

# *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*

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## *Excerpts*

*"...Being mindful means being in the movement of the world as it changes moment-by-moment, not being afraid of change but working with change..."*

*"...it is not that we fell into samsara a long time ago and now we are struggling to get to the end of it like some hellish nightmare. Samsara begins and ends each second, each moment. A thought arises you fall into it and there is samsara. The thought ends in that moment, there is a space and if you stay alive in the space samsara has gone. Then you recognise, "Aah just that..."*

*"...When we relax into the presence of our being there is enough space for everything as it is with all its difference. We are not going to get overwhelmed and so we don't need to anxiously edit things in terms of 'good', 'bad', 'for me', 'against me', and so on. Everything that arises occurs within the mirror, the revealing space of awareness, and the mirror itself does not change. Thus we can relax and just allow whatever arises to be there for no reflection can destroy a mirror, no arising can destroy or mark the nature of the mind. Something really horrible, really gross put in front of a mirror won't crack the mirror.*

*That is why in the Tibetan tradition it says the nature of the mind is indestructible, vajra. There is no substance to it because it is open and empty and yet it is inseparable from everything in the world. This indestructible awareness offers infinite hospitality to whatever is there. So we can relax. It is okay..."*

## CONTENTS

Introduction.....	2
Mindfulness: Re-collecting Ourselves.....	5
The First Foundation of Mindfulness: Mindfulness of the Body .....	11
Mindfulness of Breathing Meditation Practice .....	16
Wisdom resources Compassion.....	17
The Second Foundation of Mindfulness: Mindfulness of Feeling.....	19
Practice of Mindfulness of Sensations.....	21
Post-meditation Discussion .....	22
The Nature of Ignorance.....	23
A Central Point of Difference Between Dzogchen and The Theravadan View .....	27
The Third Foundation of Mindfulness: Mindfulness of Mind.....	29
The Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness: Mindfulness of Dharmas .....	31
Mesmerised by our own Creativity we create Samsara .....	32
Mindfulness of the Dharmas of Nirvana: The Four Noble Truths.....	34
The Importance of Basic Calming Meditation .....	36
Dzogchen: Spaciousness Comes First.....	37
Meditation Practice – relaxing into space .....	41
Mindfulness in Terms of Dzogchen: Recollecting the Ground.....	42
Being Mindful Means Being in the Movement of the World.....	50

## Introduction

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I will be discussing the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, seeing how they can be applied with conscious application and effort, as well as from a dzogchen point of view, which would indicate that too much effort can be problematic.

The basis of mindfulness is to look and see what phenomena are without entering into too much judgment about them. For example, we could say, “*Today is cold,*” but if we are used to warm environments there may be an initial feeling of, “*It shouldn’t be like this,*” followed by another feeling, “*I don’t like it*”. Of course, as soon as we say, ‘*I don’t like it*’ this blocks us from experiencing what the phenomenon actually is.

Generally speaking being mind-full means not being mind-less – that is all. The Tibetan word for mindfulness is *drenba*, which is linked to the word for memory. Memory can be memory of the past. It can also be memory of future intention, as when we are in our kitchen and we look at what is missing on the shelves; a thought is embedded in our mind which is remembered in the future and then we go to the shops and remember what we have to buy. Moreover, we can remember to bring ourselves back to being in the present moment. Thus mindfulness is about attending to something. It is an intentional attention, and the more we do it with intention, gradually it becomes natural and we are just careful.

Careful also has the sense of ‘taking care of’ which means being respectful to what is there. The word therapy has its root in attention. It comes from the name that was given to

the helpers in the healing centres of Asclepius in ancient Greece. These helpers would accompany others on their journey into healing through dream. Thus in the case of therapy, it means somebody who is thoughtful, careful, and attentive to the state of the other. We can also be attentive and careful towards ourselves. If we are not thoughtful and careful then we are at the mercy of whatever is happening, but with careful attention we have the possibility of choice, for care allows us to see that there are different options.

In our lives we have all probably been careless from time-to-time and then find that things often don't go so well. When we are careless we tend to abandon ourselves into something. We go for it, leap into something, often from a state of not really caring. Sometimes that can be done in a hopeless, self-abandoning way: *"Fuck it, I don't care!"* Sometimes it is done through an intoxication in drugs, alcohol, falling in love, or being in states of hatred. You may have a boss that you don't like and find yourself thinking, *"Fuck them!"* and then find yourself not attending to the lived situation. That is to say you cut yourself off from the context because you have gone into an internalised framed of reference; how you are thinking and feeling becomes all that is important. Of course, when you act from that you are likely to enter into conflict with the environment. Carelessness often leads to accidents in that way.

Therefore, being careful and attentive is a movement, which is not internal and not external but is exactly on the cusp, the meeting place, where experience is arising in this ceaselessly changing point between our subjectivity and the field of experience. Being present at that point, we are present with whatever is arising, some of which are factors from the past, in terms of memories, some are predictions, and some are things which are immediate through our senses.

In ordinary terms, in order to be mindful we have to discriminate between what is important and what is not important. My intention, 'what I want to be on about', allows me to know when I am straying from that, and anything else I stray into I now call a distraction. For example, we began just now with a brief meditation where our intention was to focus on the breath. Because we had decided to focus on our breath when we found our attention wandering off from that, that was then distraction. If we had not decided to focus on our breath it would be quite pleasant to daydream and let our mind go all over the place. Thus it is the intention which redefines the situation. Moment-by-moment we are living in a very complex field of experience. Internally we are complex and externally there are so many factors going on. As we develop intentions moment-by-moment, we are taking a particular slice or cut, a cross section through the world. We are saying, *"This is what I deem to be relevant to me in this situation."* The natural corollary of that is, *"Everything else is now irrelevant."* Five minutes later when my focus of intention has shifted what was then irrelevant may now be relevant.

From a buddhist point of view this is very helpful for thinking about impermanence. We can see that in the course of the day, from waking up to going to sleep, our intention is configuring the world around us in particular ways moment-by-moment. At this present moment we are probably not sat here preoccupied with the need to clean our teeth but when we get up in the morning it is quite important to clean our teeth, and that intention gives us

an orientation: "I have got to do that." Your body is mobilised towards doing that activity and then various behaviours come: with a modern tube of toothpaste you decide whether you will unscrew the top or lift the flap to squeeze it through. If you squeeze it through it gets all sticky and messy at the top, and people like me who like to unscrew it may find that quite obscene and upsetting. Someone else may do it another way. In that way, our own peccadilloes, our own slices of the world, reveal particular contexts; we are creating our world out of what we take to be important. As our intention changes so our perception of the world changes; the world is revealed to us through the trajectory of our intention. Moreover, our intention is not stable or fixed but is also contextual for an arising factor acts to reveal aspects of other arising factors.

A basic buddhist proposition is that there is no inherent self-ness to who we are. We are not fixed entities but are revealed as a moving, dynamic display of arising moments of energy. As we turn ourselves through the course of the day from one situation to another our internal experience and the external experience are both shifting. The practice of mindfulness is about being present in that ever-changing flow of experience, recognising of course that different behaviours belong to different settings. For example, if you work in a hierarchical organisation you are likely to speak to your boss in a different way to the way you would speak to someone who is structurally beneath you. If you are a teacher and you have a very mixed ability class you speak to different students in different ways. You see that some students will respond to something a bit sharp and pushing, and that others would get upset with that and need something more supportive and gentle, for each person's growing edge or interface with their potential is different. Moreover, that potential will be different at different times of the year, different times of the day and in different settings.

In this way we can start to see that mindfulness is not a fixed state. Rather, it is a capacity to be as closely aligned with this ever-changing movement of what is revealed in the juxtaposition of internal and external factors. It is a way of staying very alive and very present, respectful of oneself and respectful of others. If we tilt too much towards the other and sacrifice ourselves that is not helpful, and if we tilt too much towards ourselves and sacrifice others, that also is not helpful. We share this world with others. We don't have a private world. The fantasy of interiority, of 'me inside myself' is an illusion for there is nothing inside us. What is inside and outside are the same, moving together all the time. In our modern cult of self-display, people write their autobiographies with every kind of nastiness they have experienced – people clearly want to share what is in 'inside' themselves. The more we individualise as a culture and have a 'private life' we feel desperate to share it with other people. We see this in TV programmes like Big Brother with viewers poking and sniffing around in other people's private lives.

From a buddhist point of view this occurs because we have an intuition that it is wrong. Other people are not so different from us and yet they are exquisitely different from us. What is that paradox? They are not different from us because our nature is the same. The basic building blocks out of which we are constructed are shared by all beings, but as in the turning of a kaleidoscope, the patterning of these constituents creates infinite ranges of possibility, and so we are unique and specific in our manifestation, which of course is

changing moment-by-moment. The differences between us are not based on something hidden deep inside ourselves, they are manifest, displayed – we *show* our differences. Thus, an approach of mindfulness would be to be interested in other people's difference, to *how* they manifest, *how* they show themselves, and to see how we ourselves can manifest and show ourselves in relation to them so that benefit for other and for self can occur. This is really at the heart of being mindful.

When we get caught up in a truly internal intention, a personal intention, which in psychological language is called a neurotic intention – neurosis being simply a set of mental factors which have been over-privileged and become cut off from the changing movement of the environment – we don't see things as they are. It may well be that we never see things as they are but we can minimise the amount of projection we make onto situations by re-jigging the balance between perception and conception. Most of the time we experience the world through our concepts: we have ideas, assumptions, conditioning, habits, and so on, which become the filters or the veils through which we approach the world. We have patterns, procedures, we are on about something, we have beliefs inside ourselves and we come out towards the world in terms of a selective attention looking for confirmation of our beliefs. The more we tilt towards perception, towards trying to see what is there, trying also to be mindful of our interpretation as it arises – allowing it to be there but also simultaneously mindful of the perceptual field, of what is revealed through our senses – we begin to see that these two factors start to go into a dance, to mutually influence. That is to say, you have what you believe about a situation, what you want, and what is actually there.

For example, say it is a long, wet and cold winter, you might think, "*Ok, I need to get a strong windproof umbrella.*" You decide to go into big, old-fashioned shop with ten kinds of umbrellas. You have then got the question of what size you need. If you are a small person and you hold a big umbrella you might get carried away, and it is also something you have to carry around all day long. You could get a little folding one but in a strong wind they tend to buckle up. You have also got your aesthetic interest, whether or not you want a pink polka dot one, and whether that would be adequate to your status in the world. Thus, there is size, aesthetics, cost and function, and all of these factors are coming to us as we look at what is there. How do we come to a decision? Sometimes we buy something and then afterwards we think, "*Why did I buy that?*" What was happening in the mental configuration at the time? We know that when we buy things in shops with strip lighting often when we take them out in the day light they look rather different. We also know if we go shopping when we are hungry or when our belly is full we are likely to buy different kinds of food, certainly different quantities of food. In that way, in a very ordinary way, for we do this all the time, we can see that what we are on about, what we are up to, what we are into – which is of course a momentary context – affects our experience of the world. We look through these lenses and what is revealed is something that will fit, because the selective nature of our attention means that we are looking for something that will dovetail with the assumption of the particular positioning that we have at that moment. Therefore mindfulness is not necessarily about simplicity. The practice of mindfulness is to keep bringing to mind as many factors as possible so that we learn to live with complexity.

### [Mindfulness: Re-collecting Ourselves](#)

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There is a story in the Hindu tradition about Shiva and Parvati. When Shiva fell in love with Parvati and wanted to marry her, Parvati's father said 'No'. The father said to Parvati, *"Shiva, this man that you like is very weird. He is not normal and we can't have you marrying someone who is not normal. Look at him, he is covered in ashes, he is wearing an animal skin, he is stoned out of his head, he has long hair, and we don't want him!"* So Parvati ran away and got together with Shiva anyway and they had a little family. But due to the consequences of her action in disobeying her father along with some other activities, one day she died. When she died Shiva became extremely upset and he took her in his arms and held her and refused to let her go. People were saying to him, *"She is dead, she is dead."* But Shiva was very fierce, with a large third-eye in the middle of his forehead, and wanted to burn everyone up, and so they just let him get on with it. Shiva danced away holding onto her body, and gradually the corpse began to ripen so that bits of Parvati started to loosen up and fall off. Her nose, her ears, her fingers fell all over India until eventually there was nothing left of her. Now across India you can find tantric pitas or sacred sites where parts of the goddess were found. Also in the Egyptian tradition and in many other cultures there are stories of dismembered gods.

This and similar stories point out an important relation between dismembering and remembering. As babies we have extreme porosity of our experience; a huge amount comes in and a huge amount goes out. Babies are uniquely, particularly naked in that way. When they are upset their tears come out and their body shakes, and when they are absorbing, their huge big eyes open and they are just drinking the world in. In this absorption of the world there is a kind of memetic movement; they are copying and imitating what is around them, learning by internalising, by introjecting. Parallel to this, but developing a little bit later, they start to project. These are the two functions that go on throughout our lives. Introjection brings the other, the field factors, the aspects of the world into us and they become ourselves. With projection parts of ourselves go from ourselves out into the world, that is we dismember ourselves and parts of us are located in other places. We can see this with objects in our houses that we might say are of sentimental value. Maybe they are just some old postcards but you wouldn't throw them away for they have an immediacy of being meaningful – but they don't mean anything to anyone else. If you have kids your kids mean something to you, which again is a sentimental attachment. This suggests that we are not only connected but actually we have located part of ourselves in the other or the object. If they die it is as if part of us dies, and of course that is absolutely true for the bit of me that could have a particular conversation with my mother has to die because my mother is dead. I can imagine my mum but is not the same as seeing her face. That is to say, as interactive beings we come into existence as communication. We are communicative systems embedded in a meta-communicative system. There is nothing stable. Communication is always moving. Communication doesn't stay stable. It is dynamic and unfolding and has no fixed essence to it, but it is forming, deforming and reforming, dismembering and remembering. This is the essence of the Buddha's teaching which points to the absence of inherent self-nature and impermanence.

The third factor of the Buddha's basic teachings is about suffering. Suffering occurs due to attachment. Everybody can tell lots of stories of grief. We all have lots of hassles and troubles in our lives. However, from a buddhist point of view these are not the heart of the

issue. These are like bubbles or froth on the surface, momentary disturbances generated by deeper structural faults. What really ails us is not being at peace in ourselves, through not recognising who we really are. In being alienated from ourselves we live as refugees, and refugees have a very hard time. As a refugee you cannot settle in yourself, you are always wondering what is going to happen next, you have no stable basis, you don't have any entitlements and you don't have a passport. It is this very homelessness which is the meaning and idea that is conveyed when the texts say that we wander endlessly in samsara. The Tibetan word for sentient beings is *drowa*, somebody who is moving or going, for we are always chasing after one thing or another, hoping that the objects that we find will provide a real refuge or a real home for us – but of course they arise and they pass. We think we have found something safe and secure and then ... something shifts ... and it has gone. That is always what seems to be the case. It is very difficult to find anything safe and secure.

We want the phenomena of the world including ourselves to be fixed, stable, and reliable. But since our fate is connected with other people, how could it ever be? We have a skin-bag around us that is full of holes; we are in ceaseless communication with the world. We are nothing but communication. This is not a theory or an idea. This is the phenomenology of our existence. The lungs expand and contract; the heart is systolic-diastolic, pumping and pulsating, rhythmic with rhythms which are reverberating inside and outside all the time.

Usually we are not in touch with ourselves as this ongoing, interdependent process. Dismembering is to cut bits of ourselves off and to forget them, and when we become dismembered we end up in a sealed body. The big sealed body is the autonomous ego-self: *"I am a monad. I exist just as myself. I don't require anything. I don't need anything. I am just me."* Paradoxically, this basic ego belief is the basis of consumerist capitalism. If we are already internally defined, a self-defined individual, why spend all our time out there scrabbling to get money in order to buy so much stuff? What is the nature of the need or the lack? The lack is not negative, the lack is participative. It is our lack that brings us together; we need each other. That is not a shameful secret. That is not low self-esteem. That is not some terrible, hellish, internal vulnerability. It is part of life. There is a song by Barbara Streisand which sings: *"The people who need people are the luckiest people in the world."* There is some truth in that because actually all people need people. Why do we need people? Because our identity is interpersonal – we don't live inside ourselves. We live in our participation in the world. We are created out of our interactions with the world. What we take to be 'I', 'me', 'myself' is created out of our interactions with our parents, our school teachers, books that we have read, TV programmes that we have seen, music that we have heard, drugs that we have taken, and so on. All of that has shifted, moved, nourished and created a repertoire of responses and movements, and this range is activated in response to changes in the field around us. It is not that 'I' continuously decide what I am going to do, rather we are called forth into being by particular situations. If someone tell us, *"I have been to the hospital and have been given a diagnosis of liver cancer,"* this calls us into being in a particular way. If someone says, *"My child has just left and they have gone to a country far away,"* that calls us into our being in a particular way. If somebody says, *"I have just got a new job and I am really excited,"* we respond in a different way. That is what we do. It is not that we decide to respond, but if what they are saying comes into us, if we let it in, if we are touched and

moved, we are moved into a response. We don't actually have to think about it or plan it, it just flows through us.

This is enormously important to recognise for this is the meaning of the Buddha's teaching on the absence of an inherent self-nature. It is not something esoteric or abstract. It is just the fact that if you smile at me I will smile back. I will have smiled before I know why I am smiling. There is a pulsation or a flow and the more self-concerned I am, the more anxious I am, I will interrupt the flow of communication. I see quite a lot of people in my therapy practice who have various forms of social anxiety. Social anxiety means that when they go into social situations they imagine that other people are primarily concerned with them. The patient feels that everybody is looking at them and they don't know what to say. But you wouldn't know what to say if you thought everybody was looking at you. Thus being put on the spot constellates us in a particular way. The actual fact is that you are not being put on the spot. Everyone is just bopping around in their own little world. They don't really care and they don't really see you. From birth to death the likelihood of really being seen by another human being is pretty damn rare. Most of the time we are like ships that pass in the night; people are in their little worlds. This is sad but I would suggest it is probably true. Therefore the social anxiety: *"Everybody can see me, they have got x-ray eyes, they know what I am thinking,"* is actually the projection of a self-preoccupation. It is grounded in the belief that 'there is something wrong with me. My faults and demerits determine and define who I am. Other people can see this and therefore they will draw the same negative conclusion about me as I do'.

That kind of structure develops due to an attack on the porosity of the early infant. Children need to be protected primarily from the unskilful gaze of other people. The unskilful gaze is of two main kinds: too much and too little. The very critical person who believes they really understand what is going on for the baby, always knows too quickly what is wrong for the baby. Hence, they will be intervening in a way that will be slightly off, but the baby will learn to adapt. Similarly, if the parental field doesn't have adequate concern the baby will never be met. The baby needs to be met on its skin for if the gaze is going through the skin it is not going to thrive, and if the gaze is not going to reach the skin it is not going to thrive either. This is of course true for all of us through the course of our lives, but as we get bigger it becomes more difficult and more complicated because we don't actually live in our skin. Most of us have either collapsed inside somewhere or we are bopping around out there, having put on some kind of persona which is a rouse, a red herring. It distracts people: 'the show must go on and you will never know who I am'. It is a protective defence. Another way of hiding is to hide inside yourself, right to the extreme of disassociation. With both of these movements you are not actually in your skin, and if you are not in your skin then you are not in your senses. Moreover, if you are not in your senses then you are not going to get an accurate reading of the world as it is, and so, necessarily, you are then going to be relying on the mental map that you have already developed. However, if you can't inhabit your skin because of the persecutory or depleting environment of your childhood it is likely that the map you have of the world is going to be a bit off as well. Thus, you are not with things as they are and you are trying to construe them out of a frame of reference which is off kilter – and in that way we bang into things.



However, the practice of mindfulness can support a different way of being with 'ourselves'. Mindfulness is an attempt to again and again bring ourselves back to what is happening in the moment. How am I in this moment? What are the arising factors of experience, external and internal? What sort of thoughts, feelings and sensations are arising? What sort of colours and shapes and sounds, tastes and smells are coming from the environment? It is about attending to phenomena in a way that will allow them to reveal what they are. Thus part of mindfulness is concerned with waiting, letting things happen and seeing what they are.

Usually when stuff is arising in our mind we get agitated: "*Oh, what will I do! This is terrible! I have got to sort it out!*" That very busyness itself takes us off balance. We are not thinking that the situation may very well be bigger than us. If it is a blizzard, running around in circles is not going to change it. In the same way, lots of mental activity is not going to change many of the problems in our lives. Rather, just sit comfortably and wait and watch – calm and clear – and then the phenomena reveals itself, we can see *how* it is. And if we see *how* it is moment-by-moment as it's manifesting, there is the possibility of locating oneself, placing oneself, so that if one is going to make a move it is the most finely attuned, the most nuanced move, so that a little effort will get optimal gain, rather than headless chicken stuff which is of course very often what we are used to. The whole function of meditation is to learn how to relax more and more so that complexity can become enjoyable, rather than anxiety provoking for complexity will not end.

In relation to complexity we can say to ourselves: "*Ah there is too much to manage, I can't cope!*" 'I can't cope' is enormously important for all of us because it is the moment where we see the limitation of ourselves. 'I can't cope' means that 'I need resourcing' – that is all. Especially if people have had so-called trauma experiences in the past, and they have experience being overwhelmed in various ways, the psychosomatic system has been severely challenged, and they build up habits of flight, fight, freezing and flopping, classic reactions to something which is beyond their capacity. What is required is more nurturing so that at the point of depletion, where we feel, 'I can't cope' we have things to hand which we can bring in to help us relax, expand, and experience again that 'I am bigger than the problem'. If the problem is bigger than us we will not be able to solve it. We have to increase in size. How will we do that? By doing less.

This is again one of these strange paradoxes. It has been recorded that if you have a problem you cannot solve and you are struggling with it, wanting to bang your head on the wall, often if you go to sleep, the next morning you wake up and you see something different, a fresh perspective or a new angle. In that way one is stepping back from locking in. When we are locked into something, at that moment we are situated in a particular constellation of our capacity. For example, if you have a troubling situation, perhaps in a relationship or a conflict at work, and you don't know what to do, if you remain in the same position inside yourself, the more you think about it the more you will vibrate faster and get stirred up. Your breathing changes and your muscular tension will increase and so on. The best thing to do is to go for a walk to interrupt the positioning that you have taken on, and in the new configuration that arises you will have a new point of reference, and from that you

will have a new view. Something will be revealed and then usually there is something that can be done.

Whenever we over-concretise a definition and say, *"I can't do it!"* if we are mindful we can catch ourselves and see, *"Aah, I am aligning myself, fusing with a very restricted definition."* Once you fuse with it, it is as if it's the whole story. If you defuse from it you see that it is just a particular opinion, a point of view. All of us I'm sure get caught and trapped in things and we feel it is awful. Then perhaps you chat to a friend. In chatting to a friend it is not really the rational aspect of the conversation that is important, rather it is the fact that they don't think we are nuts that somehow reconfigures us so that we can approach it with more energy and a different tilt.

This points to the heart of the Buddha's teaching that there is no inherent self-nature to any phenomena including ourselves. The whole idea of mindfulness, especially mindfulness of impermanence, is to recognise that there will be no stable place. The disadvantage of there being nothing stable is that we have got to keep moving but the advantage of the fact that we have to keep moving is that we will never get caught. 'We' are part of a dynamic, ever-changing set of circumstances that we find ourselves in, but we don't actually live on that level. We live in the world of abstraction, of narrative, of stories. We tend to try to reassure ourselves by telling stories to ourselves about who we are. Often these stories are narrow and tightly construed. We say the same thing again and again and that reiteration concretises ourselves and the situation. They may be reassuring but they are also too tight, over-definitive, so that we are forgetting of our potential.

Thus how can we stay open and connected? How can we believe that it will be ok to not know and still be connected? Essentially, that is the function of meditation, to move from the narrative structure – which is the domain of our ego, our constant story-telling, telling people things about ourselves, believing the things that other people tell us about ourselves, positioning ourselves in a rather over-defined way—to something which is more immediate and more direct, the experience of breathing in and out, being here and working with circumstances. If you don't exist as a thing, if you cannot be defined, you will find yourself arising into the circumstantial situation, into the contingency, the meeting together, the juxtaposition of the arising elements. It is at this point that we need to be mindful. If we are going to a party or an event we often think: *"What shall I wear? What kind of shoes? How will I do my hair? Is lipstick appropriate or not?"* That is to say, in different circumstances we have to show ourselves in different ways. What is the best interface? Can I be appropriate to the circumstance? Can I do what is required? Generally this question rests in the point where wisdom and compassion meet, for if we have wisdom we know that we are not a fixed thing, and if we have compassion we make a gesture towards a situation.

When I was sixteen I walked down the Pennine Way and met my parents and brother, who was in the army at the time, and we went for a holiday in Brighton. My parents wanted us to go together to a concert on the pier, and me being an extremely unpleasant sixteen year old, refused, and they went with my brother. Afterwards my dad said to me, *"It is in moments like this that you can destroy a family."* It was completely true but at the time I didn't get it: *"I don't want to go!"* Years later, I suddenly saw the importance of this,

that my anxiety as a sixteen year old about who I was, and not wanting to be with my parents, living in a bubble of my self-concern, my self-definition, I completely lacked any compassion in thinking about them. My brother went off and did something, and my father died not all that long after. It was one of the last moments we were together, and in looking back I think, *“Oh, god, if only I had known...”* Thus, in moments like these we can see in our own lives how our self-regard, our self-concern just attacks the meaning of our existence, which is communication.

This is why there are so many texts in mahayana buddhism that stress love, compassion, care and concern: *“May all sentient beings be happy.”* The idea in the bodhisattva vow is *“I will become a servant for all beings. I will put others first. I will think about what they need”*, since if we can't sacrifice on ourselves we will be no use to anyone else. Of course, if the sacrifice is made out of placation, or perhaps out of a feeling of un-entitlement in ourselves, it is not a meaningful sacrifice at all, it is not a real gift for it is our neurosis that is creating a pseudo-gesture. I would suggest that it is very helpful to remember times in our lives where we have become so small that we rejected other people for in that rejection there is a kind of desolation – we win but we lose. When the transaction of belonging, of connectivity, is thrown into the wind and all we have is, *“I did it my way”* this is very thin soup and not really something we can survive on.

Thus, generally speaking, mindfulness means recollection, to re-collect ourselves, to have access to as rich a display of all ones potential qualities and to recollect the field in which we are operating. If we can take our projections off our experience as much as possible, keep them hovering in the air – for they are part of our experience but not part of what is actually there– we can see more precisely how other people are, how we should be with them, and then bring into relation with that the possibility of movement. Again, one of the paradoxes here is that the more attentive we are to being present with the manifesting factors of our experience, which in a sense is slightly intentional, the more spontaneous our behaviour will be. The movement of our behaviour arises in the interface of subject and object, self and other, a site where there is no real boundary because our basic condition is one of non-duality. Thus the more precise and attentive we are to *all* the factors, they will arise into the unfolding situation.

### **The First Foundation of Mindfulness: Mindfulness of the Body**

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The *Satipatana Sutra* points out the nature of *sati*, mindfulness, in relation to four aspects. Firstly the body, secondly what might be called feeling or sensation, thirdly the mind or consciousness, and lastly dharmas or phenomena.

The first of these is the body. Clearly we all have a body. Being mindful of our body on a most general level means to hold our embodiment as part of our ongoing experience. If we are in a our body, if the sense of our body – the movement of our limbs, the pulsation of our breath, the experience of the impact of objects on our senses – is alive and present for us, there is a particular quality to being alive in that. We probably all have a particular memory from our childhood, perhaps of riding a bicycle or climbing a tree or running on the beach or the hills, where there is the sense of being fully present in your body as your body.

However, in terms of dismembering we can separate our mind and our body. This is not something which started with Rene Descartes but is something which is very pervasive for all of us. We can easily be lost in thoughts, in our mental world, and forget our embodiment. The body is the link into the world, the body is part of the world, but the mind can appear to be somehow something other than that, to have an existence of its own.

The first part, mindfulness of the body, is mindfulness on the breath. The breath is very important for the breath is our connection to the world. We often say, 'I breathe in and I breathe out, I lift my hand and I lower my hand. That formulation is very interesting for it suggests subjective experience and a kind of agency. However, unless we are rather sick, we are not in any way having to intentionally breathe – we just keep breathing. We even breathe when we are asleep and if we didn't we would be dead. Who is breathing when we breathe? If you are asleep how can you say, 'I breathe? That statement is too subjective in its focus. Breathe is moving in and out. What is the breath? It is air. The air is the atmosphere of this planet that we live on. The planet comes into me and I go into the planet. When the air comes in it brings all its blessed constituents, bits of car fumes, bits of other people's skin and so on. Little molecules come into our lungs and then we kindly return the favour and bits of us get sent out on our breath to pervade the world. There is a hole in the front of our face with two little nostrils and the breath is the movement of the world in and out of us. Thus mindfulness on the breath is the real sense of not only embodiment but enworldedness, that we are not apart from the world.

Mindfulness is to be alive and present at the place where what we call 'subject' and what we call 'object' seem to meet. They don't just meet by chance but they are always meeting. Often in thangka paintings we see the god and the goddess depicted in sexual union. This sexual union represents the union of subject and object, self and other, it is a symbol of non-duality, that we always in intercourse with the world. We could see breathing in and out as a kind of sexual act. We get penetrated by the air coming in and then we penetrate the world as our breath goes out into it. This interpenetration is going on all the time. Things come into us that we don't ask to come in, like noises and visual forms and so forth, but we also go out, putting our hearing, our seeing into situations.

Thus being in the world is very dynamic. It is not lonely for we belong. In being connected through the body into the whole field of experience we are part of the world, we are connected to all other beings. This is central in terms of the notion of compassion for we are not stepping across to somebody who is other. There is an interesting story in the bible of the Good Samaritan. A person who in seeing somebody in trouble – somebody from another group, who's group is an enemy of their own – makes a decision to cross the road and take care of that person. In doing that he is saying, *"You are not other to me. I could have you as 'other' by staying in my definition so that you have nothing to do with me."* However, by connecting with the hurt condition of this person, somebody who is sick and alone on the road, one is taken out of oneself. This is a function of mindfulness, not to rest in a mental world but to come back to the basic co-existence that we share with all beings.

In the practice of mindfulness of the breath it is important to note that it is slightly different from shamata, calming meditation practice. In shamata our attention is on the

breath going in and out of the nostrils and we want to keep the breath fairly regular and stable because it is our focus of attention. If the breath is changing too much it becomes an unstable anchor, and our minds anyway are going to be wandering. So if the breathe can be as stable as possible it gives us a more reliable reference point to bring our attention back to. However, in the mindfulness of the breath we want to observe how the breath is, how it shifts and changes. You can do this practice sitting down but you can also do it when you get up in the break or go off at lunch time. In particular we want to observe what happens to our breath in different situations. If something nice is happening or you are going to cross the road at rush hour when it is very busy, or if you try to work out what you want to eat and you get a bit puzzled, each of these situations will have an effect on your breath. The events of the world influence our breath and this is what we want to check out, to be aware of.

Here at this point there are two principle directions in buddhism which one can follow. One is a path of development where we think, *"Here I am an ordinary person with lots of limitations and I could do better. I have progress I can make therefore I am going to consciously try to improve what I do. This involves effort and there is a lot of effort that can be made."* The second is the approach of self-liberation. Phenomena are arising and passing moment-by-moment, and in this path the main thing is to relax, release and drop it – just accept this is what is happening. In that way you move from being conditioned to being unconditioned. The Buddha's basic teaching is that suffering arises from attachment. When I attach myself into a situation, when I weave myself into a situation that is where all the trouble begins.

For example, when you are observing your breath you may find a whole stream of angry thoughts are agitating your breath. You might decide: *"I want to keep my breath calm and clear therefore these angry thoughts are an interruption to me. They are attacking me and they are undermining the calmness of my breath. Also I want to be a good person and not full of anger so I need to work on my anger so that it no longer troubles me."* This is a particular reading that links to the path of development. From the perspective of self-liberation we may say, *"Ah ...angry...here I go. I have been here before, it's nothing new – sometimes I am angry..."* In the moment of the recognition of it, the owning of it, there is also a disowning of it. If I can say, *"Yes, I am angry and no big deal,"* then the anger is allowed to be what it is for you acknowledge it, you welcome it. Because I know I am pissed off it is now already going because I am not standing in relation to it as something troubling me – it is just something that happens. We can do the same with envy, with jealousy, with anxiety, with humiliation, with low self-esteem and so on. All the arising factors which can appear to determine who we are, we can respond to by trying to change and transform them or we can just accept 'this is how I am'.

Thus in terms of mindfulness of the breath one is just observing how one's breath is. Due to causes and circumstances my breath is now quick, my breath is now slow, my breath is now changing and agitated, my breath is now so subtle it is just on the edge of my capacity to be consciously aware of it. All these movements arise due to causes and conditions. There is so little we can control in life. You can't control what the neighbours do, you can't control someone starting their car and revving and revving it on a cold morning and waking you up. The key point is just to see *"Ah, until now I am alive and because I am alive I am effected*

*by what is going on.*" That is what is happening. Either we can relax and try to be present with how we are in relation to the other – which is still workable, it is not that you are pinned to the wall and it is a done deal, there is still possibility of movement but movement inside what is actually occurring – or I can bring forward my template and think, *"It shouldn't be like this. This is wrong and I have to change it."* If you take that latter pathway you will always be busy for you will be attempting to control something which you can't control. Moreover, if you focus on an orientation of control you are likely to increase your anxiety and your sense of failure. Whereas if we can just accept that in being part of the world, events will turn us around, and that is how it is, then we are more likely to be able to relax and work with circumstances as they arise. It doesn't mean that we are weak-willed or vulnerable in the sense of being inadequate for we should be stronger, but rather our very being, because it is communicative, is bound to be responsive to what is occurring. Responding is just how it is. It is a neutral description: *"My breath is hot and agitated."* That is what it is. It won't be like that forever for due to causes and circumstances eventually it will change and something else will be the case.

Therefore, when we are practicing mindfulness of the breath, essentially all we are doing is bringing our attention into the body to observe as closely as possible what is occurring. It is just about seeing what is there. However, in order to see 'what is there', as I was indicating earlier, at first we have to struggle to separate perception from conception. We carry within us many, many assumptions about how things should be, many expectations and many hopes. In some circumstances they can be quite useful factors to have for they can drive us forwards and energise us. But if you are trying to observe what is there, a predilection, something determined prior to the situation, is not going to be helpful because you now have a particular template of evaluation that is saying, *"This is the wrong way or not how it should be."* Thus, allowing your life to be as messy as it is, is very important. One of the things that can be quite alarming in any kind of meditation is that when we relax the ego's defensive agency, the storytelling that we keep running to give us a good reading about who we are, we encounter something pretty weird, the weirdness of ourselves. We are all rather strange. We have funny kinds of thoughts which arise, strange sensations and sudden impulses. We are a pretty moveable feast with all kinds of stuff going on. But that is how it is and it is not a mistake.

Therefore, it is very important in this practice to become curious about conditioning: *"What have I learnt through my family, through my school, through the more general culture? What have I learnt about how I should be? What expectations do I import into situations which cause me to be confused?"* Small babies seem to have a basic integrity to them, then when you meet the same small person again when they are five or six years old they are somehow both bigger in the sense that more is going on for them, but somehow they are also diminished for they have become more particular, developed an individuality. We could say, to a certain extent, they have been dismembered, that aspects of their potential – which might have ripened if they were in a different family or with different circumstances – have become a bit constrained and stunted and other aspects have become a bit over developed. In that way we get the contortion of our family system as we grow up. In becoming curious about our conditioning we start to encounter a lot of bias inside ourselves; certain experiences are forbidden or we may feel, *"I shouldn't be like that,"* and so on. Thus our developed cultural

interpretation becomes a barrier to our seeing what is there. We find it difficult to accept that we are a construct, and the criteria of being a construct gets in the way of us seeing what is actually there.

The experiment of Dr Frankenstein was not just a one off. All of us in some way are Frankenstein's children. For what did Frankenstein do? He got parts of different bodies, chopped them up, dismembered them, and then re-membered them. He took a bit from here and a bit from there, stitched them all together and waited for the great electric storm ... and suddenly the monster was there. That monster was an artificial construct. The monster of course is desperate to be natural, it seeks to belong but somehow it can't. It looks in the window at the family as they sit and play music together and says, "I want to be part of that, why can't I be part of that?" But when they see his face they are in horror. This maybe an experience that some of us have and maybe feel on almost a daily basis; that there is something alien about us, untoward, and we cannot quite fit in. We see other people having ordinary lives, normal lives, but we can't quite find the front door to get in. We are just peering in the window. Part of that experience is due to the imprisonment in attitudes, attitudes of our culture, particularly in England of our class, the kind of education we have, the kind of politics we follow, and so on. We have cobbled ourselves together. We are both the monster and Dr Frankenstein for we have done a DIY self. All children have to construct themselves. When the child is small and goes into the school playground, the parent is left behind and the child doesn't know what to do. But they find their way, they work out how to survive, what people to talk to, what games to play and what not. If you choose to play football you are not playing with cars, if you are playing a skipping game then you are not talking about your dolls – you have to make choices. Every time you make a choice you both privilege a particular situation and you abandon another part of yourself. In that way we have got our scissors out and we are chopping bits of ourselves off and saying, "Don't worry sweetie, I will bring you out later." But then we forget these bits of ourselves and we over-accentuate others. Therefore when we come to meditation we begin to see we have these particular profiles where we are used to thinking, *"This is me. This is how I am."*

In trying to see what is actually there we have to gradually relax this template of expectations and try to just be with how things are. Our fantasies, our predictions, the foreclosures of our assumptions, none of these are giving us an accurate account of what is actually occurring in the moment. In order to see what is in the moment, we have to as much as possible adopt a phenomenological method in order to bracket off assumptions, to become conscious to what we are importing or projecting. It is not that our assumptions are negative, rather it is to see that they don't apply here: *"I don't need to see the world through this lens, that is a lens I can use, I have used and I will probably use again, but in this particular circumstance I am just going to look."* Just looking involves not knowing. As soon as you know, you will know what you are looking for, and if you know what you are looking for that is what you will be looking for which means that you then have a selective attention. Moreover, for many of us in developing our lives – which could mean freeing ourselves from our family background, or trying to work out who we were – we have been linked to education, to reading, studying and getting ideas. Knowledge has been a path to freedom in some way and has opened up doors in our lives. However, this kind of practice involves not

knowing and if your emotions are saying, “Oh no! Why would I not want to know for it is knowing that keeps me safe,” that can also become an obstacle to the enquiry.

Thus we want to simply try to investigate. We are not trying to install a particular kind of truth in a dogmatic way. However there is often resistance to doing that. Many, many people want to do meditation and decide they are going to do it and then don't do it. Most people do much less meditation than they would hope to do, for meditation is taking a holiday from our ordinary frame of reference which is the place where 'I know who I am and I know how to run my life'. When we go into meditation we don't know who we are and we don't know how it works – we are just looking. We go as it were with an empty bowl, and if you have got an empty bowl you can fill it up. If you go with a bowl full of your assumptions and knowledge there is not much space to put new understanding in. Thus, the emptying out of curiosity is very lovely but it is likely to bring some kind of resistance.

### Mindfulness of Breathing Meditation Practice

All the time there are endless pulsations. An anxious thought arises inside you and your breath changes. Somebody smiles and you smile. Somebody tells you something sad and you feel sad and probably your shoulders droop a little as well and you lean towards them, concern showing itself. Thus with the practice we do not want to make ourselves artificial, rather without judgement we want to observe: “Oh, this is what happens when that occurs.” In that way we start to see dependant co-origination as it is unfolding. However, due to our importing of artificial educational dogmas that we have picked up along our way through our lives we lose touch with this, for if we artificially cook up a presentation of 'this is how I should be' then we are not attending to what is going on.

For example, if we don't feel comfortable with someone that is real information. If it is not a pre-existing prejudice that we have taken from somewhere else and projected onto the situation, the fact that we feel more at ease with some people than with other people means something. It can mean something about ourselves, about our own neurotic constriction, but it can also mean something about how the other is manifesting their behaviour. Thus, if we are wanting to work with circumstances we have to allow ourselves to know what is there. Therefore, checking our breath, checking our posture, checking our gesture allows us to have a sense of what our organismic being is feeling in relation to the evolving situation.

In doing mindfulness of the breath now we can just sit for a while in a relaxed way. The body should be relaxed so that it is not holding muscular tension and we are going to simply be mindful of the movement of the breath. We are not 'thinking' about the breath, we are not entering into feelings about it, rather we are just trying to observe how our breath is. Thoughts may arise, and these thoughts may impact your breath, so at that moment don't focus on the thought, simply focus on the shift of the breath. A car may go down the street and just observe if that shifts your breath at all. Observe that sometimes the breath is long and sometimes it is short, sometimes it has a kind of aroused intensity or sometimes it is very subtle. In all these situations just focus your attention on it. This requires an effortful engagement but pitched at a level that is not going to agitate you. Let us try this for a while.



[Mindfulness of Breathing Meditation]

## Wisdom resources Compassion

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People get to us and that is a really good thing, otherwise we would be endlessly lonely. Compassion or availability, to be touched and moved is beautiful but it has a cost. If you say *"I want to be a good person, I want to help other people and I can feel myself retreating, I feel I have had enough but I'm going to go over that threshold, I'm going to press the over-ride button, I'm going to go beyond because of them,"* the long term outcome is probably one feeling overwhelmed and stressed, for our little ego pot will not contain very much. Thus a helpful question would be: "Is wisdom a way of resourcing compassion?" We might start to examine 'what is the ground of my being?' 'What is the place in myself out of which this gesture towards the other goes? What is the place in myself which is the recipient, the site of reception, for whatever is coming towards me?' In the practice of dzogchen, which we will come onto a little later, the main focus is on relaxing and opening into the open, spaciousness of ourselves which is always present. As long as we are in the delimited identity of our habitual adaptations, our conditioning, our patterns and so on, our capacity will be small by definition. If you limit yourself you will be limited. Thus the more we relax out of our limitations the more we can cope with, and if we are going to be with people we will have to cope with a lot.

Thus, a helpful central question would be: "Can I allow you to be who you are, give you the space to manifest as you are?" On an outer level this means not reacting by needing to correct you in terms of what I think is proper behaviour. Moreover, on an inner level, your free potential as a person is being mixed-up with your habits and limitations, you are doing a number, you are caught up in something, so how can I affirm the basic goodness of you as a person whilst at the same time taking up a positioning that will help to untie your fusion with your limitations? This is similar to the basic proposition in Carl Rogers' model of counselling which offers three basic factors. One is unconditional positive regard, which means a complete openness and full availability to the other. The second is empathic attunement, which lets one really get into the nuances of how the other person is. Thirdly there is congruence which is to say, *"And I exist as well ... I can't let you just be yourself on your own terms because I am part of being with you, and therefore I need to bring myself into the picture. Therefore, how can I bring myself into the picture without somehow reaffirming your limitation?"*

For example, in therapy somebody might be talking and you might say at a certain point: *"I am aware you have been talking most of the session and I don't know if you want to hear anything from me?"* Very often the response to that is, *"Oh, I am so sorry..."* as if the person has done something wrong. It is quite difficult isn't it to help somebody see what they are doing without that suddenly flipping them into self-blame, feeling guilt and bad, which of course is a replication of what has often happened in childhood. Small kids are often just bopping around having fun and someone shouts, *"Oh for god's sake shut-up! Why do you need to do this!"* The child freezes and feels that suddenly a big light has come onto them so that the free expression of them just being themselves is suddenly over-exposed and they retreat. That is what shame does. Therefore, can we generate absolute acceptance, unconditional positive regard, an infinite hospitality that says, *"You are fine as you are, and*

*there are a few things which can be untied. But the things which can be untied are not the fundamental definition of who you are, they are just a few habits that you have picked up along the way.* In that way we are trying to, as it were, drive a wedge between the fusion of the basic presence or availability or liveliness or potential of a person, and the habits that have evolved through their interactions with the environment. Both are present. The former, the openness, is authentic, it is a given, it is what is just there. The habits are also there presentationally; they have an impact, they affect our breath and so on, but they are constructs. Thus, basically we are good in our openness and our potential, and we are constrained. However, these constraints are not moral faults, rather they are functional constraints which, if they are enacted in the world, become, as it were, moral faults because they bring grief to other people.

We all have limitations so “Who is the one who is limited by my limitations?” In the moment that I wed, fuse myself into my limitations; I am the one that is limited. However, when I start to be aware of my limitation I am not limited by my limitation, I am actually freed by my limitation. Energy’s activity swirls around, moves, and suddenly goes into little spirals, a little maelstrom. Thus the more we can see how we tie ourselves in knots, the more we are awake to the part of ourselves that never gets tied in knots, for we start to see the difference between activity and awareness.

For example, say you are with a friend and you get into a fight where you feel really uncomfortable inside so that you can’t think and just don’t want to be there, it seems as though there is a whirling into this; it feels awful and suddenly you feel very small. You are saying to yourself, “I can’t bear it!” but who is the one who cannot bear it, who is this one who says that? As soon as you get that, are in touch with the open awareness of, you are immediately out of it and in it at the same time. Then you can be with the cusp-like movement thinking, *“Truly, in terms of how I feel this is it: I am circumscribed, I am small, I am reduced, this is awful, and in knowing that it is awful I am not in it.”* If I pretend, *“Oh it doesn’t matter,”* that would be a lie. And if I say, *“That is all there is,”* that would also be a lie. The Buddha’s teaching as always is the middle way. Both aspects are there and we position ourselves right in the middle: *“I feel like shit today, and in knowing that, I don’t feel shit ...and yet I do.”* We don’t have to change the object-form and we don’t have to change how we are in order to achieve freedom in it. Actually sometimes feeling bad is necessary if our life situation is bad. If your parents are very sick or they are dying you would feel terrible. If someone has gone away and your heart is broken you are going to feel terrible. It is to be a human being to have compassion; it is absolutely vital that you feel terrible – but who is the one who feels terrible?

We can fall into the terribleness and it becomes the definition of who we are but we can also be aware, ‘I feel terrible’ and then we can gently tilt and move between these two – sometimes in the feeling and sometimes aware of the feeling. If you are too far away from it you become spookily cool and if you are too much into it you will be a bit helpless. Very often we fall into things and we expect someone else to bring us out of it, and that is what friends are for in many ways, but we can also learn to befriend ourselves by being with ourselves while we are in it. It is these two aspects which are at the heart of wisdom and compassion and are not two separate domains. Wisdom is knowing that what is arising is

devoid of inherent self-nature, that it is an illusion like a dream. Compassion is the willingness to be in the world with others, which means that they get to us and we feel all these things.

## **The Second Foundation of Mindfulness: Mindfulness of Feeling**

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The second of The Four Foundations of Mindfulness is often translated as the mindfulness of feeling. Here feeling means the most basic feeling or reaction. It is sometimes translated as sensation. It means that we react very quickly to something that is occurring as either being positive, negative or neutral. For example, if we are being mindful of the body and we are just seeing what is happening, it is usual that we would take a reading of that quite quickly. For example, if you become aware of a tightness in your chest, it is likely that will evoke a negative feeling. You are aware of a constriction and immediately the sense is: "Go away" or "I don't want this" or "This is bad". This is the quality of feeling. From the point of view of reification, of seeing entities, self and other, positive, negative and neutral are the three categories we use for making sense of that. That is to say, we always take up a position toward our experience: if we like it we want more of it and go towards it and if we don't like it we want to protect ourselves from it and to move away from it. We can also be indifferent to our experience as when it does not impinge on us enough to really register.

In terms of the general teachings on mindfulness, being mindful of these reactions becomes enormously important. As soon as we take up a position we are going to start to view the object with a particular kind of interest. For example, if we think, "*I don't like this,*" the immediate thought is then "*How could it harm me and how can I protect myself from it?*" That clearly brings up a sense of wariness, of distancing, and instead of being open to the fullness of the arising situation, one has already put it into a category of 'unpleasant', 'dangerous' and has therefore turned oneself against it. Implicit in this, particularly in the positive and negative polarities of feeling, is a prejudice: "I am for something I agree with." That makes sense if one is open to the freshness of the situation because then one could open oneself to something that is 'good'. Of course, things that are good don't stay good for always and so the very strength of your alignment, "I want this", when the mood changes and you suddenly decide "I don't want this" you might find yourself stuck with it. Thus, the glue of desire, longing, wanting or approving can lead one into difficult situations.

Of course, very often the approval of the object, "This is good" or "I like it", is not based on a very direct, open apprehension of the thing in itself. Moreover, what has happened is the object has been subsumed into a pre-existing category: "I like it because it is an example, an exemplar of something I already know." That is the basis of stupidity of ignorance: "My country right or wrong." From the buddhist point of view, narrow identification is not helpful for it is based on the law of exclusion: "*I am British because I am not French. I am Scottish because I am not English. I am from Glasgow and I certainly don't want to be from Edinburgh. I am from the west side of Glasgow which means I don't like the people from the east or the south, and I don't like the neighbours either, and actually I'm not that fond of my brother.*" In that way the world can become very small. Instead of being able to define oneself very precisely from the inside out— which of course is incredibly difficult because we are so

multiple, so complex– the simple way is to define ourselves by excluding the things we don't like. Thus, if I say "My country right or wrong," then clearly anyone who is against my country is my enemy. I don't need to think about it, and that rapid fire, automatic knee-jerk response can lead into great difficulties as we can see throughout history. Thinking is difficult because as soon as we start to think, analyse and explore, problems multiply; we see events as complicated. Who will we make an alliance with? Who are the good guys? If everyone is a mix of good and bad how will we cut the cake? How will we free ourselves from enmeshment with problematic forces? It is extremely difficult. The allocation of value– trying to sort out what we like and what we don't like, what we are safe with, and what we are not safe with– can be an attack on any sort of real openness to the actual emerging situation. It also undermines our capacity to reflect on it, to walk around it, to see it as if it was a piece of sculpture, looking from different points of view so that its different aspects reveal themselves.

Therefore the mindfulness of the immediate feeling tone response to a situation is very important, for the feeling tone is grounded in assumption and it is also the beginning of further assumption generation. For example, "I like something – it must be good." This comes into ordinary English language: "*How are you doing?*" "*Good.*" "*What good have you done for sentient beings today?*" "*Nah, I feel good.*" You are *not* 'good' you just *feel* good. In fact you feel Ok or happy and you *think* it is a good thing that you feel that way. However, the fact that something pleases you doesn't make it good. In fact many of the things, which please us, might in fact not be very good, just as obesity and alcohol campaigns tend to remind us. Many of the pleasure in life are actually not so good. What is good for the tongue is not necessarily good for the heart or the liver.

Thus, what is required in this mindfulness practice is to catch yourself in the process of applying a label, an identification, and to just see what the basis is for the allocation of that label. For example, is what we call 'a bar of chocolate' good in itself, or is it the fact that it becomes an object of desire for us which then becomes the basis for us saying 'it is good'? When I say 'it is good', I conflate the fact that 'I like it' with 'it has moral value' thus allowing me to eat more chocolate. I am giving myself approval as if I am doing a good thing by eating chocolate because 'it is good'. Therefore, this second foundation of mindfulness involves observing how quick thinking, easy thinking, lazy thinking, labelling, makes us not think. It is what commercial companies are doing all the time with all the money they spend on advertising. They are trying to create symbolic identification with a logo, a brand, so that if you come to rely on that brand you will be willing to purchase everything in it because it will be reliable. Marks and Spencer spend a lot of money exactly on this: "We are a regular supplier, we are absolutely reliable and you know you can trust us for quality." It is not necessarily true but when people have that in mind they relax and feel it will be ok if it comes from that shop.

This is exactly the investment that we are trying to observe here, for part of the identification of phenomena involves investment of aspects of ourselves. In psychoanalysis this is called libidinal cathexis, which simply means that the life energy we have inside us, our aliveness, our vibration of connection and meaning and value, becomes located inside a particular object. That object may not be a very good object for it to be located in, but

because we make bonds with the world through projection, through seeing what is good as outside ourselves, we become hooked on these particular objects. Thus, what we want to do is to try to observe the immediacy of the allocation of interest and value to whatever is arising. Then we want to try to see what the basis is for this attribution. Is it habitual? Or is it on the basis of something which is truly revealed about the object? And even if it is truly revealed about the object, because the object reveals itself to us in relation to many contingent factors in a temporary juxtaposition, when we encounter the object – as that pattern or juxtaposition changes – it may not have that same value anymore. For example, *“Do you like chocolate?”* Yes. However, after ten bars of it you might not like chocolate. Thus, part of the liking of something is the absence of it. As the old saying goes, “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” Actually absence makes all the sense organs grow fonder. If we haven’t heard music for a while we want to hear music. If we haven’t smelled some delicious perfume or spring flowers we are so drawn towards that. But we are quickly satiated because the yearning was for distraction. There is a difficulty in staying with what is here for just sitting, settling, and waiting creates a redundancy for the ego as an active agent. If there is nothing for me to do who am I?

One of the functions of meditation is to practice becoming the audience. Usually the ego wants to be on the stage, wants to be a performer, sometimes in a supporting cast and sometimes the star. However, we need to have time in the audience where we are just part of what is going on. We don’t have a leading role, we don’t need to lead it or direct it but can just applaud and feel that is ok. This can be very frightening for many people, especially if you are getting older and you feel your physical energy is draining away. As we get older we become physically incompetent and not able to take care of ourselves, and if we have been highly wedded to the notion of being an active agent, being in charge, it becomes almost intolerable because we have never wanted to be the audience. Therefore meditation has real value in letting us see that the world performs itself; everything is going on if you just relax and wait. You don’t have to be busy in making it happen. Sooner or later something will happen. However, there is an incredible need to make things happen, to be involved, to be an agent, to be one who makes a mark. Of course if we are the audience we are being marked, and how to be marked without marking in reply can make us feel like a slave, a servant, as if we are being branded or somehow over defined. These things I think are fairly easy to understand because they are what happens to us on a daily basis.

### Practice of Mindfulness of Sensations

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When we do this practice we just sit as before and observe. Sit in a comfortable way and let the skeleton do the work. You can experiment for yourself whether having your eyes open or closed helps. You can start by being mindful of what is happening in the body and then once you have a sense of that, just be aware of your feeling tone responses that are occurring. For example, you are sitting and various sensations of movements arise and change in the body. You become aware of your posture, muscular tension, the movement of the breath and so on. When you are aware of these arisings try to be mindful of the attribution that goes with them, the particular tilting, whether you move towards it or away from it. The neutral position is also important to notice for this can be the domain of cut off disassociated states, blanking out, zoning out, “I don’t care.” These are methods of defensive

indifference. It is not a natural indifference but a reaction against the fear of being impinged on, the fear that 'something is happening to me that I don't like'.

When we are mindful of this quality of immediate sensation we are confronting the facticity of life. The experience has already happened and we apply an attitude towards it: I like it, I don't like it. The event has happened, I am still here but I don't like it. That is very interesting because what are we actually reacting to? Firstly, the event has already happened for events just go by, secondly the event has generated a narrative reading of what has happened, and thirdly, "I can't bear that". What is it I can't bear? Is it number one or number two for the event has gone? What we can't bear is the knowledge of the event. Actually, most of us have survived quite a lot in our lives. We have got through all sorts of events, but so many people who have survived mountains of shit can't realise that they are truly powerful survivors because they can't bear the story of what they have been through, although they have been through it. Thus, the strength, the courage, the continuity of existence, the vibrant capacity of the mind to be present in the midst of all sorts of unpleasant things is covered over because we can't bear knowing what has just happened, although we have survived what has just happened.

Perhaps the fact that we do survive and we are still here suggests that we are not who we think we are. Moreover, maybe the root of our identity is ontological, the quality of being, the on-goingness of our immediate existence, rather than the maintenance of particular stories and constructions we make about ourselves and situations. This puts into question the value of our rigid definitions we have of ourselves and opens up a huge freedom, for if I am not the stories about me, who am I? That is yet to be revealed, that is always being revealed moment-by-moment. No one will ever catch me and I can never catch myself for I am always free and always engaged. In that way we are stepping right out of the constructed prison of a narrative definition of self.

[Practice of mindfulness of sensations]

### Post-meditation Discussion

I think it would be useful to discuss with a neighbour to see if you can identify how you become aware of this movement of positive and negative attribution. Is it a cognition? Is it something that arises after the fact because you have found yourself aligned into an arising, not resisting it and therefore intuiting that that means positive? Or you have turned away from it and tried to install something else, and therefore it is negative? See if you can get some sense of how that functions for you.

**Participant:** We were just realising how much you can exhaust yourself in the course of a day by every little thing. We were both very aware of our heartbeats and a feeling of, "What is happening here?" and all sorts of little things. I heard my stomach rumble and thought, "Oh my goodness." Then heard other people's rumbles and then thought it was alright. So it really brought it home to me how much we are dealing with that all the time and how tiring it is.

**Participant:** For me there seemed a lot of desire in me for some strange reason. I don't know why but I found I was quite ruled by desire. I tried to keep myself balanced but for some reason a lot of desire came to me.

**James:** that is often the case though isn't it, we move towards objects. The whole structure of our body, with our sense organs directed towards the front, means that we are moving out towards the environment, and it is usually if we come across something we don't like that we pull back. This has advantages for it keeps us engaged but what is it that drives the desire or the hunger? In a sense we are intentional as creatures, we are looking for something, but what do we imagine it would be that would be of real satisfaction? For the various objects we meet give only temporary satisfactions and then we are on the treadmill again, moving and moving and moving.

The bear noting of something in a sense gives you nouns such as 'hot' and 'cold'. But once you start to elaborate you get all the adjectives and adverbs and more elaborated positions. The desire to elaborate takes us into narrative for we want to make sense of it but a lot of that activity is meaningless, just stuff. For example we hear a car going by and we think, "Where is that car going?" Who cares? The person driving the car cares but it is nothing to do with us – but the noise of their car has come into our world. Or we have an itch that we scratch and then it has gone, and we think, "Why did I have that?" There is stuff arising and passing all the time and it is just movement. It doesn't signify anything else. It is what it is and so if we are not satisfied with its bear appearance, and need to cook it and turn it into something else, we will endlessly have fuel for being busy. Inside that activity for making sense of things is the desire for the possibility of cognitive control, the sense that if we can get enough clear thoughts and can link them up then we will know what is what and our lives will be rich and deep and meaningful. But in fact an awful lot of what happens to us in our life is just meaningless stuff. That needn't take us into some existential despair for it is not necessarily negative, rather it is just a neutral fact. It is just stuff ... but we don't want that to be the case.

## The Nature of Ignorance

At this point it would be useful to start to link what we have been considering here to the notion of the three root afflictions or poisons. These are stupidity, aversion and attraction/desire.

Stupidity can be seen as a kind of mental dullness, a sort of not getting it. Moreover, dynamically it is a state of assumption in that we assume something to be the case. For example, we assume that we exist. Clearly we are here, we are alive and we are present. What are we present as? "Me! I am here and I exist." This becomes a solipsistic swirl: someone is having an experience ... who is the one having the experience? ... "Me!" ... Who am I? ... "I am the one having the experience." It just chases its tail around and around. This is the core nature of stupidity, an impenetrable screen of identification with fixed cognitions, which prevents the one having the experience putting themselves into question. The very fact that I say, "I exist," contracts myself into a position that affirms the particular unique 'me-ness of me'. This is affirming in some way but I have now diminished and

shrunk myself, nailed my colours to the mast: "This is who I am." Of course that then means I have a limited capacity for in being 'this' there will be some things I like and some things I don't like. That is to say, according to how we construct the core definition of ourselves, certain things can be brought together or not brought together.

This reification and objectification of our existence, "I exist as an entity", "I am a separate person", leads into "*This is happening to me.*" If we simplify that down we can say, "This is happening." There is the facticity of 'this is happening', which is revealed through a bare awareness, an impersonal awareness, which is still me because it is my awareness. There is all the vitality and freshness of existence in that but without the condensation or centripetal movement into the centre of definition, "This is happening to me", which leads into 'I like this' and 'I don't like that'.

In all the buddhist traditions there are many different methods for trying to tease open and unlock this contraction into a fixed definition of oneself, particularly on the experiential level, so that open, naked awareness can be present with whatever is occurring, including the particular patterning of 'I', 'me' 'myself'. That is to say awareness contains within it the definitions of the personality. It is not the other way round in that my individual personhood, my unique private personality contains awareness. Rather that is revealed in awareness. The personality, 'I', 'me', myself' is not the owner of awareness and it is not the agent of awareness.

In the buddhist tradition it says that for life-time after life-time we have been wandering in samsara in a state of ignorance. This is essentially what ignorance is. The dog is the primordial unborn awareness and it has a tail. That tail wags and that is who you think you are; you are wandering through your life, happy and sad. This is unreliable and unstable but it is not who you are. It is not the whole story. It is only part of the story. The big stage on which the story is enacted is awareness itself. Thus all that is required is to re-centre oneself, for these two phenomena have never been separated. It is not that anyone has lost their buddha nature, the ground of their being, for their being is manifesting out of its own ground all of the time. However, through the misapprehension, the mistaking of a manifesting display as being our core identity, we are ceaselessly trying to hold in shape and maintain a fixed sense of self. This is an impossible task for as we were looking earlier events touch and move us. When the dog sniffs something nice its tail starts wagging. However, when something moves through the domain of awareness there is a movement that is all. Awareness itself reveals subject and object without separation.

At the moment we are sitting in this room. We look around the room and we can construe this in several ways. One way is to say, "*I, living inside my skin bag, look out at this world which is out there – me inside you outside.*" When we are strongly fused with the sense of our individual self that is exactly how it feels. We feel a bit small and diminished: "*I am just a person in a big world. There is all this stuff going on and I never really quite understand what life is all about. I have tried my best but things keep messing up and I don't really understand...*" All kinds of neurotic stuff goes through our head. Another way of experiencing our being in this room is to relax a little bit ... we are just here. What happens if we are just here? What are we aware of? We are aware through our senses of 'cars', 'buildings', 'people', and we are also



aware of 'our body'. Even if I close my eyes I still hear things. I feel the sensation of my feet on the ground and I am aware of the cushion under my feet. That is to say, the object field or the environment and my subjectivity arise together. I am never truly alone because I am always experiencing myself in the environment. Therefore, the non-duality of self and other is what we are living all the time, for how I come into the world depends on the context. If I go away from other people, go into a solitary retreat for example, I still have practice to do, I arise as I am in relation to the practice. If I have nothing to do I won't know who I am which is why solitary confinement is such a punishment. People are kept on their own without books, music, sound, and sometimes the light is taken away, and people generally start to go a bit crazy, for we find ourselves through being in relation. What I call 'me' is incomplete for it is always me+you, me+the morning, or whatever it may be. That is to say, the self is always contextual and because it is contextual it cannot be autonomous. Autonomy is a completely false notion. It is useful for describing certain patterns of manifestation but it cannot define the true nature of the person because we are fundamentally relational.

Thus the central point of stupidity is that we don't recognise that we are always, already connected with other people. We are energetic forms manifesting in a sphere of interaction and we assume that *"I exist as a separate thing, 'me', and therefore, I need to protect myself. I need to stop the things I don't like and get more of the things I do like."* This is the basic nature of what is seen as the three core poisons for the one who is protecting themselves doesn't know what they want. What do we want? We don't know. If we think back on the course of our life with all the decisions we have made, have they been wise? The classic term for this is, 'it seemed a good idea at the time'. Time passes and then we think, "What was that all about? How did that happen? God, what was I doing? What was I thinking of?" Well, you were thinking it was a good idea.

This should give us pause to think. Perhaps, relying on thoughts as the ultimate arbiter of meaning and value is not a good idea. Maybe thoughts themselves are overvalued, that cognition, like a cuckoo, has pushed the other aspects of our intelligence out and settle into the nest, consumed all the food and keeps insisting that thinking will show what is what. That is probably not the case. Moreover the times when we have been safest and have made good decisions is often when we have had a deep intuition. The feeling of deep intuition is the feeling tone of actually being connected directly with the environment, when you start to trust what your belly tells you. The more that is the case one can start to relax and see that these pulsations of attraction and aversion are simply communicative modes. They are not carrying any inherent truth inside them, they are just relational. The things which we don't like are simply a gesture, for if we are embodied we have to choose something. For example if you go out for lunch you have to choose something off the menu. It is not a big deal but you have to do it. "What will I have?" We make a choice and some food comes and we eat that. But what do I really want? "I don't know." That is a false question for how could I know what I really want? If there isn't a real me which is a fixed thing all we have are passing fancies. This is Prospero's island, a realm of dreams, a realm of illusion, and so to want to have a concrete, definite truth is a kind of madness for you are asking for something you cannot have. What you can have is participation in an emerging field with others and that participation, if it's imbued with wisdom and compassion, can be

light, connective, delightful, pleasing and valuable – but it won't establish anything stable, you won't be safe in your manifestation for that is not what manifestation is.

There was a story in the newspaper recently about a lady who came out of her house and saw someone sitting in her car. She asked them what they were doing and the man drove the car at her and killed her. There was another story recently about a Sikh man who was a builder. He was a good-looking man and somebody started chasing him down the street and they killed him. These stories points to the fact that manifestation is unsafe. There is not a thick wall between life and death; people are dying all the time in car accidents and so on. Our life is so fragile. Of course we have to be mindful or careful or do our best to protect it but it is not a solid thing. It is risky to be alive and what keeps us safe is being present in the moment through the senses. We are most able to do that if we are not locked in the convolutions of our mental labyrinth, chasing one thought after another after another.

These three poisons are essentially ways of tightening up and resisting the relaxation that comes from relaxing into an open presence. Open presence simply means that there is no limit to what can be received. There is no way of being overwhelmed because there is a place for it. Now, why don't we want to have that? It is exactly as we were looking earlier. If I were that open I wouldn't be me. "I don't want to stop being me." Therefore, in order to maintain myself, and ignoring the fact that I am going to die, I will hang on to being whoever I think I am and try to maintain a fixed frame of reference. From the buddhist point of view, when we die that fixed frame of reference, all the familiar things of our life will dissolve and we will find ourselves moving into a rebirth somewhere else. In that 'somewhere else' we will have none of the currency of this life in our pocket and we won't have a clue what is going on. Then we gradually start to find our way into that existence ... and then ... you pop your clogs and once again off you go – round and round and round. Thus trying to maintain a narrow focus has no deep or essential value inherent in it. What has deep value is a relaxed state of openness which can actually manage to welcome and contain whatever occurs.

There are many unpleasant and difficult things that occur and that need to be incorporated, accepted as part of our existence: desire, longing, lust, murderous feelings, jealousy, rage, and so on. As long as we say these are terrible, negative qualities which diminish me and I must not have them, we are all the time trying to purify ourselves by splitting ourselves, by trying to cut off aspects of ourselves and push them outside. On the other hand we can leap into indulging them, but that is another way of lostness. The middle way is to see them as energy forces inside ourselves. "I can accept this is how I am." With these forces as a resource we can then see how they could be mobilised in a way which can be useful: *"What needs to be said? How can my anger be useful to challenge things? How can the arising feelings of irritation be something which is giving accurate information about the field, and therefore don't need to be interpreted as there being something wrong with me?"* That is to say, our basic emotions, as we develop a healthier relationship with them – if we stop indulging them, either by merging with them or trying to get rid of them – can show us they are just giving feedback about what is going on. That is all. Moreover, if we use that feedback then the immediacy of response in a situation will just be there.

For example, in the course of a day I see many different patients in the hospital where I work and I behave in different ways with different patients for there is not a standard package to be given to them. There is the fact that if I relate to them, how they are affects me and what will come out of my mouth. I can say some things very easily to one person but to another person there is no way I could say what I have just said. With some patients confronting them very strongly is incredibly useful but with other patients it would be completely the wrong thing to do. Thus, rather than thinking, "Oh, I need to get better at confronting," we can observe, "Oh, something is going on wherein I don't confront this patient." Usually if we really enquire into that we will see that the non-confrontation isn't due to our own neurotic placation and anxiety, but rather it is telling us something about the quality of the interaction. This is at the heart of having a more hospitable awareness, an awareness that allows everything to be here as communicative about the moment. Thus by living connected to what is going on, what is revealed in the moment allows me to respond. That response has absolute validity in the situation but it doesn't really have much validity outside that.

We have OFSTED inspectors that are causing mayhem everywhere for they are asking people to be eternally accountable: "You must justify what you have done and if your justification does not fit my template you have done something wrong." This generates a culture of fear but of course we do this to ourselves. We have these internal suspicious critics and we don't really trust ourselves. We are not quite sure whether we can relax and be spontaneous because maybe we get it wrong: "I don't want to do the wrong thing." That sort of anxiety seems to be somehow making us safe and making us better people but the possibility of this kind of mindfulness practice is to really investigate that. What are these spirals of arousal which come in? What function does our anxiety have? Does it keep us on the straight and narrow, because if so we are probably working from a basic assumption that we are bad, something is wrong with us, and only by worrying about it and keeping on our own case and driving ourselves, can we possibly be at all acceptable. That is a very, very bleak vision, a sort of Hobbesian view of the world.

However, from the buddhist point of view, especially the dzogchen point of view, from the very beginning our nature is completely pure. There is no fault or error in awareness. Awareness has never been marked, or damaged, harmed or mixed up with anything else. Our nature is open, pure, and perfect, and within that nature, which is like a mirror, our behaviour arises, our thoughts, feelings and sensations arise. These manifest like little spirals and the way to release these spirals, knots and tensions is not by trying harder by driving ourselves, by berating ourselves, but by integrating the manifestation into its own ground. The more we recognise all manifestations are linked to the ground, the more we will experience them as instantly releasing. The more we cling onto them as being some 'thing', which is the basis of stupidity, the more we get into adhesions which create pain and difficulty.

### **A Central Point of Difference Between Dzogchen and The Theravadan View**

In the theravadan commentaries on the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta*, The Mindfulness Sutra, it always says, "Try harder – Try harder." But from the point of view of dzogchen one

is more inclined to say, "Take it easy. Don't judge yourself too harshly. Observe how you are and the causes and conditions through which you get tied in knots. What are the causes and conditions whereby these knots will start to unloosen." This is the main work, to observe what tenses you up, and what releases that tension.

The central point of differentiation between traditional theravadan mindfulness and the more general mindfulness that you will find in dzogchen is an attention to the one who is being mindful. Within the theravadan approach to mindfulness this is never really directly addressed for the one who is doing it is the five skandhas, and there is a taking-for-granted of that. However, in the dzogchen tradition we are very concerned to observe who is the one who acts? What is the nature of agency? When we talk about 'me' doing something, what does that mean, for actually what we are talking about is a narrative account of something. What is the actual phenomenology of the arousal of energy as it moves towards an object? In the dzogchen teachings it says that from the very beginning our own mind has been completely perfect. This means that the mind is not a thing, it is not a construct.

In this room there are people who speak different languages. Some speak French, some speak German and so on, but we are speaking in English. We are speaking in English because we all understand English. We weren't born understanding it but have learnt it. Some people learnt it very early in life and some later. All that we construe and think and do inside English is a set of learnt pieces, it is a language game. In Wittgenstein's notion of a language game you enter into the game, you learn the rules and you act according to the rules as if it was meaningful. When we were born we were born into the particular language game of our family and we learned to take those rules as if they were self-existing. They were there before we were born and we come into it and it just seems to be how things are. Then of course we go to school and learn different kinds of language games, and we tend to move seamlessly between these language games and learn to comport ourselves in different social settings with a degree of ease and appropriateness. What often doesn't happen however is that we think, *"Hang on a minute ... I keep changing these things ... what is real? I am taking each of these things to be real but they can't really be real because if it is truly real what is the rest?"*

All of the games, if we believe in them, seem to be truly real. When one of the games collapses we can feel very sad. People are invited to believe that something is the case, and we are willing because we are mugs and sucker to believe that almost anything is the case. We act as if it is the case and then suddenly we are betrayed for we were taken in, we were fused with a language game and took it to be real. Football is a game – it is not life despite what the t-shirts say. All of the things that we do in samsara are just games, or from a buddhist perspective we would say they are an illusion. They are like the reflection of the moon on the water. These things arise due to causes and circumstances for a while and then they are gone. When you were captivated by them they seemed to be completely real and then they are gone. All that remains are the traces created by one's own orientation during the time of one's participation. In the traditional buddhist language this is called karma, the tendencies we develop while in a game we were taking as real.

When we start to see that things are not so real and that our being in the world with others is a display of energy, we see that we are living in a participative theatre where I make a gesture and you make a gesture and so on. These pulsations of connection and movement are all that we have, and that can be done collaboratively or with conflict. Generally speaking our lives go better when it is collaborative. When we relax into the presence of our being there is enough space for everything as it is with all its difference. We are not going to get overwhelmed and so we don't need to anxiously edit things in terms of 'good', 'bad', 'for me', 'against me', and so on. Everything that arises occurs within the mirror, the revealing space of awareness, and the mirror itself does not change. In a mirror the reflections change but the mirror itself does not change. Thus we can relax and just allow whatever arises to be there for no reflection can destroy a mirror, no arising can destroy or mark the nature of the mind. That is why in the Tibetan tradition it says the nature of the mind is indestructible, vajra. There is no substance to it because it is open and empty and yet it is inseparable from everything in the world. This indestructible awareness offers infinite hospitality to whatever is there. So we can relax. It is ok.

Awareness can 'cope' with everything. It is the ego aspect of ourselves which is going to be tremulous and upset for the ego cannot cope with everything. We are both this limited physical existence and an infinite awareness. It is not a case of either or but the integration of these two main modes. If you open to your awareness you can still be hit by a car and die. People who get some kind of awakening or enlightenment still die for it doesn't stop the body having the logic of the body, but rather you don't have all your eggs in one basket. If you think, *"I am just this physical form and when I die that is it, so it is all up to me. I have got to get the most out of life. I have got to do my best,"* these incredible pressures and driving forces can make us crazy because how do you get the most out of life? What is the best thing to do? What will make me happy? How will we know?

If we try to be present with whatever is occurring we will always be where we are. What this is suggesting is that ontology precedes and is more important than epistemology. That is to say, the quality of being, of being oneself just open and present is more important than any interpretation or understanding that can arise, for every understanding vanishes – it just goes. You may have had the experience in school or later in college or university of writing an essay. You really get into it, you finish it, you hand it in and if you get a good mark what do you do then? It has gone. It was just a moment. You fall in love. It is just a moment. You eat a good meal. It is just a moment. Nothing can be grasped. You cannot take it with you. But who is the one who remains after the event. You are still going. 'Someone' is always there. Who is the one who is always there? Since you were born you have always been 'you'. You haven't been the same size, you haven't been doing the same things, you haven't had the same interests or the same friends but somehow you have always been you. What is that you-ness of you? That is the unborn natural condition. That is the nature of the mind itself. By relaxing into that the various turbulent movements of life – happiness, sadness, closeness and distance, they just come and go. But under all circumstances we can still be here – open and spacious, an infinite hospitality. That is the central point of the difference between dzogchen and the theravadan view.

### **The Third Foundation of Mindfulness: Mindfulness of Mind**

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The third foundation of mindfulness is mindfulness of the mind, *citta*. The mind in this sense is not the open awareness but what we might call the site of mentation, the site of mental activity which includes memory, planning, thoughtfulness, and so on. The mental content of our mind is also pervaded by these three poisons we were looking at earlier. That is to say, a lot of our thoughts are repetitive, they follow familiar patterns. We have our own private obsessions, likes and dislikes. This is the realm of stupidity, the sense that 'I know who I am', 'I can define who I am'. Then inside that we have the movement of attraction and resistance to particular thoughts.

This level of experience is not normally revealed to us in our everyday life. But when we sit to meditate, when the external stimuli are removed and we are just with ourselves, we become much more aware of our internal turbulence. We become aware of leaping into some thoughts and fusing with them, and trying to keep other thoughts at bay, feeling them to be toxic or poisonous. We also become aware that we have a discontinuous sense of self, in that we are in one thought and then suddenly we are in another one. We might even consciously intend to do something like track the breath and suddenly we are off into a train of thoughts. This is very similar to what happens when we are dreaming. Sometimes we remember a long dream, we are in one particular scenario and then for some reason we jump out of a window and then we are on a train. In the same way just as you are meditating and following the breath, suddenly you are off thinking of work or about a friend, and you are completely in that. Then that comes to an end and there is a shift to something else.

These mental events are permeated by three factors: the belief it is real, and because it is real either 'I like it' or 'I don't like it'. When we practice this third mindfulness, we sit in the same way and start to observe the content of our thoughts and how we stand in relation to that. For whatever arises in the mind we can see these three main categories operating: neutral or indifferent, aversive, and fusional or attractive. These are the general categories and of course there are all sorts of subdivisions but in these three general categories almost every kind of mental event can be located. Thus at first we are just trying to do that.

One of the functions of this is that it gives a protective, prophylactic force to save us from being so caught up in thoughts, for if we are mindfully attentive to what is arising, the proactive quality of that pulls us together so that we are not so dispersed. Just as when we are on about something we sort of gather our resources, we are 'all of a piece', we are moving in the same direction. Thus the intentionality of the mindfulness, antidotes dispersal and brings clarity to seeing the structural quality of the thought rather than being caught up in identification with the semantics of it.

Let us try that for about ten minutes. Just allow your mind to move freely with its thoughts, feelings and sensations, and attend to the particular turn that you see these arisings as having.

[Practice for ten minutes]

This is something we can practice again and again. It is quite difficult to do because what you are asking yourself to do is to keep an eye on something which is rolling free. That

is to say, if you let your mind run free, to precisely keep an eye on it is more difficult. It is not that somebody comes and knocks on your door and you look at a CCTV screen to see if you like the look of them or not before you open the door. There is no door to the mind. When the thought arises it is arising as you, it had already got you before you knew what was there. Observing the mind is incredibly difficult. It is not like being inside your body and looking out of your eyes whereby turning your head very quickly you can disrupt the absorption of being fixated on one external object. When you are in your thoughts you cannot do that. Thus it is a very subtle, nuanced activity to do. But with some practice you get a bit more clarity and you can be present with what is arising and just feel the tilt of it. Is it that one wants more of this thought or less of it? Generally speaking all thoughts are pervaded with a degree of desire. This desire is different from the desire for a mango milkshake; it is not that it is something nice so that we would like to have that experience again. It is a much more existential desire for there is a need to be fused with something in order to exist. The ego like the mind has no shape or colour itself. It finds its existence by haunting so like a ghost it occupies the space, which is filled with something else.

When a thought arises and we identify with it, we are already in it – what does that mean? This is where meditation becomes very interesting for who is the one who is experiencing the thought? This is at the heart of dzogchen and all the tantric practices. We start with the state of awareness, open, relaxed spaciousness, and experience arises into that ... and then it has gone. If you look from the point of view of a 'subject' examining an 'object' it is very difficult to observe your mind. This is why a great deal of people struggle with meditation again and again for there is the sense that "I am trying to do something to myself." This is almost impossible. The key thing is to relax and open to a spaciousness of clarity, within which thoughts, feelings and sensations arise. Awareness itself is not actively trying to do it or make it. It is not like someone who has been employed at short notice to manage the spotlight at a theatre for a show they have never seen so that, when the curtain opens and the dancers run on, they struggle to keep the spot light on the central dancer for they do not know what they will do. That is how we end up in the meditation. We don't know where the thought is coming from and we are trying to follow it. But because the mind is always fresh and new we will never catch it. This is why in dzogchen they use the image of the mirror a lot for the mirror reveals what is there without effort. The mirror doesn't run around trying to find something and then focuses on it, it just reveals what presents itself.

Therefore in tracking the spontaneous, the intention has to relax so that all the attention can be relaxed into a pervasive awareness rather than focused into a spot light. What we are doing is relaxing the habit of intentionality or uncoupling intention and attention. In many of the general meditation methods of theravada, mahayana and tantra, intention and attention go together for we are setting out to do something. This can be the visualisation of a mandala, the observation of the breath and so on but it is predictive and noble in advance. However, this intentional attention finds it very difficult to catch the spontaneous moment. Thus when we do the practice, first of all we just sit and relax into the out breath, relax into open spaciousness and just observe what arises.

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### **The Fourth Foundation of Mindfulness: Mindfulness of Dharmas**

The fourth aspect of the traditional foundations of mindfulness is called the mindfulness of dharmas. The word dharma means a whole range of things. It means phenomena, external and internal mental phenomena, and it also means the basic teachings of the Buddha and all the dharma teachings. Mindfulness of dharmas means becoming mindful of the constituents or the basic building blocks of two aspects. The first aspect is samsara and the second aspect is nirvana. In the traditional account, the basic building blocks for samsara are the five heaps or skandhas, which includes all of the most basic phenomena we experience including ourselves. There are shapes, infinite numbers of names that we can give to different shapes. We can say red, orange, green and so on, and inside these colours there are many nuanced shades. There are economic systems, the history of villages, towns, cities and nations – there are many, many things out of which we make other things. Anything which is a product can also be the cause for further products. Thus we have an endless chain of cause and effect and each point of that can be called a dharma, for a dharma is a building block.

Our world is built up of many kinds of assumptions. At the moment we are in England which is not a very problematic statement. What it means is that we all share an assumption: We agree that the place where we are is called England. It need not necessarily be called England because England is called by other names if you are living in other countries. But inside this language game we agree that it is England and that reassures us that we are a bunch of smart cookies that know what is what. But we have to be thoughtful that this is a construct which we are taking as a given. Thus mindfulness of dharmas is mindfulness of the way in which a construct is taken as being self-existing.

### [Mesmerised by our own Creativity we create Samsara](#)

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The classic teaching on how we take objects to be self-existing comes from an early theravadan text called the *Milindapano, The Questions of King Milinda*. In this text the Prince asks the Buddha to explain the basic principle of buddhism to him. The Buddha asks for the King's chariot to be brought out and for the King's servants to take it to pieces and to lay out all the disassembled parts. In this being done there was a lot of wood lying on the ground. Then the Buddha said to the King, "*Where is your Chariot?*" And the King replied, "*I don't have a chariot anymore, it is destroyed.*" Then the Buddha asked the servants to put the chariot back together. "*Oh!*" said the King, "*Now I have a chariot again.*" So then the Buddha says to the King, "*What was added to the pieces to make a chariot for when the pieces of wood were lying on the ground you did not have a chariot?*" Nothing substantial was added but some-thing was added. What was added was the concept in our head. When we see the chariot, we see it as being 'out there' but where does the chariot exist? It exists in our mind. We add a name, an interpretation onto the phenomena and because we have a shared cultural agreement we think 'this is a chariot' and we all feel intelligent. However, actually we become stupid for we have agreed to imagine that something is truly existing which is not truly existing. A construct is brought into place when we apply the concept 'chariot'. All these dharmas, all these assumptions, all these pieces which have been aligned, which have been juxtaposed in this specific pattern, have been locked into shape which we see as self-existing in and of itself: "It is a chariot."



I remember as a kid having a bicycle and sometimes the chain would come off and my hands would all be covered in oil as I was struggling to get the chain on. I'd think, *"What is this? It is not a bicycle. If it was a bicycle I'd be sitting on it riding it."* Eventually I got the chain back on and the bicycle was a bicycle – but when the chain was off it was not a bicycle. It is that simple isn't it. From the buddhist point of view this is an imputation by definition. It is a projection, something is put from the outside into something, and having been put into it, it is then experienced as belonging to that phenomenon. It appears inherent when it is actually contingent. Thus we can see that moment-by-moment either we are cheating ourselves by taking things to exist when they don't really exist or from a tantric point of view we are creating everything. For example, who is saying that this is a buddhist centre? We are. We name it. People who don't know anything about buddhism would say, "I don't know what it is. It is some weird place." But we say, "No, it is not a weird place, it is a buddhist centre." Thus we can see again and again that we are creating narratives that we believe in. We are storytellers for ourselves. Through our suspension of disbelief, our succumbing to, our enchantment by and intoxication with our own creativity, our storytelling, we are mesmerised and bedazzled, surrendering the clarity of awareness as the price of belonging. But our belonging then becomes a kind of imprisonment.

The practice of dzogchen is concerned with how to maintain the clarity of awareness and still participate with the full pleasure and enjoyment of life, to run these two things together so that it is not an either or. Often in buddhism, Hinduism, and other spiritual paths either you are a 'worldly person' running around involved in life or you step back and become 'a spiritual person', a mark of your spirituality being that you are not involved in things. Whereas the dzogchen view says that participation is not the problem. Rather, the problem is participating 'as if' everything was truly real, taking it for granted and not allowing yourself to see the actual nature of what is occurring.

We human beings in this culture at this time have these thoughts together. It is like a group hallucination. Two hundred years ago the cultural beliefs of the time, the economic situation of the time, the class differentiation of the time would have meant that a meeting like this would have been impossible here in Macclesfield. Two hundred years ago it wouldn't have been like this at all. What is occurring just now among us is a construction. Due to causes and conditions there is an interest in buddhism in Britain. Due to other causes and conditions this place arises in Macclesfield. Due to other causes and condition for some reason we all meet here together this weekend. This is a joint creation which has no inherent substance to it. It is just a meeting and parting. Our energies meet with more or less contact. For some people what is happening here might be very meaningful and useful and for others it may feel very strange. This depends upon the particular resonances we have inside ourselves – and this too dissolves and goes. Who is the one who had the experience? What is the nature of that awareness that is present now in this very moment? It is not just thoughts and stories about yourself. Before the thought you are still there. After the thought you are still here. What is that?

This is just openness – nothing at all – and then there is something. The something arises in the nothing. Here we are. What is it? Whatever we want it to be – we are making it up. "No we are not, it is what it is." If we did not bring our cultural assumptions into this it

wouldn't exist in this way. That is to say our participation is an act of co-creation. This is an emergent field which emerges due to the particular qualities that we have, and each person in this room will have their own unique specific taste in their mouth. We each have our own experience of being here. You can be sitting next to someone who is feeling it is great and you may be thinking, "What on earth is this?" The same stuff is going on but how come it is so different? This is because what we bring to each experience is our particular patterning of dharmas.

Therefore observing dharmas in relation to the aspect of samsara is to be aware of all these possible aspects, which when they come together create forms. You can either take the forms as real and self-existing, which is the creation of samsara, or you see the illusory constructed nature of these forms and with that awareness just allow them to come and go. In dzogchen this is called the self-liberation of all phenomena. Phenomena arise, they are here, they have an impact, they change and move ... and then they are gone. What is it that has changed and moved? It is your energy which does not have any solid internal definition. All we have are energies reverberating across each other.

### Mindfulness of the Dharmas of Nirvana: The Four Noble Truths

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The other aspect is mindfulness of the factors or dharmas of nirvana, which in the theravadan tradition means looking at the Four Noble Truths. The path to awakening arises on the basis of understanding the First Noble Truth of Suffering. Although all of us suffer and have difficulty in our lives we understand this in different ways. Some people think it is genetic, some think it is just like the weather, that life is hard, some people, perhaps through coming in contact with the dharma, may come to a point where they think, *"Oh, yeah, there is a lot of suffering. My life is actually not very good. The illusions that I have kind of keep my chin above the water but I don't want them anymore – this life really is quite painful."*

There is then the Second Noble Truth, which says that there is an origin to this suffering. You may start to read some dharma and think, *"Ah, that is right, that is what happened when I got involve with that bloke and it was like that, that was what was happening. That was attachment, that was delusion, that is really what happens for me!"* In that way we can see how we built up a particular illusion. We invested our creativity, our energy into something and became mesmerised and attachment to our creation. Like the Buddha says in the ***Dharmapada***, the creator of this house is gone, the house is broken, the roof beams are down, the house of illusion has collapsed. That is to say I see what I do. I think I am making a good life for myself but I am actually creating a prison for I am trying to make something impermanent permanent and that is why I suffer. I don't suffer because I don't try hard enough; I suffer because I try unskillfully. You can't make a silk purse out of sow's ear. You can't make permanent liberation out of impermanent phenomena – but we try. That is awakening on that second point.

The Third Noble Truth is that there is an ending to suffering. The ending of suffering comes when we no longer bring these constructive factors together and believe in them, for suffering arises from the false belief that something is true and self-existing; we strive to get the unstable to be stable. If we recognise the unstable as unstable, that energetic

manifestation is always changing, that we have meeting and parting, we can be aware of the pain that goes with that. But when we start to feel the meaning of our life is lost when something ends or passes this is because there has been a false attachment. For example if you have kids they grow up and they go away. They are doing what is natural. If you have built your life on top of your children you are going to get upset. If you build your life up on the structure of your work and then the boss leaves and someone difficult to work with comes in then you are going to be sad because you liked it the way it was. You didn't have any power to control it. "Yes, but I thought..." What did you think? You didn't think, you assumed, and thinking and assuming are different. In that way, to awaken to the ending of suffering is to stop wasting energy in trying to make things the case when they are not the case.

The Forth Noble Truth is The Eight Fold Noble Path which leads to letting go of the delusions of the pathways to suffering. However we also need to be mindful that these good aspects of the Eight Fold Noble Path, right livelihood, right concentration, and so on, are also impermanent. Even wisdom is impermanent, for we may build up a lot of experience and then we get old and die, or if we live long enough we get dementia and forget. So what was it all about? What was the point? Well, who is the one who gets dementia? It is a very central question that we have to face in the practice of dzogchen. There is no point in having a fantasy of enlightenment as being clear all the time. Awareness and the content of the mind are not the same. It is quite possible to be aware and confused at the same time. But if we build up in our mind an image of what clarity is, if we think that buddhas are nice and smiley, clear and straightforward sorts of chaps, that this is the sort of chap I want to be with, maybe it is not like that. Maybe the buddha is more like one of these wild nutters with flames coming out of themselves. That is to say when we feel confused, when we feel depressed, when we feel lonely, if we have decided that these factors indicate to me that something is wrong therefore I cannot be alert, I cannot be awake, I cannot be in a state of awareness otherwise this would not be happening, we are simply telling ourselves a story.

Don't tell yourself stories. Observe and do the practice again and again being aware of whatever is happening. There is no conditioned arising which can limit awareness. That is the central point of the mahamudra and dzogchen teachings. Awareness includes everything. It cannot be caught or trapped by anything. So whatever mental state you are in- perhaps sometimes despair, or hopelessness, or cynicism, or an agitated excitement- don't fall into it, don't take it as real, don't take it as definitive of who you are. Just stay present with the one who is having the experience and observe. The experience will pass. Who is left? The one who was present with the experience. Who is that one? What colour do they have? What shape and so on?

The heart of all the practices is to be kind to yourself, to trust yourself, to open to yourself, and through that open into the situation. If you act as a policeman and are harsh and suspicious of yourself everything will shrink, and in that shrunken state everything you see will be diminished. The advantage of that is that it gives everything a definite shape where you think you can move it around and make things happen, but it is a very small world and that is the world that is referred to as samsara.

Giving yourself a hard time, striving to 'get' enlightenment will not work. 'You' will never 'get' enlightened. You are already enlightened for enlightenment is part of our existence; awake spaciousness is an aspect of ourselves. You cannot make it, you can't buy it, and you can't lose it. So if you say, "I am going to get it when I'm ready, when I'm worthy," it will take a very long time. It is not about being worthy for it is already yours. The main thing is to relax and to trust, to just observe yourself and see how you are, and through that awakening to the fantasies, the stories that you tell yourself about who you think you are.

### The Importance of Basic Calming Meditation

In the practice of basic calming meditation, also known as shiné or shamatha, we focus our attention on a simple external object or on the flow of our breath and make a clear intention that this is the only thing we will focus on. Whenever our mind wanders off just gently bring it back. In this practice we employ a conscious focussing of our attention in order to separate ourselves from our enmeshment within the fleeting contents of our mind.

With this intention the thoughts, feelings and sensations that arise are recategorised from being 'interesting' to being 'distracting'. We are extricating ourselves from the normal pull into fusion with the various phenomena that arise. The aim is to stand apart from the ever-changing flow of experience, to find some space and perspective in our mind, for when we are caught up in stuff, when it is all very busy, there is not much space. Some of the thoughts that arise for us may feel quite spacious but because we are in them we don't see them in relation to anything else. This encapsulation in the transitory moment creates a decontextualisation which has us jumping from 'world' to 'world'. The isolation of moments of experience generates an exhausting sense of fragmentation and the felt need to hold it all together.

In the general mahayana analysis this is called the state of impure relative truth. Within this mode of experiencing we have the sense of duality, of a subject and an object which are taken to be truly separate. This view is described as impure because the subject takes itself to be strongly real and also takes the object as strongly real, and with this generates judgements and the distortions of the five poisons, the afflicted emotions of stupidity/assumption, desire/attachment, anger/aversion, pride and jealousy. Our experience tends to be pervaded by some kind of colouration, some kind of emotional inflection, an enrichment or distortion of what is going on. In this state it is very difficult for us to see a situation without immediately having an opinion, a reaction which comes to be the main sense of the situation we take away with us.

This practice of calming the mind helps us to learn how to listen, how to taste, how to touch, without filling the space of experience with our habitual attitudes and assumptions. The practice of calming disrupts our usual patterns by encouraging a concentration which is simple and straightforward. It doesn't have any agenda and it is not improved by passion or emotional enrichment. You don't concentrate better on your breath if you are angry or sad or desireful. You may feel you are concentrating more for there is fixation on the object of your desire or rage. If you are really annoyed with someone there is a kind of tunnel vision and

aroused attention to detail and you know exactly what is what about the object of your anger or irritation. But this is very different from a calm, clear, concentration. With calm concentration the object is allowed to be itself and does not provoke the mind to busyness. Whereas when you are focusing on something with an affective arousal you fill it with your projections. You think you are seeing it clearly but actually you are creating it out of your projections, out of what you are imputing to be the case for the object.

The more we calm the mind and find ourselves less automatically caught up in what is arising we start to be more spacious and can see the actual status of what occurs more clearly. We are both more separate from what is going on and more connected with what is going on.

True connection is not based on merging but begins with perspective; we have to be separate in order to see. We don't see with fusion and we also don't see with avoidance. When we see clearly we have the safety of not being under attack, for what we are seeing is apart from us, it is not getting to us, it is not controlling us, and it is not overwhelming us. Paradoxically the uninvolved of subject and object allows them to be more present than they are, as transient illusory forms moving within the sphere of awareness.

This is the union of wisdom and compassion. Wisdom is seeing what is in its own place without distortion and compassion is the unbroken connection with whatever is arising. Sometimes we see compassion as a form of pity or wanting to take care of people, but in order to take care of someone as they are we have to see what their actual situation is without incorporating them into our assumptive world. Practicing in this way we come to dwell in what is termed the pure relative truth. Within this we still identify with the sense that, "I am here as a subject experiencing objects," but these objects are now more simple for we are not telling them what they are. We are not seeing them mediated through our reaction in terms of gain or loss; gain in terms of our desire, "What can I appropriate here," and loss in terms of how terrifying or frightening it could be if our certainty or security was taken away, thus bringing up aversion. Becoming relaxed and spacious and welcoming all beings into that state is the general path of all the mahayana teachings including tantra.

### **Dzogchen: Spaciousness Comes First**

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Dzogchen is a word which simply means great perfection or the natural perfection. It is a view and a practice in the tradition of Tibetan buddhism. It is concerned not with getting space in the mind but with recognising the mind in space. That is to say, spaciousness comes first. Spaciousness is the primordial ground. There is an openness, an indeterminability, an ungraspability at the very core of our identity. From this openness there arises what we take to be our mind. That is to say we become aware of spaciousness itself. This is illustrated in a traditional example: within the infinity of the sky there is the sun and the sun is blazing out. The sun is like awareness, radiating out, illuminating all that's around, but the sun is located in space.

If we are trying to get space inside ourselves it is as if we are like a balloon. The more you blow up a balloon the more space you get inside it. However, it is encapsulated in a skin

bag, it is sealed. The air inside the balloon is not different from the air outside the balloon but this thin rubber membrane creates the appearance of separation. In the same way, as long as we are fundamentally committed to being an individual, no matter what we develop it is very difficult to escape the domain of appropriation: "This is my experience." "I am quite good at this." "I have realised this." This is self-referential, a self-reflexive movement that takes even a very open experience back to what seems to be an enduring, on-going central point of reference which becomes a limitation even in the midst of opening.

Thus the path of dzogchen is about non-appropriation. It is about letting be, just trusting what is there, trusting that whatever comes, comes and not trying to interfere with events too much for actually all our interference is simply a form of activity which creates new problems. Thus part of the view in dzogchen is concerned with less activity and more openness. The more we open, the more we can see the complexity and then work with that, not through the paradigm of control and power but through minimal joining or participation moment-by-moment.

Grand plans tend to be disastrous because they are always blind. You can read the history of the first world war about the various pushes that were taken up on the western front and you can weep. You think of these 50,000 young men, someone blows a whistle and they get up and walk into a hail of machine gun bullets. Why? Because somebody had a 'grand plan'. The person who has the grand plan is not the person walking into the machine gun fire. The person who has the grand plan for collectivisation of farms on the Russian steps is sitting in the Kremlin with quite a full belly. This is what we have to be aware of; the one who manifests the grand plan and the one who pays the price are not the same. This does not just play out in politics but also inside ourselves for we are not one thing. We are each a polyphonic universe. We have many different voices, many different attitudes, impulses, many different positions or facets, and when we occupy one of these positions, that one seems to be the truth. When we are angry the world is revealed through our anger. When we feel tired we see the world in terms of tiredness. Somebody phones you and invites you to do something and if you are tired you don't want to go. If you were not tired you'd really want to go and you'd be excited. Moreover, these voices are not conscious and intentional rather they are constellated in the moment of interaction. We are ceaselessly participative but our participation is always just a fragment. We are dismembered, as we were looking at earlier, and until we can re-member or keep an eye on, or be aware of all our different members or aspects, all that we are doing when we participate in the world is bringing one bit out and bringing others back in. Every revealing is a concealing; every showing of one aspect of us is hiding other aspects of us. This is why when we are caught up in samsara, when we are caught up in duality, there is a kind of clarity that goes with a commitment to a position: "Now I know what I am on about. Yes, I know what I really want." In the intensity of the arousal of that we don't recognise that it is just today's point of view and that it is going to change. The old saying is that a week is a long time in politics. Well, an hour is a long time in being yourself. How reliable are you? Maybe every five minutes you change, maybe even every one minute. Now if you are committed to the idea, 'I should be reliable. I should know who I am', you are going to be very disturbed to know that you are not so reliable.

We pretend to be more reliable than we are and if we get away with it then, “Pretty good ... cheating other people, cheating myself, I am a regular guy, and you are pretty regular too.” This is not true but this is the social convention, this is the way we move. We attempt to stay in role, on track, all of which involves editing and construction of our presentational self. Modern sociologists and anthropologists have written a lot about the nature of narrative and the construction of social identity, but we don’t need to read books to understand this, we only need to observe ourselves. We want people to like us therefore we do as consumerism would recommend, we give people what they want, we try to be what the other wants, and because we have many different aspects we can very often do that. But what do ‘we’ want? Then we have a tension between being true to ourselves and fitting in or adapting to the other, and that tension can become very wearying, especially if I think what other people want or require of me is not what I want, for then it is easy to draw the conclusion that what I want is wrong. That is to say, if other people are the validators of my value and I feel false in pleasing them or fitting in, that must be a sign that I am full of shit, so all the more reason to seal myself over, to not look at who I am and to keep the facade going. That is very tiring and very difficult. So what is the best way of dealing with being disturbed?

As we have seen, part of the function of meditation is to provide a space in which we can see what is going on. Moreover, in dzogchen meditation the basic principle is that we just open and relax and stay present with whatever is occurring. Within mahayana there is a lot written about the difference between mind and the content of the mind, ‘*sem dang semjung*’. *Sem* means the mind itself and *Sem jung* means what is arising or coming up inside your mind. Thus there is the knower and the known. What we usually do is fuse with what is arising for us. We take our experience to be personal, and that very gesture of appropriation means that there is a site from which the appropriation is going out: “Oh, my god, I don’t want to be like this!” Thus a thought has arisen in our mind which we feel is defining ‘me’, for it wouldn’t be in ‘my’ mind unless it was ‘mine’. Two things are happening here. Firstly, the thought itself is being objectified and intensified and so appears strongly real. Secondly, the one who is taken to be the experiencer of the thought, ‘me’, is also seen to be small and truly real which leaves ‘me’ feeling overwhelmed by my own thoughts. Thus there is a reification of the thought and also of what I deem to be ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘myself’, as if I exist as a ‘thing’, an entity.

But do we have any stable parts? We have bodies but they seem to bop about a lot: the blood is always pumping, air is going in and out, the endocrine system is flushing hormones here, there and everywhere. This is all continuous – there is just a flow of ‘stuff’. There are no stable aspects to ourselves. Even bones are not particularly stable for they are actually processes. Thoughts are clearly not very stable, neither are feelings or sensations. When we scan our experience we find that there is nothing solid there. What we encounter is movement, movement which is revealed to someone. Who is the someone it is revealed to? Who is the experiencer of experience? If we are feeling happy who is the one who is feeling it? This is usually taken for granted for we say, “It is me of course!” The taking for granted of the enduring stability and known-ness of ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘myself’ is the basis of ignorance. We assume that ‘I’ is a done deal, that this felt sense of my own individual existence is self-explanatory and therefore we don’t examine it. Really enquiring into who is

the one having the experience is the absolute centre of the practice of dzogchen. Otherwise we are eternally condemned simply to be in stories about 'ourselves' and stories about 'other people'.

Central to the view of dzogchen is that the mind itself is pure from the very beginning. That is to say, the exquisitely subtle presence of just being ourselves prior to thought, feeling and sensation and so on, is pure – it has no content. Because it has no content it can have all content. We can be many, many different things and each of us are. Each person here has many different kinds of conversations, shows many different appearances to family members, children, parents, friends, lovers, people in shops, colleges and so on. We have many different interactions, and internally in ourselves in the course of a day all sorts of feelings and sensations arise. Because we are indeterminate, because we can't define who we are we can be all things. Samsara is the anxious desire to define our own existence: "I want to know who I am." "I am this." And what makes samsara different from nirvana according to the buddhist tradition is that in samsara each of these momentary solutions is – instead of being seen as a gesture of interaction, a communication in the ongoing flow of communication – taken as definitive.

From a Buddhist point of view we have many different life-times. Thus I can say, "I am a man," but that has to have a comma at the end of it for "I am a man, in this life-time." In another life I could be a frog or a dog. Thus what I take to be this situation is relative, it is contingent, it is dependent co-arising. Due to causes and circumstances I am alive in this form. There is no inherent truth or definition in this because due to factors it can change. That is true of all the factors of our existence. In this recent economic down turn, for example, many people have lost their jobs. There was nothing in what they were doing that was bad or wrong, but actions from people many thousands of miles away – actions which they thought were ok and of which they had no sense of the distant consequences – caused those redundancies. The fact the China wants to develop its economic structure and have a lot of low priced exports means that many factories in the midlands here went bankrupt because they could not face the competition. Here in Macclesfield at the Heritage Museum where we went for lunch they had a sign up saying how when the import restrictions on silk from France were lifted lots of the mills went bankrupt. Thus a law made in London impacted what was happening in France and people in Macclesfield became unemployed. Someone living their life as a weaver concerned with their daily lives, with their sense of their world suddenly finds that there is a wind blowing from very far away and it topples this little structure they are in. They didn't see it coming. How could they? For on one level it had nothing to do with them.

This is very interesting isn't it for we think that there is so much in the world that has nothing to do with us because we have a little shape that we live in: "My little world. I have my little house, my little ponies, I have got my barby dolls, and I move them around and do their hair and put them out in a row, and we have a picnic and then Christmas and a birthday party. I have my job and I have to pay my mortgage, I have got the shops and maybe I have got a special friend." Then a big wind blows. Somebody dies or you go to the doctor and they give you some bad news and the whole thing shifts. This is the problem with the clarity of the ego; it is always trying to stabilise a situation and turn the world into a



kind of chess game as if we knew all the pieces on the board: “If I do this and that then I will know where I am.” “Only if I know what will happen will I be safe.” Well, sweetie, you don’t know what will happen and you are not safe. “But I want to be safe – you mean I have spent my whole life working in a post office to end up unsafe?!”

What a buddhist point of view would say is that samsara is a paradigm, a world view, within which there is a lot of structural faulting which is invisible. Because we don’t see the structural faults we interpret the faults as being something to do with ourselves and so we try harder to fix them. But if the faults are structural they are beyond our capacity, and if we wake up to that then we can often feel demoralised and hopeless. *“Well what is the point? I have done my best and it hasn’t worked out. What should I do?”* Buddhism is saying that all of this distress comes from looking in the wrong place. Rather than always thinking about the content of our experience and how we can improve it – having a sort of object-fixation where we are looking out and moving things about – instead we relax and explore who is the experiencer of the content, who is the one having the experience?

In dzogchen the main focus is on relaxation, opening, and being aware of what is there in its richness and its complexity and having minimal intervention. It is not a path of mastery. It is not a heroic path. Many of the tantric paths are truly heroic, you become a great being who can save the world and kick the ass of all the demons and so on. Dzogchen is not like that for to be a hero is to have a particular kind of agency; you cannot be a hero unless you have a clear task. But what is the clear task? The clear task is to stay present. Staying present doesn’t involve any big demons. Staying present simply involves relaxing and opening. When Jason goes in search of the Argonauts he doesn’t come up to see this incredible multi-headed snake and think I will just relax and open. Hero’s don’t do that. They have a shield and they cut all their heads off. That is agency: “I did this.” Then the bards could write a story about it. A lot of tantra is established in that sort of discourse but Dzogchen is relax and open.

### [Meditation Practice – relaxing into space](#)

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We can practice a simple meditation now, which allows us to experience this relaxing and opening. The central point is that the mind is pure. If something is pure it is undefiled, just as when a reflection arises in a mirror, the mirror is not improved nor destroyed in itself by the quality of the reflection. In the same way, whatever thoughts, feelings and sensations arise, whatever actions you have done in your life, good actions or bad actions, none of these have improved the basic spaciousness of the mind. Every action, every thought and sensation is energy – it is a movement of our mind. The movements of our mind influence other movements of our mind; they don’t influence or change the mind itself. With this understanding we simply relax our attention out of the domain of energetic movement, which is what we are always caught up in, and just rest in the open, mirror-like awareness within and through which all movement is occurring – movement which seems like subject and movement which seems like object.

We do this very simply by imagining in the space in front of us a white letter A. You can imagine a Roman capital A or a Tibetan letter A, whichever is easier for you. This Aa

represents emptiness, the spaciousness of all phenomena, the spaciousness of the mind of all the buddhas. We then recite the sound Aa three times integrating with the presence of all the teachers and all the buddhas. At the end of the third Aa we just release the fixation on the letter Aa and let it dissolve into space letting our gaze rest in the open space. We relax all our fixations on whatever arises, sounds, colours, thoughts, feelings, sensations and so on. We simply rest in the openness. Then whatever arises, whatever comes just let it be there. It is just like a reflection – it won't benefit you and it won't harm you, so there is no need to react to it. Whatever comes comes, and whatever goes, goes. We don't try to hang onto thoughts that seem useful or beneficial or increasing of who we are, and we don't try to push away thoughts that seem negative or demeaning to the felt sense of who we think we are. For who we are, who we take ourselves to be is simply an energetic construction – it's just a sandcastle. Out of the infinite sand of the beach, we construct particular shapes from the factors of our history and the things which have happened to us. Then the wave comes and washes the sandcastle back into the sand. All that we take ourselves to be is part of the world. Like a magpie we have taken 'this is my family', 'this is what I do', 'this is what I love', 'this is what I hate' as being 'I', 'me', 'myself' but these are simply ungraspable movements of energy. Thus not identifying with 'subject' thoughts nor 'object' situations, allow subject and object to move freely as energetic flow.

[Meditation]

We have a break now and as you get up and move about, if you can just keep the sense of the movement occurring in space. If you are talking sound is going out of you into you through space.

### Mindfulness in Terms of Dzogchen: Recollecting the Ground

In terms of mindfulness in the context of dzogchen, what one is recollecting or remembering is integration of the ground and whatever is arising – the integration of the mirror and the reflection. From this point of view, what we mean by samsara or limited existence is a forgetfulness which separates us from the ground of our own being, leaving us wandering in a maze of thoughts, feelings, sensations, and so on that arise. When we relax into open spaciousness, very quickly thoughts, feelings and sensations arise, and when we get caught up in these thoughts and feelings we forget that openness. Therefore the on-going work is not trying to call back to mind a specific focus, but to relax back into the recognition, the integration of the experience of openness and the experience of the arising – to experience whatever is arising as inseparable from the open ground. Optimal integration is through relaxed spaciousness.

There are two main aspects in dzogchen. The first is concerned with primordial purity, with the natural purity of the mind. That is to say, the mind has no fixed content, it is not limited in any way, it is not defined by anything that arises. In the meditation practice that we were just doing you can start to experience this. If you keep releasing and letting go of whatever is arising you start to see that when you grasp at something and it seems real, the next moment it has gone. These moments of arising are like the particles of sand, and if you don't release them you gather them together and you build your sand castle of a self.

Then some event comes along and washes it away leaving you scrabbling around gathering up other little moments to build up another sand castle ... and another one ... and another one. However if we just allow them to go we start to see that awareness is unchanging, and that experience is always changing. The one who is aware of the experience is always there, like the mirror, and the flow of experience is just like the reflections, always changing, for you cannot stabilise experience.

This opens up the second aspect of dzogchen which is spontaneity. That is to say we allow things to be as they are, we find our participation arising just through being relaxed and open. The worry 'will I get it right' does not occur, for the one who is acting is not an individual self. There is nothing to prepare for in a precise way for participation emerges and arises through being in the situation. For example, here we are in this room with awareness of our embodied being which is inseparable from our sense of the perceptual field. That is to say our energy arises as 'subject' and 'object', we are never just in our own little subjectivity. In the breaks we talk to different people in different ways. Some people are a bit in themselves, some are tentative and shy, some are more relaxed and open, and so on, so if we relax and open we can just be in the situation – a mutual adaption is going on all the time. By not over-determining a situation, by not commencing with constructs and intentions, with 'something I prepared earlier' we can trust that the immediacy of the connectivity will give rise to what is there. That is the nature of spontaneity.

I would imagine that each of us in our different ways can suffer from some kind of social anxiety. Most of the time, when we become adults and our lives are a bit sorted, we find we create a world for ourselves where most of what we encounter is manageable. But every now and then we have to go into another social situation and we don't know how to do it and we find ourselves feeling a bit diminished or troubled. That is because we start to think about the situation, about what others may think of us: "Will I get it right? How do I do that?" Something happens in our thinking that extrapolates us from the situation and so we alienate ourselves. We start thinking about it, and it all becomes a bit solid and concrete and real, which then increases our anxiety. This alienation is ignorance, for ignorance is the ignoring of primordial integration. That is to say, from the very beginning everything has been perfect, everything has been integrated in the ground of becoming, but when we don't recognise that we then feel stuck with a lot of 'stuff': "Ah, what is all this?" So we start naming it and trying to work out what it is, and through that skill we develop a certain mastery and think, "Ah, I know how to do this ... I know how to have a life," – but inside that there is a kind of complacency.

From a Buddhist perspective this experience is named as the three stages of ignorance. The first stage is losing it, ignoring what is actually the case. The second stage is the elaboration of interpretations, and the third stage is believing those interpretations are real. We live inside a little world, which runs for a while, and then something whacks it and we have to rebuild our world ... and rebuild our world. That is what samsara is. It is a reification, a solidification which then has us bumping into situations. If you have a big jigsaw puzzle with lots of pieces it can be quite difficult to get all the pieces to fit, for each piece has a particular shape and it's only going to fit in its right place because it won't fit anywhere else. If you imagine your life in samsara as an infinite, endless, jigsaw puzzle

where you have your particular fixed shape, you have to desperately find other pieces that will fit with you. You meet someone and you think 'this will be nice' and you seem to fit for a while, and suddenly it seems as if they are tearing a bit of your edge off. However, when we start to see that everything is an illusion we start to get less concretisation and more flexibility. The invitation that the world ceaselessly makes to us to be flexible, to compromise and to adapt, is not an insult or attack. It is the ego that construes the situation as one of definition and defence, and so we go for power and control, but that is very difficult to achieve because the interactive field is so complicated. Thus from the point of view of dzogchen the most important thing is to relax, to trust, to open.

With this meditation practice we have just been doing, at first it is best to practice for short periods, perhaps five minutes or ten minutes at a time. What we want to do is just experiencing the arising and passing of phenomena. We are not doing this from the point of view of 'I am observing this' but relaxing our awareness so that it pervades the spaciousness – just as the clarity of the mirror pervades the whole surface of the mirror. We are not trying to look in the manner of a searchlight or a torch, which has a finite source point and illuminates a particular delimited area, for awareness is not located in one place or anywhere.

When we are present with what is arising it is as if we are located somewhere observing what is arising, which is located somewhere else – but as the object goes there is a space and then another object or experience arises ... and then that goes. For example in this room in order to see this wall on my right I have to turn my head. When I do this I then cannot see the wall on my left. So if I want to gain the experience of one wall I have to inevitably lose the experience of the other wall – so I'm having to keep turning back and forth and in that turning I am agitating myself. Thus when we are following our thoughts, when we are caught up in them, it is like being on stepping-stones across a river. Very often these stones are not in a very clear sequence. They are a bit wobbly and we have to hop about from one to another. That is to say we go from one thought to another, and each thought we arrive at locates us in a new positioning. Thus we are positioned here and there, filled up with a feeling or emotion, and then with another, and another. That is the nature of a dualistic involved consciousness – it is always somewhere and it is always up to something.

However, awareness is empty and open, revealing whatever is there without moving. Doing this practice again and again allows us to see that every time we seem to be 'somewhere' and we feel we have 'got it', if we stay relaxed and open what we have 'got' will vanish, for there is nothing to get. This is why you can't get enlightened for enlightenment is not some-thing to get. You can get better at learning French; you can get better at driving a car. There are all sorts of things you can develop skills in doing. But awareness itself is there from the very beginning. It is not a construct. It is not made up from your effort. It is not improved by good thoughts nor destroyed by bad thoughts. It is self-existing. That is why it is called *vajra*, meaning indestructible.

We start from the position of 'I am an individual self', 'I, me, myself' and want to improve ourselves. This is the basis of a great deal of spiritual practice: physical yoga, tai

chi, and so on. We feel that 'if I try hard I will get better'. This is absolutely true in terms of developing qualities. For example you might study the *paramitas* or *The Path of The Bodhisattva* by Shantideva, which shows you in detail how to develop various qualities such as patience, diligence, determination, and so on. However, you cannot develop your buddha-nature, for your buddha-nature is not a thing. By doing exercises you can develop your muscles so that they get bigger and stronger. You can develop your intelligence, your capacity for reflective rational. You can develop your understanding of grammar and literature and so. If you invest focused energy into any of these things you will get a result and there would be some benefit in that.

Our ego-self is like Latin grammar. If you attend to it and you work hard you will gain a certain mastery. We like to feel in charge of ourselves, to know the various contours and dispositions that our own individual-self has, but that self does not have the key to enlightenment. No matter how hard we try it will not open the door to enlightenment. That is just a fact. However, the ego is not necessarily part of the problem. It is something who's real nature is revealed when you have the solution – but the one who has the solution is not the ego. Who is it then that gets enlightened? Enlightenment is already there. At this very moment in this room we have our awareness of the room, prior to thought about the room, an unchanging clarity which reveals the experience to us. For example, say you go walking in the hills, trudging your way up a hill to get to the top. There is a vast vista that unfolds in front of you and there is a moment in which there are no particular thoughts in your mind - you are just awe struck. There is very little separation of subject and object, for subject and object are arising together – you are part of the world. In the middle of nowhere you feel completely at home. That is the quality of awareness. Awareness is revealing subject and object because the 'subjects' usual internal whirling of self-reference has been quieted by the awesomeness of the environment, leaving a space for the true illuminator to be revealed. The pseudo-illuminator is quiescent. The natural light of the mind now shows what is there.

This is not something that you can think about. It is not something that you can write about in your diary. We have all these marvellous romantic poets who spent hours and hours trying to capture moments of the sublime – but it is impossible, for the sublime is uncatchable. Why would you want to catch it? Better off going down the street and giving people free bus tickets out to the Peak District, for it is participative, it is a quality of experience which is immediate, direct and ungraspable.

The basis of everything is emptiness. The heart of the Buddhas teaching is the absence of inherent self-nature, whether you are reading that in a theravadan text or in mahamudra and dzogchen. In the theravadan texts they talk a lot about something being beyond enumeration, outside of arithmetic. In modern philosophical language it would be said to be beyond totalisation. Most discourses are totalising discourses, discourses of mastery: "You can master this subject" or "If you understand this you will see the whole circle." But totality means it can be 'got'. Dzogchen is about infinity and infinity is beyond accountancy. There is no way to measure the extent or the dimension of the mind. This is why in the practice of dzogchen we take up such questions as: What is the shape of the mind? How high is it? How wide is it? Where does it come from? Where does it stay? Where does it go to? When we do this, sit quietly and observe what is going on in this way,

we come up with solution after solution. If we simply stay with the solution and observe it, if it is the truth it should remain ... but it goes. Each of the solutions we come up with is the ego's appropriative totalising account: "I have the answer." But then it goes. It was just an opinion, just a fleeting moment.

That which remains, the unborn openness, is inexpressible. You cannot say it but it is there. When we talk in language what we are doing is moving energy around, and the purpose of dharma teaching through language is to try to massage the rigidity of our constructs so that we loosen up inside in a way that allows us to dissolve and let go of the burden of our constructions so that we can just receive and be part of what is already there. It is not about building up a whole new battery of new cognitions. All our speaking is a kind of massaging of energy so that we can start to recognise energy as energy, and the ground of energy as something else. If you take energy to have its own ground then you have the solidification of the individual ego: *"I am just me. I have always been me. I was born me, I have done lots of things in my life but I am just me."* That is a totalising. That is to say, "I know what I am. It is a done deal. It is already accounted for. I have a sense of what is what." These kind of statements are propositions, and the path of samsara is one of propositions, of statements, of answers. But all these answers are a kind of screen or a disguise which hide the real question of 'Who am I?' When we speak and project and assume and give our totalised answers we look powerful, we seem to be clear, but it is just an illusion, for everything that we have constructed has gone. Maybe you write something in your diary, or you write an article and it is all very clear and you are completely in that and then it has gone. There is nowhere to arrive. All constructions are impermanent. The Buddha said these things many times, and when we observe this for ourselves we see that structures arise and then they pass. If we are weeping because they are passing we are pissing in the face of the Buddha. We are saying, "Why are you right? Why can't I be right? It should be permanent!" But it is not – it just goes.

We are sitting in this dharma centre which arose due to causes and conditions, and it may end due to causes and conditions. That will be up to people's collective interest or energy to work out but it is certainly a dynamic situation. It looks like there is a building which is existing, for it has a name, a title and there is a charity and so on. All of these things are there but they are held in place by little fine threads, and if these threads get pulled or cut everything can wobble. It is like a puppet show. Everything is impermanent – everything is an illusion. This is the central point and when you start to observe your own mind you recognise that every content of your mind, all the historical factors, all the tendencies, all the likes and dislikes, out of which we construct our sense of self, are impermanent for they arise and pass.

On a meta-abstract level we create a narrative which seems to endure through time and when we fall asleep inside that bedtime story of the narrative of who we are, it appears as if everything is just fine as it is – but that is just a dream. Then something whacks us, tears across our lives, and we wake up shocked: *"How could that be happening to me! I am not like that. That should be someone else's fate, why is it mine!"* This is the suffering of samsara. And as the Buddha says it arises from attachment. Attachment is the belief that patterns of energy are reliable, predictable, and solid enough to carry the weight of our sense of identity.

When we say that all is impermanent, that it's an illusion, it doesn't mean there is nothing at all. It is not a nihilistic view. When we just sit with our eyes open, relaxed into open spaciousness, the whole field of experience is arising both internal and external. And gradually the more you do the practice the more you experience that all is dynamic. Instead of seeing fixed things you become aware of the vibrant pulsation of energetic manifestation moment-by-moment. For example, if you are doing the practice on your own, you find that your body starts to move and you get up, you make a cup of tea, phone someone, and so on, all of which is the flow of energy. It is not that 'I' am making a cup of tea: 'subject'—'action'—'object'. It is a flow, and the flow is happening inside the mirror of awareness. Nothing has ever left the mirror of awareness. Samsara is not outside the ground of being; samsara is a delusion inside the mirror. It is as if a reflection had enfolded another reflection, and so its clarity cannot be seen. We are nothing but folds of energy, pulsating like seaweed in the ocean. These are the patterns of our lives.

Thus the heart of mindfulness in dzogchen is to recall, to recollect, to remember, to relax into integration. Ordinarily our energy is wired up and we are quickly reactive to what is going on. We spin into endless vortices of invested meaning. This takes our fancy, that takes our fancy, we have to do this and have to do that. All this is just like whirl winds in the desert. The wind blows, sand goes up in the air, the wind drops, the sand falls, there is the calm after the storm. The more spacious we are, the more we can allow these winds to blow through. Then we start to see that consciousness is a movement of energy within awareness. They are not separate categories but consciousness is the dynamic, energetic quality of awareness, and awareness reveals, it doesn't 'do'. The energy of awareness arises as consciousness, as our participative energy.

Whenever we get lost, lost in believing that things are strongly real, taking events as very important, just relax, and when you relax you are back in integration with the ground. Samsara is not a thing. It is not that we fell into samsara a long time ago and now we are struggling to get to the end of it like some hellish nightmare. Samsara begins and ends each second, each moment. A thought arises we fall into it and there is samsara. The thought ends in that moment, there is a space and if you stay alive in the space samsara has gone. Then you recognise 'Ah just that'. But if you fall into the arising, and then the next and the next, each of these moments links together into a narrative of the continuity of me being 'me'.

Thus a key aspect of dzogchen is to start to put oneself into question, to observe oneself and think, 'Ah, what am I up to now? Here we go again. What was that all about?' It is important to just see, to observe, and not to get into blaming. Just observe that you move here, you move there, you have particular fixations, and so on. For some people it will be anxiety, for some it will be depression, for some it will be a kind of mania, for some it will be 'being a good girl', for some it will be working hard, for others people it will be getting wrecked and destroying their lives – but all these are just patterns. None of these patterns is inherently better than any other. In terms of the relative domain of social adaption, getting you act in gear, getting a job and a place to stay, that makes sense. In terms of the validity of the event, in terms of its integration with the ground, it doesn't matter. In the Indian tradition you have the stories of the mahasiddhas who lived in many different ways. Some

lived on small islands with lots of dogs around, and they ran around barking like dogs. Some were drunk all the time. Some were angry and fierce all the time. That is to say, it doesn't matter what you do, because what you do doesn't define who you are. It only defines who you are in terms of social interaction.

Often people who take themselves seriously have their vision of how the world should be, and they will interpret what you do on the basis of that. They say 'good' people are very good and 'bad' people are very bad. On a relative level this is true, and the general mahayana teachings and the theravadan teachings offer many teaching on *shila*, or morality. There are lists of what one should and shouldn't do. But what is the basis of the good or the bad deed? Who is the one who is the actor? Of Course it is very important to be helpful and compassionate but there are different kinds of compassion. There is the compassion which is an intention to help beings, and there is the compassion of actually helping people by doing dharma practice. There is also a third kind of compassion called the compassion which is free of reification or objectification. This is compassion which does not take an object, and this is said to be the most useful kind of compassion. That is to say, by staying relaxed and open in the mirror-like state, seeing that everything is an illusion, one moves ones energy into the world as an illusion in a field of illusion. In that way all the interactions that we have with people are deconstructed, that is they don't become something strongly real. Moreover, we don't have a strong intention to help them for in recognising that all beings have been inseparable from the ground from the very beginning, there is nobody to be helped. However, because one is present with finesse, one meets each person with an absolute delicacy. One finds oneself being so close to them that they feel met and seen and heard. This is the function of compassion. It is not a doing towards others but it is the openness of ones being that allows a very finessed, co-emergence with the other. It doesn't require any particular intention. One is not attempting to do something for or too the other, but without thinking, without intention, some benefit arises because the other feels welcomed, seen, and there is a space to be.

*Participant:* Which practices help develop that finesse?

*James:* Relaxation – not trying.

*Participant:* And everything will just come from that relaxation? So that is the integration?

*James:* What is very helpful is to take a text, say the heart sutra, and to study it in detail. It could be good to form a study group to do that. The heart sutra sets out one of the basic teachings on emptiness. On the basis of that teaching, if you really see 'form is emptiness', 'emptiness is form', 'form is not other than emptiness', then when you see the form of a person, you see this is the form of emptiness, that is to say, the person is an illusion. You apply this to each of the five skandhas, you can apply it to all the different building blocks of existence – and when you really taste that, when you get it ... "*Ah – it is an illusion!*"



For example, this is a statue here on the table is just a bit of metal. Now, why is this statue worth more than the basic metal? This is because somebody has formed it into a shape that can hold our symbolic projections. The metal does not cost very much but your fantasy about the metal is big bucks. That is what barbie dolls are: a bit of plastic that little girls get to project a lot onto. What they are getting is what they already have, a fantasy in their head, which they project onto a bit of plastic. Once we actually start to see this, we experience that every situation is an open potential – our patterns and the open potential move together. If we take that as strongly real it creates seeming ‘things’, entities. Yet if you see the illusory nature it creates nothing – it is just like the reflection of the moon on water. If you really get this point, it is as the Buddha says in all the different texts that there is no death, and there is no death because there is no birth for we have never been born. That is to say, we have never truly existed as entities, as ‘things’ for we are simply a process of energy. That is why we can die so easily. One knife and a whack on the neck and blood is everywhere and you are gone. We are an energetic system that is very vulnerable – that is what death is.

*Participant:* But while we are learning that finesse it kind of creates difficulties with other people who perhaps don't have that same understanding or feeling of the illusory nature of things.

*James:* Sure, and that is a big problem, for the basic request that comes from all the people we meet is: “Take me seriously.” From a dharma point of view that is the worst thing we could do. It's not that we are going to stand on a soapbox and preach dharma to people. Without saying anything, without doing anything differently you can do as they want but you know that your speech is empty. Just as we say at the end of a tantric practice, ‘all that appears is the form of the deity, all sound is mantra, and everything which arises is the thought of the deity’. There is nothing there to grasp, and inside that, we carry out our role in the theatre of our own existence. So you talk to an old person in one way, a small child in another, to employer in one way and so on. You don't have to say to them, “You have got life wrong.” We are not like Mormons knocking on the door. It is not taking the good news to anyone. Rather by your being relaxed maybe they will notice something. It is a very subtle movement.

An example of this can be seen in one of the stories of Padmasambhava when he flew off to the island inhabited by very ferocious beings called rakshasas. The king here was a very fierce and dangerous being, so when Padmasambhava arrived, he arrived at night. And when the king was sleeping he went into the bedroom of the king and through his meditation he knocked the king's consciousness out into a pure land and merged his existence into that of the king. Then the next morning the courtier brought in whatever the demon-king usually had in the morning. And the demon-king, which was really Padmasambhava, behaved in the usual grumpy manner so that no one noticed any difference. He continued in this manner but gradually month by month, year by year, he became a little bit softer, and the people around him gradually got used to him being a little bit softer and eventually it was all very nice, and they were all invited to the queen's garden

party. That is a nice example of how to do it. It is not about suddenly confronting someone, telling them you have got the 'good news', or that they have it all wrong. It is about altering our behaviour for we are interactive beings. A loop of communicative interaction is going to be altered if one of the polarities is softening and releasing itself. Thus without even saying anything, a mood of movement and dynamism is introduced.

### Being Mindful Means Being in the Movement of the World

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Let us now do some mediation practice again and bring our brief time together to an end. Again, we want to sit in a relaxed open way. Let your gaze rest in the space in front of you and relax into the space. Then whatever arises let it come. If you feel bored and stupid, if you feel you cannot meditate, allow that thought to be there and observe what happens. If you fall into the thought you will have a whole chain of thoughts, if you just relax and be present with the thought just see what happens. Keep seeing that whenever you get caught in something, whenever you seem to have found an answer or have a definition just be with it and see what happens.

[Three A'a practice]

As I suggested earlier that is a kind of practice you can do for short periods of time and gradually get more used to it, doing it for longer periods. In terms of details on how to deal with problems in the meditation, there are transcripts of talks on the my website that deal with this: <http://www.simplybeing.co.uk>. However, the key thing is to simply really try to receive deep inside yourself the notion that everything is pure, everything is open, everything is ok, and when problems or difficulties arise don't take them too seriously. Just sit with them and observe them arising and passing, knowing that these are communications or messages and they require a response – how will you respond? The more spacious you are, the more connected you are with the infinity of your potential, with all your knowledge and wisdom, the more easily what is required will come to hand as you engage with it. Worrying, over-thinking, ratiocination, troubling yourself again and again with things leads to a narrowing of vision and an increase in anxiety which again further feeds a narrowing of your capacity to think. In many ways it seems almost counterintuitive to us, that relaxation is better than mobilisation. We live in a culture which is absolutely addicted to the notion of mobilisation – “Something must be done!” From this point of view, all energy is arising effortlessly from the source, and the over-identification of oneself as an actor or an agent is actually an interference with the easy flow of connective movement between all phenomena. This view is a profoundly different way of understanding experience. I have personally found it very helpful in my life, and I think it is a useful thing to try, but it is about trying it. Don't worry about getting it wrong because no error is enormously important – mistaking occurs all the time. If you miss-take something you can just let go of it and take something else – and then gradually you get used to not taking anything. But actually, as you relax and open many things are coming to you. It is the return to the Garden of Eden: a time before ploughing, before honing wood, pulling water, where everything is just there. Who is the one who brings it? No one. What is brought? Nothing.

Try to practice every day if you can for short periods of time. Don't take yourself or others too seriously but be very present. Being mindful means being in the movement of the world as it changes moment-by-moment, not being afraid of change but working with change. Not being afraid of change doesn't mean just throwing everything into the wind and letting things dissolve. Whatever is built up is not so much the 'thing' that is built up, rather movement has been created by collaborative energy, and collaborative energy is very beautiful – that is one thing that could perhaps save this planet from the way human beings are.

Here we have a dharma centre and for it to manage to continue in whatever form, will require collaboration. That involves being very clear about what the task is and for people to attend to that task rather than attending to their own natures and personalities, likes and dislikes. However, if everybody stays in their own individual bubble and their own point of view collaboration will be very difficult, and that is likely to lead to an unhelpful outcome. The practice always has these different aspects: the basic openness, the hospitality to everything that arises without judgement, and then the precise movement moment-by-moment into the emerging field. And whatever has been done wrong, whatever mistakes have been made are not so important for there is the next moment and the next moment if we stay connected. If we decide to say, "Oh, I have had enough of this," then there is nothing to be done. It is not about fusion, it is not about cutting off, it is about being flexible and staying connected with things so that participative energy allows more possibilities of growth and development for many people.

Let us now dedicate any merit arising from our time together. We imagine that out from our hearts, rays of lights stream to all sentient beings in all the different realms.