changed, that shape of cup lost its value and they've gone. They didn't need to go and of course living in rich, capitalist countries we are very aware of how much stuff is thrown away although it is not worn out. I find it very difficult to throw away my shirts until I have holes in the collar. Sometimes when I go into the hospital my secretary says to me, *'James, I think you should wear a better shirt. You're supposed to be an important person here, so why are you looking like a beggar?'* I reply, *'But this shirt is still workable...'* And she says, *'Maybe for you, but maybe not for everyone else.'* In my mind the function of the shirt is just something to put on to cover my body, but in the hospital system the shirt should reflect my status. My shirt is unbecoming to my status! This is a kind of madness but it's also true. This is dependent co-origination, that what we wear is determined by these factors.

The exploration of dependent co-origination is enormously important. It helps us to see that things arise in relation to other things; they don't exist in themselves. There is no inherent self-existence in any phenomena — all phenomena arise in relation to other phenomena — that's enormously important.

For example, I'm not very interested in cars but I do notice that modern cars all seem to look the same. Fifty years ago, you had very different looking cars because one of the things was that the manufacturer of a car — Mercedes, Ford, BMW, Jaguar or whatever — was wanting to make a unique statement about their brand. *'If you buy this car we are showing you what we can do for you. This car is unique and individual.'* Nowadays car manufacturers are interested to show the aerodynamic properties of their cars, so they have flow charts to show how it can go through the air with minimum friction to increase your speed. Petrol efficiency is now seen as important and impacts car design. That's enormously interesting, isn't it? A factor which might not be very important to you consciously has already determined the kind of product you can buy. That of course is happening all the time.

Supermarkets and other stores have people called 'sourcers' who travel around the world trying to get the best deal. There are the fashion designers in Paris, and then there are the sourcers who go to India and China and so on to set up the factories to produce these things. What will be in your shops has already been decided a year before. It may seem to be new fashion for you but it's two years' old in terms of the design. Your choices, which feel unique and personal to you, are determined in the big puppet factory, and you don't see who's pulling the strings.

This is the nature of a consumerist, commercial economy; somebody is in charge and will determine what you get. You feel free because you have so many choices but they are all determined by Doctor Pavlov! This is how these things work. With dependent co-origination we start to examine ourselves and we realise that, *'Maybe I am more conditioned, more habitual, than I know.'*

Karma: the theatre of the mind

This links in with the understanding of karma. Karma is the idea that actions create patterns which have consequences which arise later. Part of our karma is revealed to us in terms of the socio-political structure of the world we encounter. It is our luck to be alive at this time with these opportunities — the opportunity to learn to meditate and to practise but also the opportunity to travel freely in the world and consume many things. This was not possible a hundred years ago, and a hundred years from now it's may no longer be possible. We are living in a particular window of opportunity.

The melting of the ice caps in the Arctic is happening so rapidly we have no idea how things are going to be. In my house there are many moths eating my lovely carpets and it gives me the ethical dilemma: to kill or not to kill? Do I offer my carpets not just to the Buddha but also to the moths? There are so many moths because the winter has been very mild. Maybe I should get a little pet bird that could do my killing business for me? That's what happens, isn't it? Everything is changing in that way.

What is revealed to us is something that we are implicated in, but what we get are the consequences of our prior actions. As Nagarjuna said when explaining dependent co-origination, repeating the words of the Buddha, *"If you want to know about your past life, look at your present life. If you want to know about your future lives, look at your present actions."* What we experience now is the fruit of causal chains from way in the past that we neither see, remember, nor understand.

Given that this is the case, then our fantasy of being individual agents, individual actors making our own existence, is very, very confusing. We think we are in charge, we think we're making it, but it's actually arising from other causes. The food we eat, the clothes we wear, the ideas we have, the places we go and how we get to the places we go are dependent on all sorts of factors.

Being aware of these factors means starting to see that our perception, which seems to identify concrete, separate objects like the glass, is always mixed up with projections, associations and assumptions. When we see the glass as a glass, this is a mental creation in our mind. The 'glass-ness' of the glass is not in the glass, it's in our mind. We see some-*thing* as truly existing out there, but it doesn't. The world is mental and that is very strange. The world is not material. Whatever this is that I have in my hand, and whatever my hand is that's supporting whatever it is that is in it, is an experience which is revealed to me, and that experience is revealed in terms of the structures of the ideas and associations I have.

For whatever reason, all of us here are somewhat interested in buddhism and we want to practise, so that brings us to a place like this for these few days. If we walked down the street and said, *'Dear lovely village people, don't waste your time in your normal activities. Come and join us. We have the true faith.'* would we be able to recruit many people? Maybe not. They might say, *'Leave us alone or we'll call the police. If you want to be mad, be mad, but don't disturb us. We have our church and our Bibles.'* And we might respond, *'How sad for them. We must include them in our practice because we know what is valuable.'* Everybody has fantasies. How can we know the true nature? Is christianity good? Is buddhism good? Is islam good? Who knows? All of them are only ideas, players in the theatre of the mind. At least we have the advantage of realising that this is theatre, not truth.

How is it that what we perceive as existing in itself is co-created with our own mind, as dependent co-origination explains. Of course something is there, all of us can see something, and on a conventional level we can agree that this is a glass. What dependent co-origination is inviting you to do is look at the conventions whereby you arrive at a group consensus that this is a glass – to recognise that your education and the culture you grew up in is the basis for being able to perceive this as a glass.

There are still tribal peoples in the world who have never seen glass like this and they would wonder what it's for. You can see this in anthropological films where they're shown examining a glass or a mirror. Gradually they come to know and after a while they're sitting drinking cheap alcohol and they've lost their whole culture using a glass! They have been 'civilised', they wear underpants, which is all a great improvement!

Colonialism, capitalism, is about ideas. The Americans have missionaries in every country in the world. There is not one colonial people, not one tribal people, not one ethnic minority that doesn't have some crazy missionary sniffing around trying to convert them. It's impossible to keep these people out. They have armed guards in the Amazon rain forest to try to keep missionaries out, but they are so convinced what they understand to be the real truth that they think, *"I would be a bad person, I would be a sinner, if I didn't bring you the 'good news', because I know it's what you need."* This is a very dangerous attitude and it is why buddhism is not 'by invitation only' but rather 'by desire'. Hopefully there will be no international buddhist missionary societies, but one can never tell.

Buddhist practice is a means of transforming our assumptions, not endlessly pumping people with new assumptions. We analyse our assumptions by examining phenomena around us. For example, a carpet. We can look at our carpet and reflect on how, *"This is wool. The wool has come from a sheep. The sheep was out in the fields eating grass. The grass grew thanks to the rain. The sheep was sheared, the wool went to the market, was sold, got washed, sorted, teased out and so on."* These are all processes whereby the carpet came about.

Although that level of analysis is useful we still need to stop and reflect, *"Who then is the one who just did that analysis? I have just made sense of the complex history of this item by running a process of thoughts over it. These thoughts have been added on to the carpet. I see into the carpet and through the carpet into its history. If I was to take that off, what would be there? If I take off all my analysis and I take off even the concept of 'carpet', then what is there? Something red and green. Take off red and green — what's there?"* This is the work.

We can practise doing this with the objects around us. The first thing is to try and see what are the external, historical, cultural factors that have created such an object. How and why might it have arrived here? Then look at our own mental processes in being able to do that, remembering our education, our school, how we learned to read, how we had to do homework – all of these things which have led us to a point where we can now do these things. Then start to look at the nature of the semiotic universe we live in, the world of signs and signification. How do we apply words like 'glass' and 'carpet'. What is the true status of words that we use to make the world meaningful to us? We may take it for granted that something which is red is red, but of course some people are 'colour blind' and don't see it as red. There is a particular functioning of the optic nerves and the brain sensors that give some of us the reading of 'red', and that also is dependent co-origination.

So here we have an invitation to start to explore the assumptions that we bring into our experience of the world, that we take the world as a given, when actually we are co-creating it moment by moment.

Shall we do that now for fifteen minutes? Pick up and look at all sorts of things, and really engage with our own part in the creation of the world.

[Observation practice]

Questions and comments

Comment: I was meditating on this steel cup. As a geologist I know it's made of iron and I was tracing it back to the places where iron is located and how the iron is removed from the earth. Then I thought about how it's going to be produced later in a factory and so on. I realised that I had forgotten almost all that I knew before. I had forgotten it because it was such a long time ago. Now I can't remember the processes for making iron. I'm highly educated, I hold a doctorate in geology and I don't know anymore, but I think this is because of time.

James: Yes, that's interesting, isn't it? You get a qualification like a PhD and you can put it beside your name throughout your life. When you die it can say 'PhD' in your obituary, but all that you learned at the time of getting your doctorate slips away. The name or the signifier is still there but the basis of it is gone.

Response: Yes. I feel really sad that I knew all this and now it's not present.

James: Maybe one of the impacts of impermanence is to make us feel fraudulent. We gain qualifications or whatever and they may be true at the moment that we got them, and then they're gone. Perhaps most of us no longer remember much of the mathematics that we studied at school. We may still have the certificate, and it's our certificate, but it has nothing to do with us; its relation to us is entirely conventional. In that way we're a bit of a fraud. We come into existence due to these causes and conditions – studying, practising and putting it all together – and then it's gone.

Comment: Despite all the dharma objects in this room for some reason I was drawn to the fire extinguisher sign on the wall. One thing I noticed is that the sign appeared conventional and just gave instructions for what it was for. Then I turned around and was looking at a sacred sign, and I thought well that's really interesting as this is actually of no value to me at all unless a fire starts! It was interesting to notice how much I evaluate and invest in things by categorising them as sacred or profane.

James: And then looking at who is the one who is ascribing this value?

Comment: Yes. So much I have received is from someone else who has explained to me the value and I took it at face value that they must know.

James: In the end these things do take us towards a silence. As it says, in this short praise verse to Prajnaparamita, who is the manifestation of the understanding of the nature of emptiness, “beyond speech, thought and expression”. Whatever we say about it is not going to be correct. It’s more about noticing that we can use words either to bind us in more strongly, or as tools, like screwdrivers, to unpick and loosen up how we move things.

In the end everything is just movement; one thing is following another and following another and if we let go of that there is nothing to say. Yet, in order to be with others we have to say something.

Wisdom goes towards silence and compassion goes towards language. A lot of the practice in dzogchen is about how to integrate these two. In an extreme form it might be said that those who know don't speak. When I lived in India, I knew an American guy who lived as a muni, a silent person, for three or four years. He didn't speak but he wrote everything down on the scraps of paper that he always had to hand. So his vow of silence didn't really lead to much peace and quiet at all!

How can we speak without being intoxicated by language? Without falling into the dream that the language is describing real, true entities and that our speaking is being done by a personal subject who is real and truly existing? This is really at the heart of it. How can we experience the playful movement of language as an energy interaction, as part of the arising of the world, rather than as something which is following after, trying to catch up with and describe phenomena?

Any other thoughts?

Comment: Looking at things in a new way, gives a very nice feeling of freshness. Everything is more pure and primordial.

James: Wonderful.

Comment: Looking at different things made me realise that the carpet, the thangkas, the steps, the toilets, whatever, were brought about by many factors. I am surrounded by interconnectedness more than I thought. When I really go into it everything is done by many factors, many people and so on.

James: And you also.

Response: There is really so much involvement. When I looked at the picture of the young Karmapa I thought that on one level he is just an ordinary guy, and through all the centuries of culture and religion the image became quite powerful.

James: It's amazing that, isn't it? How someone like Cardinal Ratzinger suddenly becomes the Pope, and as soon as you become the Pope it's a whole different game. Yes, you get a better hat and a fancier car but suddenly you enter into all these projections. *“The king is dead, long live the king!”* Any object will do as long as the signifier can stay alive, because that is what we are protecting. What really gets invested with meaning is not things themselves because they are always ungraspable, but the chains of ideas. Is it not amazing that so much energy gets invested in something which has no substance to it? By investing the things with no substance, we miss the things which are actual and in front of us, but of course they don't have substance either. Substance is the illusion. So instead of it being light, playful, moving and alive, we become much more wary about, *‘How do I work out who I am in this big world?’*

Comment: I tried to deconstruct something I was touching. I closed my eyes and I was moving my hands feeling the thing. I tried to move away the concept of there being something touching my hands. I felt the heat and movement and then I tried to lose the concept of heat. What comes next? The concept of moving. The concept of ‘am I moving?’ or ‘is the world moving?’ It got a little crazy,

like a spiral, and I wanted to get out of it and open my eyes because I was losing my personal identity.

James: Yes, it's very important to feel that deep resistance. If things aren't the way I think they are, then who am I? We want to jump back into the familiar. It's quite a leap to go across. According to the tradition, when the Buddha first taught this teaching on emptiness many people who heard it fell unconscious; it was too much. If you really understand – and it doesn't simply become another set of ideas you play around with – it is shocking.

Comment: I was just standing on this little carpet and my mind started to reconstruct how it belongs to this place and to the Tibetan buddhist tradition and so on. Suddenly I touched it with my hand and then what came in to my heart was a love for these people and their traditions. It was so nice and I felt a connection to my own spiritual path. Then there was a feeling that those who worked on this and those who looked at it were the same.

James: So the quality of the object if you open to it can bring you into a particular place in yourself?

Response: Yes.

James: I am sure they would be very happy because that's one of the functions of these statues; to allow a kind of resonance with them.

OK, shall we have a break for tea?

[Break]

Emptiness: the hinayana view of the five skandhas

Generally, in the Tibetan system, they say that the hinayana view opens up the understanding of the absence of inherent self-nature in persons. That is to say when you look at a person, yourself, and all other people, what you see is the coming together — the acting together — of five basic factors: the five skandhas. There is no inherently real person, although when these skandhas function together it creates the illusion of that.

The classic teaching example comes from a text called *The Questions of King Milinda*. He was a king who lived slightly south of the modern Afghan and Pakistan border. He asked the monk Nagasena to explain to him the meaning of the teaching on the absence of self-nature. The monk asked the king to have his chariot brought forward and he then instructed that all the joints be removed and the parts separated out. Nagasena asked the king, '*Where now is your chariot?*' Then Nagasena instructed that the chariot be put back together, and because it was a simple wooden chariot, the chariot was suddenly there again. '*Great king, where does your chariot come from?*' he now asked.

It's the juxtaposing of factors which at a certain point generate this meta-phenomena that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. You add all the parts together and at a certain point there is a kind of magical transformation in which something comes into existence. As soon as it comes into existence it is as if it exists inherently by itself... because the chariot is just a chariot. When the king calls for his chariot, people know what to bring him and the chariot is there and we take it for granted; we rest comfortably in the assumption that the chariot is just a chariot.

It's the same with a car. You get in your car and you drive it around and then you see that it needs petrol. The car seems to be going by itself but of course it needs petrol. Sometimes it breaks down and you have to take it to a garage, and people who know about these things will make it better. That is to say, they will return the car to the status where you don't need to think about it anymore, where you will be able to take it for granted. When things work well, we don't think about them.

It's the same with our physical health. It's usually only when we get sick that we start to get a bit curious about our body, otherwise we're just bopping around in our existence. Then you get a backache, or a toothache, or a headache. '*Oh, why have I got a headache?*' Before you got the headache you didn't notice your head; you're just you yourself — bopping about.

In this teaching they say there are five basic components and everything in the universe can be reduced into these five. They are basic building blocks, similar to a periodic table of basic chemicals such as Dmitri Mendeleev set out.

The skandha of form is described as shape and colour, and clearly we encounter that all the time. Linked with that is the skandha of sensation. We have a feeling tone of positive, negative or neutral — it's a good feeling, I like it; it's a negative feeling, I don't like it; it's a neutral feeling, a kind of indifference. The feeling tone is mostly described on the object side: pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, but of course you have to have a subject to have that experience.

The skandha of perception is a mixture of perception and projection in which you have the identification of phenomena. Perception is always a perception *of* something. To see that the sky has clouds in it is a perception, but the perception is operating with all sorts of knowledge about what is being perceived. Perception is where knowledge and the movement of the five senses come together.

The fourth skandha is traditionally called association, *samskara*. Samskara in Sanskrit is a word that refers to how things are done. In hinduism, the samskaras are linked to the laws, the rules and regulations of life, how one goes about formulating things. It means bringing together, thereby creating things. The traditional example, as seen on 'the wheel of life' drawings, is of a potter working with a wheel and a big lump of clay, taking the excess balls of clay off the top of the lump. These associations are the way in which this integrated quality of the world is separated out.

It is a bit like what we spoke of earlier; when you let go of language and naming there is a kind of inexplicable, inexpressible integration of all phenomena. However all the time we are pulling out of that — like the potter pulling out of the lump of clay — we are pulling out particular phenomena. We do that on the basis of our assumptions, that is to say our identifications on the basis of categories that we already have in our mind. To put it in another language, we are proactive in our approach to the world. We are seeking. You could see it as a form of editing. We highlight certain things and we put other things back. German psychologists used to refer to that as gestalt formation, where something becomes the figure and everything else recedes into the background.

Then we have consciousness, which in terms of the skandhas, refers to six consciousnesses. Each sense has its own consciousness and then there is an organising mental consciousness. Consciousness always takes an object, that is to say I am always conscious *of* something; the consciousness comes into existence together with its object. Consciousness is not a state of awareness or attention which is there prior to the arising of phenomena, rather it emerges in the moment of the presentation of the object. Let's say a car goes by; the sound of the car arises with the arising of the ear consciousness. What the ear consciousness gets is a sound, and the sixth consciousness — the mentation or mental processing consciousness — takes that sound and relates it to its memory bank and offers the idea that this is the sound of a car. Each of the senses is pulling in raw information as the sense is evoked by phenomena, and these two consciousnesses arise and pass.

This is why if you are watching a film and you are really entranced in the film, it seems as if you don't have a body. Your attention is so caught up in the film that the proprioceptive sensation — the sensation of external and internal touch — is not evoked because you are in the film. Afterwards you might think, '*Oh, I feel a bit stiff*', and suddenly you become conscious that you have a body. That's

why our experience of ourself is discontinuous. We exist as a continuous phenomenon on the level of abstraction, not on the level of phenomenological presentation.

When there is no sound you don't hear anything, nor do you have a capacity to hear because you are not listening. Maybe if you are an anxious mother waiting for her children to come home from school, your ears are already twitching waiting to hear them ring the doorbell, but that's a different story. Usually if something is not there we don't get it, it's not impinging for us; you close your eyes and there is nothing presenting itself. Of these sense consciousnesses, hearing is said to be the most subtle. It's the last to go when you are dying and it's the one that you can wake people up with if they are falling asleep; if you make a noise they will usually wake up.

These five factors or skandhas, (skandhas simply means 'a heap'), these five groupings, are like pigeonholes in an old-fashioned post office. All the mail for the village is put in a heap, and then the postman arranges it all according to the street. The postman then puts a rubber-band around the mail for each street and puts it in his bag; it's organised in that way. We sort all the experiences of the world into these five categories.

This is merely one method of analysis; it is not how things actually are, but for people who believe in it, it *is* how things actually are. It's a way of trying to stay present with the fact that when you see 'people' this already means that you have fallen asleep in the dream of 'people-ness.' You can wake up to the fact that what you see is this product of the interaction of these five skandhas. When you see your friends, parents, children or colleagues and you recognise someone immediately and say, 'Hello,' you are already stupid. To have friends is a sign of being stupid because you know the person. 'Oh, I recognise you!' Do you? You've already fallen into this sleep. Of course there is nothing wrong with recognising people, but you could recognise this is shape and colour and this shape and colour is being organised into a familiar pattern. That is to say, the process of *re*-cognition is indeed involved in cognitions, but the feeling tone of it is simply to take it for granted. 'I didn't know you before, but I met you yesterday so now I know you a bit. That's why when I see you now, I say, "Hello."' That's a recognition. I'm already starting to build up a sense that I know something about this person. My associations now have something to wind themselves around.

Have you seen these candy-floss machines at fairgrounds spinning sugar around and around? A man takes a stick and the spun sugar winds itself around the stick and there you are. We do exactly the same. We take some little thing, wind a whole structure around it, and then we're taken in and mesmerised by it.

According to the Tibetan tradition, the hinayana system is generally a path of renunciation. What is being renounced is addiction to familiar forms of reassurance — to taking things for granted. In that path you renounce samsara by becoming a monk or a nun which means that you renounce all your familiar relations. If you are a young man and you become a monk, your mother has to immediately treat you differently. If you had been staying at home and working on the farm, she might have shouted at you because you'd walked inside yet again with muddy shoes. Now that you are a monk, your mother has to bow to you. You've been taken out of your familiar field of associations and people need to think differently when they see you. Of course, you experience the feedback loop of other people's different responses to you and that reminds you that you are different. You are now a renunciate and on the basis of that you have a social distance between yourself and other people; there is now a formality in social interaction. Monks should be treated with respect, and that respect is a kind of coolness of atmosphere which promotes analysis and reflection.

The kind of meditation that is particularly associated with hinayana is to calm the interaction of these five skandhas. In shiné or shamatha, the calming is not just calming the mind but it's calming the immediacy, the speed and the turbulence of these five factors operating together. It is a focused unruffled attention. A renunciate should not be too busy about in the world as it's not their concern.

—Oh, there's a fire in the village! Quick! Can you help?

—*The whole of samsara is burning, my friend.*

To which the ordinary person, if they are not buddhist replies, 'Well, fuck you!' But if they are holy, 'Oh, thank you for reminding me.'

Of course it's really helpful because samsara is always burning, and the fact that one house in the village is burning means what? If you are an ordinary person it's terrible. 'My God, it's terrible somebody could be inside there! Oh, so sad they've lost everything! Oh no!' The monk is thinking, 'Everything is fucked. Everything is bad news. This is samsara. We don't get out of here alive and we all get a few scars around the heart. So your house is burning down or you've got cancer. Are you surprised? If you're surprised that's a sign you're stupid. Would you like to be less stupid? Come and learn some meditation.'

That's very different, isn't it? That's quite radical. That is to say I am not living in your box, I'm not a nice, social person, and I'm not friendly. Why would I be friendly? For you friendliness means to be involved in your life: 'How are you?' 'Oh, that's terrible!' Or, 'Oh, that was so nice that we had a really good talk. We covered everything.' 'Err, why? It's all nonsense. It's empty.' You don't see its emptiness. Every time you fall into it you just get confused. It's very different, and in order to stay with that analysis you have to have spaciousness.

Some of you may have done mindful walking — walking very slowly and carefully. You may look like a bit odd, not like a normal human being because human beings walk quite quickly looking out and being interested in what is going on. When you do mindful walking you're not concerned, you are just placing one foot in front of the other; breathing in and breathing out.

Another meditation practice particularly linked with this is vipassana. The hinayana reading of this is primarily concerned with identifying the causal factors that lead into a rounded perception of something. For example, you start with the shamatha slow breathing practice to calm yourself, and then you start to scan through the body tracking the arising and passing of sensation. As these sensations reveal themselves, you name them in the simplest possible language. You look and see what are the constituent parts of this experience. Maybe you are sitting and you become aware of some sensation in your back. The quick response to that is to say pain, but when we are tracking it according to vipassana, we try to get the first impression — the naked or the raw impression. It might be like a scratching, or a grinding, or a stabbing, or hot. You just allow that simple term to refer to what goes on and then you continue scanning. Each time that you hear a sound it might feel very exciting, high and lifting, or it might feel depressing or falling, so that's what you would say: falling or growing, rather than cooking the immediate impression into a familiar rounded category. Again it gives rise to that slightly spaced out feeling. If you do this practice a lot you cannot function quickly in the world. If you do a lot of this practice you shouldn't immediately get in a car and drive it. In fact with many meditation practices you shouldn't do that, because driving a car is a kind of dream; it's an attunement into a particular level of perception and if you alter your perception it's not so easy to drive.

Trying to see things in terms of these five skandhas means analysing, slowing down, and seeing how the imputation of the conclusion takes away the need for analysis. We are very familiar with this in our ordinary life. For example, many people have mobile phones. The mobile phone will probably have many functions you don't understand and that you don't need. You may not even know how a mobile phone operates. Do you *have* to know that? No, you just have to know which buttons to press to get what you want. Essentially, you are like a barbarian, because here is this incredible thing and you don't know anything about it. As long as it works, why would you need to know?

This is exactly the nature of the five skandhas. We draw the conclusion that this is a man and this is a woman; this person is younger and this person is older; I feel closer to this person and I don't feel so close to that person and so on. We leave it at that:

—*This is my mobile phone.*

—What is it?
 —I don't know, it's a phone.
 —How does it work?
 —I don't know, it's a phone.
 —This is a man.
 —How does that work?
 —I don't know — it's a man!

Stupid, but happy.

—Normal? I am normal. Are you normal?
 —If you are normal you will see the same sort of things that I see.
 —Oh, good. It's lovely being with normal people.'

You agree and smile. Just like when you go to the zoo you see the animals responding. They hope for some peanuts and bananas and we hope for some little signifiers that will reaffirm ourselves; the true existence of the world.

This is why renunciation is very important in the hinayana path. Many people who practise the higher levels of dharma don't have an intention of renunciation. However to practice integration without renunciation is very hard, because renunciation is the separating off of what you are involved in, in order to have a space to see what's there. And then you can begin something new. If in your kitchen you fry lots of food in oil, the grease will gradually coat the walls and everything in the room. It does not work to just paint over it. You have to clean it down with sugar-soap or something similar and then you can paint on top and it will be fresh. If you don't remove the grease — if you don't even see the grease — then you cheat yourself.

This is the criticism of dzogchen from some of the other buddhist schools — that people are cheating themselves and deluding themselves because they haven't done the basic cleaning. Yes, dzogchen itself is a very great cleaning process, but you have to do it very carefully. Nonetheless, to understand something about renunciation is also very important because it stops you in your tracks; it applies the brakes on your assuming. When you assume you go very quickly and easily because you don't have to think.

Some of you will know this little story from my main teacher, C R Lama. When he was a child he was recognised as a tulku and so he would be involved in the monastery sitting on the throne with the other lamas. When there was some big initiation the village people and outsiders would come and at the end they would make some offerings. The big lama would get most of the offerings of course but even these small tulkus would also get something some of the time. Usually they would get a white scarf called a kata, but it didn't always happen. C R Lama would be sitting there and a person would come up holding a kata. However there were quite a few lamas lined up, and if he would lean forward to receive the kata around his neck and it wasn't for him he'd get hit on the back of the head. You have to learn not to assume it's for you until it is offered. But if someone is offering it, you might also get hit, because you've got to think where is the person? Don't go too far forward — don't go too far back — you have to be there.

That's why assumption is very important. Assumption is stupid. Assumption says the future will be the same as the past. How do we know? Just because someone behaved one way towards you yesterday doesn't mean they'll be the same today or tomorrow. If you can't separate out from your assumption, if you don't know when you are trapped inside an assumption, it will be very difficult.

Many forms of psychotherapy nowadays are based almost entirely with looking at assumptions. Mindfulness-based cognitive behavioural therapy, that is so pervasive, works almost entirely with assumptions, with schemas, with repeated negative thoughts and so on. It can be very helpful because it's not just that they are clearing out assumptions, but that people suddenly become aware that they see the world through these glasses: *'I thought these glasses were me but they're not.'*

In the summertime you may wear sunglasses and when you take them off suddenly the world looks very different. You get used to the particular green or brown or reddish colouration from the glass. That's why it's very helpful to stop and think when you see a person, what is their shape and colour? What are they wearing? *'They're wearing trousers.'* As soon as you have a sense of trousers you don't really look. Envy is maybe the only thing that will make you look more, *'I wish I had those trousers.'* If you don't have any envy, you don't even bother looking. Looking clearly at the shape and colour, you just stay with colour and you feel the colour because when you look at a colour like red, green or brown, it will affect you energetically. Different colours impact us differently. Of course if you don't attend to the colour, because you are just concerned with the name of what they are wearing, you're being impacted but it's out of your consciousness. This is also very important.

The more you understand about the five skandhas, the more you realise that your energy is being constantly impacted and moved around by external and internal factors. We can examine them some more now, although I won't go into them in great detail because there are many excellent and detailed writings on the five skandhas.

Emptiness: the mahayana view of the five skandhas

From the mahayana buddhist point of view there is a critique of the five skandhas as irreducible building blocks which are the basis of the world. The critique is that if these are basic building blocks, and if they operate by standing in relation to each other, then when they are positioned one to another they will have an interface. The interface is the front, and if they have a front they will have a back — and with a front and a back they will have a space in between which will require a top, a bottom and two sides. That being so, they are occupying space and therefore they could be split. What they are split into will also have the same form of front/back/top/bottom/leftside/rightside and so can be split again *ad infinitum*.

Mahayana considers the five skandhas to be a stage in the process of manifestation but not the basic ground of manifestation itself. All phenomena are empty of inherent self-nature and one of the ways in which we can see how emptiness and form are related is through understanding the five skandhas. Emptiness here means that there is no inherent self-nature in dharmas. Dharma refers to phenomena both tangible and intangible. To be empty of inherent self nature means there is nothing to grasp.

We start to see how we impute meaning to things; everything is simply a name put by mind. All the discriminations which the different kinds of phenomena are alluding to or referring to are differences which are not fixed inside the object, but which are contingent or adventitious. They come because that's what we say they are. That is enormously important. The meaning of the object, the nature of the object, the life of the object, is not something *in* the object but stands in the relationship, and this relationship is full of many different factors. The object is empty. The subject is empty. Everything is empty.

Now if everything is empty, and yet everything is here, what is the nature of the 'here-ness' of things, the facticity of things? It is that they have no 'thingness' in them, and yet they appear! We have form and emptiness; sound and emptiness; taste and emptiness. All of the five skandhas are inseparable from emptiness. The six consciousnesses, their objects, their organs, these eighteen factors are all inseparable from emptiness. Emptiness means you can't grasp it, it will always slip through your fingers like sand and yet it's there; something is impacting us all the time.

This is the illusory nature of phenomena: they appear and yet have no inherent substance, like an illusion. Or, as we looked at yesterday, they appear like the reflection of the moon on water or like a mirage. Nothing is there, but nothing presents itself as everything. What stops the integration of nothing and everything is our fixation on some *thing*: it is this or it is that. That 'some thing' is strong

because our 'some thing' is always 'some thing' for me. I have put my personal meaning into the object and left it there so that it's always there. I can get it back, but actually I trust my investment.

Banks are generally a good place to put your money. Of course when you put your money in the bank you think it's still yours, when actually it's not, it is the bank's and the bank is going to do a lot of things with that money. It's the same with us. We put ourselves, our libido, our life energy, our meaning, and our values into the object, and we leave them there as if that's a safe investment. But of course it changes. We might tell someone, *'I love you,'* and then they go and do something we don't like and we get pissed off. *'You're not the person I loved. Why aren't you the way you were before, when I loved you? Why do you have to change? You should be reliable, like a bank.'* However, as we know, no bank is really reliable. The value of gold goes up and down. There is no commodity in the world that has a stable value; all markets are about fluctuation, and all people and objects are the same. Market forces mean dependent co-origination.

My point is to be aware that you are investing yourself in the object. It's not that you shouldn't love or care for people, but you have to think, *'I am doing this. This is the theatre of my experience. I am constructing this. It is meaningful to me because I make it meaningful. It is not inherently meaningful.'* Nowadays in many parts of the world, people are being murdered. We read about it in the papers and we think, *'God, this is terrible!'* We haven't met these people but we think it's terrible. But the people who murdered them think, *'Great, they're dead now. I'm very glad. It's a good outcome. We need to do more of this.'*

Emptiness: the tantra, mahamudra and dzogchen views

An understanding of emptiness is the beginning of the practices of tantra, mahamudra and dzogchen. Without emptiness we cannot do any of their practices, all of which, in one way or another, are concerned with energy because, if everything is empty, all you have is energy. All you have is this movement of signification; the idea and the energetic quality of it go together.

In the tantric view they say that the thought, the idea, the mind, travels on the wind. According to the nature of the different channels in the energy system of the body — whether they are clear or knotted — ideas are coming and going. Sometimes they are repeating in little swirls, sometimes with an open integrated movement, and the energy is traveling along that. As the energy travels it carries our thoughts, and the thoughts then become the nailing of energy into the world.

Some people are very interested in gambling and because of this become very interested in racehorses and learn a lot about racehorses. You can buy newspapers where you read all the details about the horses. Would *you* want to do that? Perhaps not, but some people do. It is important to keep looking at all the strange things people put their energy into, and then look at yourself and think, *'I'm also pretty strange. My own life is very weird. How come I'm putting my energy into this?'* It's just a game. It's only theatre. Whether you are buddhist or not, a good person or a bad person, at the centre there is only emptiness — one letter 'A' — there is nothing else — that's all. Inside this we create games: samsara/nirvana, going up/going down, being good/being bad, people like me/people hate me. This is the movement of energy within emptiness. However if we don't understand emptiness — if we fall in love with the drama — we take a lot of knocks plus we are a danger to other people.

The root of ethics is emptiness. This is a central point. Normally we consider that the root of ethics is reality, in the sense of a substantial reality, and we say, *'You have take this seriously. No, really, this is important. Don't do that! Be very careful.'* If you're a 'good person' you are having to think twice in order to manage your old habits and your impulses, after the fact of something having arisen.

What emptiness means is that if everything is empty then there is nothing outside empty. Everything is inside empty, which is why it is sometimes described as a great circle. This big circle may be called

the *dharmadhatu* and in this context *dhatu* means space or dimension, and *dharma* means all phenomena. It means that the space in which everything arises — which is emptiness — is like a big circle and there is nothing outside this. Nothing is being imported from anywhere else. There isn't a reality factory outside. True entities are not being smuggled in across the border and sold for lots of money. It's not like that. There *are* no real entities. There never have been any real entities. There never will be any real entities — because it's empty, which means that the factory that makes entities is empty. That is the basis for understanding that samsara and nirvana are inseparable, '*The factory that makes entities is empty.*'

Some kinds of emptiness are called entities and so we act as if there are real entities when they are really empty. This is only one kind of theatre, and that theatre is called samsara. That's important to know because otherwise you think, '*Really, there is a reality and emptiness is the antidote,*' because there is still the belief that there is a real poison. Who made the poison? If everything is empty, there is no poison.

This is how you can see that emptiness and the practices of mahamudra and dzogchen are not so very different, since everything is, if you like, in the mahayana tradition. Of course there are other similar teachings on emptiness, for example in bön and taoism, but essentially the view of emptiness is to be understood according to method. Analytic methods are the general mahayana approach, and the development of the qualities necessary to sustain that is the paramitayana and the methods of tantra and dzogchen. Some are slower — going through stages — and some are immediate, but they are essentially the same.

Emptiness means that the richness of the world we experience is being created through the movement of the mind. When the mind doesn't move there is nothing. When the mind moves there is everything. What is the quality of the movement of the mind? When the mind is very rough and troubled it creates crude entities; it creates hatred where we want to kill or hurt people. When the mind's movement is more subtle it creates gentle feelings, attuned feelings. Neither is real.

Is it better to be a good person or a bad person? From the point of view of emptiness it doesn't matter; good people are empty and bad people are equally empty. However from the point of view of compassion it makes a big difference. Wisdom, which is the realisation or the activation of emptiness, and compassion which is the free energetic response that doesn't cause trouble for others, are inseparable. That's the really important thing.

This is a practice for meditation. This is not a practice for walking down the street pushing people off the pavement! From the point of view of your meditation, it doesn't matter if you push someone off the pavement; push them off and it is just form and colour. In your meditation you have to know it doesn't matter, otherwise who does it matter to? Is this the great open compassion or is this your anxious ego?

—*Oh my God, that would be terrible!*

—*Why would it be terrible?*

—*I'd get found out and sent to prison.*

—*There is a bodhisattva motivation for you.*

Do you see what I mean? It's so important in your meditation to go everywhere and do everything, and to see any thought that arises in your mind as completely empty whether it's good or bad. Don't stop bad thoughts and don't encourage good thoughts in your meditation.

Going into the world requires a shift. Many people make bad mistakes by thinking that emptiness excuses everything. It doesn't. Karma and emptiness are inseparable. The fact that you understand emptiness doesn't stop karma. Karma is just a name of one of the plays that runs in the theatre of samsara. Actions have consequences. Actions are illusory and their consequences are illusory. Can you understand that?

To recap briefly, emptiness means whatever is arising — be it a sensation in the body or a sensation in relation to what seems to be external phenomena, a thought, a feeling, a memory, whatever is occurring — has no inherent self-nature. How it reveals itself to you is how you reveal it to yourself. You yourself attribute the value.

The title of one of the great dzogchen texts is *Kunjed Gyalpo* (ཀུན་བྱེད་རྒྱལ་པོ་) and it means 'the king who does everything'. The king that does everything is your own mind. Your mind makes samsara and nirvana. This is not an omnipotent narcissistic fantasy; it is the recognition that out of this basic emptiness everything arises and that emptiness and awareness are inseparable. This is why, first of all, it's very helpful to keep looking at how you impute value, and how you impute meaning and a sense of 'givenness' to phenomena.

Any thoughts and questions about this before we do some practice?

Questions and comments on emptiness

Comment: You mentioned that out of emptiness everything arises. This might lead to the impression that emptiness is a fixed thing, or a safe ground.

James: It might.

Comment: It could be a safe ground but I think this would contradict the philosophy of dependent origination. All we have is dependent origination and if you fix it to emptiness, as Nagarjuna says, then you are incurable. When you are in imagination about emptiness that is a solid state, and I wouldn't go this way.

James: No, I'm not going that way either. It's not solid. It's exactly because it's empty that it's the mother of all things.

Comment: I wouldn't agree on that.

James: You don't have to agree, but I am presenting the nyingmapa view, which is different from some other views such as the zen view which you have been studying. Geluggas and nyingmapas also disagree slightly about these things.

James: When we praise prajnaparamita we say, '*Beyond speech, thought and expression is this mother of wisdom.*' You could say anything and what I say here is not a definition of anything; it is just gestures in the flow like dancing. If you take it away and put it in a box and put it on top of your head, you will get very burdened by it. When we say, '*emptiness is the root of everything*' or '*emptiness is the mother of everything*', this is poetry, this is an illusion. It's like the smell of a flower, you can't catch it but it just shifts you a little bit. If you carry it with you, '*Ah, now I have the truth*', it will poison you.

Tibetans have a saying that if you keep butter in a leather bag, the leather bag will dry out and become brittle. If, however, you take butter and massage it into the material, the leather will become soft. It's the same with the dharma. We have to take the dharma and massage it into ourselves through the meditation practice, and then we become very soft. If we hold onto it as if we are holding the truth, we become brittle and defended.

Manjushri, the great bodhisattva of wisdom, has a double-edged sword. It cuts out and shows the emptiness of phenomena, and it also cuts off your own head. It's about how we hear language. Nagarjuna, in our western terms, is an academic philosopher and in general only academics understand or read him. (I am talking about our frame of reference.) Nagarjuna refers to problems that have already been set up in Indian philosophy. Here we are talking about meditation, and this is very different.

The purpose of understanding these things is to soften the self, not to correct the false views of others. We can study Nagarjuna to free our mind from false views. However views are movements, like a massage, and even if a view is false you can tilt the head and then you'll see something different. This is a difference between meditative lineages and academic lineages.

Comment: Nagarjuna is a philosopher but he describes reality as he experienced reality.

James: He described reality in terms of what was current for him in that frame of reference. We are not living in *his* frame of reference. If we follow dependent co-origination we have to be in *our* frame of reference which is rather different.

Comment: That's right. For me that is the evidence that we only have dependent origination, not as this thing, as a perfect world, which reveals itself in front of or inside me.

James: Without there being a 'me'. That has to come through the meditation.

What I am saying is not opposed to Nagarjuna, but what is being set out in his work is a position, and other people have taken different positions to this. What we are doing here is probably not going to make us buddhist scholars, although I studied these texts myself. It's about applying how you can soften yourself, how you loosen yourself. Every view is of value in that. Many methods are not true for ever, but in particular circumstances they're extremely useful. This is why we say that the Buddha taught eighty-four thousand methods; it means infinite methods. Anything can be a method. We are talking on the level of the method not of the formulation.

Question: You were talking about friendship. Do you think it's better not to develop friendships? If so, how do we deal with this, because I think we need our friends?

James: In the traditional structure you have the sangha, which is like a circle, a circle of collaborators, people who are working together who have a conscious clear intention of what they are working on. If we look at our friendships we might want to ask what is our motive in being friendly with a particular person? Is it that they reassure me that I am a good person? If I get a bit anxious and they say, '*Oh, you're fine. You're doing great. Don't worry.*', is that helpful or not? On the level of being an ordinary person disturbed by life's circumstances that may be very helpful. However your anxiety may be a door to open you up to some deeper sense of who you are, and in that moment your friend is like your enemy.

There was a famous Indian monk called Shantideva. He said that your enemies are your best friends because they provoke you and show you who you are or what you are. They show you your anger. If you didn't have people behaving badly towards you, you might think you are a good person, and then that person gets to you. Another lama, an Indian scholar and meditator, Atisha, travelled in Tibet for a many years bringing with him an Indian cook who was very annoying and who gave him very bad food. Somebody asked him, '*Why do you keep this cook? We'll give you much better food.*' His reply was, '*He helps me with my practice.*' Was that being a friend or an enemy? It all depends on what we want. If you want to be cosy, safe, feel loved and secure, then an ordinary friendship may be very good for that. A dharma friendship may be slightly different.

Question: What I observe in the sangha is that people are always gathering together with certain friends. It is the same everywhere, so where's the difference?

James: Yes that's something to think about, isn't it? Is the primary bonding the reassurance of the *status quo* of how I am, or is it part of my work to examine and be present in my life as it reveals itself?

Possibilities of falling asleep are everywhere. We desire to be asleep. A little bit of us desires to wake up but a lot of us desires to be asleep. With all of these things you can't say it's good or bad; what we

have to examine is, *'What am I using it for?'* This is a tool or a possibility. What am I using it for? Like with food. You can use food for sustaining your body or you can use food for emotional comfort. Now in the west obesity is increasing year on year. Being overweight means a lot of problems for the functioning of the vital organs, the joints and so on. Using food for emotional release is maybe not the best use of food, and using food to sustain the health of the body is probably pretty wise. If you were to say, *'Oh, food is very dangerous,'* that wouldn't be too helpful. It's something about the skillful means, the skillful use of whatever phenomenon, whether it's food, friendship, sex or study. We have to think, *'How am I using this in this situation at this time?'*

Response: I now have a sense of what emptiness means, but not the experience. It is still a concept.

James: An everyday experience: if you take an apple and you bite into it and you start to crunch it down in your mouth, the apple is revealing itself as many different things. You swallow it and what is left in your hand is different, so the apple is gradually becoming a non-apple yet it's becoming a 'non-apple' in the process of revealing its 'apple-ness' to you. When you look at the apple it doesn't have much function for you. As soon as you get the function of the apple, it is already on its way to being something else. In that way you can see that what you imagine is the 'apple-ness' of the apple — its shape and colour — is existing outside of interaction. As soon as there is interaction it shows that dependent co-origination, or the emptiness, is the possibility of different forms manifesting. If it was only one thing, if it was defined by having that shape and that colour, you wouldn't be able to do anything with it. It's the same with your own body; your body changes, sometimes healthy and sometimes not so healthy. Your moods change, sometimes hopeful and happy, and sometimes more sad, anxious and depressed. This is going on all the time. If you were just one thing that wouldn't be occurring.

As soon as 'the apple' arrives in the shop, your teeth are already in it. It wouldn't be in the shop unless there were teeth waiting in the world to eat the apple, otherwise why would the shopkeeper sell them? So your teeth and the apple have been together for a long time. You haven't just met, you're soul mates, and one day you'll meet her and...*[James mimics taking a bite out of an apple]* In that way you can experience for yourselves that moment by moment I'm changing, and yet somehow I'm still me. What is that relation?

This emptiness is not a 'thingness,' it's not another kind of entity; it's not a meta-entity. It's not a pure form, some kind of platonic ideal. It's the immediacy or the flavour of the indeterminacy of any situation. When we apply a name or identification to a phenomenon, like to a glass, we seem to remove the indeterminacy of what it is; we now know what it is, it becomes as it were overdetermined but by what? By something extraneous to it. The object is defined by something *not* in the object, but something happens. In a western sense, a false consciousness forgets itself and then imagines that it is determined in itself. That is its emptiness, and it is because it's empty that it can be determined in many different ways, which is why the phenomena of the world can be used in many different ways by different people.

For example, in Pakistan they still have many old sites from the time when there was a particular Greek and Indian intermingling to create the culture of Gandhara. They made very beautiful stupas and statues. Nowadays people are digging these up and selling them on the international art market. Perhaps before if you were walking in the mountains and you saw a little stupa, you would feel very happy and pick some wild flowers and put them down beside the stupa and walk around it. Someone else might think, *'Ummm, I need to organise a big lorry to take this one away.'* The frame of reference is completely different. You think, *'Ah, holy object.'* They think, *'Money.'* Same object. So what is the 'object-ness' of that object?

They are only thinking money because there are art collectors in the west who are willing to pay a lot of money for it. The local businessmen don't see any value in it; they are muslims so it doesn't have

any meaning for them at all, it is just old stone. If they are extremists they probably even want to destroy it. In that way the indeterminacy of every object is its very openness to transformation, both its transformation through time and space, but also its transformation through the receiving of the projections of many different people.

For some people the invasion of the Chinese into Tibet was a liberation, and for others it was a horror. Some Tibetans have done very well, they have increased their income and their quality of life, as they understand it, in all sorts of ways. For other people it's a heartbreaking tragedy. That is emptiness. That's what is very difficult, because if it were just one thing then you wouldn't be able to get multiple definitions. When you examine your daily life and identify the things that are significant to you, check out with other people whether this is significant for them. If it's not, you might think, *'Oh, so it's not in the object.'*

On the table at the back of this room is a plastic container full of face paint in the German colours, black, red and yellow. You could get all kitted up, like for a football match. Some people would like to do that. They would feel more authentic — more fully themselves — when they'd got the German flag on their face. Lots of other people wouldn't want to do that. It's amazing.

There are many other different methods you could use to get some experience of emptiness. Especially just observing yourself: observing the fluctuations of mood; observing how your posture changes; observing how your breathing changes; observing how the temperature of your body changes; how your appetite changes; how you need to have a pee; observing your sleepiness; observing your wakefulness. Observe these fluctuations. Although you carry the same name which you have had for many years, what is there that is consistent and reliable through the course of a single day? Just keep looking at that. Even if *'I am change'* is a bit strange, because it has that undertow like when the waves arrive on the beach, change is there but the *'I am'* sucks it back and makes it self-referential.

So what are all these names and attributes being put on to?

In our Tibetan tradition, they speak of sky flowers. It's like when people throw flowers in the sky around the Buddha, they float there. When people who know you well say your name, where is this name going? Does it go straight inside you and you find who you are? Or is it some little garland of sky flowers all around you? People remember things about your life. Does that define you and pin you down? No, it's just different kinds of ornaments like the buddhas and bodhisattvas wear.

Kuntu Zangpo is completely naked; he has no ornaments at all. Dorje Chang has many ornaments. That's the difference between whether you are looking at the openness itself, or the openness and the elaboration. There is no difference between them. It's just a practice of what happens when somebody says they don't like you, or somebody says they are happy with you. How you expand and how you contract. If I was just me, if I was truly authentic, would that be the case?

Sartre developed this notion of bad faith and he managed to live in bad faith most of his life. The idea was that you could be authentic, and then you would stray from that authenticity. But what is it to live authentically as a person? It implies you've got some kind of builder's plumb-line showing the true line of gravity running through you, so that you know when you err to either side and stray from yourself. But is that accurate? Most of these plumb-lines are created by education, like when your mother said, *'Be a good girl.'* *'Don't tell lies.'* *'Give the other children back their toys. No, I know you want that toy but it is not your toy'* *'You have to be nice.'* We have many ways in which we construct a sense of how we should be, but that is an internal image. If you remove that, and you stay with this change, what is the line of ethics? How will you know how to behave?

This is at the heart of understanding the development of the three kayas, the threefold nature of existence in the dzogchen tradition. We will look at this later.

OK, let's do a little sitting before lunch.

Again just take a relaxed focus on the breath or something external, and with that relaxed focus just be aware of the movement of your existence; the arising of thoughts and feelings. Not going after them, but not holding your attention too tightly on your focus so that you allow some sense of the movement — the fluctuations — of your experience.

[Sitting practice]

Tantra is grounded in emptiness

Let's start again with the refuge and bodhicitta:

**SAN GYE CHOE DANG TSOG KYI CHOG NAM LA
JANG CHUB BAR DU DAG NI KYAB SU CHI
DAG GI JIN SOG GYI PAI SO NAM KYI
DRO LA PHEN CHIR SANG GYAE DRUB PAR SHOG**

To the Buddha, Dharma and the best assembly, I go for refuge until enlightenment is gained. By the merit arising from my generosity and other virtues, may I attain buddhahood in order to benefit all sentient beings.

We will look a little bit more at emptiness in relation to tantra, and then we will look at the principles of dzogchen.

We now have to think again about how we use the word 'emptiness'. In English the suffix 'ness' implies something abstract. We can refer to 'the redness of the carpet', and it is as if there is this abstract quality which is present in the carpet and is also present somewhere else. This implies that the red stands both in relation to the carpet and apart from it. The term 'emptiness', however, is not indicating something somewhere else; it's a gesture towards recognising exactly what is there in front of us all the time, including ourselves.

'The wetness of water' is an abstract quality which is possessed by water. However when you watch water flowing and you immediately see the wetness, the term gestures us to be in a more immediate direct relation to how things are. It is in that second way that we have to use a term like 'emptiness'.

As long as we use language you can cut it both ways. You can use the language to concretise or solidify a position, or as a way of gesturing into the flow of experience. What is important is not to make pseudo-entities, not to make abstractions which then become concretised and we then feel we've got something. Language is being turned again and again back into the flow of experience just to give a slight tilt or orientation. Tantric practices are all grounded in this understanding of emptiness.

Tantra is concerned with transforming what appears to be the case into other things and then back again, and to do that repeatedly. As you move between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar, so that the unfamiliar becomes familiar and the familiar becomes unfamiliar, you have a loosening of the firm basis of personal identity. You can only do that if you can recognise that the form that you want to transform yourself into is radically different from yourself, because otherwise you are simply modifying your situation by adding something on. It like the problem with plastic surgery — the person is still the same. Their nose may be a different shape but they now stand in relation to their new nose; one thing has been acted upon — it has been modified — but it hasn't been transformed.

In the practice of tantra we always start with the sense of absolutely nothing at all — there is nothing. This is often represented in the visualisation by infinite clear blue sky. The thing about the

sky is that it has no top or bottom; it has no corners, it has nothing for you to grasp and to create a relationship with. We don't stand in relation to the sky — sky in the sense of infinite space. In this blue sky, out of the blue sky, into itself, not coming from somewhere else, you have a series of transformations. Often there is a small point of light which reveals itself as a rainbow light, which turns itself into a letter, which turns itself into a seed syllable and then another letter comes which becomes the deity. There are many different ways of doing it. The key thing is that it starts from there being nothing at all. Therefore the figure which arises in this situation has no inherent self nature; their nature is like a rainbow. All the paintings that we see of deities indicate figures of light.

In the practice of tantra, when deities such as Arya Tara, Chenrezig and so on manifest, you can see every detail of them but they are translucent — you can see through them — they have no material solidity. Then, through various transformations, you enter a state of identity with the deity. They are light, which is nothing at all — ungraspable and yet manifest — and through that you also take on that nature. At the end of the practice you go back to being your ordinary-shaped body, but inseparable from the nature of the deity. Now you have a body, but your body is form and emptiness. You continue to speak, but it's sound and emptiness. The thoughts and feelings that arise from you are just the movement of the deity's mind; it's just the energy of emptiness revealing itself. That's the basic function of a tantric practice.

Tantra is a form of mahayana buddhism and is about the integration of wisdom and compassion grounded in the central understanding of emptiness. It's very important we see that the power of a tantric deity lies in their being absolutely free of solidity, and that we see that the blessing of the deity is to free us from any sense of solidity.

The tantras give historical and mythological accounts of how each deity mandala came into existence and faith is very important in order to do their practice. But to have faith in the *forms* of emptiness is very different from having faith in substantial forms. The goal is always to deconstruct, to dissolve, to let go of whatever one is fixated in.

There are many different kinds of tantric practices. In the movement of the practice itself there is a demonstration of emptiness and manifestation from emptiness. It's as if there are two polarities, which are not separate at all, and somehow there is a movement between the two.

Tantra and dzogchen are, in the same way, concerned with energy. The general paramitayana mahayana texts are not really concerned with energy; they are concerned with deconstructing a duality. In tantric visualisation we imagine rays of light moving a great deal. They go from our heart to the deity and from the deity's heart to us. The connection is through energy in the form of light. Forms which are very condensed inside a tiny ball, or *thigle*, reveal themselves as whole worlds and then fall back into a tiny point. This is to help us understand what it is like when we participate in this world here, because moment by moment worlds are opening and closing to us.

When I travelled here and was in the airport it was a completely different kind of world. I was shuffled along into the plane, and once on the plane you can't open the window or go out the door. You are sealed into a particular frame of reference that has its rules and logic. The plane lands and you get out of the plane into another kind of world where very different rules apply. This is going on all the time: radical disjunctions between waking and sleeping. We have other disjunctions: breathing in and breathing out; being happy and being sad; being in a room and going outside... We sit in here and have a particular quality of connectedness, and then we just go round the corner and out the door and suddenly there is a big sky and big clouds. We don't have many big clouds in this room! If you open to the big cloud you can feel this, and then you come back indoors. These are different worlds. You can run a narrative across them and say that they are all the same, but part of the practice of tantra is to see the absolute variegation — the distinct uniqueness of specific environments. This is why there are many different tantric practices: some with peaceful gods; some with wrathful gods; some with deities who are more erotic and so on. As you enter into their

mandala you take on a whole set of energetic qualities in how you manifest; you adapt to the world in a particular way.

If you do a lot of practice with a deity like Chenrezig who is very mellow and whose focus is compassion, you become very soft and delicate. Your diet is going to change, how you speak is going to change, and your relationship with other people will be changed. If you practise focusing on a very wrathful deity, your posture will change, your breath control will change, your food will change; you are in another world. We are in worlds all the time, but here what we are experiencing through the use of the mandala is that these worlds have the nature of emptiness. That is to say, there is nothing to grasp — their nature is illusion; it's there and yet you can't grasp it. The only way to enter it is through participation in the experience. The practice of tantra is a participative practice, an aesthetic practice; it's about entering into the mood.

It's like going to see an opera, you have to be in the mood. If you surrender to the music the tears will come out of your eyes because it's terribly sad. Why are you crying? This is only a professional singer who is being paid to perform. But you think, *'Oh, sweetheart, how could this happen to you?'* It's like that, isn't it? It's exactly the same when you become Chenrezig — tears come out of your eyes at the suffering of the world. You are in a particular mood and that mood affects everything.

This is the world as an aesthetic revelation. One in which the colours and shapes harmonise to bring about a coherent picture. A mandala is a setting of absolute coherence. Traditionally it pertains to the sambhogakaya realm, which is the realm of the richness of the manifestation of the buddha nature. In this realm everything is fixed by particular qualities: the teacher is always a fully enlightened buddha; the dharma is always the highest teachings; the sangha is always the bodhisattva sangha and so on. These are the fixed characteristics, it doesn't change. In our ordinary world it is not like that all; things change and move and are very uncertain.

In tantric practice we are working with this principle of the unborn, unceasing nature. What is unborn? All phenomena, and in that sense this is the quality of emptiness. Everything you see, you feel, you touch, has not come into existence as a true thing, that is to say it remains within the womb of the great mother Prajnaparamita. This is a traditional metaphorical way of speaking of it. We didn't come out of her body; her womb is emptiness, her nature is emptiness, and all of us spend our whole lives in there. Nothing has ever come into true existence and yet moment by moment new phenomena are manifesting and showing themselves. There is a ceaseless display but none of this display ever comes into true existence. These interwoven, inseparable qualities are the basis for the tantric understanding.

'Unborn nature' refers in particular to the dharmakaya. The dharmakaya is linked to the nature of the Buddha's mind. In particular it means a quality of awareness which is unchanging, unperturbed and completely open to what is happening. It stands in relation to the form kayas of which there are two: the sambhogakaya and the nirmanakaya. The sambhogakaya is this dimension of unchanging precision in which everything is just as it is, and the nirmanakaya is the ceaseless movements of manifestation. The root of the word 'nirmana' means sparks from a fire — like little moments — and this is really what our life is. New things are ceaselessly shooting into existence without ever coming into existence; just little moments like fireflies on a summer's night. Something is there, nothing is there.

We are excluded from this world by ignorance. Ignorance functions by solidifying what we see. We see ourselves and other as existing within a binary opposition of me and you. This then pans out into all other binary oppositions such as good/bad, right/wrong. Within this we struggle to make sense of things by making the outer world the way we want it and by making ourselves the way we want to be. This work never comes to an end which is why samsara never ends because it's an impossible problem.

You cannot repair something which is not broken. We are endlessly trying to repair something that is not broken, but every time we try to repair it, it becomes more complicated. You've taken your father's big clock off the mantelpiece and you've opened the back. You've got a screwdriver and you're taking all the bits out of the clock. How do you put them back in again? Endless trouble! This is what we're doing all the time, but while we're correcting this, *that* slips away, so now we're correcting *that*.

Our whole life is going like that and somehow it never comes together. No matter how hard you try there is always something more to be done. You do the dishes and then you have to finish washing the clothes. Then you think, *'Oh my God, I've got to get to the shops.'* There is always something to do. The fantasy is that I should be in control of this, that I should know what I'm doing. This is the sense of the separated ego who is struggling to have power over a domain which is not separate from it but which it believes to be separate.

Tantra: the theatre of experience

In tantra one is very concerned with moving from duality to an understanding of non-duality, of how form and emptiness exist together. We can look at a cup, for example, and think of form and emptiness quite easily, but imagine you are walking along the road. How many millions of perceptions you are having? You walk for twenty minutes, how many things have you seen? Form and emptiness is endless, is infinite; you could never sort this out by analysis.

Tantra offers us the possibility of immediately and directly experiencing the process of the manifestation of the lived world, and through that a relaxation. You find yourself in a world that you inhabit rather than in a world of estrangement, a world of others who could help you or harm you and you are not quite sure which. You become part of a world which is seamless, which is just itself. This is what the notion of a mandala is.

In the practice of tantra one is moving out of narrative into a lived aesthetic transformation in which everything is radically transformed. Tantra is described as being a 'vehicle of the result'. (The hinayana and the general mahayana are described as being 'vehicles of cause' because you spend your time getting the accumulations of merit and wisdom in order to realise something — you are gathering the preparatory conditions that will let you understand something.) In tantra, once you enter the mandala, you have access directly to things as they are. You don't have to be humble. In fact inside the practice of tantra humility would not be helpful which is why they have a concept of *lhagyal*, of divine pride, pride in yourself as the deity. If you don't have that it will slip away, and the negative thought that says:

—*Yeah but I'm just an ordinary person, I'm not very good at meditating. I try but you know...*

As soon as you do that the god is just walking away, saying:

—*Hey, I thought you loved me? I thought you wanted me? You summoned me here and here I am ready to kiss you, but now you are saying, "Oh dear, I've got spots today. I don't think you'll want to kiss me." I don't worry about your spots. I love you.'*

—*Yeah but I worry about my spots. Sorry.*

And the god goes off. That is what happens.

Self-doubt is the big problem. In worldly matters we might like our leaders to have more self-doubt and not enter gung-ho into wars. Self-doubt can be very helpful in grounding and being careful. But once you enter into the mandala, you are moving away from an ordinary territory where rational thought and reflection is the guarantor of ethics and balance, into one where active participation with every aspect of yourself is the real guarantor, and that is very different.

That is why in the field of tantra you have samayas; samayas are a profound commitment to stay loyal to the practice. Tantra is about emigration. If you go to America and want to live there you have to enter into their process of citizenship. You have to stand and salute the flag and recite these 'holy words': *'I pledge myself to this nation.'* If you demur, *'No, actually I'm English.'* They'll say, *'Then you*

can't stay in America. Go back to England.' You have to leave England and get rid of its passport to become American. Many countries don't like dual-nationality.

It's the same if you want to practise tantra; you have to be willing to burn your karmic passport. But who can guarantee that your new tantric passport is a good one? Only faith in the guru and regular practice can do that. That's a big risk. They say that the practice of tantra and the practice of dzogchen is high risk: it's stepping out of the familiar matrix of articulated relations between concepts — we are not making sense of the world in a familiar way. That is why it's useful to practise across all the yantras so that you get some balancing. If you make too extreme a leap and you can't really do the transformation or integrative practice, then you have a deep confusion.

In tantra you still have to make effort; you have to transform and stabilise the nature of the transformation. In most practices you have to recite a lot of mantras. Usually you recite the mantra one hundred thousand times for each of the syllables of the mantras. Some mantras are very long — they may have thirty to forty syllables — that means four million recitations and that's just the beginning; that's just warming up and getting into it.

It's exactly like emigration. An emigrant may have to learn a new language, new social interactions at work. You have to work out how your kids are going to fit into school. Leaving your country and going to another country is a big step. Why are you leaving your home then? What's wrong with samsara? It's quite nice here: nice food; nice music, have a little bop, have a drink with your friends. But no, you say:

—*I'm going to emigrate.*

—*OK. You are new to this country. It'll take you a while to fit in. Here is what you have to do.*

—*But why? Why do we have to do all these practices? Couldn't I just arrive and be me?*

The problem with that is ghettoisation. For example in England we have many areas where there are only hindus or sikhs or muslims from Bangladesh or Morocco. Imagine if inside the great mandala of Chenrezig we had a little corner for the Germans eating their sausage and sauerkraut and another for the English with their little cups of tea! But it's not like that. If you are emigrating, you are emigrating, and that is the important thing.

Tibetans will ask again and again, *'If you don't want to do it, then why are you here? You said you want it, so do it.'* Tantra is nothing to play with. If you want to play, buy a football. It's a really important thing because you dishonour your own potential if you muck about with these things. If you want it you can have it, but then you have to go for it; you have to put all of yourself into it.

Of course, the practice in tantra is about using energy. The energy of the voice in terms of recitations of mantras; the energy of the body in terms of mudras; and the energy of the mind in terms of the visualisation and the remembrance. There are many, many things to do. If you think working in a hospital is difficult then try doing a long sadhana retreat, there is a lot more to remember. Everything has to be in its proper place. Different tormas to make every day; offerings to make; different recitations; different numbers to do on different days of the month. This is because you are establishing an alternative world. It's just like in a theatre. In a theatre you've got to prepare the stage, get the props, look at the lighting, do the advertising, choose the directors, the actors and so on; there's a lot to be done. It's not just people walking onto a stage. Tantra is about creating a new theatre of experience, and a lot of participative energy is required.

Dzogchen: things are as they are

The view of dzogchen is different. Dzogchen is concerned with how things are as they are. *Dzog* means completed, finished, perfect. *Dzogpa* can mean just blown, all gone, nothing more to do. *Chenpo* means great. It is the great completion. It means that everything is perfect but also that nothing needs to be done. Inside dzogchen you are redundant. This means that the central questions are, *'Who is the one who is doing whatever is going on? Who is the one who is talking? Who is walking? Who is sleeping?'*

Normally, moment by moment we live in a self-reflexive world, that is to say everything we do and every gesture we make carries a feedback loop which affirms oneself as the one who is doing it. If I lift my hand, I know that I am lifting my hand. Everything I do tells me I am the one who is doing this; there is an affirmation of the centrality of the individual self-agent. This is going on whether you are self-reflective or not. You might not have the light on, you might be drunk and wandering about, but somehow most of the time, unless you are about to black out, you will have a feedback loop that *you* are the one who is having the experience. This is the line that is dropped in dzogchen. The basic view in dzogchen is that from the very beginning, (meaning time without time), for always and forever, it has always already been the case that there is no problem; there is no limit. Everything which arises is just the natural expression of the unborn ground nature.

Natural purity: kadag

This nature is expressed in terms of several principles. The first is natural purity. Purity here doesn't mean pure in terms of pure or impure; it's not a binary opposition. It doesn't mean that if you practise dzogchen your armpits won't smell, or your socks won't get dirty. Life goes on and we can say that something is dirty and needs washing. Purity here means there is no relativisation, there is no juxtaposition, there is no placing of one thing in relation to another to make hierarchies of value where one aspect is better than another. Primordial purity is 'everything is as it is', the natural expression of the open dimension, which is a quality of awareness and emptiness.

You cannot grasp your own mind, nor can you grasp anything which is experienced in the mind. The mind has no content, no colour, no shape, nothing fixed in it, no past, no present or future, and yet everything is revealed in it. What is revealed in it is itself; the revelation is inseparable from the openness. This is the absolute purity of all things.

This means that you yourself are pure from the very beginning. Whatever you have done — good deeds or bad deeds — has not affected your purity. Whatever things you are ashamed of, feel guilty of, hurt yourself with, berate yourself with, beat yourself up about; none of this has in any way spoiled, defiled or stained this original purity. We are good. Good in the sense of being inseparable from this ground openness. That is to say, there is no samsara. Samsara is not something apart from nirvana; it's not another place. You can't go there just as you can't get away from the natural purity. Samsara is an aspect of natural purity, even the hell realms are pure.

How can this be? Only meditation will show us. You can talk about this for a long time but you won't understand through words. It is only through meditation can you come to see that everything has this same nature. The meditation that does this is not a meditation that is striving to create something new. It's what is called the meditation of non-meditation, of relaxing into the primordial awareness which is always present, which has always been the basis of all your experience, and allowing it to reveal to you everything which occurs. You don't need to make any effort, because effortlessly everything is manifest.

Effortless manifestation: lhundrup

In Tibetan, effortless manifestation or natural spontaneity is called *lhun-drup*. It means just coming like a volcano. *Lhun* means a heap or a lump coming out all of a piece; not built up bit by bit but just there. Everything is the same, so when we do the practice there is everything. What is this everything? Primordial purity and everything. The 'everything' and the 'primordial purity' are inseparable.

The traditional example for this is a mirror. When you look at the mirror you see something which is not the mirror. You never see the mirror itself because it's always so full of stuff. The stuff that is in the mirror is the quality of the mirror; it is the mirror's capacity to reflect that fills the mirror with reflections. You can't find the mirror itself. Likewise you will never find natural purity because it is not a thing. There *are* no things. However relaxing into this state of natural purity, everything is

immediately manifest. It is not manifest out of it — it doesn't go from A to B to somewhere else — but it is exactly there. This is the quality of *lhun-drup*.

In the practice we come to recognise that everything is immediately there. What is it? It is the energy of the ground. On to that many different interpretations are applied: names, forms, opinions, I like it, I don't like it, it's the best, it's the worst and so on. What is that? That is the energy of the ground. Why is it like this? Ask Kuntu Zangpo. As far as I know he never decided to tell anyone, not even Padmasambhava. If you want to know, wait till you meet Kuntu Zangpo directly, and that can be your first question. It is like this, and the more we relax into the practice we come to see that.

Speech which is energy, movement and turbulence, moves with images and creates different patterns, just as when you hold a mirror and turn it around and it will show many different things. All of them are immediately there in the same place. They have exactly the same status as reflections: some strong, some weak, some beautiful, some ugly. This is not just intrinsic to the reflection but the opinion — strong, weak, beautiful, ugly — is also a reflection. Energy is playing with energy and this is the construction of samsara.

When you take the energy and concretise it in terms of the vocal expression, you take the semantic content of the communication and you privilege it above everything else. When we speak, all sorts of things are happening: vibration in the voice box; changes in the diaphragm and so on. Energetic vibration is linked to our face because in ordinary ways of speaking our face is showing a lot of the other significances, so we reveal ourselves. However if you take all this background away and you just link the meaning of the words together, they seem to carry a particular concrete quality. In dzogchen, speech is a movement; we are not speaking to install something. From a western point of view, it has a resonance to Wittgenstein and the notion of a language game. Language speaks to language; words speak to each other. Words are not describing the things of this world, they are an interplay of signifiers which move, massage and create an opening and closing of different domains of experience.

When you experience that then your speaking becomes part of the integration of primordial purity and effortless expression. The same with your gestures, the same with walking, the same with every aspect of existence. Nothing exists outside primordial purity. Everything has the nature of primordial purity. Whatever your life is, whether you are working or not working, whether you are young or old, happy or sad, busy or lazy; it doesn't matter. There is no form which is inherently or intrinsically better than any other. All modes are valid, that is to say, the structure is intrinsically ethical.

When you relax and open, the energy is freely available to go wherever because it is not being edited and turned around the organising spiral point of 'I, me, myself.' *'Do I want to do this? Do I not want to do this? What's in it for me? Will there be any benefit for me? Is there any danger?'* These are the usual frames of reference whereby we judge and evaluate whether we are going to do something. However in this state of non-duality, the integration of all the aspects of the world — of self and other — are inseparable. We find ourselves moving into connection ceaselessly, and this connection can fit very nicely because it's unimpeded. It can be very tender like a lover's touch; it fits exactly around your face because there is nothing coming in between, you're not adjusting it in terms of yourself. This is the nature of compassion.

Compassion in dzogchen

Compassion in dzogchen is like the general notion of the compassion which doesn't take any object. That is to say, a non-dual compassion is one in which energy just re-balances itself. If you see someone who is sad, you go to them. Why would you not go to them? If you see someone who is happy, you might smile with them. You don't impede the natural movement of connection. This is spelled out in terms of the three modes of energy.

There are many different ways of explaining this, but very briefly, primordial purity is like an enormous crystal ball. The crystal ball will take on the colouration of anything it is placed near. The purity is an unobstructedness towards experience, because it has no content of itself and because it is never defiled by anything with which it comes in contact; it is completely open. It is not anxiously fearing that if I get too close something terrible will happen to me. There is absolute relaxation because there is nothing to protect. This is called *dangwa* and it is about just sitting, whenever you have the chance, just sitting. Once you have the experience of that it is present with you in everything you do. Whether you are walking or talking the quality of *dang* is there, arising and passing, no need to block.

The second aspect is this quality of the mirror: the infinite potential to keep showing different forms. We won't get tired, we won't get exhausted, manifestation is ceaseless, on and on and on in different forms. This is the quality of *rolpa*, which also means a kind of play. It is linked to the notion of *maya*, an illusory form, like a theatre. In India there are stories about magicians who could conjure up whole cities that everyone would see as real. Or they could make a rope appear, someone would climb up the rope and then the rope and the person would both disappear. It's the sense that something is there since it seems so real. This is happening all the time when you sit in your practice; it seems so real but you didn't get it, you fell into it.

In that way our meditation can be a problem since it seems so real. It is real, like all the meditation times gone by, but we've just been off in a daydream, and that kind of daydream is very dangerous. That is the point where you start to recognise how you cheat yourself. *Rolpa* is particularly important for meditators, because when we sit and we get lost in the meditation that's the time to realise how the reflection, the revelation, the energy of the unborn openness *itself* has caught itself. Who has caught you? You feel you got lost, but what is that getting lost? Did you throw yourself away? Problem of the subject. Was the thought so strong? Problem of the object. What happens? *Rolpa* is the basis for dissolving all meditation problems.

As the texts say many times, when your meditation becomes tied in knots, when you feel you can't meditate, when you lack clarity, return again and again to '*Who is the one who can't meditate?*' What is the source, what is the ground out of which this problem of meditation is arising? This is the primordial purity. This is like the crystal ball and what is arising is like a dark colouration. Has the confusion contaminated you or not? When you believe you are contaminated you collapse into it. This is the attachment, and releasing the attachment is self-liberating. *Dang* and *rolpa* are very important.

The third aspect is the movement, *tsal*, which occurs ceaselessly as we participate in the world. Whether you mean to or you don't mean to, you are flowing into the world. You are touching and being touched. The ceaseless movement between these reflections goes on and on and on. The traditional example of *tsal*, is a rock crystal: the light goes into the crystal and it refracts out into this five-coloured rainbow light. This represents the ceaseless variation of the gestures we make as we are with other people.

The light that is refracted is the light of the primordial purity. Whatever you do, whether you are happy, sad, angry, envious, jealous, depressed, hopeless, bright, shining, big, light, happy, free, tied in knots, feeling stupid or unloved, it is all just this quality of the energy. A state like feeling depressed and anxious will impact how you are with other people. Your friend phones and you listen to them speaking on the answer phone. They ask, '*Are you in? Pick up the phone. What's going on with you?*' You think, '*Oh, later.*' Your energy is blocking, because you are in this state.

You can resolve this on the level of *rolpa* — on the level of the mirror and the reflection — and that frees the energy. Part of what keeps samsara going is we try to resolve the problems of manifest energy on the level of manifestation, but we are *already* trapped. We might think, '*Oh God, why did I do that? I'll phone them later. But I can't ...*' Thought chasing thought, chasing thought. You try to

sort it out and you end up like an ouroboros, chasing your own tail round and round. There is no end to conceptualisation. In the practice of dzogchen, whenever you get trapped interpersonally or in the world [*James snaps his fingers*] — and then it's gone. If you follow it, if you try to tease it out, if you try to think your way through it, to analyse or understand it, it will just mesh itself more and more tightly.

You can experience this in the body. You may feel it directly if you have done some yoga and get a sense of the energy channels of your body. Anxiety, jealousy, envy? You feel the knots coming, you feel the collapse, you lose your clarity; that is what happens. If you try to untie the knots by using more energy they are likely to knot even more. The main thing is always to bring the energy back. In the yoga system, you bring it into the central channel. The central channel, the avadhuti, is simply the meeting place of *dang* and *rolpa*, unborn openness. Keeping it light is very important.

The view

I hope you can now see that tantra and dzogchen have very different orientations, and also that their views are very different from the general mahayana view or hinayana view. The reason to understand view is that the view gives you the basis for understanding the meditation. The meditation is very simple and straightforward. The heart meditation of dzogchen is simply to relax into the natural state. There are three different aspects of instructions: some are more about using energy, some are more about the clarity of the view in terms of the primordial purity, and others give more precise, experientially-based instructions. At the heart of each, if you don't believe in your own purity you won't make any progress.

In dzogchen it is generally said that you don't have to do any preliminary practices. There is nothing to prepare for because it has all been pure from the very beginning, but if you believe that you are a pile of shit then that is not going to be available to you. You have the key, which is your own relationship with yourself. In countless past lives all of us have accumulated many negative thoughts, many despairing tendencies, many ways of self-abandonment, of intellectual defenses, of hostilities and so on. These are us and also they have nothing to do with us. They are how we are energetically in the world, but also they have nothing to do with us. Our primordial purity has never been stained or defiled by any of these things, yet they do definitely continue to manifest in our energetic being in the world with others. That is who we are — but it's not who we are, because it's not the whole story.

It's very important to notice what it is that gets in the way of relaxing, opening and trusting: it is what we hold in ourselves. This is why learning different kinds of practice, such as yoga, can be useful because they are ways of opening up some of the knotting. At the heart of it is all is how you reaffirm these knots, how you tie these knots again and again on a daily basis. That comes out in terms of who you believe yourself to be. If you believe yourself to be constructed out of thoughts, then you will be determined by whatever thoughts come into your mind. I don't think anyone has good thoughts all the time. It's not like that. People also have bad thoughts. Once I saw the Dalai Lama hit someone. It was in Tsopema and there were many Tibetans all pushing forward. One Tibetan man said something to him and the Dalai Lama went over and slapped him. He was pissed off. Why would he not be pissed off? Everybody gets pissed off, that's what happens. The question is, should he feel bad and guilty and ashamed of that? *'I am the Dalai Lama, I should at all times, for all people, under all circumstances, be a very good guy.'* That would be crazy. The question is what do the movements of energy define? Do they define me? *'Who is the one who thinks? Who is the one who feels? Who is the one who is angry? Who is the one who is sad?'* I, me, myself.

—Ah ha! I think you are responsible for the bill, madam. Would you mind paying now? You did say, "It's mine."

—OK, I will pay the bill. Oh, it's very expensive, I didn't appreciate that.

—Sorry, madam, but this is the restaurant called Karma. This is what samsara is.

Moment by moment, who does it? Who are you? This is why it says to observe yourself again and again, and see that you are a liar, and a cheat and a fraud. You walk in this world telling other people who you are and you are not that at all. You cheat them and you cheat yourself. *'Hello, I'm James.'* Who is this 'James' I am supposed to be? I don't know. Let me continue pretending. Who is James? We have to sit and meditate and observe. When we know who is 'James' then we can be 'James' because we are not 'James.' 'James' is the expression — not the definition — this is the important thing.

When one refers to nirmanakaya in tantra, it is always expressed as something coming out. In dzogchen they sometimes use the example that the nature is like the sun; it's always full and there is no lack, the rays come out from the sun as the fullness of light and illumination. This is the natural quality, the *rang zhin*. The heat and light impact us as they come into the world. The rays make our body feel warm and they make the plants grow. This is the energy of the compassion and it's flowing out. When the plant grows, it doesn't feed the sun.

So when you do something strange [*James makes the sound of sighing*] let it go — it's gone.

—*Yeah but I shouldn't have done it.*

Pull it back.

—*It's mine, I did it and I'm a bad person.*

Let it go.

—*No, I did it. I am a mature adult and I am going to take responsibility for my actions because I need to improve. I will need to remember I did a bad thing.*

While you are remembering you've done a bad thing, which by definition means you are not a very good person, the next moment is arising so how are you going to behave?

—*Well, I'm not very sure because I am a bad person. How will I behave? Now I'm bad and confused.*

—*What do you want to be?*

—*I feel all these demands...*

This is the busyness of the samsaric mind. [*James clicks his fingers*] It's gone. There is more to come; the sun is not finished yet. Dharmakaya, or this *ngowo*, ceaselessly moves on. More will come — let it go — better luck next time. What is making the action bad is that the crystal is dirty, so that when the light is shining though, instead of the refraction being in these brilliant five colours, it gets all mixed up. Now you can take that in two ways. On the side of primordial purity, that is fine. However the danger with that is that you become very arrogant, and arrogance is not very helpful. Or you can take it on the level of connection with others. If you're not attuned to others then when you are with them, you bang into them. When you bang into people they go, *'Ouch,'* and tighten up. When they tighten up their structure is more resistant to awakening. So, if you take the bodhisattva vow seriously, very subtle attunement with others is necessary, not too strong; not too weak but just right, just right. In that way they might get something.

So these are the basic principles of the general view of dzogchen. We take it into our own way of being by doing the meditation practice again and again.

We will take a short break now.

Choosing a practice that suits you

There are many ways to enter this meditation, largely determined by how far away from the meditation you feel you are. If you feel that you are rather lost and confused, but you have some hope, then using a more tantric method is often helpful.

You might, for example, pray to Padmasambhava, visualising him and doing an elaborate or a less elaborated practice. At the end of the practice you dissolve into Padmasambhava and Padmasambhava dissolves into you. In that state there is nothing at all, and then you enter into the

practice. You are using the tantric method as a transition out of the restrictive stories that you tell yourself about yourself. The more at home you are in the practice itself, the more you can just go into it. You can do it through guru yoga — through unification with the teacher. You can do it with the *Three Aa* practice, releasing on the out-breath. It depends on what stands between you and yourself.

Now, that is going to change through time, which is why we learn different kinds of meditation. The nature is always there — it's all there is — it's the ground of everything. However for some reason, which we call 'karma', we are more caught up in phenomena or less caught up in phenomena.

The more caught up we are in our ideas and emotions and so on, the further away we feel from the ground. The ground of what? The ground of the emotions we are caught up in. We are not very far away at all, but we feel very far away, and therefore to work with ourselves we take some help. This is why prayer and devotion is very important, either to the tantric forms or some of the dzogchen deities, or to the teacher, or to the dharmakaya itself; you can pray directly to the real nature.

The thing about prayer is that it is an energetic alignment. When we pray we put our hands in front of ourselves which seals the energy around the heart chakra, and we focus our energy and then we are there. Elaborate or not elaborate doesn't depend on the method as something necessary, it always depends on the relationship that you have to your own state and to the methods that you know. If you don't know how to read your own state, then what are you going to do? When you go out and stand outside a restaurant looking at the menu, you think, *'I'm not sure what I want to eat.'* You open the door to the restaurant, and say to the waiter, *'What do you think I should eat tonight?'* Some people do that, they say, *'What's your best dish? What's good today on the menu? OK, I'll have that.'* That's nice, but you hand yourself over to the waiter. If you have a good waiter that's fine, but perhaps the waiter is thinking, *'Mmm, we've got two smelly old fish that have just about gone off'* and so he says, *'Oh, the fish is very good tonight.'* You never know what the other person's motive is. In some ways it's easier to be like a small child, to ask, *'Rinpoche, what practice will I do?'* What is the Rinpoche going to say? *'What is your problem?'* Imagine going to the doctor and saying, *'Doctor, what medicine will I take?'* *'Oh, I have some free samples from the pharmaceutical company but I am willing to sell them to you for 200 euros.'* *'Oh, thank you.'* It's not like that. First of all the doctor asks, *'What is the matter with you?'*

In the dharma system it takes quite a long time to make a diagnosis. In the general tradition, the student has to make their own diagnosis. That's why we teach and why people study: to learn self-to-self diagnosis, it's not about some formal theory. It's taking these ideas and palpating yourself just like a doctor would do to see if there is any pain. Does this make sense? What does this illuminate in myself? Then you make a kind of diagnosis, and you think, *'Ah, my problem is anger, or my problem is this ...'*

In formal tantric initiations, they make a big mandala and you get blindfolded. Wearing the blindfold you throw a stick into the mandala, and wherever the stick lands that is your section for that particular practice. Maybe you land in the anger section, and you think, *'I don't feel very angry, I don't get into many fights.'* Anyway, now you are in the anger section, so why is that? Because your stick fell there. Your stick is now telling you the truth about yourself. That may be helpful if you believe in the unconscious, in intuition, or in the dakinis grabbing the stick in the air and whirling it three times and plopping it exactly where it has to be! But you could also say that this is about the anxiety of being able to know who you are. Can you speak from your belly? Can you speak from your heart? Can you know what's wrong with you or what ails you?

The tradition says to view yourself as the patient, to view the teacher as a doctor and to view the dharma as the medicine. You go to the doctor and you ask for the medicine, but we don't have the doctor with us all the time. Even if you marry a doctor, they may get a bit bored by your endless questions about what is wrong with you every five minutes. Learning to diagnose yourself is very

important. How will you do that? The view that I have been setting out starts to give you some sense of how to do it. Do you blame yourself a lot? Do you become addicted to strong negative views? How strongly are you addicted to these views? Do you feel that *you* will have to purify them?

When people get obsessive compulsive disorder, they often wash their hands many times because they feel that things in the world are contaminating them. The things that they feel are contaminating them are not really contaminating them, and the more they wash their hands, the more the skin on their hands becomes damaged due to the constant scrubbing. Their diagnosis of the problem is actually the problem. You may diagnose yourself as a very bad person who needs a lot of purification. *'Don't worry, madam. We have many purification practices to sell you. Some of them are very beautiful, in fact some of them are made by Gianni Versace. It's an exclusive range and it will cost you a lot of money.'* Indeed, there are many lamas who are selling this kind of practice for megabucks. Higher level practice, higher level guilt; this is what we call samsara.

Why do you need purification practice? What's wrong with you? Are you sure you are sick and not maybe just a bit hypochondriac? How will I know if I am well? That's a very good question. How will you know if you are well or not? That means that you have to start to know whether you are cheating yourself. The main focus is always: observe yourself, start to see the games you play and how you tie yourself in knots. Some of these games are very inflated and some of the games are very deflated, only *you* can know that, nobody can know from the outside, not even the lama. If you go and ask a good lama a question, he will ask, *'What is happening for you?'* They want to know and if you don't tell them they are not going to know. They don't put their hands on top of your head, and say, *'Oh, you need this.'* Why would they do that? You have a mouth and you are in touch with your own condition.

The beginning of the practice is to start to observe your own condition; it will reveal itself in subtle ways. If you want a quick answer, then you will get something solid. Staying with the confusion, staying with the not knowing, gradually you trust, *'Oh, it's a bit like this, or it's a bit like that.'* If it was one clear thing then you could know what the antidote was. *'My problem is anger.'* *'You can do Dorje Drolo practice. It is very good for that.'* However it usually isn't just anger — anger is maybe mixed with jealousy or depression — this is a more complicated sickness, it's very subtle.

—*What I need from you is a very detailed, phenomenological account. How exactly does that work for you?*

—*I don't know.*

—*Well, just sit and observe what happens.*

—*OK.*

—*Ah ha, you are already applying the medicine.*

That is dzogchen. When you observe yourself that is already the medicine. The medicine is not something else, it's not an antidote applied to your situation; it's to be in touch with your situation and to know it directly. When you know it directly it's liberating itself; it's always changing and going.

Three Aa practice

For our purposes here we can use this *Three Aa* practice. *Aa* as you know is very straightforward, it's simply releasing the breath out. Sanskrit and Tibetan consonants all have an inherent A sound which is why A is considered to be a primordial sound and the basis of all other sounds. Also A represents emptiness. All the teachings of the Buddha on emptiness are represented by just this one letter 'A.' It's seen as the source of everything and the final destination of everything; everything arises from 'A' and goes back into 'A', but 'A' itself has nothing. We are just saying *Aa ...Aa ...Aa ...* there's nothing to catch there. The sound is moving out and vibrating, and into this vibration we try to bring all the knots and limitations of ourselves. They are already in the 'A' but we just release ourselves completely naked and unprotected into the *Aa*.

If you listen to an Indian music concert, the sitar reaches this perfect point and the audience sighs. It is exactly that — no thoughts. That's exactly what we are trying to do — just gone. Then in that state

just relax — nowhere to go. Everything continues to happen, but what is it? Where does it come from? Where does it rest? Where does it go to? The answer to that lies in just looking.

In TV detective programmes you see the detective following the suspect, and the suspect looks in the car rearview mirror, and thinks, *'Oh shit, I'm being followed.'* What happens next? They drive very fast! If you are a bad detective and you are on your own case, you won't catch the criminal because the mind will become very busy. So very gently observe yourself. You are not trying to catch yourself out — you are not a criminal — you are just looking with a very gentle observation. Or like a sick person lying in bed. We don't quite understand some illnesses and so the doctors just look. Every now and then they might take the pulse, but they are just looking at the face and the body to see if it is tensing. That is what we do when we say *Aa*. We just sit. What is going on? You don't need to judge or investigate. You don't need to add any other chemicals; just let it be as it is.

So sit balanced letting your spine hold your weight. Your chin is slightly elevated from its more usual downward position. The gaze is in the space in front of you. We do this with the eyes open resting in the space. We are not staring at the far distant wall, we are just settling into the space, and then we make this sound *Aa*.

[*Three Aa practice*]

It's a very simple and straightforward practice, but it contains the integration of the three aspects of energy plus the three aspects of our nature. It's always open and yet it's full, and all kinds of movements come. Movements of what in ordinary terms you might see as being lost, being caught up in some idea, your breath going funny, your body slumping... With all of these the key thing is just to relax and stay open because nothing actually exits from this domain; there is no way out of it.

Primordial purity is everything, there is nothing on the other side. No matter where you go you remain within this nature and in that sense there is no limit; there is no point where you cross over into anything else. You cannot lose it, you cannot lose yourself, you cannot lose the world; it's always already perfect and complete. That's the function of the practice — just staying with it again and again. Whenever you find yourself feeling that you've lost it, or that you don't know what you're doing, or that it doesn't make sense, or that you have a headache — whatever it is that seems to be other, that seems to be something on the outside, just relax, don't follow after it, and you will be back there.

Chasing after things and trying to organise and improve these activities will always de-centre. You will lose yourself in trying to find yourself. It's always and already there. This is why dzogchen is called the path of self-liberation. Whatever seems to be an obstacle or a limitation will go by itself, and this is why we take the energy back again and again. Just at one, at peace.

OK, so we will break now for today and recite the Dedication of Merit:

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

By this virtue may I quickly gain the attainment of the glorious Guru's stage, then may I put all beings without even one exception, on that same stage!