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# Getting acquainted

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## Excerpts

*The great chain of cause and effect keeps growing as if self and other were two knitting needles moving together to pattern events in the far future, using the yarn that manifests in the moment and was spun long ago.*

*Although there is nothing to be done we have to put ourselves in the way of it. This 'not doing', this separating off, this keeping oneself apart, is the activity. If you stand under a waterfall it will wash you without you making effort – but if you stand away from it you will remain dry.*

*When judgement arises this is a sign that we are not present in relaxed open awareness but have identified with the position of the one apart, the one who decides, the individual evaluative consciousness. Judgement hides the simplicity of the arising thought. So instead just remain relaxed and open letting the flow of signifiers and signifieds go free by themselves.*

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## Getting acquainted with our assumptions

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In Buddhism there many different 'views', many different readings or understandings of who sentient beings are and how the world functions. Each of these views illuminates part of the territory of our lived existence just as if you walked round a large sculpture and at each step a new aspect of the sculpture would be revealed. Each aspect is valid and has an impact. Interpretations can be made and responses formulated. In the Nyingma tradition the view of dzogchen is believed to be the one that gives the most complete and perfect account of the sculpture, the complex multi-dimensional actuality.

So why are there are so many different kinds of teachings? Because the actuality of the mind cannot be put into words and as soon as we try to explain something about it we take up a position and express our sense of 'the view from here'. When we take this limited, located perspective to be the whole picture we confuse ourselves. Each standpoint both reveals and conceals as more and more viewing positions are described – yet cumulatively they do not lead to the whole. The whole is beyond totalisation and only reveals itself through the view from nowhere, which is everywhere. This is the view of dzogchen, a non-dual view not dependent on separation, not standing apart from whatever occurs, but rather being the very field of occurrence. Duality means partiality – being just a part, not the whole or even a part of the whole, and being partial, biased, taking one side or polarity rather than the other.

Before we enter the dharma path our life as ordinary sentient beings unfolds as a series of positions revealing 'our world' at that time – as a baby, an infant, a schoolchild and so on. The world is unknowable as something as such. It functions as a potential revealed through relating and engaging. Our life is participative and how we participate reveals our life. We cannot step out of the world and observe it from some neutral position, although this has been a goal for science and some philosophical schools.

However in the end we have to face the fact that we are embedded in socio-cultural, political situations. We have our gender, our age, our own psychological dispositions and life histories. The world we encounter is mediated through these multiple and often invisible factors which position us. On the level of our individual personality this is not something which can be

removed but it only becomes a problem if we think we should be in a neutral situation and able to see things with absolute rationality, as if mind and appearance were two separate domains. From the buddhist point of view this is an impossible task arising from ignoring the actuality of our being. Rather we are encouraged to habitually and situationally adapt.

One way we do that is to adopt an intentional position and then observe how we come to deviate from it. For example, in order to calm our mind we might focus our attention on the flow of our breath at our nostrils. We start with a simple clear intention to attend to the breath and nothing else. Then if we find our mind is wandering off we bring it back to our intentional focus. This is the meditation practice of shamata yet when we engage with it we have the experience that we don't spend much time doing the meditation because we are easily distracted. We can take the distraction to be a problem and strive to overcome it, yet the distraction shows us something important about our own situation. It shows us that we are not very rational. It shows us that 'our' mind has a life of its own. I can say, 'This is my hand and I can open and close it', but if I say 'This is my mind and I can make it do what I want', then I am deceiving myself. When we start to spend time with our mind we find that a lot is going on: things come up that we did not intend, like memories, impulses, sensations and so on.

### We are not who we think we are

This points to a very important fact: we are not who we think we are. We have built up various constructs that give us a sense of our personal identity. These include all the stories that we use to explain to other people who we are. We may believe that they are the truth about who we are but they are just a very narrow path through the big forest of our actual existence. This forest is full of many different wild and unpredictable thoughts and feelings. The more we practise the more we come to see we are not just the path, we are also the forest. If we focus on the path we start to think that the forest is the problem and then we pray, 'Oh, may I please not get lost. May all the Buddhas keep me safe.' But if we are also the forest where are we going to hide? We are already mad and once we start to meditate our madness is revealed to us. We cannot take the madness out. The madness is actually generated by the notion that we should be a simple straightforward person, knowing who we are and knowing what we are doing at anytime. But we are not like that.

Different views and meditation practices help to illuminate different kinds of confusion and turbulence. Through engaging in meditation we can come to see what the nature of that turbulence is. The content of our mind, our experience of ourselves and of the world is dynamic and always changing. Although we can develop certain capacities for focused attention, certain capacities to maintain an intentional identity as a meditational goddess or god, nonetheless the chaotic turbulence continues. It is beyond ordering or controlling by the force of will.

The view of dzogchen takes a different approach to this ungraspable dynamic turbulence of existence. Instead of trying to catch it and tame it and turn it into what we want, we work with the experiences as they arise. Seeing that whatever occurs is the play of the mind we attend to the mind itself rather than to its transient contents. Then we can see that the openness or unborn given-ness of our mind itself is inseparable from, or non-dual with, whatever forms of display it reveals.

If you work with adolescents in a city school there is usually a lot of resistance in these young people to the task of being a learner, to getting on with what the school thinks is the proper activity of education. If you try to impose control this just seems to build up resistance. The ideal way is to try to see how the different children function, what their learning styles are

and how they show themselves. Of course that takes a lot of time and resources in an educational environment and so non-compliant children can be perceived as a nuisance. But perhaps they are on to something. Their behaviour indicates that they feel they don't belong, that they don't fit in: "I exist, I am like this, so where do I belong?" This is a deep and troubling question and it is not answered by offering encouragement to conform. What is this world? Where does it come from? What is the ground of my being? When our mind is disturbed it is often because we cannot find the space or clarity to look at how we are. The fixation on becoming what we and others think we ought to be blinds us to the actuality of existence.

Instead of seeing problems as things to be solved or removed we can start to allow them to show the contradictions they embody—and then problems become the path.

Of course getting up on time, keeping our possessions in an orderly fashion, preparing our work, being able to pay our bills and so on, all of this has meaning in terms of daily existence. It is a necessary part of survival but it is also a kind of stupidity because in order to maintain these structures we use up all our time and energy and do not put our assumptions into question. We continue our lives on the basis of taking for granted that what we do is meaningful. Indeed in its ordinariness and social acceptability what we value, and consequently how we act, seem to be inherently meaningful but of course this sense of meaning rests on constructs that are not inherently meaningful.

The kind of job that we do is created in our particular culture according to the sociological and economic development we have had in the last hundred years or so. None of the things that we do has an inherent validity, though situationally they may seem very important. A hundred years from now people will probably not be doing the sort of things we are doing. That is to say, what we take for granted, what we take as given, what we take as inherently important, is in fact a construct, a temporary form arising due to causes and conditions. Without pushing against these constructs, without trying to get rid of them and make a new life for ourselves, which of course would be just another kind of construct, we can start to see the actuality of our existence.

We can start to recognise that the sense of order and prediction that we have in our day-to-day life is based on selective attention. We see that we pay attention to certain aspects of the experiential field, and ignore other aspects of the field, and that other people make different selections. This creates the particular slice of the world that we each move through moment-by-moment, day-by-day.

In the Buddha's teachings are many different views and meditation methods and guidance for daily life. In their different ways they are methods of putting into question our habits of assumption and investment which give a seeming sense of predictability and given-ness to the objects that we experience in the world around us and to our own identity. The basic teachings from the Buddha are that there are no self-existing entities, that is to say there are no phenomena which exist in and of themselves. Everything that we experience is relational, whatever seems to be the case is only the case according to the causes and conditions of its current circumstances.

For example, the building we are in here in Todtmoos Au in the Black Forest was not originally the guesthouse of a buddhist centre. It was built with another intention. Due to the changes in the economy of the valley, people moved away and traditional activities changed and this building, which had originally been a water-driven mill, lay empty and unused. This occurred at the same time as the arrival of teachers of Tibetan buddhism and the ripening of the culture in Germany such that people were drawn towards buddhism. With their interest money became

available to purchase the building, which then became this dharma centre guesthouse. We think of this now as 'a buddhist place'. Probably in the village the old people do not think of this as 'a buddhist place' because they still remember the name of the miller and the former function of the building. This is a very simple example of how we take a construct to be a given and edit the field of experience so that it confirms our belief and assumption.

The reliability of our sense of the object also confirms our sense of the reliability of our sense of self: I can make sense of any situation by seeing what it is i.e. according to my own interpretative template.

## Mapping the world, mapping ourselves

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Each child encounters the individual topologies of their family structure. This is the world as the child experiences it and for small children it is the only world that they have. Within that matrix of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours the child develops a range of maps of their world and learns how to compartmentalise them as a way of diminishing the tension that their contradictions generate. As we grow up, we encounter new situations but although the new experiences are fresh in their immediacy, the way we approach and interpret these situations is not fresh. We negotiate the new territory by relying on the map we have already learned and adopted. The fresh and new gets mediated through imported assumptions.

The maps that we have are emotionally invested: 'I like this; I don't like that. This is bad. I don't want to know about that.' The attitudes we developed inside our family become our sense of what is normal. We come into the world with its infinite possibilities and yet take only a little of what is available. If the experiences in childhood have been quite severe our map becomes narrow, rigid and neurotic. That is how the learned limitations on our capacity to respond lead us to states of frustration which manifest as depression, anxiety, obsessions and so on.

In the old days, people would go to church and the minister would give a sermon that might touch on aspects of some individuals' maps. Nowadays psychotherapists perform a similar function. No matter how you become aware of your patterns and tendencies it is very difficult to consciously remember the particular tilt or tendency that you have internalised and especially to recognise it before it manifests to the evocations of the siren songs of our karmic world. It is difficult to experience the invitation without responding. Conceptual consciousness is a believer, always ready to get involved.

That is why shamatha meditation is helpful – it lets us block our ears so we can keep on rowing, keep on our proper course, like Ulysses' crew. Mindfulness practice can help us to hear the sirens' song yet still row past the rocks, but this is hard to do and requires a coolness and willpower that are uncommon. Tantra tries to hear the sirens' call as the flow of mantra – as sound and emptiness – and since this path utilises devotion, it is the power of the heart's longing that keeps us safe from ego's fickle fancies.

However if there is only one option on the menu there is not a choice. A lot of the time there is only one option because our sense is, 'Well, I am just me. This is who I am so how could I do anything else.' When we start to become more attentive to how we are ourselves and to the continuous process of the unfolding or revealing of how we are, we can start to see that the map of who we are does not illuminate the actual presenting territory very closely at all. A lot more is going on than we have grown accustomed to paying attention to. So we need to focus on seeing how we limit ourselves.

The complexity of our field of experience indicates the self-defeating nature of our habit of identification based on selective attention. Our endless attempts to recreate the already established image of 'How I am' and 'What I do' is a perverse alchemy, a struggle to convert illusion into substantial fact. The Buddha said that all suffering comes from attachment. We have outer attachments to our personal possessions and these are reasonably easy to identify. But the main form of attachment that causes us grief is our attachment to our own expectations, our assumptions about who we are and how the world should treat us.

This is one of the difficulties for children growing up. Each year their body changes, they have new competencies, and are entitled to engage in new activities yet they also have memories of how things had been before. A child of seven may sometimes feel and behave like a child of four. It is not that when you become seven you are never six or five or four again. It the same for adults, whatever age we are, we are also many of the ages that we have been before. Regressive state-shifts can be triggered by pleasure, trauma, daydreaming and many other external and internal events. At each stage in our life we develop new kinds of maps, which don't replace the prior ones but are layered on top of them.

### Unintended consequences

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From a buddhist point of view it is even more complicated than that because we are not just dealing with the complex situations that we have experienced in this life but with the influence of karma, the consequence of actions enacted in prior existences. Karma indicates that when we meditate and experience strange thoughts and feelings, although they may have no obvious connection with our life as we know it now, they arise due to our activities in previous lives. Moreover it is likely that many of our previous lives were passed in other realms, and in forms that were not human.

What arises for us is the ripening of factors embedded in our own mind-stream. Hence the complexity of our existence is truly our complexity. No matter how strange events may seem to be they are the energy of our own disposition. Our world is a ceaselessly active network of interactions, within which biased actions create biased reactions. The karmic reaction or outcome manifests long after the causal situation has passed and it is often not something that we could have imagined at the time that we performed the action.

For example, there is a big demand now for hardwood in the western world. The people who live in the tropical forests where this kind of wood grows need to have money because they have children and old people to support. They look around, see a lot of trees and think, 'If we cut down the trees and sell them we will get money, the children can go to school, we can build a house of cement, drink Coca-Cola and eat well and have a television too.' These are the aspirations of many people. They cut down the trees but theirs is a tropical region with a lot of rain. The rain hits the ground which is not held together anymore by the roots of the trees and the earth dissolves. It flows into the river, the river goes into the sea and the land becomes depleted. Now the trees are very far away because they have kept cutting them down, 'But I have got a concrete house and I can't move it to where the trees are. How did that happen? I was just trying to have a good life. I didn't want to cause global warming.'

These kinds of events happen all the time, and follow the law of unintended consequences. We find ourselves in a situation that seems to be just as it is, 'This is what we have got'. We respond to it in what we think is quite a reasonable way – and things seem to go okay. In that way, there is an action and there is an immediate result. Inside that frame of reference it looks like a good transaction, 'I feel quite satisfied. My friends also say, 'Hey, you are getting a

new house, you are doing pretty well, that is good.’ What is not obvious is the consequence that is coming later. It is implicit in the action but invisible on the level of the frame of reference of our conscious intention.

When teenagers start to explore their increasing freedom, going to parties where there is good music and hanging out with people who are smoking dope, they often conclude that this is more fun than doing homework. The peer group affirms that this is good but the long-term consequences are not obvious to the young person taking that path. They may think: ‘My friends like me, my friends think I am good but you my stupid parents are always dissatisfied, unhappy with me. Why should I listen to you, I want to listen to my friends. They understand me, you don’t.’ In this way we can see how difficult it is to imagine the future consequences of our actions when we are mesmerised by the intensity of the current situation

The buddhist concept of karma points to an other and greater difficulty – to imagine that our actions now will lead to incredible events and lives we have no idea about. From this point of view there are no accidents, all patterns of experience arise from causes and these causes are not mechanical forces but ethical turns. Karma requires four elements for full impact and ripening. There is the ground of ignoring non-dual integration leading to belief in the fundamental separation of self and other. From this arises an intention to help or harm the other. This intention is fulfilled in an enactment where one actually helps or harms the other. And finally there is a review where if one is happy with the outcome and glad that one has acted in the way one did then there will be the full consequential ripening at some point.

Karma is not a very complicated idea. It indicates that we rarely see the whole picture. We think that we enact discreet activities each with a beginning, a middle, and an end, and therefore we can be in control of our situation. However, life does not quite function like that. The great chain of cause and effect keeps growing as if self and other were two knitting needles moving together to pattern events in the far future, using the yarn that manifests in the moment and was spun long ago.

In meditation practice we may notice that our mind is confused or that we have a lot of instability. Of course we can see it as a problem to be solved, and apply specific antidotes. There are many kinds of meditation and other activities which offer methods for dealing with problems. For example, if you find you have many rapid thoughts and you feel a bit scared and panicked, you can learn to do some hatha yoga. The asanas will allow periods of focused breathing inside a particular muscular structure and gradually the organismic system will calm down. However, the complexity of the field, when we really open to see what it is, is beyond this kind of control. New events are ceaselessly arising in the mind. New kinds of provocations, external and internal, sicknesses, accidents, death in the family, seeing the first snowdrops and so on.

If you follow one of the many paths of correction, antidote or transformation you find that the work never comes to an end. The constructed stable becomes unstable, and then frustration with that instability drives new forms of instability.

### [Put ourselves in the way of it](#)

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Rather than doing this, we can relax and open to the path of no path, the meditation of non-meditation. By ceasing from identification with the ego’s proactive and reactive pulsations we see that all the forms of energy, all the patterns that constitute samsara and nirvana are actually self-liberating. The one who sees this is the clarity of the mind itself. It is not that we have to integrate or re-integrate with the openness of the mind itself but rather simply to see that from

the beginning all appearance, whether seemingly object or subject, has been inseparable from the open ground of the empty, ungraspable radiant mind. There is nothing to be done, no improvement or repair or correction. This is '*dzogpa chenpo*', the great completion, the always already whole and complete.

Although there is nothing to be done we have to put ourselves in the way of it. This 'not doing', this separating off, this keeping oneself apart, is the activity. If you stand under a waterfall it will wash you without you making effort – but if you stand away from it you will remain dry. To stand apart is to identify with your thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories, hopes, fears and so on and to use these to constitute yourself as the individual singularity of the autonomous zone of I, me myself. Who is doing this standing apart? I am! But who am I? Ungraspable awareness! So who is grasping at 'I' as something apart? No one! The illusion that stream of arising is the arising of something, some prior essence, rather than the display of emptiness is intoxicating. Fusion with that illusion generates the delusion of self-existence which fuels the nightmare of samsara. Nothing is occurring. Truly. Yet the delusion that something is occurring keeps the mirage flowing and attention captivated – a prison without walls or guards or prisoners.

If this is not immediately clear then one needs to enter the play of walking towards the waterfall. The illusion of a path from lostness allows lostness to vanish as long as the path is walked in the manner of a dream. Struggle, striving, mobilisation, will not help for there is nothing to be done. Doing nothing, while doing something, is the way in which the ground and its display are allowed to show their intrinsic primordial integration. This has always been freely available, openly on show – yet it is disregarded whilst the spotlight of attention is fixed upon the never-ending pas-de-deux of prima ballerina subject utilising the seeming strength of the muscular object to catch her as she leaps. To see the interplay of subject and object is to drop the opacity of reification and enter the truth of energy free of entities. This energy is inseparable from the ground, the basic fecund openness of the mind itself.

### On the path of no path

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So on the path of no path we begin by looking at the nature of what is experienced and the nature of the experiencer. Looking at experience we start to recognise that our interpretation of what is happening is formulated in conceptual patterns within the semantic web of signifiers and signifieds. These conceptual patterns are vivified by the feeling-tones and emotions that we add; our explanations may seem rational and neutral but they are generally imbued with affective bias. These interpretations seem to tell the truth and to give us some knowledge that we can rely on.

For example, you might be thinking, 'I'm just not used to sitting on the floor. No wonder my back feels a bit uncomfortable.' Clearly this interpretation might bring a sense of calm: 'Now that I know what is going on I feel okay.' Thoughts can wind us up or calm us down but either way the new patterns created by applying energy to energy are transient, and so the show goes on. In this way we deceive ourselves with the subtle lie in believing that a passing thought will tell the enduring truth about a situation.

Thoughts are part of the movement of our experience. They are not coming from some neutral place outside. From the moment we arise in the morning until we fall asleep at night our experience is ceaselessly changing as self and environment mutually influence each other. Walking along the street, step-by-step the world is changing as your body repositions with each swing of the hips and new vistas arise – this is a new world. What is actually occurring now has

never, ever, occurred before. Each moment is fresh, the breath of the dharmakaya, the radiance of the mind.

Yet, remarkably, the main thing we do is to reassure ourselves, 'Ah, it is the same old world. Same old, same old.' We know what it's like and so we don't have to pay attention to the details. Unaware, we smother the new-born moment with the heavy blanket of our habitual assumptions. Once we start to see the pervasive actuality of impermanence, of ceaseless change, seemingly external objects and the seemingly internal thoughts, feelings and sensations show themselves as ceaselessly arising and passing.

It is not wise to rely on thoughts as vehicles of truth, value and profundity. Thoughts tell us about 'things' but they cover up the actuality of these seeming 'things'. Of course thinking can sometimes be useful. Thoughts are like screwdrivers and hammers. That is to say, they are performative, they are movements of energy that impact the matrix-situation and bring about some degree of change. They can be taken as expressions of the energy of the ego-self. They reassure us about the knowability of the world and the effectiveness of our self. We want to feel happy; we don't want to be troubled, so we are willing to believe lies in order to think that life is okay.

We do that externally on a political level, we do it on an economic level. We do that on many levels. The fact that many of the financial instruments that were used to generate money before the crash of 2008 were unstable and without any clear basis, was well known. But as long as the opaque is going well, people choose to believe that it is clear, that somehow it will be okay. To see and understand what is occurring is to create complications. Life should be okay if we just trust that it is okay.

For as long as our sense of personal self, our sense of identity is wrapped around in comforting ideas, we are likely to fall asleep in complacency. The days turn into months, the months into years and life goes by. Yet at each moment there are opportunities to start to look with fresh eyes, and to start to awaken to aspects of ourselves that we have not become aware of before. Putting our assumptions and beliefs into question is vital if we want to awaken from the delusion of stasis and find our place in the ever-unfolding dance of illusion. Looking in this way we can awaken to the profundity of the Buddha's teaching.

### Awareness is ungraspable; narrative is graspable

Our egoic existence is created out of causes and circumstance; it is part of the continuing chain of action and reaction. As a person I influence my environment and am in turn influenced by the many factors operating around me. This is the theatre of becoming, of the appearance of transient patterns which are grasped at as being either self or other. However our ego, our sense of being me as I take myself to be, is not the whole story. We can be aware of ourselves, of the particular beliefs, actions, memories et cetera out of which we are composed.

These compositional factors are impermanent, however the awareness through which they are revealed is not impermanent. It is self-existing and is not caused by anything. This is why it is the basis for freedom. Ungraspable awareness cannot be found or known as an object yet is always present as the inseparable or non-dual illuminator of each moment of our experience.

Awakening to its actuality we are freed from the delusion of seeking our identity in the flux of subject and object formations. Because awareness is non-dual with appearance, with experience, it does not stand in opposition to, or as other than, whatever is occurring. It is neither

the same nor different. Finding ourselves in the openness of awareness we see that appearance is the energy or display of awareness and with this we are the primordial knowing of indestructible integration. As soon as we start to say something about our actual experience of being alive, the phenomena that we are trying to describe have already vanished. A new moment is occurring, full of its own experience.

When we are talking about ourselves, most of the time we are talking about the past or the future, about what I have done or what I will do. The past and the future are, strangely, more definable than the lived present. When we start to pay attention to ourselves as we arise moment-by-moment it is very fresh but also indeterminate. It is what it is, precisely, undeniably, but as soon as we say it is this or that it has already gone and we are making a story, a narrative open to endless interpretation. Because narrative is graspable, is something we can get a grip on, we come to rely on it for meaning rather than on the fleeting actual occurrence.

The function of meditation practice is to give us an awakening to spacious freedom from our usual habitual preoccupation and immersion in the flow of signifiers so that we can start to see directly the unborn ground of our own being. Letting go of the endless task of making meaning through relying on concepts, we find ourselves experiencing a profound relaxation!

When we start to see what we have been up to, it becomes clear that we have been living in quite a perverse way. We have been asking ourselves to do something that is impossible. Although we are creatures of ceaseless movement, movement which is interactive and contextual, constantly forming and re-forming in relation to the evolving environment, we have been asking ourselves to be reliable, predictable, straightforward, well-organised. We have sought to embody mastery and total agency and this has brought us a great deal of internal persecution, because this is a goal that we cannot fulfil.

As John Lennon said: *'Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.'* Life is what happens. If we want to be in life, if we want to be really alive, we have to be in the present moment of occurrence. We cannot prepare in a specific way for situations that are yet to arise since they always manifest aspects that we could not possibly predict. If a child has homework to do, for example to learn a poem by heart, they may do this and can feel confident but then in the classroom someone else recites it first and they do it so well that all the other children lose their confidence and stumble when it is their turn. If you are going out to dance it is unlikely that you will know exactly what kind of music is going to be played. You could practise tango a lot beforehand but when other kinds of music play you cannot do your tango. The key point would be to be in the mood to dance, just dance. In this way you can find a way to participate whatever the music.

We do this by not entering into judgement. In dzogchen we want to find ourselves fully open to participating in life however it is. We don't prepare for this by trying to learn something new. Rather we put ourselves in the way of what is already the case. Openness is here already; it is how awareness is. We don't become open by focusing on technique, by changing the content of experience, or by trying harder. What we seek is already here. We don't need the ego's anxious busy involvement. What is required is to relax, trust, open and be with what is.

With this open ground as the basis from the emergence of patterning energy we can trust the co-emergence of 'self' and 'environment' for these aspects are actually inseparable. Trusting the flow of emergence as the display of the creativity of our mind we can appreciate more and interfere less. Our mind is inseparable from the mind of all the Buddhas. The ego is born from

ignoring this basic fact. Directly seeing and being this basic fact allows the ego's self-referencing to dissolve like morning mist before the rising sun.

The ego does not exist as a real entity. There are no real entities. The ego is a concept which, like all concepts, can influence perception, thinking, feeling, remembering, planning et cetera. The more a concept is invested with value and belief the more influence it has when it impinges on the emergent field of experience. The ego's hopes and fears, plans for the future, editings of the past, lead to unavailability in the actual present moment. The map hides the actual territory; the unowned non-dual territory needs no map.

From this point of view we are not trying to develop more power to control events but, rather, a profound relaxation, a coming to be at home in the spontaneous manifestation of the non-dual field of experience which is intrinsically beyond appropriation. This flow of experience reveals the whole range of possibilities. Happiness and smiles will come and there will also be tears, grief and misery.

This highlights a central question about spiritual practice: do we see the practice as a kind of super-defence against bad things and a magical method to create a lot of good things, or rather, as a way of being able to be fully present in our lives as they manifest? Dzogchen illuminates the latter view and underlines that it will only be possible if the root of your individual self is planted in the infinite ground of awareness, which of course it always has been.

Most of the time, however, our experience is governed by the seeming fact that the root of ourselves is planted in the flow of thoughts and moment-by-moment as we identify with whatever is happening. Things go well and we become happy, things go badly and we become sad. There is a lot of turbulence and we try to make sense of it since the situation is not immediately meaningful. Good things will come and bad things will come. Okay, but what does this mean? Why is this happening to me? What can I do to make life better for myself and others? These quite reasonable questions promote concern, involvement and confusion since events are ungraspable and transient. Already in our lives many events we have judged as good and bad have come – they have come and they have gone. Because they are coming and going they are not a stable ground.

If you were a farmer and you wanted to plant some seed, you would not plant it in the river, you would plant it in your own land. So when you plant your identity in thoughts it is just like throwing the precious seed of your existence into the river. Something may sprout but much further along the way – and you will be swimming to catch up with yourself.

### How can I do it?

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First we have to find the ground of our existence. What can I fully, deeply, infinitely plant myself into, so that I rest and open? This is the key concern addressed in texts such as Garab Dorje's *'Three Statements Hitting the Main Point'* (sometimes translated as *'Hitting the Essence in Three Words'*).

We need to be open and receptive, able to retain what we learn, and able to let what is left reveal itself without being mixed up in our opinions and judgements. These three aspects are facilitated through the development of one-pointed attention, the capacity to stay on target without being distracted by external or internal factors.

It is not easy to do this because our capacity for attention has been commandeered into the service of the vulnerable ego. Being without inherent essence, substance, or reliable identity our illusory ego is constantly engaged in the anxious activity of attempting to secure the appearances that seem to promote health, happiness and fulfilment of our wishes. This is paralleled by its activity of trying to avoid danger, pain, unpleasantness and all that diminishes our sense of self. Concern with these two factors, of increasing pleasure and diminishing pain whether one's own or others, leads to a hyper-vigilance which is almost invisible because it is so normal.

Our attention is mainly focused out through our senses. We tend to fear boredom and crave stimulus and excitement. Our readiness to react to changing events means that in our self-identification as the subject in a world of objects we are unsettled, not only because of changes in the environment and in our mental content, but because subject and object are linked – changes in one bring changes in the other. In this way the ego uses attention to maintain its sense of continuity.

### Shiné with fixation

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In order to free attention from servitude to the ego's whimsicality we need to develop the capacity to let our attention rest on a simple object of focus and minimise the habit of arousal that leads to the distraction of micromanaging the content of the flow of experience.

This practice of calm abiding is known as shamatha or shiné. We simply sit in a way that lets our skeleton support our weight so that the muscles and especially the diaphragm can relax. We keep our gaze down the line of our nose but without staring at anything. Breath is not forced, with enough air passing in and out of our nostrils to provide a focus for our attention. Our tongue is placed against our hard upper palate and the hands palm up, right on top of left, on our lap. Then, with a clear and simple intention to focus our attention on the flow of breath and nothing else, we settle on to the breath.

If we find that we have wandered off, following a thought or feeling or sound or whatever has captured our attention, then without blaming ourselves or investigating why this has occurred we simply bring our attention back on to our chosen focus, the sensation of the breath at the nostrils. At first we may be repeatedly distracted, merging with and following after whatever arises. Do not enter into judgement. If you find yourself thinking something like, 'Oh it's hopeless, I can't meditate', this is simply the experience of being merged with another thought. So when this happens simply, gently, and compassionately return to the breath without agitation or irritation.

Have you ever seen a traditional country waterwheel where the water is directed from the river into a narrow channel which then feeds onto the top of the wheel, filling each bucket in turn? The weight of the water turns the wheel and the wheel turns the milling machine inside the building. In the same way, when the flow of thoughts in our mind meets our consciousness, our conscious attention is filled with thoughts and feelings and this drives the wheel of dualistic experience. Even if this is not self-reflexive and we are just carried along by whatever is occurring, there is an underlying self-reflexivity which confirms that this is happening to me.

If we disconnect the flow of water from the wheel, the buckets empty, the water has no traction and the wheel will stop turning and rest at ease. In the same way if our attention is maintained on its simple focus (the breath) it is unavailable for interruption by the stream of thoughts. The problem is not the nature of what is arising. The problem is our interest in it.

Generally we have the belief that 'I am a doer; I am the thinker of my thoughts'. Because thoughts arise in my mind I take it that they are mine and that I have somehow made them. Of course according to the principles of karma what arises for me has been generated by tendencies created in the past by the force of my own actions. So in a sense they are therefore my share, my lot, mine. But I, the ego-self, do not make them in this moment of their occurrence. Thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories and so on arise and pass. They do that whether 'I' identify with them or not. Whether I take them to be good and seek to hang on to them, or see them as bad and seek to escape them, it is my attention that leads the energy of my judgement and involvement. The flow of experience is unceasing. I can't stop it and I can influence its patterns only rarely and even then only a little. However I do have the potential capacity to be free of habitual entanglement.

By maintaining my focus of attention not only does this thought not catch me, but I gradually become less susceptible to being caught. Then it becomes clear that I — the simplicity of attention, the clarity that shows what is there — am not a thought. I as mere attention is non-conceptual, not made from thought, not resting on thought, and yet when distracted and merged with the flow of thought it is as if I was nothing other than thought.

As the Buddha said, suffering arises from attachment, from merging and identifying with transient objects as if they were essential to, or actually constituent of, self. Self is empty and yet easily filled. By seeing that it is empty we can allow it to fill and empty with transient experience without overvaluing or incorporating these ephemeral presences into our habitual delusion of a reified permanent self.

So again and again we focus on the simple sensation of breath and through this we are returned to the simplicity of being. So much of life is passed in judgement, elaboration, construction of interpretation, analysis — so much mental energy for so little gain. Of course, such habits help us to survive in the workplace and carry out all the tasks of life maintenance — and so they are useful situationally. But who am I? Who is the one who is busy keeping my life afloat? These vital questions, the keys to the door of the awakening, require a focused attention if they are to be deeply and truly addressed. And so we return to the basic practice again and again.

### Shiné without fixation

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We can also practise calm attention without employing the support of a fixed focus such as the breath. To do this we allow our attention to rest on whatever is occurring as it occurs, not going after past thoughts and not waiting expectantly for future thoughts. Whatever is arising, whatever kind of experience is revealed to your attention, just stay with that as long as it is present. As soon as it ceases to be present, remain calm and open and then as another occurrence presents itself find yourself present with whatever you encounter. Whether what is occurring is simple or complex and diverse, stay with it without interpreting or identifying it or making sense of it. It is what it is and then it's gone.

In this way we gradually relax from being an attentive subject seeking a focus to being a relaxed open presence with panoramic attention. Through this we come to see that the one who needs to attend to something is not separate from that which is attended to. Attention sloughs off its intensity and revealing awareness, unborn and free of inherent content. This is the luminous space within which experience occurs. This is the actuality of dzogchen.

For example, you might be sitting here and suddenly hear a bird singing. Just be present with that birdsong. It stops; there is silence. Then a motorbike appears, passes and vanishes. Silence. Then something else. Whatever arises with the senses, just be with it,

Many thoughts may arise around what has happened. Any thought about the past is occurring in the present so just stay present with the thought that is here now. Don't merge into it or reject it. Before we accept or reject a thought or feeling or sensation there is a judgement as to its impact and value.

This judgement is a quality of the subject. When judgement arises this is a sign that we are not present in relaxed open awareness but have identified with the position of the one apart, the one who decides, the individual evaluative consciousness. Judgement hides the simplicity of the arising thought. So instead just remain relaxed and open letting the flow of signifiers and signifieds go free by themselves. They do not touch awareness. They cannot influence or contaminate awareness.

Awareness is smooth. But ego-consciousness is sticky and easily adheres to the sticky potential of empty thoughts taken to be real.

Enlightenment, or awakening, is the uncovering of the infinite, the primordial. Actually the covering and uncovering has always been going on. The Buddha said that every arising form is also a ceasing form. Whatever appears will disappear. No one can alter the impermanence of phenomena. Appearances go free by themselves. As we sit here, without any effort from us, the day is unfolding. We don't need to do anything to make this happen and there is nothing we can do to stop this happening. We are participating in a world that flows along by itself. The world is the flow of experience. If we stay with what is happening it shows itself as arising and passing – arising and passing. Our own grasping at the world – which we take to be something composed of real, graspable objects – is the means by which we remain deluded. Our mind traps and binds itself with mind-forged manacles yet it is only our own mind that can set itself free. We don't need to renounce the world. We don't have to give up our possessions, or even our habits. The one aspect that does require renunciation is our belief that the meaning of existence is contained in thought. You cannot think your way to enlightenment. 'Enlightenment' is a thought, for those who even think about it.

Thoughts are movement, are surface. They do not lead to depth although they are inseparable from depth, openness, emptiness, sunyata. However thoughts, as transient phenomena, are not the problem. The problem arises when we take thoughts to be conveyors of truth, of enduring value. Thoughts are impermanent in their actuality but because they can be remembered this creates the illusion that once arisen they are somehow enduring. The conceptual content, the intensity, meaning and value that we take to be inherent in the thought, is in fact a quality of our relation to the thought. Since our attention is fleeting and the presence of the thought is fleeting the seemingly persistent value of the thought is a denial of its transience.

Only by stimulating and directing the flow of thoughts can the illusion of their continuing value be maintained. Once we rely on thoughts to clarify and organise our life we are dependent on identification with thoughts to support our sense of self. Thought selection, investment, repetition, compulsion, and many other ongoing activities are required to maintain our version of ourselves and our world.

All the effort that we make to achieve something, something that seems very important, is just like picking up a handful of sand and watching it run through our fingers. For example, if you have studied you can say, 'I have a degree' and use that as a signifier in the world, as a currency. However as the years go by, the status of the degree is increasingly ambivalent. If somebody were to say, 'I understand you have a degree in physics. Please sit the exam again just to make sure it's still valid.' you might reply, 'Well, I have not studied it for twenty years and I have forgotten a lot now. I'm not sure I could pass it now.' 'In which case give the degree back because it doesn't mean anything.' This is the fantasy which deludes both self and other. This is the fantasy of enduring identity that our world is created from. When you stop studying, the degree doesn't have much to do with you anymore. It is just an echo, a ghost. In the same way when meditators are attached to thoughts as if they carried some real substance they are seduced into the chain of signifiers, a chain which doesn't go anywhere except round and round. Grasping leaves us empty-handed.

This is the great paradox: we get more, we get everything, when we give up trying to get anything. The present moment is full, complete, fresh, and sufficient – this is the great completion, dzogchen itself. So do less and you will be more, without being anything!

### Approaching the text

We are going to be studying Garab Dorje's *Three Statements Hitting the Main Point* and later the commentary by Patrul Rinpoche. Garab Dorje was the first being who transmitted these dzogchen teachings into our world. Although the truth of these teachings has no beginning or end, the availability of the teaching and the transmission depends on circumstances, in particular the availability and conjunction of a competent teacher and a student who is ripe.

In the west, we have lived for many centuries now in a humanistic world, a world where human beings are the centre of everything. We define the value of everything that we experience by reference to our beliefs, assumptions, and intentions. Believing that we can only ever be human beings we discount the intrinsic value of other forms of life and see them largely in terms of their value to us. In this very materialistic period of our culture the idea that there are other realms with advanced beings seems somewhat strange. Such possibilities are relegated to the domain of science fiction nevertheless in America thousands of people have written and testified about how they have been taken up into alien spaceships and operated on in various ways and so on.

From the buddhist point of view there are many, many different realms where beings can be reborn according to our particular tendencies. Nowadays in the west this is often interpreted in a psychological way, so that hell is taken to indicate a possible way to experience our human existence if we are unfortunate enough to live, for example, in a war zone. Yet the traditional point of view sees these realms as actual dimensions in which we can be reborn and then take to be our total reality.

They are 'real' in the sense that the inhabitants that live in them take them to be real. These domains manifest different qualities according to the habits and conditionings of the beings in them. Neither these environments nor their inhabitants have an independent existence. They are not established on the basis of a fixed essence but manifest out of the interplay of forces which emerge for a while according to their karmic source. In the same way this world that we live in exists in its current form due to causes and conditions and as these change the world will appear in many different ways. The isolation and individuality of the ego is reflected in our sense of being apart and alone, that it is all up to us, and that our salvation lies in adopting the heroic mode to

defeat the forces that oppress us. Dharma, however, focuses on collaboration, on mutual benefit, on connectivity and especially on the intrinsic inalienable connectivity of non-duality.

We human beings are accustomed to employing a basic organising dichotomy of reality and fantasy. We believe there are things that are real, that can be proven, and be returned to again and again. We also believe in the category of fantasy arising from the imagination. For example, many people work all day and find their reality very exhausting and so in the evening they like to go to the theatre or the cinema or read a book and by these means they enter into a fantasy realm where life is different from the constraining reality of their everyday life. The relaxing fantasy is much enjoyed yet it provides only a holiday from reality; it does not transform the structure which governs our existence.

Buddhism offers a path to freedom from the limitations of both 'reality' and 'fantasy'. What we take to be 'reality' is in fact a deluded perception for there is nothing real in the sense of being a self-existing entity reliable, substantial and with a true defining essence. All that we have and all that we are, are patterns within the flow of becoming, the complex interactive field of emergence. What emerges moment by moment is experience, the vitality of the interplay of the energy of awareness. This energy is the unfolding of what we take to be 'subject' and 'object'.

Our appreciation of this text will be increased if we approach it with a sense of the fragility of our current situation. No matter how much energy we put into trying to maintain what is seemingly real and important to us, all the aspects of our life remain vulnerable to many external and internal factors of change. 'Liberation' in buddhism means that is you awaken from the fantasy of believing that an illusion is truly real. Trying to stabilise the ever-changing flow of experience is the cause of our suffering. Impermanence is not a nuisance that spoils our plans; it is just how it is.

However from the point of view of modern materialism such a view is itself only another illusion, another fantasy belief. These are very different views of the world, and it is important to see the axioms or basic beliefs underpinning them. The western view starts with matter, with stuff, which through the happenstance of random events leads to the appearance of life on this planet and the long story of evolution that leads to human beings and the development of our current situation. The buddhist view is that the basis of everything is the mind. The mind is not material, not matter, not stuff. The mind is open ungraspable awareness without beginning or end. It is self-existing and rests on no supports or causes. To awaken to this mind as our own fundamental ground is freedom. To get lost in the delusion of taking the transient contents of the mind to be truly existing as reliable things is the path of limitation and suffering. We have a capacity for choice. We can look at the different views and see which one illuminates the depth and expanse of our experience.

In Buddhism we practise to enter direct experience, experience that is not resting on the familiar weaving of the patterns of conceptual thought. The Garab Dorje text points to the way we are living within our assumptions which we take to be real. These assumptions are not assumptions about a reality that is already out there but are themselves constitutive of the sense of reality that we hold to be true. If our assumptions were merely an interesting commentary on, or interpretation of, the substantial reality of the thingness of things, then we would be dependent on opinions based on partial perception, like the six blind men and the elephant. We would be walking around something that is real and definite and through the lens of our own interests and selective attention developing our own sense of what is actually there. We would be forever excluded from the thing itself, from reality as it is, in and of itself.

From the dharma point of view, however, we are active participants in the construction of our experience, not on a superficial level but on the most profound level. How we develop our vision of the world determines the world that we experience. We are not mere observers arriving after the fact of existence but in our unborn openness we are inseparable from the ground within which everything emerges without being born. This is the facticity of experience free of reification. It is not something that happens to us but is the non-dual ocean of emergence within which we flow.

We are not recipients of a world which already exists but are involved moment-by-moment in the creation of this world that we inhabit. By being with it as it is, by not editing, selecting, adjusting, altering, avoiding, fusing, but just opening to it, to the this-ness of it, we find freedom. Open awareness is never trapped, limited or modified. But if we cleave to thoughts and feelings we enter the domain of commentary and find ourselves displaced from the actual moment into the delusion of the six realms of existence, the realms of self-maintenance, hopes and fears, interpretation. It is a paradox that by trying to be in control, we find ourselves being controlled.

The artificiality of the six realms is the basis of the possibility of awakening. If what we see is determined by the way that we see, then by altering our way of seeing, the habitual projected forms of samsara lighten and dissolve. We see the paradox that the world is not what we think it is and we are not what we think we are, but yet the world *is* what we think it is, and we *are* what we think we are. Freedom and limitation are co-present. Form and emptiness are inseparable – that is freedom.

If we focus only on form we enter the prison of our own delusion. Taking appearances to be real, to be substances existing in and out of themselves, is a way of imagining the very 'things' we grasp at. When we step out of your habitual reliance on our own idea of things, we see that our 'take' on what is occurring to be the truth is a miss-take. When we go to the cinema we suspend our disbelief and fall into the movie, which then seems very real. We allow ourselves to take it to be real, as existing – but we also know that it is not real, it is just light on a screen. The individuals in the audience are co-creating the film by offering their interpretive capacity to the patterns of light and sound which arise. In our forgetfulness of our own active participation, it seems that the film is something out there existing, fully formed in itself.

The Garab Dorje text and practice shows a way of stepping out of our enmeshment in conceptual thought. The danger posed by thoughts lies not in the thoughts themselves but in our desperate need for them as tools and materials with which to carry on creating our familiar world. Thoughts are not the whole story. If you take a part to be the whole then you have a misapprehension. Because we have been biased towards the aspect of manifestation and to the reification of that manifestation, we are tilted towards believing that this is all there is. Our practice is to rebalance ourselves so that the tension applied in being off-balance, is released.

### About the author: Patrul Rinpoche

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Patrul Rinpoche, 1808 to 1887, was renowned as a very well-educated lama who could communicate dharma to uneducated people. He was very aware of the entanglements found in monasteries and liked to travel around as an ordinary monk, living in the tents of nomads and the houses of poor people. He did not like to have servants with him nor to be seen as a special person. He preferred to let people find their own relation to him rather than being directed by

knowing his rank or reputation. He valued simplicity and the spontaneity of genuine encounter and would often slip free of the choreography of convention

An example of Patrul Rinpoche's style is the time when he had been invited to a monastery to give some initiations and decided to walk there following a small track, beautiful and peaceful. Along the way he met an old woman who was walking very slowly and carrying a big bag on her back. He walked with her, asked her where she was going and she said she was going to the monastery as there were some teaching going on there. He replied, 'I am going there too, let me carry your bag.' He shouldered her bag and they chatted as they walked along the way. He parted company with her when they had almost arrived. Later the old lady was very surprised to see that he was now sitting on the throne as a great lama. His gentle simplicity encourages us to reflect on how anxious we are about what other people will think about us. The prison of self-esteem easily blocks any direct contact of one heart to another.

*A general introduction to approaching the  
Patrul Rinpoche commentary on Garab Dorje's "Three Statements hitting the main point"  
given on the first day of four days of teaching in Todtmoos in 2009 and 2010.*