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# *Equanimity and the pull of the five poisons*

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*The power of the five poisonous afflictions (mental dullness, desire, aversion, jealousy and pride) is very strong and each affliction can easily pull us away from grounded harmony and into the treacherous security of taking up a position. However equanimity is the great quality of the Middle Way avoiding extremes. Poised, dynamically balancing according to circumstances yet without bias in any direction, it reveals the freedom not to be at the mercy of the afflictions.*

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A Teaching day at Tibethaus, Frankfurt  
19 October 2019  
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FIRST SESSION .....	2
Introducing the practice: we are the the world .....	2
Neither in control nor out of control .....	3
The erroneous notion of being a self .....	5
Befriending the mind .....	6
Inhabiting our life as it is .....	7
The changing shape of experience .....	9
Seeing clearly .....	11
Liberation in impermanence .....	12
SECOND SESSION .....	13
Our mind like infinite space .....	13
How we take hold of the world .....	14
Becoming aware of our selectivity .....	15
Self and other, the Siamese twins .....	17
Definition, belief, neurosis .....	20
Bringing meditation into the world .....	24
Balancing connection and separation .....	25
Thusness equals immediacy .....	27
THIRD SESSION .....	29
How is the ground of all phenomena? .....	29
Substantiality: a product of our thinking .....	31
Connecting before formulating .....	34
To give the full welcome .....	37
When the poisons are purified .....	39
Key principles of our practice .....	42

## FIRST SESSION

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### Introducing the practice: we are the world

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We have a bit of time together to explore more the understanding of equanimity. Maybe we'll start with doing some simple practice just to arrive.

The most straightforward practice is that we just sit. Here we are, just as we are. Life is going on. And of course we have to follow the main meditation instruction, which is not to merge into whatever is arising, but also not to hold yourself apart from it. We know when we merge into the thought because we go with the thought, or we go with the outside appearance. And we know what it's like to hold ourselves apart. We become a kind of witness or observer: I am here and I know what is going on. That seems like an antidote, like a balance, if you're used to merging into things. It's quite good to be able to step back a little bit. You get some separation and perspective, but it's also a place of isolation.

If you don't have any separation it's difficult to have the open view that allows wisdom to arise, that allows clarity to arise. But if you're too far apart you don't have the connectivity which allows compassion, or kindness, or engagement, to arise. So the central teaching in Buddhism, in all the different schools, is the Middle Way: avoiding the extremes. You can use that as a kind of balancing focus for yourself. Whenever you seem to go into a position, whether you're in sitting meditation or in daily life, you're getting a bit stuck. You're freezing into *here I am, this is what I believe in, this is what I do*. And if you adopt a position inevitably you are rejecting many other positions. You are privileging: you're putting one position as more important than another, which reduces our availability.

So, of course, you might say then, "Well, if I don't have a position I'm going to be all over the place, I won't know where I am, I won't know what I believe in or think." I don't think it's as extreme as that: it's to see that when we are in the world we are in the world, we are not in ourselves. When you walk down the street and you see people busy with their phones, or listening to music, they are not in the world. They have chosen to try to be in a private world in a public space. In the language of my mother that's very rude. You shouldn't do that, because a public space is a public space, it's a shared space. But people don't want to share the space, so you have more and more alienation where people think, *it's all too much, I don't want to know who these people are, I'll just go into my own private world and I can listen to the music I want and I can cut off*.

From the point of view of dharma this is madness, it's complete madness, because this world is us. We breathe in, we breathe out: without the world we are dead. Our connectivity with the world is not an attack, it's not something miserable that is stealing our life. This is where we live. So how do you inhabit the world, how do you share space with other people? That's really what kindness or compassion is about.

In order to do that you have to find the space in yourself that allows you to respond into the situation, not dominated by the other, not trying to dominate the other, but in collaboration, and to have a flexible connectivity which keeps the movement of interaction going. That's really at the heart of the Buddha's teaching, that the bodhisattva is available to respond. The bodhisattva is not going around knocking on people's doors and saying, "Can I help you?" But when there is a need for help we respond, according to the need, not according to what we want to do.

So, if we are going to approach other people according to them there are two factors necessary. One is not to be full of myself, my hopes, my plans, my desires, otherwise I'm going to impose this on other people, put that onto them. And secondly, I need to have some space to receive the felt presence of the other. I have to be able to see them, get a sense of how they are breathing, their posture, the look on their face. How are they? If you ask someone, "How are you?" usually they will give you some screened comment. But you can see people: people show themselves. So the more you let people show themselves and you receive that, then you can respond into that situation. These, then, are the two things: being available for the other by not being full of oneself, and allowing oneself to live through the senses in connectivity with what's going on. And the more we isolate ourselves and live in 'I-me-myself', in my independent kingdom, in a world of one, the wall between me and the world gets bigger and bigger.

So, now we'll try. We just sit. In this style of sitting you sit with the eyes open. You can also look down the line of your nose, not staring at the ground, but allowing your gaze to open just a little bit and disperse. Light is coming in through the eyes (we don't want to block the senses), and then, life goes on. We hear sounds, we get a sense of some people moving, we have our thoughts, feeling, sensations. Don't block whatever is arising, and whenever you find yourself going into judgment about what is occurring for you — you might be thinking, *I don't know how to do this*, or, *is this meditation?* — whatever kind of thought arises, don't merge into it and believe it, don't defend yourself against it, but just stay present. *This is arising, this is arising, and then it goes!* So, that's a very simple way to arrive and relax.

[15 minutes practice]

### Neither in control nor out of control

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Okay.... It's useful to do that kind of sitting for quite short periods at a time, not to try and force it. And clearly, when we sit in that way we find that a lot is going on: sensations, feelings, memories, thoughts and so on. This can feel a little bit disturbing, that our mind is seemingly disordered. So then you have two possibilities: one is to try to impose order, to try to establish some order, and the other is to find a way of living with the dynamic complexity of how we are.

There are a lot of Buddhist methods of imposing order, of disciplining the mind, of trying to develop more good thoughts, or ethical thoughts, positive thoughts, than negative thoughts, so that you become the kind of person that you want to be, which

is quite a good intention. The problem with that is that because we live within a stream of karma (that is to say, what arises for us comes as tendencies, propensities and impulses established in our previous behaviour) we find that the content of our mind is changing all the time. And so you can have a quiet day of meditation, and then the next day your mind is completely a mess. And then you start to feel, *well, I'm not making any progress, surely progress should be linear*, the way we look next door where they're building some new flat: it's high into the sky and every day they add some new things. First they made the structure, and then they put in the windows, and now they're starting to do the electrics and so on. It's a very progressive development. And you can read books about the stages of dharma progress, and then you look at your own mind and you think, *oh, maybe I'm not making so much progress — how is this possible?* Well, it's because the mind is not a schema, it's not done by city planning. If you have a child, and, say they like motorcars and have a collection of little cars, they can play on the carpet, and maybe they put all the red cars first, then the blue cars, then the green cars — you can organise that. But then you go out in the street and you look at the cars coming along the road: they don't have any order or patterning according to colour, or make, or age, they come as they come. As long as the car stays on the road and doesn't go too fast and crash into something, or go so slowly it provokes the car behind, the flow of the traffic keeps coming.

So, these are the two possibilities in meditation: one is to try to impose control, to order yourself, in which you step apart from your experience and try to shape it according to some map, some template that you have. Or you stay with the actuality, the 'how it is-ness' of your mind. *It is like this! It is like this, wow, weird!* Every time I sit to practice I have no idea what's going to happen: my mind is unpredictable. The wind is unpredictable. The weather is unpredictable. You can look at the television and they show you the map, and it is going to rain in the afternoon but you don't know exactly when the wind is going to blow the rain onto you. Circumstances, events, moving together. How do we live with complexity? This is the one pathway. And these are the two pathways if you want equanimity: one is to have everything so ordered, so predictable, that you will know exactly what is going to happen, and the other is to find a way to be more relaxed with complexity so that you're not overwhelmed.

What we'll be looking at today is more in the second direction. The first you can easily learn from books and it's quite predictable. You have to keep trying again and again, doing general shi-nä (Tib.), focussing on the experience of the breath at the nostrils so that you don't get so distracted, that you don't get carried away by the content of your mind. The problem with that (if you do a lot of it) is that you become unable to respond, you don't want to respond. And if you live in a meditative environment and people think that this non-interruption is very holy and noble activity then you can continue like that. But if you go to a place like Bodhgaya and you see people doing their slow walking meditation, it's almost like they have a sign, "Do not disturb! Get out of my way! I cannot move because I have to be very mindful! I have chosen not to be a human being." If you say good morning you're disturbing their meditation. For me that is insanity. It's insanity! If you want to do this private activity do it in private, don't do it around the big stupa, because we are relational creatures.

Relating you find in all forms of life. All animals, all insects, are caught up in fields of communication. In Buddhism when we talk of compassion we're talking about communication, of linking, and when you link with other people you will have disturbance. If you choose to have children you choose to disturb your life in a very big way. Children are very, very disturbing. They wake you in the middle of the night, they get sick very easily when they're small, they want a lot of money when they're teenagers, they don't do what you want. That's what it means to be connected with other people. You fall in love with someone and they're never who you thought they were. They become somebody else. You think, *yes, but, why have you changed? I thought you were ... dot dot dot.* That's how life is.

So the orientation that I want to open up for you more is how we might find a kind of grounded equanimity in our interaction with a complex field of experience: neither in control nor out of control, but responsive in a grounded, clear way, so that you remain grounded and balanced in the face of what is going on.

### The erroneous notion of being a self

There are a few basic terms which perhaps we need to sort out first. One is 'ourselves'. We have a body, we have a voice, a capacity for communication, we have our mind. But we also have this notion of being 'someone', being an individual, being a self. From the Buddhist point of view this notion of being a self is erroneous: it's a false interpretation of what is going on, and it's the basis of suffering. So when we read about suffering the basis, in most of the traditions, they say, is ignorance and thirst, or longing. Ignorance means that we don't attend to the dynamic unfolding of our experience, and we then invent, or create, the idea of stability. And then we try to find the stability that we think we should have, that we want to be more stable than we are, we want other people to be more stable than they are. And so we're endlessly trying to seek something that is actually not available. So 'self', in this sense, is a concretisation that there is something in me, some private, personal, enduring essence, some kind of guarantee, some fixation of identity and value which is enduring through time, and which if I am skilful enough I can maintain under all circumstances. I can be 'true to myself', and that will make me a reliable, predictable person. This is, actually, the theatre of childhood. Children need to believe that their parents are reasonably reliable. They need to have their mum, in particular, as an available person, because as soon as they say, "Mum!", a big person has to turn around — "Yes, Sweetie, what's the matter, what do you want?" — that somebody is there and is available, that they have space inside themselves. And if that is not available for the child usually some distress arises for the child because they want unimpeded communication. So they need to know, *Mum is reliable, I can predict how she is going to be, and she is available.*

Of course, 'Mum' is also a woman, and as a woman she has another life that the child knows nothing about. She has maybe a happy relationship, or an unhappy relationship. She's got friends, she might have work to do. She's got all sorts of things in her field of experience which the child has no access to. So the child's

notion of the stability of the mother, what in psychotherapy they call the object constancy, the fact that Mum is predictable and reassuring, this is a fantasy, and it's a fantasy by not attending to all the detail's of 'Mum's' life which are annoying or disturbing for the child. Maybe I am very, very narcissistic, but when I was a child, I remember very clearly, if I was out with my mother and she would meet a friend and start talking, I would become very bored and pull on her dress and say, "Mum, come on! Let's go!" "No! I'm talking with my friend!" *You don't need friends, you have me!* So that's how we feel, because if Mum has another life then Mum isn't who I think she is. The unpredictability of parents is very disturbing for children, so if kids grow up in a family where there's a lot of alcoholism, drug addiction, confusion, it's very disturbing.

So we start our life in a fantasy of a reasonably ordered world where everything is predictable, and then, hopefully, as we move into adolescence we learn to cope with less prediction, and we start to see unpredictability as exciting rather than as anxiety-provoking. And then we're ready to move out into the world and find our way in this flux.

### Befriending the mind

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In some ways you could say that's similar to our dharma practice, that at first we learn these nice things about the Buddha, and we see the statues, and everything is fixed and ordered and clear, but as you participate yourself, more, you experience in meditation that it's a lot more confusing. You can try to impose order by prostrations, repetition of mantras, being involved in building stupas and so on. And these are situations where you have what are called the three wheels: you have the subject, the object and the connection between them. So, I am going to do my meditation: there is a meditation to be done, I am going to do it, and there is the doing of it. You say the prayer or you do the formal practice or you recite the mantra, the visualization, whatever it is, and in that process there is 'someone' 'doing' 'something'. These three wheels are the energy, or the vehicle, which maintains our world of duality, our experience of being in samsara. So although there are many dharma practices their very structure maintains the separation of subject and object, because as long as you exist as an individual agent who is going to do this then it's as if there is someone inside who, by an act of will, can think, *okay, I don't want to do the practice but I said I would do it, I am going to do it and I will do it*, and then you do it. You're not really doing it because you're not really there, you're forcing yourself. You're making yourself do something artificial in the hope of arriving at something natural, something intrinsic. There's a little bit of a contradiction there.

When we start to look at our mind we see, *oh! I can make my mind my enemy or I can befriend my mind*. I can try and force my mind to do things, but then I'm just, as we say in English, going through the motions. I'm just doing it, but I'm not really connected with it. I'm not really fully participating. It's something false, like some kind of acting. So how can I be authentic? Well, the only way to be authentic is to be authentically how you are. So, sometimes when we sit to do our practice we are sad, we're confused, we're angry. We might be jealous, we might be full of longing, we

might be busy thinking about a problem at work, we might be waiting for a holiday period to come so that we can have some free time. This is how we are. Now, the more you have a formal sitting practice, you have a contradiction between 'what I should be doing', how I 'should be making it happen', and how I actually am. So when we say, "No, I really, really have to do it properly," we're saying, *how I am is an impediment to how it should be*. That is to say, *the future is better than the present, how I am is not very good*.

The reason I'm explaining it this way is, many of you have had a lot of teachings in that direction. They're not wrong. It's just that you have to see the structural implication: that these are ways of practising that are designed to help people restrict the chaos of their life situation, to keep them on track, to turn them from being a four-wheel drive cross-country vehicle to being a train. Now you're on the train tracks, *woo woo*, heading towards enlightenment. It's very nice. As long as you stay on the tracks you're going to get there. But when you look in front, at your life, when you wake up in the morning and you open your eyes the first thing you see is not train tracks: you see the space of a room, and you go out of your flat and you see the space of the street — spaces in which things are moving and changing in an unpredictable manner. So it's for that reason that we have these traditions of mahamudra and dzogchen, which are concerned with appreciating what is, rather than trying to install what could be, or what we imagine how it should be. It means finding clarity within the seemingly confusing forms which arise.

### Inhabiting our life as it is

Sometimes there's a lot of difficulty in life. You might have physical pain, you might have people close to you who are very sick, getting old, in hospital. There are all kind of reasons why we are not at peace. So, *I feel disturbed*. Now, if you have an interpretive approach that says peace is better than disturbance then it's as if the disturbance is stealing my peace, or it's attacking my peace. And so I want to get rid of the disturbance — *ah, now I can be peaceful*. But then something else happens, now I'm disturbed. I can be disturbed by unhappiness, but I can also be disturbed by happiness. Maybe you get a new job, or a promotion, and you feel very excited. That's also a kind of turbulence. So if you have a polarity between calm and disturbance, and you say one polarity is good and the other polarity is bad, and you're living in a moving world, then the shifting flux of experience, the fact that moment by moment you have different things going on, means that you're constantly having to evaluate where you are and what's going on, what's the meaning of this. Difficult to find equanimity in that, because you're starting with an interpretation that says, *this polarity is good and that polarity is bad*.

So, for most children excitement is good and boredom is bad. Most kids have a very limited tolerance of boredom, but quite a lot of life is boring. We want to get away from boredom and get some excitement. This is why being a schoolteacher becomes more and more difficult, because children come with an expectation of excitation and agitation. We have more and more diagnoses of children with attention deficit disorder, who can't focus into the text because calmly focusing 'is boring'. If you don't

find that subtle middle point of calm focus and just stay with it, if you're reading and just absorbing the information, if it's not wildly stimulating and exciting, then *I can't be bothered, can't get into it, it's too much*. And so the door to knowledge seems to get smaller and smaller for many children.

From the point of view of meditation that we're looking at today, the issue is not the content of what is arising in my mind, but the frame of reference that I am using to interpret or understand what is going on. So, when I say, "I am upset", that could be a simple description: something has happened and I feel upset. Or it could be a statement: something is wrong. The first thing you have to do is try to separate these two aspects. Can I stay with the description? "I'm very sick." Maybe you've been to the doctor. You get the diagnosis of a terminal illness and you've got to live with that. You don't know exactly when you're going to die, but somehow death is getting closer. So there's a kind of *'oh my god'*. There's an agitation, *what will I do with the time available, how will I live?* There's all kind of turbulence, *this shouldn't be happening, I wish my life wasn't that way*. But it is like this, so the question then is how to live with this life. You look at other people, they seem happy, they seem to be healthy. *It's not fair*. Precisely: it's not fair, the earth is not flat, people don't have equal lives. We have the particular contour, the particular shape of our existence. How can I inhabit my life as it is?

So if I am acting as a kind of immigration authority on what's arising for me, and saying, *this is negative, this is bad, we want to impose some tariff on this import, we don't want to have this in our country, we don't want to have these thoughts or feelings in ourselves*, you start to agitate yourself. The whole thing about Europe is to have free trade. For some reason in Britain we are not very interested in remaining in this union— we want to do go alone. Many people warn that Brexit will be an economic disaster for Britain. It's also a cultural disaster for Britain because when we say, "We are better off alone." but we live in an integrated world and we know that for ecological crises, for so many problems in the world, we need to have universal collaboration. Whenever you have nationalism, like in America, like in Britain, like in Turkey, like in Russia, you see the danger because it immediately is hostile and militaristic. It's a very hot situation, a very unstable situation, rather than working out how to collaborate with other people and to be part of a pulsation. The British complain that, "We give so much money to Europe and look what happens in Poland, they get all of this, and we don't get any of that..." But, of course, as the Polish economy develops they will have more money, so they will have to pay more money back into the EU, and gradually it balances and rectifies.

But whenever you see things in a short frame of reference, winning and losing, it's, "What about us? No, we're not going to do it." We can observe in politics and economics exactly the structure of the self, because just as you have a nation-state with borders that says, "I like", and "I don't like", and "We'll let these people into the country but not these other people," you have the status of the ego. You sit in meditation and you have these thoughts that disturb you and you want to get rid of them, and you have other thoughts that you like and you want more of. You're endlessly editing and trying to control what's going on. So, from the point of view of meditation, we dissolve the boundary.

## The changing shape of experience

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In meditation we're often talking about non-duality. Duality means two things: inside and outside, Britain and Europe, good and bad, right and wrong, like and not-like. As soon as you have these two you have an oppositional boundary in between them. If it's this it's not that, if something's good it's not bad, if something's bad it's not good. We know this is not true. Ice cream is good, but too much ice cream is not good for you. Good wine is delicious, but a lot of alcohol is going to screw up your liver. Everything is good and bad relationally, and that depends on your body. For some people, if they have diabetes, ice cream is really not good, they really should not eat ice cream. And for other people they can eat a bit. Other people can eat quite a lot because they have a metabolism that deals with it. So to make a formal decision that all ice cream is bad and therefore we should ban it would be stupid. It's very simple to impose rules and laws. What we actually have to do is attend to our own living profile as we pulsate with the world. Sometimes we are more expansive, we can cope with more; sometimes we can cope with less. The more we see, *I am ever changing and you are ever changing*, the more I cannot predict how you are going to be — I have to stay with you, I have to be attentive to you.

Attention is the basic fact of therapy. 'Therapy' comes from the Greek word for the attendants at the shrine of Asclepius, where people went for dream-healing. The attendants were there to help the person not be disturbed by what was going on so that they could go deeper into this dream space and have some revelation of what was going on. The attendant is there to be attentive, to pay attention to what is going on.

So that is what we're trying to do in the meditation: not judging, not pulling what is happening into our interpretive schema (*I know this is good, I know this is bad*), but rather bringing ourselves to be with this changing topology, this changing shape of experience. Then we start to see: *sometimes I'm sad, sometimes I'm hopeless, sometimes I'm happy, sometimes I'm relaxed — I am movement*. Then the Buddha's teaching on impermanence starts to make more sense. At first we understand impermanence by *oh, the seasons change, the cycle of the moon changes, the number of leaves on the trees change*. We can see these external marks of change. We see the changes in our body as we get older. But when we really look, what is truly impermanent is the content of our experience: the sensations in our bodies, our thoughts, feelings memories, but also our perceptions — what we hear, what we see — are changing.

So, the room can seem to be something quite stable. Many of us have been in this room before. When we say 'this room' what are we referring to? Are we referring to the perception of the room, or the idea of the room? Because each time you come into the room it's slightly different, since 'this room' includes whoever is in the room. People are moving their bodies in this room. Someone's head goes to the left, someone puts their hand up: the room is changed. The angle of the sun is going down as we head towards winter, so the illumination in the room changes. In the

daytime now we're relying on the electric light. The shadows are changing. Now, you can say, "That is irrelevant! The room itself is not changing." So what is the room itself, the essence of the room? Now, in ordinary life the essence of the room is obvious, *I mean just look around, it's the same damn room, the room is the room, are you stupid, come on!* But what are we doing? We are insisting. (It sounds like a speech from Donald Trump — "Argh... the room... the room!") What is the room? The room is your idea of the room, so you're proceeding into the room with your idea of how the room is, and then with your selective attention you're confirming your idea of the room: *of course it's the same, yes yes, it was like this yesterday.* There are many things in the room which are different, which are discounted, unattended to, because they would disturb your confidence that *this is the room.* So what you're actually doing is maintaining a pre-established idea in the face of the living phenomena. You're saying the idea is more important than the phenomena. Does that make sense? This is absolutely central to the Buddhist understanding, because we are concerned with phenomena. We are concerned with what shows itself, not with the interpretation of what shows itself, the editing of what shows itself, but the thing as it is. You have words like 'thusness', 'tathata', 'de bzhin nyid', which means 'how it is, just how it is'. How is it? It's like this: that 'this' is present before your conceptual interpretation, because when you have a conceptual interpretation you're gathering selected data from this field of experience and pulling it into some parallel with your schema of interpretation. Does that make sense?

So, for me, my mum, my mother, was 'my mother'. She was not my mother for her friends. She was Jean. They knew 'Jean' and I knew 'my mum': one body, two women ... many women. How is that possible? Jean was a different Jean for her different friends because they had different relations with her. So Jean, as phenomenon, as living person, was manifesting in different ways according to the people she met. Some people she'd be very friendly with, with others a little more guarded, as we all are. For me this is my mum. For me the idea 'this is my mother' often blinded me to how she was. My dad would say, "Listen, your mum's tired, do the dishes." That's an insane thing to say to a teenage boy. *That's my mum, mums don't get tired, mums do everything, that's what they do, don't de-mum my mum — maintain the mum-ness of my mother!* That is to say, I took my mother for granted. I began with the idea of how she is and what she does, and that became the kind of distorting glasses through which I perceived her. So I discounted the idea that she was a bit tired or she wasn't feeling very well because I wanted her to keep being 'Mum'. That's a very ordinary example, but it gives us a sense of how we delude ourselves by wanting to maintain the idea of something in the face of the evidence.

We see that now with global warming. There are a lot of companies which are changing their publicity, these big oil companies and so on — 'working for a better future'. They're pumping a lot of money into putting a spin on what they do to make it look much better, just like the tobacco companies did before. They don't want to change what they actually do, but they want to change the appearance because they know that we are all susceptible to believing in ideas. So the function of the meditation practice is to observe how you limit your experience of phenomena by your commitment to ideas. Let's say that you're feeling disturbed just now. You sit, and you start to feel very unhappy and disturbing thoughts come. You are disturbed:

that's all that's happening. You are not dying, you're not falling unconscious, it's not unbearable. You don't want it, you don't like it: that's an interpretation on the basis that there are other things which would be better. So you have a scale of reference with which you're saying, *according to my interpretive schema, my scale of interpretation, this kind of experience is crap, it's at the bottom, I would prefer to be happy*. But you're not happy. So it's very difficult to be with the unhappiness which you are which is arising for you. You're locked into comparing and contrasting. When we read in the dharma texts about being present, being open, being mindful, it means not entering into judgment, not taking up a position with regard to what is occurring, but just relaxing and being with it.

### Seeing clearly

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So this raises again the question about what is our mind and what is our self. As a person, as a kind of subjectivity — probably for all of us — we would say, “I don't like being unhappy. It doesn't feel right. That's not how I want my life to be.” That is to say, when the unhappiness is there it seems to be absorbed through us and to become us: *I am unhappy*. It's not just that I am experiencing many unhappy thoughts, but *I am full of unhappiness, I'm just unhappy, I've got nowhere else to go, it's horrible*. So then we are like a kind of tissue because the tissue absorbs. If I stick this tissue into the water the water goes right into it. The tissue is designed to be absorbent. Our ego self is very absorbent. It's very porous. So when we are full of this stuff and we don't like it, we want to get it out. And of course that would be the opposite of equanimity, taking up a position: *this is really unpleasant, this is not good, I need to get rid of it*. But if we can just stop for a moment and be with it, what is it? *It's horrible*. Uh-uh, you're telling it what it is. What is it? So when we have terms like vipassana, which means seeing clearly, it means trying to see what is there, what are the phenomena, not what is my interpretation of the phenomena. The mind is our illuminating capacity that lets us see what is there. When we interpret what is there we add positive and negative to it, especially as it affects us. So if you're walking on the street and you see some dogshit you think, *yuck, why do people not take better care of their dogs?* If you're a bit inattentive and you get dogshit on your shoe that's something very different. Now you're *argh!* It's really annoying because it gets to you. *This is happening to me!* — it's not something 'out there'.

So it's the same when you feel that your experience is attacking you. You have to change it. Now what you have is the self as the subject, facing its own experience as an object. Does that make sense? *I don't like these thoughts, they're my thoughts, they're me but I don't like it*. So I'm both merged into it but I want to get out of it. But I can't get out of it, so I'm helpless. And that's very often the situation where people move toward suicide, because they feel trapped in a situation. They can't see any way out, and the more they think about their situation it seems hopeless. And then they start to accumulate pills, or they get some razor blades, and they start to plan, *how can I get out, because there is no way out of this*. It's because they are fully identified with what they take to be the hopelessness and the fully limited quality of their situation. Actually, 'my life is hopeless' is a thought, mixed with a feeling. *I've*

*lost everything.* That may be an accurate description. *I've lost everything.* You're still breathing, you can still eat, you can still see the sky. *It's irrelevant, I've lost everything, can't you fucking listen to me, do you not see, do you not realise how terrible it is?* When you sit in a room with people who are in that state the world is being evacuated. The qualities of the world, the richness, the possibility, is all vanishing, and they're just living in their idea. Now of course if you say to the person, "You're intoxicated by an idea," they'll get even more angry. They'll say, "You don't understand! It's like this!" But the this-ness of the hopelessness, the despair, is a sequence of thoughts, sensations, feelings, memories. It's a patterning coming together. It has an intensity, but it's not the final definition. When people really are ready to kill themselves it's because they think, *this is it: full stop, that's it.* So there you see the power of the concept as a blinker to the actuality.

### Liberation in impermanence

In actuality we as embodied beings are surrounded by many, many possibilities, we can move in different directions. New beginnings are always possible, but not if you blind yourself to the actual by your intoxicated belief in your interpretation. Does that make sense? That's one of the great things about meditation, that when we sit, even though a thought or a feeling or a sensation feels really intense, definitive, true, it vanishes. It vanishes! Okay, so this is true, and it's gone. Which is the most important, the true or the gone? This is why the Buddha is always saying, "Impermanence! Impermanence! Attend to the going, attend to the vanishing." Good times become bad, bad times become good. Friends become enemies, enemies become friends. You hate someone and then you fall in love with them. All kind of permutations are possible because 'enemy' is an interpretation, it's not a fact. When you don't like someone you develop a selective attention that privileges or highlights their negative qualities and makes their positive qualities invisible. Someone else says, "Yeah, but they're not so bad! Come on, they're not so bad." But, "I want to tell you, they do this and they do that...!" Which means, *shut up, I have my definition, I know.* When we sit in the meditation this is what we encounter: the way our mind is giving a definite reading of value to something which is arising. So you have the potential of the thought and you have your interpretation, and when these two merge together that seems to be 'how it is', and then it vanishes. Both the interpretation vanishes and the arising sensation vanishes.

We can do some more sitting now for a little bit. And as we do that just be present with whatever is coming, as it arises and passes. Don't try to direct your experience. If you enter into judgment, if you start to feel very bad or very happy about something, just try to relax your gaze a little bit, to offer a kind of space, so that you see, *this is unfolding in the space of my mind,* as if your mind was a theatre stage. And one particular thought pattern comes on, and it's the queen and she's very grand, then the joker comes on, and then the children run on. So there are all kind of events arising and passing in your mind. Don't block the feeling tone that comes, because some thoughts evoke happiness, some thoughts evoke sadness. Stay with the freshness of what is occurring. The issue is, when you start sticking one moment onto the next moment you build up a picture. It becomes cumulative and then it

becomes dense. Then it seems to have solidity, truth, validity. But actually it's gone, that thought has gone. Since we woke up this morning how many thousands of thoughts and sensations have we had, arising and passing? So, we just relax and open, and we're present with the freshness of whatever is unfolding.

[fifteen minutes practice]

Okay. We'll take a break now and then there'll be time for some questions about anything we've covered so far, or other questions connected with equanimity.

## SECOND SESSION

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### Our mind like infinite space

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**Question:** It's about not being too much into the thoughts, yet not stepping back from them. In day-to-day life it's very easy to merge into thoughts because you have to act — there are thoughts connected to the action and you merge into it. But in the meditation it's just the other way around. Just now I thought something like, let's go to the zoo and look for the animals, and the animals arrived, walked through my mind and disappeared, just like you said. But it's kind of intentional: I sit here and think, okay, let's look, and then unwillingly I get into the role of the observer. I lose this point between merging and observing, I'm just the observer of the parade. And the parade is great, but I'm not the thoughts anymore — I'm too far away.

**James:** This relates what we were starting to look at about 'a self' and 'the mind'. When you were a kid parents and teachers were saying, "Pay attention! You need to focus your mind!" You get a sense that attention is like a kind of torch. Like if you're camping on a dark night, you get up and put the torch on, and then you see a very limited area. It's very bright in a circle and everything else is in the dark. So that's what our focused attention is like. It has the advantage that you are illuminating something and you know roughly where you are but it makes everything else more invisible. That is our ego self, our conscious self: *I am looking at something, I need to think about this, I need to remember this.* We also have this idea of the mind itself, that the mind is like a self-illuminating stage, or a space. The traditional example is that the nature, or the deep actuality, of our mind is like infinite space. It's not something that you can find anywhere, as something. And rising in it, like the sun arising in space, you have awareness. And awareness, like the light of the sun, gives a panoramic illumination. Everything is illuminated by the sun, so our awareness is not like a torch. Our conscious ego, or identification, is like a torch. So if you have a problem to solve, or an essay to write, or if you're working with a programme, you gather your attention onto that specific topic. Whereas awareness is just showing, showing everything, equally.

In the meditation practice if we become too intentional, too achievement-oriented, too organised around the sense *I need to make progress, or, there's something I need to do*, we bring ourselves into the focused quality of the torch, but then we're always trapped in 'I'm the one doing it'. So the desire for the practice itself is to relax and to trust that our mind itself is illuminating, that what is called clarity, the mind, reveals everything. And inside that illumination you can focus, you can adjust, you can highlight, which is the second level of organising conceptualisation.

For example, if you walk down the street here there are many, many trees. There are cars, there are people, there are leaves on the pavement: there's a lot. And if you walk down a bit, and if you close your eyes and then you open them, everything is there at once, millions of things are immediately available. Then you start to think about what's going on. You think, *which way will I go? Or, where's the bus stop?* You think about something in particular, and so much of the field of immediate clarity, unmediated clarity, vanishes because now you have a particular concern: *I have to find the bus stop, I don't where it is.* You look around, some people are coming. *Who's got a friendly face, who could I ask, who looks as if they might know?* And you're making all these micro-judgments, you're bringing your focused attention onto the selection of an object, a particular person here, mediated through your interpretive schema of who might be friendly, who might give you an honest answer, and so on. We are evaluating. Most of the time what we call our conscious attention is an evaluation.

In Tibetan it's a little bit easier because they have a basic verb 'she-pa', which means 'to know'. They have particles which are placed in relation to the basic 'to know'. So you have 'ye-she', 'ye' meaning original or primordial. So 'ye-she', which is often translated as 'pristine awareness' or 'original knowing', refers to the quality of knowing which is there before anything is done to it. It's a kind of ever-fresh, simple registering of what's there, just as when you open your eyes and the trees, the cars, the rain, the sunshine — everything — is immediately there. You don't know 'what it is' because 'what it is-ness' is established by a particular way of thinking. If a dog or a bird or an ant were out on the same street we would think, *well, they're on the same street.* But their experience would be different: that is to say, their experience would be mediated through the nature of their sense organs, what they are conditioned to highlight as important. So dogs are more interested in smells, ants clearly pick up chemical communication when they rub their antennae together. There is all kind of communication going on that we don't have access to.

### How we take hold of the world

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But we, as human beings in our delusion of world dominance, imagine that our perception is the truth of the world, which is one of the reasons we have so many problems. So, consciousness, as we use the word in English, becomes a translation for 'nam-she' or 'nam-par she-pa'. Nam-par means 'a shape', so nam-she, consciousness, means 'knowing shapes', knowing some thing. It's about apprehension, how you take hold of the world. How you take hold of the world has two aspects: it has simple cognition (identification), and then it has a feeling tone (an

emotional component). So, this morning when I was having breakfast upstairs there was a bowl with different fruits inside. In the first perception there's a shape with colours. Before you even think 'fruit' it's just *oh! all of it!* — it comes all at once. And then you go into the identificatory consciousness and you think, *this is a pear, this is an apple, this is an orange*. And then that's immediately inflected, like rubbing oil into flour to make a focaccia: you massage the feeling tone of what you like and don't like into it. And so you think, *I'll have a pear, hm, there are apples... no, I'll have a pear*, is like this pear-ness is becoming big and apple-ness is receding into the distance.

So the feeling tone of our existence is very, very important, because it's part of a kind of not very conscious selectivity that goes on. So when we apprehend something, say, *I want to have a pear*, it's a form-ulation, it's a formation, not just of the pear-ness of the pear, which is making it figural — it's now in the foreground — but it's formulating me. So I am now a pear-oriented person and if somebody says, "Oh, do you want to try these? They're good." "No. No, I'll have a pear." So I am being formed through this particular constellation of identificatory factors. I'm patterning myself, just as I pattern the world. In that moment 'pear' has more value for me than 'apple'. That's not always the case, but for whatever reason, *oh yeah, I want a pear*.

So in that way I've taken hold of an aspect of the world and I separate it from its connectivity with everything else. When we're doing the meditation practice this is often what occurs: some feature becomes particularly important for us, and as soon as it gains an importance, the emotional content, the feeling-tone concept, becomes merged into it. So it's not just that this is interesting, but it's interesting because *I like it*, or, *I don't like it*. You have, as it were: here is the object, here is the subject. But my experience is the unity of the subject and object. So, I think I am thinking about drinking some water, and that water is neutral. There is also some apple juice that I could have, but I choose the water. So in that sense the water is not neutral: the water is privileged above the apple juice. This is more figural, more present, more immediate, for me.

### Becoming aware of our selectivity

So the open potential of what is possible becomes redefined according to my participation. Every step you take in life reveals a new vista. Does that make sense? If you're walking down the street, every step you take — your body's slightly tilted, your gaze is slightly tilted — and there's a new revelation of what's there. But we don't get the whole shebang: we get 'our take'. Tibetans have a nice word, 'rang-cha'. It means 'your slice', your share. So the world is full of many, many things, but you have your share. There are shoes you would never wear. You go into the shop, there are so many kind of clothes you would never wear — impossible! You go into the supermarket and there are all these kinds of foods, and you don't buy them — it's not your share. You see it on the shelf, you see other people buying it, you think, *good luck to you... not for me*. So in that way we're living in selectivity all the time: that is what the ego means. If your existence is totally conditioned by this selectivity on the basis of your own personal criteria, your habit formations and so on, the world you get is your world. You think, *I'm making my choices in 'the' world*, but you don't

have any access to ‘the’ world because you’re already pre-formed into ‘my’ world — because you couldn’t imagine putting that vegetable in your shopping basket. *I don’t eat that, don’t like it, not for me. Other people eat it, but it’s not for me.* So you have an editing which is prior to consciousness — *it’s just normal for me to wear these kind of clothes, to talk to these kind of people, to do these kind of things, this is how I am.* We look at our friends, we look at people we know, and we recognize them: *oh, that’s you, you’re like that.* You are ‘like’ that. ‘Like’ means a comparison, doesn’t it? So I’ve got a template, I’ve got an image of you and how you are now. I think, *oh yeah, you’re like that, that’s how you are, come on, that’s you.*

It means that ‘you’ are this range of choices: you manifest as the choices you make — about the movies you see, the places you go to, the kind of books you read, the kind of people you want to hang out with. That selectivity is what we call ego. Ego is the selector because ego is the point, it’s the entry point, into the open field of potential where I say ‘like’, ‘don’t like’, ‘for me’, ‘not for me’, and it’s happening so quickly we’re not even aware of doing it. So this is what we’re engaging with in the meditation. We’re starting to become more aware of our selectivity and how that operates, because what’s arising is a thought and it has a valency, a charge, for us according to our own particular disposition. That’s why in some ways we’re lucky to be in a consumerist capitalistic society, because we have so many choices in the shops and we can really see: people customise themselves. They are custom-ers. They’re people who buy things, but they also shape and fashion themselves through their choices. If you recognise how you do that externally, and you can really see, *how could they wear that, how could they think that’s a good thing to wear? — shock! — I couldn’t wear that,* so now you’re getting a sense of the shape of yourself. Then you see, in the meditation it’s exactly the same thing, that you have a selective attention, you have bias. So this is bringing us back to equanimity, equanimity as meaning ‘without bias’, without bias towards supporting friends, without bias against enemies, without prejudice, without saying, *this is intrinsically better than that.* So, I like this because I like it. That’s all. I don’t like it because it’s better, or the best, or the most important, or the most worthy. I just like it, that’s all. There is no truth to my choice except ‘I like it’. It has no underlying essential status. *Pears are better than apples. People who eat apples — well, you should be a bit suspicious of them, they’re kind of strange. They could have a pear, but they say, ‘No, I’ll have an apple....’ That’s already letting us know something about them, isn’t it?* We do that. That has led to a lot of war situations. All wars begin with naming: friend, enemy, terrorist, superior person, inferior person, ‘one of us’, ‘one of them’. It’s all about categorisation.

So the nature of consciousness, this knowing that takes things, that shapes and apprehends, is the vehicle of power, of personal power in the world, because *I know what I like, I know what I want to do, I know how I want to live.* It gives you a way of shaping and finding your pathway in life, but it’s also quite blind, it’s quite blinkered, because you’re already choosing the things that fit your profile of yourself and you’re rejecting the other factors.

The function of the meditation is to try to relax out of that selective tendency and to be with whatever arises. So the texts say, “Neither adopting nor rejecting.” That is to

say, the mind itself, our basic awareness, our basic presence, is pure and complete from the very beginning. This is the meaning of the term 'dzogchen'. 'Dzogpa' means complete, 'chen' means great. The 'great completion' means that the mind has no lack. Our sense of lack comes from the ego, from our self-formation, which is a pattern inside ourselves. And it's clear that we don't lack just one thing: moment by moment we lack different things. We lack companionship, or we lack food, we lack a sense of where we're going to sleep tonight, or whatever it would be. There are lots of things that the ego doesn't have access to, because it's a small point of view. Awareness is a panoramic vision, and so it's not troubled by the things that the ego has. This is the difference: the Buddha's mind, which is also our potential, is open and available, whereas we are somewhat closed and selective.

Now, we want to be closed and selective as long as we're trying to protect ourselves because *who would I be if I did what you do, I'm me because I don't do what you do, you are you and that's why you do these things, so if I was to start to do that I wouldn't be me*. That's one of the things that people experience in relationships, that there's a pressure somehow to confirm the validity of your partner's choices. But they don't feel right. It feels right to them, that's why they want to be like that. But you have some reservations because you don't want to be that way. You like them, but you don't want to be them, because you're you. So the ego is a kind of self-referential monitoring system whereby we're maintaining the continuity of who we think we are. Does that make sense? And so you can see, that's what's operating in the meditation: when we find ourselves drawn to some things and not drawn to others, and it's [fingersnap] — we didn't have a chance to think about it! And this is at the heart of meditation.

Normally, we have to think. We make sense of the world. We say, "Hang on a minute, let me think about this." And you get these variables and you kind of see how they might fit together — *okay, yeah, I could do this*. You're composing, like a musician composing. They've got various notes and they bring them together to get a sequence of music. So we take the possibilities of the situation and we bring them together. Some we reject and some we highlight, and then we have this particular melody of the moment. But, of course, while you're doing that you're out of play, you've gone into your study or your studio, to paint or to write or to reflect, and then you go back into life. But in life you can't do that (as you were indicating), you've got to respond. If my responses are coming out of my ego sense of self they're going to be triggered by vibrations of harmonic or disharmonic. Does this particular possibility harmonise with my sense of who I am, or does it seem to be contrary? And if it's contrary is that exciting, expansive, hopeful? Or is it anxiety-provoking — *o my god, I don't think I could do that, it wouldn't be me!* You feel it in your gut, don't you? It's a visceral kind of thing: *how do they do that?* It's just immediate: *not me!*

### Self and other, the conjoined twins

So 'me' / 'not me' is how we are editing the world: from the point of view of the ego. Because, actually, according to the teaching, the truth of our world is non-dual. That means 'not split'. There isn't self and other. Self and other are like conjoined twins,

always moving together. So we want to say, *hey I'm just me, I'm independent, I'm just me, just leave me alone, stop telling me what to do, I'm me*. And next minute we're lonely — *hey, do you want to go to the movies, shall we go to the café?* Because I want to be with you, but on my terms, which is a kind of impossible movement, isn't it? And that's why we kind of rub up against each other all the time, we have incomprehension. *Why can't we always be easy? Look, we had a great evening — let's try and live like this!* And next day you're fighting at breakfast ... because maintaining harmonisation is complicated if it's the harmonisation of patterns, because, as we looked at earlier, I'm not making me: I am finding myself being like this. I find myself thinking, I find myself saying something. There isn't a little factory inside me producing this. I don't know what I'm going to say before I say it, I don't know how I'm going to walk before I start walking. It depends on circumstances.

So each of us is emergent. We are emerging in the field of possibilities. That is to say, how we emerge is influenced by external factors and internal factors. I'm not 'doing me'. I'm not an agent, the doer of myself, and yet our ego sense of identity tells me, *it's my life, I'm going to live it my way, this is me, this is who I am*. That's living a lie, and that is how we live. The Tibetans have a word for that — 'rang sang', which means self-deception, that we claim to be autonomous individuals, and yet we live in interdependence. We claim to be making our thoughtful, self-definitional decisions — *this is what I'm going to do, this is how I am* — and, yet, somehow, we are moving around like seaweed in the ocean. You can just see: the seaweed's attached to the rock and the tide's moving, and it's moving this way and that way, glistening and running over other fronds of seaweed. We're like that with other people. We feel this and then they feel that, and we think, *okay*, and now I feel something different. We are unfinished, we are a work in progress... and yet, *I'm me*. This is this primary contradiction that creates so many problems for us: I should know my own mind. "What do you really think? We've got a problem in our relationship. Tell me what you really want." It's a horrifying thing when somebody says that to you. "Do you really love me?" "Sometimes, 20%, 100% sometimes... moves about." That is how life is — that is how life is. But you can't say that because honesty would destroy us. "Sometimes you're so horrible I don't want to see you again!" It doesn't really help a relationship if you say that too much. *It's true*. So in order to maintain the relationship you smooth it over, bring on the sugar factory. These things are really tricky. Then when we see that we don't really want the truth — we don't really want the truth! — we want the image, because the self is an image.

So bringing it back to the meditation issue, because of this ceaseless fluctuation, if we are situated in our ego self we're going to be pulled into artificial manipulation to try to maintain the patterns we're familiar with. But if we can relax and open, and just allow whatever is arising to be what it is, then we see that it comes and it goes, and it hasn't defined me. It is present as part of my experience, but it hasn't defined me.

Definition is very difficult for us as human beings. For example, if you feel a bit down and you go to see the doctor and you get a diagnosis of depression, and they want to give you some medication, this is very problematic. Because the doctor probably

didn't have very much time to see you and needed to come to some formulation, they need to give shape to the account you're giving of the sensation in your body and the kind of thoughts you have when you wake up early in the morning and so on. So they're trying to get a pattern, which allows them to make the diagnosis, on the basis of which they might give a prescription. And so they are pre-disposed to be looking for the signs that will validate the kind of diagnosis they will come up with. There are many other factors in your life. You could ask the depressed person, "Any good things happen yesterday? What did you enjoy eating yesterday?" "Oh, I had some chocolate. It was quite nice." "Oh, tell me about that." "Well, it was Swiss chocolate, I like Swiss chocolate." So the person starts blethering about that and — oh! — there's a whole other pathway of experience operating for that person. And so the global definition of depression starts to open up, and it's one of the many flavours of that person's experience. But you can't do anything with that as a diagnosis. So you have to edit out in order to get the seeming clarity of the definite diagnosis. And that's really at the heart of it: if you are 'making sense of things', if you are working out what is going on, you are highlighting some features and hiding other features.

In the meditation we want to go in the other direction and just allow it all to be there as it is. Without correcting, without shaping, without modifying: let it show itself. Our interpretation is a grasping, and what we grasp depends on our system of taking hold. If you were an eagle — sea eagles can swoop down and catch a fish in the sea — they put their talons, they put their claws, into it and fly off holding this big fish that's moving around. We couldn't do that. The fish would just slip out of our fingers because we don't have those claws. So how you can take hold of things makes a difference. If you see a crab in the sea, or a lobster, it can catch particular things. But we have these wonderful hands, we can catch lots of things with a lot of finesse.

So if you look at yourself, how do you take hold of the world? If you imagine mental hands what are they like? Some people can be jealous and they just think, *I feel jealous*. Other people are terrified of feeling jealous. Some people can be angry, other people are terrified of being angry. They want to be nice, they try to please other people all the time. Some other people say, "Well, I'm in a bad mood, what do you expect? I'm in a bad mood, sort it out for yourself, I'm in a bad mood." And other people go, "Oh, I didn't mean to upset you. I'm so sorry..." And they start to soften it again. So, what can we allow on our plate as my experience? In the meditation we're trying to have a bigger and bigger plate, so that it can have sour, sweet, bitter, sharp, some chilli flavour.... All kind of different flavours are there, like a palette with many different colours on it. And they're all there and they're all valid as colours. So all our moods are like colours. We can be depressed, angry, confused. We can feel stupid, feel betrayed, feel all sorts of things, and then they go. They arise and then they go. But if we don't accept them, or if we try to select them, that engagement, that grasping, takes hold of them.

So here's this bottle opener. If I take hold of it I have got it. But it's obvious that it has got me, because now [putting down the bottle opener] my hand is free. If I want to get this, where's my freedom? I have lost my freedom by getting the object. So that's a simple example to see in your mind: when you catch a thought or a feeling and you get into it, you've got it, but it's got you because now you're trapped in it, and your

potential for moving in different directions is lost. That's what Buddhism means by attachment, that you have limited yourself. Inasmuch as you get one thing you've lost this potential. So the more fixated you become on the shape of yourself, or how you want other people to be, you give up your freedom. You can take it up [picks up object] but you have to put it down: you have to put it down.

That's where we come to impermanence. Every thought that comes is going, is going. Let it go. If you let it go you get your hand back, but if you hang onto it you don't have any freedom. You become caught up in brooding, in reflecting, worrying, going round and round and round. So letting the thought go because thoughts go, letting the moment go because moments go. Things come and things go. Relationships work well for a while, then they become difficult, then it gets a bit easier. That's how our life is pulsing. Coming to a final conclusion, saying, *this is hopeless, we've been together and it doesn't work out, this is the end* — what you've done is you've formulated something, you've brought a definite shape to the situation. Two people, or a family situation: this is a system of great potential. But the potential has become fixated on certain views about the other person. "You annoy me so much, you always do this." If you're a therapist, when you hear 'always' big alarm bells start ringing, because nobody is always anything. But when you really dislike someone you start saying, "You always do that. You always say that! Why do you always say it?" It's not true, but that's how it feels, because what it's really saying is, "I feel under attack when you're like this, I can't be me in relation to you."

When you apply that to the meditation it's about formulation, it's about solidification, about maintaining the continuity of patterns. But, actually, the patterns dissolve, so freedom begins with trusting impermanence. In the dzogchen texts it talks about the self-liberation of phenomena. It means you don't need to keep editing your world, because your good experiences will vanish and your bad experiences will vanish. They both vanish. Good times come and go, bad times come and go. So if you stay open and relaxed, instead of being caught up as the starring actor in the drama of your life, you become like the illuminative stage on which these various dramas are occurring and moving, and you're both, simultaneously, the stage, the lighting, the movement of the acting, and the audience, because you are also the observer. All is operating at the same time.

### Definition, belief, neurosis

**Question:** I realise that I have a tendency to develop a super-ego attitude: *I want to be available*. Which is not true, because, for example, in groups I often tend to feel, *oh, it's getting too much, it's getting too loud, it's too many people, I feel uncomfortable*. So what I understood is: okay, if I realise this, then my feeling uncomfortable is just 'something'. Then I come on another level, because then I say to myself, *I should be happily amongst you being unhappy*. Which is also not true, because I do react, not always, but then I get absent, or grumpy, or I start whining, doing a bit of a drama, things like that. Like when you just mentioned again about being relaxed, I thought, well, maybe it's kind of a double position: like being relaxed

in being not relaxed, like relaxed into being '*I realise I'm not relaxed, and I relax while I'm not relaxed.*'

**James:** Mm-hm, exactly. So, the traditional image for pointing to this is the mirror and the reflection. The mirror is always open and empty, but it fills with different kinds of reflections. So your mind, as the luminosity, as your basic kind of being-here-ness, the fact that life is happening, that just *oh! there's this and this and this*, that kind of immediate 'here it is-ness' is like the mirror: it's just showing whatever is occurring in the moment. The patterns of the reflection are changing, and you're not in charge of them. And the reflection doesn't damage the mirror, but the reflection seems to damage the ego because the ego is like the tissue — it absorbs the reflection, it absorbs the moment *I'm feeling uncomfortable*, and so that becomes a kind of totalising definition of me: *everyone else here likes each other and they know each other and they're all very friendly, but I feel kind of weird ....* Now I'm in this little ball of myself. And I'm like a bad doctor, I'm making a false diagnosis. I'm saying, "*This is terrible, this shouldn't be happening.*" I'm over privileging the feeling quality and using the feeling as a definition of the object.

The child says, "I can't eat this, it's horrible!" 'I can't eat it' is a subjective feeling. 'It's horrible' is an objectification of the subjective feeling. "It's not horrible. If you eat it you won't be sick, you won't die. It's just not the taste you like. You can learn to eat things that are not the taste you like, because we're going to visit your gran on Sunday, and she's going to cook something. And you can't tell her what you're going to eat and what you don't eat. That's impolite." So there you're used to it, but I don't know whether people can dare to do this any more. But when I was a child the super-ego function in society said, "You eat what's on your plate." And now so many kids become fussy eaters. They say, "I can't eat it." Because what they're doing is, they're taking the subjective feeling and projecting it into the object: *the object is horrible*. The object isn't horrible, we are eating it, it's good. You don't like it, so if your not liking it is allowed to mushroom it becomes a total definition of the truth of the world. And the more I expand the more I'm imprisoned. Does that make sense? Because the more I'm entitled to say, "I can't eat this, I won't eat this, I'm not doing that", the more I am restricting my world. I can't move out and just be here.

I supervise a lot of child therapy and so many kids now can't go on a sleepover at their friends' because, "They're going to give me things that I can't eat, I can't eat there. No, I don't do that." You just eat it, it's not poison, these people are not going to give you poison. "No, but I don't like it". You don't like it? What is the status, what is the value that we should attribute to the fact that you don't like it? So that could be some little wall that you step over, *I don't like it but anyway I can eat it*. Or you could let that wall get bigger and bigger and bigger: *I don't like it, I can't, no you can't make me, I'm not going to, it's horrible ...!* Hyperventilating, temper tantrum... it's not much fun being around that. And the child, in their omnipotence, is becoming completely powerless. They spoil the whole family. You get that with eating disorders, and with all kind of things.

So it's something like: what is the status, what is the actual value of what's arising in my mind? When we are meditating and different thoughts and feelings are arising,

when we're talking about equanimity, we're talking about that we can allow it to be as it is. *I'm not in charge, I didn't make the world, this is how it is, I don't need to react.* The mirror is not damaged by the reflection: this is the basic point in the meditation. If we relax into the state of the mirror, into the openness of the mirror, it's just reflections coming and going. They're there. I mean, the reflection is in the mirror; it's very, very intimate. You feel something right inside you, you feel it in your belly, in your heart, and then it's gone. And then something else is there, and something else is there, and something else is there. It was not a final, defining moment. But if you invest it with special truth, with strong feeling tone, then it seems impossible, *I just can't, I can't...* and you're imprisoned. You've gone into a prison because of the attribution of a meaning. The meaning is not in the object — it's coming from you. So you project limitation onto the world, and then you are further limited by the limitation you experience out there. This is very, very tragic.

**Question:** Isn't it just another level, which is also a reflection?

**James:** Right, it's just another reflection. Say you go to a party and you're feeling uncomfortable and sad, the possibility is that other people could see that you are uncomfortable and sad, but then the thing is, *I don't want them to know that, I want them to see me in another way.* That is to say, I want to be able to delude other people by telling them a false image of myself. I want to hide the truth of my existence. Now, each of us, I think, has done that in our life. So then the question is: what do I gain by hiding the truth of my life, by falsifying my experience? We could be there and looking sad, and someone might come up and ask, "You doing okay? Want to have a chat?" And they take you out of yourself. But in order to let them take me out of myself they have to get close enough to be feeling the vibration of me. *But I don't want them to, I don't want them to do that because it's really embarrassing that they would know that I feel scared or embarrassed or useless, or I can't dance, I don't like this music, I don't know anyone.* I've been shrinking myself, so I'm shrunk. And they say, "Oh you look a bit shrunk. Chat with me and we'll get a bit bigger together."

There we see how fear is so controlling of us, and that ego is an image. The ego is actually like a fetish. A fetish in its traditional meaning is usually a piece of wood, and traditionally nails were used a lot in a fetish. You hammer nails in, as iron has a very deep significance in magic in the movement from the Stone Age into the Iron Age. And the piece of wood with the nails in it, and perhaps some kauri seeds for eyes, becomes invested with a particular meaning. This is so interesting for art: you have a construct which is then taken as being inherently meaningful. It's a double move, it's like a Freudian repression, which is exactly what you get with Tibetan thangkas and statues. When you have finished painting a thangka you write OM AH HUNG on the back, the seed syllables of body, speech and mind. Then you paint in the pupils of the eye and once the eyes are completed then you believe that the deity is now present. It becomes an icon like in the Greek Orthodox system. They have a very similar way of doing it. The same with a statue: you make the statue, make lots of mantras and long dharani mantras, and you put them inside the statue, then you do a consecration and you invite the god to come and live in the statue. And now the statue is not just an idea about something somewhere else, it is the living presence,

which is why people make prostrations to the statue. They're not making prostrations to a piece of metal but to what is living there. So it's a fetish relationship. We artificially construct the statue, and then we make the statue intrinsically meaningful. It's a double move. Does that make sense?

And the key thing to see there is that this is parallel with what we do in our neurosis. We make something important, and then we think it is inherently important. For example, I've heard so many stories about the pathways particularly of girls starting to cut themselves. There's the first thing when they're a bit upset and then they make some cuts, and they start to see, *this is something I can do. First it happens to me that I'm in a bad mood, and I've heard other girls in school talking about it, and so I start to cut, and now it's something I do. So I'm sitting in school all day and I'm just waiting till I get home, and I'm thinking I'll go in the bathroom and get a razor blade. And I'll put this disinfectant and a bandage on it, and I'll wear this long shirt so my mum won't see...*, planning the whole kind of thing that they're going to do. More and more of their psychic energy is being invested in this ritualised performance. They're making it real for themselves. So when they get home it feels like an absolute necessity to do that. This is something artificial made to appear intrinsic. It appears to be arising for me as an absolute necessity, but it's a learned behaviour: this is our life.

When we were small we didn't speak our mother tongue. Then we started to stumble around in language and then we became fluent, like a river flowing. The words are just coming through us. So language, which was 'other' for the baby, started to become 'self' and is now fully us: we are language. And language is a set of conventions. It's entirely artificial, the meanings that are ascribed to particular sounds. There's no direct correlation between sound and meaning at all. It's artificial. But when we speak and it's a language we understand, then, *oh yeah, I get it, yeah!* It seems given, it seems true. But it's a construct.

So when we start to look at our mind and these thoughts, we see that we are the prison-maker, we construct these bars of our belief system and live inside them and believe it's real. *I can't do that, I'm not like that. Why not? You can do anything. If other human beings do it you can do it. There's all kind of things that people do. What's stopping us from doing it? An idea. Why do they do what they do? It was a thought.*

You see people (I've only ever seen men) who have a dotted line tattooed round their neck and it says, "cut here". Interesting thing, amazing. Why would you do that? Or get a big spider's web tattooed on your face? Why would you do that? It was an idea that came into their mind. Essentially they want to say to everyone, *fuck off!* but it's much quicker to put the spider's web there on your face since you don't need to say a word. It's aggression: *leave me alone, I don't like you, I hate you, I hate everything, I'm not one of you, fuck off and die, just fuck off.* They are caught by a thought. The formation of aggression has manifested into this symbolism, which is upfront and in your face every time you see them.

That's an idea. So it takes us back to phenomena — fresh, moving, changing — and then you catch hold of an idea — *I like, I don't like, I can, I can't* — and it can take the form of the tattoo, which is now permanently marked. And your potential as a person is marked. If you go for a job interview with that tattoo on your face it doesn't look too good. You've marked yourself out, you've made yourself an outsider.

That's a very visible external example but internally, you can think of your internal tattoos, of your beliefs about yourself: *I don't like people, people are going to laugh at me, I wouldn't know what to say*, all this kind of socially anxious thoughts. These are just ideas. And then somebody chats to you and you relax and you're having a reasonable time but if you had stayed in the thought formation you would be imprisoned.

So this is why in the meditation we want to let the thought be there and to see that it goes, because if you can see that it goes you don't have to put energy into modifying and editing and directing and controlling what is going on. Impermanence is freedom because everything changes. So when you feel embarrassed or stupid or confused, and you don't pull this into yourself — *oh god why am I always like this?* — and you stay a bit open, and you think, *well, I don't know anyone here and it's a bit strange and I don't quite know what to do.... but oh, it's due to causes and conditions that this is arising!* And now I start to chat with someone (different causes and conditions) and the feeling tone of being different and strange is vanishing. If I had stayed in the belief it would have put me into an egg. I'd be encapsulated, locked inside this, and then I'd probably leave early because *this is too much, I felt really uncomfortable*, but if you see, *oh! this arises due to causes and conditions*, as they change this will change.

### [Bringing meditation into the world](#)

When we talk about inherent existence and the absence of inherent existence it means exactly that. The feeling seems real, it seems true, it seems absolutely valid, but there's nothing to it except my belief in the belief. *No one here likes me, I'm different*: believe that idea and you put yourself in a little cage. And if you think, *oh, this is a thought, I'm anxious, okay, have a chat, look at someone, smile, look at the paintings, do something*, your mood changes and that thought vanishes. This is the practicality of bringing meditation into the world: to always stay with the phenomena. Phenomena change, and they show they're changing. Ideas can be held, which is very interesting because the idea is an abstraction. It's ethereal, it's like mist or cloud. It's got no substance to it: it's only true if you believe in it. Phenomena are palpable: you can touch them, smell them, taste them — and yet they're always vanishing.

So, the actual is vanishing, and what seems to remain is abstract. That is weird, that is very, very strange, because we imagine that what remains is actual, but it's not. This room, since we got in this morning, has changed quite a lot. The mood in the room changes because we get to know each other a wee bit more, we warm up, we relax a bit. So it's a different feeling tone in the room: the light is changing from

outside, people's postures have changed, you had a break and so on. The room as a revelation, as phenomenon, shifts. It's always shifting. The idea of the room can be maintained. That's why when we meditate we look at ideas. We look at the thoughts and feelings and sensations which seem to be the guarantors — they seem to be the proof of the ongoing truth and validity of what I believe. I believe this because I can bring the thought back, again and again, and every time I bring the thought back into my mind, *it's the same and it's true and that's how it is*. The actual situation is changing.

Now we see the poor Kurdish people, big, big friends of America when they're doing everyone's business, and for the Turks with their hatred of the Kurds.... I mean, we should remember Turkey is a country marked by murderous hatred: the genocide of the Armenians, which they denied; the genocide of the Christians, which they denied; the genocide of the Jews in Turkey, which they denied. They've been murdering minority communities, left, right and centre, for a very long time. Now they want to get rid of the Kurds completely — and they are a member of NATO. Because we have nuclear weapons there we say, "You are our brothers." Deceit, hypocrisy, double-dealing, self-deception: we're up to our neck in it, we're over our heads in it, it's everywhere. The re-definition of the Kurds: friend / enemy. Donald Trump says, "Nothing to do with us. Where were they in the D-Day landings? They didn't help us win the Second World War." We have madness, big-time, in the world, where any kind of stupid idea, empty idea, comes out, and because the president said it we should all say, "It must be true, it must be true." In that sense Trump is very helpful for us because we see that in ourselves, that we believe crazy ideas. We believe our anxieties, our neurotic constructions, our depressions, our manic phases. We believe all this stuff.... Comes and goes, comes and goes.

So equanimity is basically to be able to be like the mirror and allow the movement of the reflections. Sometimes I'm happy, sometimes I'm sad; sometimes I'm social, sometimes I'm more solitary. I'm just like this, I'm just like this. Don't 'believe' that you know me; don't 'believe in' me: see me. If you see me you have to see me now, and now, and now, and now. If you 'believe in' me you're believing not in me but in your idea of me. So I have now gone from this perceptual presence in relating with you, co-emergent, to being an idea in your mind. And the idea in your mind is going to slip away from me as I am. So believing in other people is not a good idea, but seeing them is. And that's the whole idea of kindness and compassion: it's to actually stay with people as they are.

### Balancing connection and separation

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**Question:** I have a practical challenge, something that I truly observe in my life at the moment. I believe I have let go of a lot of previous habits or concepts and now I am experiencing decision problems, like really big decision problems! For example, what haircut? I always did it like this. My mother always said it's too short. She wants it longer, I dislike longer. And now I have it longer because she wanted it. But I'm like: *the Buddhists cut it completely — that would be an option* — but what to do in the end? I need some haircut and the hair stylist expects me to say what they should do.

I'm looking for guidance, to help me make decisions. How do I come to wise decisions if I am moving away from previous concepts?

**James:** Well, you grew out of your mother's body, and when you came out of her body they cut the cord connecting you to her. But not in her mind: you're still connected with your mum. Your hair is growing out of your head. It belongs to you. But your mum thinks you belong to your mum. So now you have a battle: who does your hair belong to, to you or your mum — because you are her boy, her darling boy? So, one umbilical cord was cut. Maybe there's another umbilical cord to cut, because if you want to have freedom in life, the only way to have freedom is to allow other people to be free. Your mum has to be free to have her opinion, but you have to know that her opinion is her opinion: it's not the truth of your life. When she says something about your hair she's expressing her like, her dislike. That's her talking about her. She's using your hair, your head, to talk about her. If you hear it that she's talking about you then you're pulling her into your world and giving her much too much power. She likes it or doesn't like it: that's her. Other people have their particular formations. You can't please everyone. So if you want her approval then you have to try to work out what she would like and do that. But you might get it wrong. She might really be wanting a son who stands up to her and does not do what she says! Either way aren't doing what you want so you get torn in the middle. We might say to your mother, "Don't build your hopes and your happiness on your son's hair." We might say to you, "Don't build your hopes and your happiness on your responses to your mother." Once you start taking another person and making them an object of your projection so that you believe somehow that they are an extension of yourself, life becomes very difficult.

It's like thinking, *well, you have your thoughts and feelings, and they're different from mine. I can't make you happy.* So I'm the kind of person who doesn't make people happy. *May all sentient beings be happy:* it doesn't mean that I can make them happy. What I can do is remove some of the impediments to their being happy.

A major impediment, or a major blockage, to their being happy is if they build their happiness on how you look, because that's not their world: that's your world. So it's about separation. But in dharma it's like the Middle Way: if you separate too much — and sometimes families have a big quarrel and there's a split and they never speak to each other ever again — it becomes intolerable. So finding enough separation to have your own life, your own world, your own mind, and yet be close enough: that's a negotiation and it's quite tricky. Parents, especially perhaps mothers, have to learn not to comment on their children. "Mum, it's just your idea." When the baby was very small, the baby was yours. You were the queen of the baby. Now you're getting old — time for retirement. The child is autonomous, they have separated, they are 'other'. They are truly other: they are not yours.

You get this a lot in Indian culture, where the son, traditionally in the village structure, continues to live in the family home and the bride comes in. And she comes under the power of the mother-in-law, and the mother-in-law loves her son, 'her' son. And so this girl is for baby-making and cooking, and so on, *'but it's my boy'* — because nobody cuts that cord. And usually the girl has to have two male children before she

gets any status that starts to allow her to have a voice in the family. So these are very interesting issues about identity. It's exactly what we were talking about in the meditation, about fusion, because if you merge into a thought it becomes you. If you merge into your children they become you. If you merge into a lover they become you. You get a kind of intimacy as an antidote to loneliness, but you lose the autonomy of yourself, and the autonomy of the other. And the fact is, if you and I are not the same, and I don't know how you're going to behave and you don't know how I'm going to behave, we both have to be attentive. So not-knowing brings you back to phenomena. Does that make sense? But knowing allows you to assume, *oh, you're like that, you're always the same, come on, we know you, we don't need to look at you, we don't need to get any fresh information in this moment about how you are, we know you.* And that's part of the separation in families.

As Buddhist practitioners we want to be connected. When I was in Nepal a long time ago I was in a small retreat place. Just two monks were there, and I did a lot of things with them — we did some building, all kind of things. And one day I said to them, "Oh, you're both really good friends," and one of them replied to me, "We're not friends, we're friendly." That's such an interesting thing, because when you become friends very often people collapse, they form this A-frame relationship. They fall onto each other, so if one moves the other has to move. But if you're friendly it's like an H-frame: both are grounded and centred and you connect across, and you can open that bridge or you can join it, but you haven't lost yourself. Once you collapse onto that other person any movement is disturbing for the other person. Such an interesting idea.

It's the same in the meditation. If you don't fuse with the thought then it's a kind of an H-frame: you have the clarity and you have the appearance and they're arising together. You have the reflection and the mirror: they are close, intimate, but they are also separate. They are not truly two different things nor are they one. This is non-duality. The mirror is the main image for non-duality. But when you merge with another person and take them too seriously your boundary dissolves, which is exactly what we experience in the meditation: you merge into a thought and you get carried away. So, we don't want to be too far away and we don't want to be merged: we want to be present with it as it is. And then making decisions is much easier, because you're actually in touch with the shape of the world, the manifest shape, rather than clouded in predictions about how the other person's likely to be, and what I will do if I upset them and so on, and it just becomes more and more abstract. And you lose your life, which is ... just this.

### Thusness equals immediacy

**Question:** To formulate about thusness, or how it is: I think that's really difficult, because on the other side it's always the thing, you don't know what it is. You don't know, but then you should 'see' how it is. But when you know how it is, then you don't know again. So it's like this process about the bowl of fruit: you see the colour, you have a name, 'apple', 'banana', you have like and dislike. Where's the thusness? In all three stages, or in the apple?

**James:** If you see it then it's in in all three stages. I think the best way to explore this is through the body. Nowadays we are very lucky that there are so many kinds of movement possibilities. So, for example, on one extreme you could do learn classical ballroom dancing, then you could do salsa, then you could do tango. Tango is bringing more emotion, there are certain kind of moves and postural things that you can do, but the feeling tone is arising behind that. Then you could do five-rhythm dancing, and you feel the body moving in these different rhythms in different ways. You're not deciding how to dance: as the rhythm changes you find your body moving in that way. And then you go to maybe a jazz improvisation class, where you're moving your body with other people's bodies, in contact, without knowing how to do it. And if you really enter into that experience you find, *oh! if I stay connected there is a truth in that connectivity which allows the body to move harmoniously, with all kind of emotions coming through.* So, there is a knowing which is a non-conceptual knowing. I cannot know in advance how my body is going to be in response to this rhythm, with these particular people. But the knowing arises unmediated and then I can see directly. When I get anxious, when I get self-conscious, when I try to think what to do, when I decide *I don't want to dance with this person but I really like that person, I want to dance with them,* it fucks. You've lost it because you've now inserted the wedge of a thought into the field of connection. Does that make sense?

So that's really at the heart of it. When you've got that immediacy and you're trusting that this is arising in the freshness of the moment, then you take that back to the tango class and you dance the tango from the freshness of not knowing. And then you can take it to something more classical, like a foxtrot, or a waltz, which is in some ways much more predictable, but the ground of the waltz is this openness. So instead of knowing in advance how I'm going to move you stay exactly with the beat of the music. You're not ahead, you're not behind, you're on the button, which again is the basic meditation instruction. It says, "Don't go after past thoughts, don't wait expectantly for future thoughts, stay present with the emergence." I think that doing it through the body is very, very helpful, because then you really see it, and then you see, *it is my own thinking which takes me out of time — my desire, my aversion, my hopes, my fears.* They become a kind of barrier zone between me and actual, living contact.

So there's the thusness in that. The thusness is the immediacy. And the immediacy can also be present in formulas, because, for example, if you have to go to work and you sit in a business meeting, there's a certain choreography of how you should behave. Maybe a chair-person introduces the agenda and asks people to speak and so on, so it's not free-form spontaneity, but you can be fresh in it. But you won't be fresh if you go into thinking about what people are saying, and judging them, *oh for god's sake, shut up, so boring ....* You've vanished! So once you get the flavour of this you can apply it in any situation in life. And the key thing is, being here, being just with 'this', is more complete, more fulfilling, more satisfying than running after any thought, any imagining. So the phenomena are our life, and the imagining is the loss of our life, because when you go into the realm of the imagination you become a ghost, and ghostly existence is a lot of what we have.

Okay, we'll do a little more meditation before the lunch break. Now, when we're sitting we want to relax into the out-breath, long, slow out-breath. Feel your releasing of all the tensions of your body, voice and mind. Imagine you're just open like the sky, or like a mirror, and whatever is occurring is just reflection, rippling across the surface of the mirror.

[8 minutes practice]

After this break we'll look more at the nature of the mind and the relation between awareness and delusion. While we have this break, whether you're going outside or staying in, try to keep this sense of everything as being revealed moment by moment. In the tradition they say, "Don't hold your mind inside, don't hold the world outside." That is to say, don't say, "This skin bag is the ultimate barrier and I am something in here." Because when you're sitting here you're aware of sensation, you're aware of thoughts, of feelings, but you're also aware of walls, other people's clothes, how they look. You go outside and you hear the traffic. So, the world out there is your experience, something you experience. That's how it's revealed to you, as experience. Your own body is experience. Your thoughts, your mind, are experience. If you're talking you experience your voice through how you hear the words forming. Everything is experience, and this experience is undivided. It shows itself as the movement of subject and object, a bit as if we have this huge dance stage and the choreographer has made a pas de deux, so there are two people dancing together. The pas de deux is a united movement. The bodies are seen as they move together. It's not two people dancing — that would very clunky — but this is a whole combined movement of extension, fall, recovery, all the possibilities. Neither two, nor one: there are two bodies, but they're moving together, in harmony. This is non-duality. So this is how subject-and-object is: you're walking along the street with the world. How you walk depends on if there are wet leaves and it's slippery, how you put your feet on the ground, if there's a puddle and you see a car coming and you don't want to get splashed so you move your body slightly away. See how you're moving in this absolute pulsation of responsivity with the shaping of the world around you. And then, of course, you can see how you cut that, how you divide it, how you go back into yourself with your opinions about what is going on. So this kind of practice is subtle. It's more difficult than just saying a mantra, or saying, "May all beings be happy." You have to be present and observe openness and how it closes, openness and how it closes....

Okay, so we'll meet back at two.

## THIRD SESSION

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### How is the ground of all phenomena?

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Now we'll look a little bit more at the mind, at clarity and confusion, and then we'll do some more practice. The way I'll explain this is in the traditional Nyingmapa

dzogchen way. Nyingmapa is the lineage, dzogchen is the mode, or style, of practice.

Everything has the same ground. The ground, or the base, or the source, is the origin and the support and the conclusion of all phenomena. This ground is not different from your mind itself. The ground is self-occurring: that is to say, it's just there by itself, it's not made by anything. It's also uncompounded. (Compounded means put together from different bits and pieces.) The ground has no maker, it's not made by anyone, nor does it make anything. It's infinite, it has no limit. It's beyond expression. And it's beyond the categories of nirvana and samsara. That is to say, the ground of our being, the ground of our existence, is unlike anything we know. It's not a cognisable — it's not something that you can take with your mind, like some kind of thought or memory. But it's the basis for experience: that is to say, it is the openness out of which your experience of yourself is manifesting, moment by moment.

If you were a fixed thing your potential would be very, very limited. But in the course of your life you've already experienced so many things: different states of your body, different shapes of your body, different levels of your intelligence, different qualities of emotion.... You have been many, or, put another way: you are multiple. There is no first person singular: you are manifold. That is to say, you are a whole variety of expressions of the potential of the ground. What you take to be your self is based on a forgetfulness of the ground. So the ground itself, when it's recognised, when you're awakened to it, the ground is the inseparability of awareness and emptiness. And that reveals itself as the inseparability of clarity and emptiness, where clarity is everything which is arriving all at once (what we were looking at before lunch): pre-conceptual immediacy. And inside that you move, your body moves, your voice moves, thoughts and feelings move. We are moving within the field of clarity, inseparable from the ever-empty ground. These three aspects together: this is the wholeness of our existence. Even when life is very difficult and you seem to be trapped in a particular formation, if you relax your absorbance inside that vibratory *'oh my god, this is me'*, you see, *oh, this is showing!* This is what is occurring, this is experience revealed by the clarity of the mind. Just as, if a mirror is very dirty or dull, you don't see very much in it, but if you have a good mirror, and it's clear, even a very horrible reflection, something very dark and ugly, reflected in the mirror is shining, because it's the quality of the mirror.

When you feel terrible stay with the clarity: the clarity leads to the openness. Yes, this is easier said than done.

What happens is that this ground is without bias. The ground is described as completely even, which on this level means 'indifferent': it doesn't care, it's just the ground. Just as, if you have a piece of land and you leave it, everything possible that has a seed that goes into the earth will start to grow there. Some of what grows you call weeds, you call nettles, thorns and so on. Other things you call flowers, beautiful spring crocuses, and so on. And you say, "Oh, I like the flowers, I don't like the weeds." But for the ground there's no difference. The potential of the ground shows itself according to circumstances. So this ground also shows itself as the ignoring of

itself. Rigpa, or awareness, is the intrinsic clarity, or the intrinsic awareness of the ground showing itself. For example, you might be walking along the road and you're really aware that you're walking. You might have been to a dance class and you really feel it in your body, and you can feel your shoulders, your hips, your knees, and you're moving with the world, weaving in and out of the people, and *oh! I am this movement!* You're not necessarily thinking about it, but it's as if there's a lucidity about it, an unimpeded clarity in being aware of the body unfolding itself in these different movements. Or, you could be walking along the street completely distracted. You're still walking, your feet are going on the ground, your hips are moving, but it's dulled off. It's there — without this body you wouldn't be walking down the street — but you're there and not there simultaneously. This is what Buddhist ignorance means: you're ignoring what is there. What is there doesn't vanish when you ignore it. When the child goes, "Ha ha, you can't see me!" they haven't vanished. They're there. That's the key thing; you can have layers and layers of patterns of avoiding, but it doesn't destroy anything, nothing has been torn apart, nothing has actually been split. You're just inattentive.

So now we have a lot of people practising mindfulness. Mindfulness means to increase your capacity to be here and now, present in the moment as your life unfolds. If you have the sense of that, when ignorance arises the space of awareness starts to thicken, like a fine, wispy cloud in the sky, and then gradually other little fine drops come together and the cloud thickens, and then soon all you see is the cloud. You don't see the sky anymore. Without the sky you wouldn't have the clouds. The sky is the mother, or the ground, or the basis of the clouds. You don't get clouds in the wall, you don't get clouds in the floor, you don't get clouds up your nose: you get clouds in the sky. So the cloud is a way in which the sky shows itself. The sky can show itself clear, or it can show itself cloudy. Whether it's clear or it's cloudy makes no difference to the sky. So again, that's an example like the mirror: whether the image in the mirror is beautiful, or terrifying, or ugly, it's just a reflection and the mirror is not affected by the quality of the reflection.

### Substantiality: a product of our thinking

Now, when the process of the stuff that's arising becomes multi-layered and thick, the clarity, which is the clarity of the mind, is refracted through this clarity and appears as dark light. So it appears as a kind of substantiality. For example, if I had a sense of being here I might say, "I exist". So, 'I exist' is two seconds of sound coming out of my voice-box. It's a thought which takes a micro-second to comprehend, then it's gone. It has no 'truth' to it. *I exist, I exist, I exist...* You have to keep repeating it, and, even if you do keep repeating it, it vanishes, and vanishes. Yet it seems to have a density, it seems to state something very solid: 'I exist, I am'. What are you? *Well, let's see, 'cause I don't know yet what I am — I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm tired, I'm this, I'm that.* 'I am' is a potential, and before 'I am' you have 'I'... I... I.... 'I', in that sense, is a simple presence. I: it indicates here, now, I. 'I am' is starting to thicken. What are you? *I am tired, I am Scottish.* So now there's the stickiness of 'am', the verb 'to be'. To be what? *Just being.* Yeah, come on, but just being what? What are you? And the more that people ask you, "What are you?" you

come up with, *well, I'm German, I'm this, I'm this, I'm this...*” because we've all got so many things that can come in, down into 'I am'. Loosen the 'am' a little bit: *I, here I am, but I'm not 'am', just I*, and then 'I' is just ... *can't speak, can't say, can't think...* So that's how it thickens up: *I, I am, I am this, I am that, I like this, I like that, I want this, I want that*. And then you have patterning, which becomes meaningful because the one who is saying 'I am' doesn't exist: there is no subject. Subject is a product of thinking.

So this is the next level of ignorance: you have a reversal of the causal sequence. If I now stand up and I am now walking, it's through the walking, through the movement of the body that we have '*I am walking*'. It's not that I am making myself walk, but for whatever reason a thought blows through my mind, my body gets up and it's moving around. So walking, movement moment by moment, seems to distil an essence which is '*I am*'. '*I am*' becomes a point of reference, like on a computer you have a cursor, this little arrow thing you can move around. That's what '*I am*' is like. You move that around all over the screen and it will perform different functions, but it's not really anywhere. It is an empty signifier.

So, here we have a cup. 'Cup' can signify all kinds of cups. There is a specificity to this cup: it's just this cup, it is no other cup. That takes us into the phenomenon of this rather pretty cup, with a little bird on it, it's very sweet. This cup is a cup. Now what comes first, 'this' or 'cup'? For us it's 'cup'. You look at 'this', you see 'it's a cup'. As soon as you see 'a cup', 'this' vanishes. 'This' could be a weapon: we could break the edge of it and cut your face open and take your eye out. We could open your throat and clear you if your thorax was collapsed. You can do all sorts of things with a cup. You could heat it and do cupping on someone's back if you believed in cupping as a medical system. You could make some music and dance around with it. As soon as you apprehend it through 'cup' you limit your felt sense of its potential, which shrinks it, but it also makes it dense. On the density of it being a cup you can then start to compare it with other cups. It becomes a cup in a world of cups. Does that make sense?

If you don't go for the density you just have 'this'. So that's like being twelve, fourteen months old and you're coming towards language and you're pointing, "Ungh, ungh, ungh...!" "Oh, you want the cup?" We've gone beyond that, we can say it's a cup, but we don't really see the cup because we've already wrapped it in its concept. That's the key point here. You can start to recognise for yourself how your very intelligence, your capacity to use concepts, which helps you to function in the world, is both illuminating within the frame of reference of language and our shared convention of how we make sense of things, and it's simultaneously obscuring. Does that make sense?

So, we live in a world of prejudice. There're a lot of people who are prejudiced against gypsies. Some English people are prejudiced against Scottish people. In Scotland the people who live in Glasgow are prejudiced against the people in Edinburgh. The people who live in the west end of Glasgow are prejudiced against the people in the east end of Glasgow. The people who lived in my street were prejudiced against the people in the next street. The people in my house were

prejudiced against the people two houses along, and I, personally, was prejudiced against my brother, living in the same house. Prejudice is very easy and, of course, it's very important, as we touched on earlier with the law of exclusion: *I'm me because I'm not my brother, I'm from Glasgow because I'm not from Edinburgh, I'm Scottish because I'm not English.* If you say, "But what is Scottishness?" *Well, that's very complicated, but just let me tell you one thing: I'm not English.* Problem solved! The law of exclusion is very quick and very powerful, and we see how many wars and conflicts are established from it. *I like you, I don't like you:* it's already simplified. So the cup is huge potentiality, restricted by our interpretation and habitual use of it.

This is what Buddhists call ignorance. Not everyone would call it ignorance. From the Buddhist point of view someone like Einstein was ignorant. He was clearly very brilliant and understood many things, but he didn't see that everything which is arising is an illusion. His physics would lead you in an objective way to see the ungraspability of material. However, as we exist as people we have to be there, present in the moment of the unfolding of ourselves. So then we see, *I exist as energy, I exist and I can dance, I can sing, I can study, I can die, I can be sick, I can be sad. I am a million things... and I am nothing.* The reason I am a million things is because I am nothing: because our ground is open and empty we have infinite potential. When you have a fixed ground your potential is limited.

So, looking back on the last two hundred years we've had these various struggles of consciousness-raising — there was anti-racism and the rise of various turns of the feminist understanding, in which women were being defined by men, then women started to be able to define themselves. They started to be able to get training in universities, in medical schools. That, certainly in Britain, is only a hundred fifty years ago. Then they started to be able to become teachers in medical schools, then they started to become professors of medicine and write books about medicine. So, in that way the potential of the woman that was being held like a bud that hadn't opened, starts to be able to open and blossom. You wouldn't see the potential unless you see the blossoming. And there we see what prejudice does. If you say, "Black people are stupid and shouldn't be educated," then on that point of view you don't provide any public education for them. When you start to see that there is potential in all beings then you can give more and more resources to their flourishing. And they will flourish in their unique specificity, just as they are: not as examples of a cup, examples of a woman, but as 'this', 'this woman'. Then it becomes difficult to say anything generally about women because what would that mean? That's an abstract signifier. What you have to do is be close to individual women, and they show themselves: that's what they are. And there's no end to that showing because each person, if you give them attention, shows all these different moods, all these different ways that they are, so that each of us is unfolding in communication in this field of clarity. But, when you say, "I am Scottish, full stop, that's the end of it, there's nothing more to discuss. I am a man, therefore full stop," you solidify, you separate yourself off from this field of experience and you become just this thing, and then you either get close to other things or you get further away from them: like and dislike, on the basis of me being me.

This is very, very important: ignorance from the Buddhist point of view means consolidation, solidification. And if you study Buddhist philosophy you see that this is understood in terms of the inference, or the imputation, the projection of the idea of inherent existence. So I say, "Mary is a lovely woman." As soon as we say 'Mary' we take that word to indicate a particular person, somebody who is. She is Mary, and she's been given the attribute 'lovely woman'. You could have all kind of interpretations of 'lovely woman', but Mary is someone, is a noun, a thing, and various adjectives and adverbs can be placed around Mary so that the qualities of Mary-ness can be teased out in different directions. But that implies that there is Mary, with some Mary-ness inside her. Mary is manifesting from Mary-ness: some little drop, like very strong brandy, which mixed with water becomes Mary and flowers out in different ways. But from the Buddhist point of view there is no essence of Mary. Mary is performative. Mary unfolds from the potential which is inseparable from the empty ground: emptiness shows Mary. There is no individual ego-self, or subject, which is the factory or the basis of Mary. Mary is not standing on Mary-ness. Mary is finding herself Mary-ing, becoming Mary, unfolding as Mary, according to circumstances. Because, say you meet Mary, and you're going to go out for a coffee and you're walking down the row, and you come to the door of the café and Mary looks in and it's, "Oh my god, Isobel's in there, I'm not going in there!" And so you have to go find another café. So, Mary was very friendly and liking everyone, but then she sees Isobel and it's, "Whooh, I don't like that woman!" Suddenly you get a different aspect of Mary, like a carousel in the fairground with the horses and the buses that go round and round: you get friendly Mary, angry Mary and resentment-bearing Mary, and each of these aspects is evoked situationally. Does that make sense?

### Connecting before formulating

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Our mind is an infinite potential which becomes limited the more we see ourselves as a personality, as this particular formation. And then that gets even more limited when you have strong definitions.

I used to work in an old-fashioned psychiatric hospital, which was out in the countryside and people who were deemed psychotic were sent there. They would wander around in the grounds, have sex in the bushes, always tapping each other for cigarettes. The clothes they wore would never fit because they were done in a big laundry. Nobody really cared what was going on. It was like a hell in some ways, but there were not many rules. People were free. It was an asylum so it was protected from the outside, but inside it was pretty crazy. Since the patients were mentally ill, there were the staff there to care for them. If you were staff you could go home whenever you wanted, but if you were a patient you couldn't. The wards were locked anyway but if you were a patient you had to get permission to go out. How you were thought of, how your potential was seen, was entirely determined by being called staff or patient. If somebody was a patient everybody knew that they have a small life: *we don't expect very much from them, they get some free food here and a place to sleep and so on, but they are structurally useless; in society they are useless, we're not allowed to kill them anymore, we have to keep them alive because we're all*

*nice middle-class people, but basically they're useless so we keep them out here in the middle of nowhere.* The staff, on the other hand, are useful. And they have a little badge that says 'Consultant This', or 'Nurse That', and they walk around saying, *look, I'm useful, I'm useful, I'm useful,* and the patient? *I'm useless, I'm useless, have you got a cigarette?*

So interesting, isn't it, that your capacity to awaken and blossom out as your potential is so often constrained by social settings, by other people's view of you, whether they see you as an immigrant, or as too old or too young. *How can we accommodate you?* Nowadays we've got much more capacity to think of people having formal disabilities being employed in mainstream organisations. And we have ramps for people in wheelchairs, and so on. It took a long time for that to come about. Before that we were just saying, *these people are useless, because they are ab-normal.*

We live in a very interesting time where normality is being opened up a little bit in terms of gender identification and so on. And we're coming closer into the culture as attentive to phenomena rather than to categories. In Britain, anyway, we get more and more young people who are saying, "I'm non-binary." Non-binary, which means 'I'm neither male nor female, I'm not a boy, I'm not a girl'. I was listening to an interview with a twelve-year-old boy and he was saying, "I'm non-binary, I don't feel I'm a boy or a girl: I'm me." Now you could say this is some insane kind of narcissism, which I would be too scared to say, but anyway, he's saying, "Don't put me in your category, because I'm in touch with my feeling, and I feel like a girl some days, I just want to be a girl, I want to be pretty and I want to do what girls can do. Some days I want to do what boys do, and don't put me in a box. And your categories put me in a box." How interesting that a twelve-year-old can say that, and the whole school system turns then upside-down, trying to work about classrooms. And they say, "Don't call me 'he', don't call me 'she' — call me 'they' or 'them'." Which makes grammar incredibly difficult when you're trying to talk. So, should the school say, "Listen, small person, just shut up, just shut the fuck up. Become normal. In the old-fashioned language, fit in or fuck off"? But we can't do that now, so we have to say, "Wow, this is how you are." So from a dharma point of view this is fascinating because it says that phenomena come first. If we trust that this person is giving an account of the phenomenology of being, they're saying, *when I'm in touch with this possibility of me, I'm neither male nor female: I can't be boxed,* which is exactly the function of meditation.

So in some ways the cultural changes that are occurring bring you closer to the possibility of speaking as phenomena rather than as category. Does that make sense? Very, very interesting. So back again with ignorance: ignoring the ground potential traps you further and further into categories. And then of course you have the two power positions come in very strongly: *I'm the person who can tell you who you are,* or, *you're the person who can tell me who I am.* So if you have a master position, the master tells the other person, the slave or the servant, who they are. And the servant or the slave is entirely determined by the meaning of the master.

So that power-play is enacted in schools. Teachers are often trying to tell students who they are. Now you get students being more and more uppity, swearing at the teacher and telling them, “Who are you to tell me who I am?” And so you’re getting, maybe for the first time, a real battle for democracy. No dictators. Dark sarcasm in the classroom — “Hey teacher, leave those kids alone.” There’s something about putting all these rules and regulations: if you take that off will it become chaotic, or will it become a multi-dimensional pulsation in which we have to be attentive to the other before we address them? *I see you, I hear you, I respond*, rather than *I know who you are and this is what I’m telling you*. It’s very demanding, and it makes us tentative, that is to say, not quite sure. It could also be called sensitive. So that instead of having the confidence of *‘I know, I can take up a position’*, we can be fully in our senses and be picking up optimal information about the situation, which is essentially the relation between wisdom and compassion, because with wisdom we see the emptiness of all phenomena. We see that everything arises in interdependence. So sticking a category onto a shifting surface is quite difficult.

Patrul Rinpoche, in explaining this, uses this traditional example that it’s like writing on water. If you’ve got a pool of water and you put your finger in and write your name on it the first letters have dissolved by time you get to the last letters. The field that we move in is dissolving and dissolving. Nothing gets established because nothing has inherent existence. It’s not confirmed from the inside, but it manifests in relation with other manifesting factors. The ground, the essence, is ungraspable open emptiness. It’s not a dead emptiness because it’s radiant, and it shows this possibility. And within that, by staying in our connectivity, we move according to situations. You have different conversations with different people. On different days, different moods. It’s just like that. So instead of trying to build up a cumulative information about someone you’re staying freshly with who they are.

Now, in terms of our modern culture this is unbelievably radical when you realise what is happening with the Chinese state with regard to the Turkish-speaking minorities in the west of their country. They’re going for total surveillance, total face-recognition technology, and it will spread all through China. It’s already come to London in many places — it has for me in the airport: I stick my passport in the thing and then step forward, and you look and it’s reading your face, according to the face in the passport. Face recognition, yeah. It’s very, very amazing, that. Which means instead of going up and saying hello to someone, and they look at your passport and they ask what you’re doing, instead of it being at all relational, it’s entirely about abstracted image that’s moving through.

So, what this would say is, hey, we’re going in the other direction, we’re not going to formulate before we connect: connection, and then formulation, if necessary. But maybe we don’t need to come to a conclusion about anyone. You can stay in contact with someone, you can like them, you can get closer to them, you can establish patterns of relating, but you don’t need to say, *they are wonderful*, or, *they are horrible*, because what would you stick that label onto? It’s like writing in water. You have a fight with your partner and you think, *oh, I hate them!* And you go and talk to a friend, “God, I don’t know if I can survive this anymore, what a bitch, why is she like this, da da da da dah....” And next day things are better and you’re feeling okay,

and your friend says, “Hey, have you left yet?” “What? Why would I leave?” “But yesterday...?” “Ah, yesterday!” Because that’s what we are: we’re fluctuating in our emotions.

### To give the full welcome

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So the question in dharma is: how do you live in freshness, how do you not solidify? Because if you don’t solidify yourself and you don’t solidify the other person each moment is fresh, and then you respond. So in the description of the bodhisattva, the bodhisattva moves as required. When you see these statues of Tara or Chenrezig they usually have one foot sticking out. The Buddha is sitting with his legs crossed because he is representing stability, but the bodhisattva is representing readiness to move — not always moving, but in readiness to move, according to need. So how will you know if it’s needed? You could start with an abstraction: everyone is in samsara, they’re all suffering, therefore I must do. But what will you do? That depends. It depends on how they are, how they are now, at this moment, in this situation and with me. It’s always ‘with me’.

For example, in the hospital system (it’s the psychiatric setting I’m talking about) patients get moved around among different clinics. And so they see different health professionals and they get a big stack of notes written about them. And this is an objectification: it is as if we really know the main things about this person, key points to be aware of. But when you go into the waiting room to meet the person for the first time you don’t know who you’re going to meet, because you’re not meeting ‘a person’, ‘a thing’, as revealed in the notes, you’re meeting a potential which is going to evolve with you. So how you are and how they are are part of the story. It’s not *‘I’m the therapist, this is the patient — the patient’s going to stay in the patient box’*. Me, my therapist-ing, my presenting of myself as the therapist, is co-emergent with this person. The patient and the therapist are born together, just as the child is the mother of the mother, because the woman becomes a mother because of the child. The child gives birth to the woman being a mother. So the patient gives birth to the therapist being a therapist, and the therapist gives birth to the person being a patient because they’re in the system. So immediately you can feel the choreography of the dance: that we could go into a set piece orientation, or we could relax. The person comes into the room and you might say, “What did you notice on the way here today?” “Oh, so many leaves are coming off the trees.” “What do feel about autumn? Do you like it?” And you start talking about autumn. “Any autumns in your life stand out for you?” “Yeah, I remember, that was the time of year my mum died....” And you go into the therapy in a completely different way because they’re revealing the profile of themselves as is possible to you. And what you’re getting is the unique specificity of your meeting together. This would not happen with anyone else and it’s only happening now.

So this, as far as I understand, is our dharma way of proceeding in the world: not to start with knowledge about people, not to start with an interpretation of them, but to try to meet them in the shared experience of phenomena, because that’s where the freshness is, that’s where the potential is. And that’s where the person can start to

experience the unfolding of their capacity, which has been limited by the beliefs that they have developed about themselves on the basis of the beliefs other people have had about themselves. If somebody has a formal diagnosis it doesn't really mean very much. It doesn't really mean very much. If somebody has been in prison for attacking a therapist what does that mean? It might mean the therapist was an arsehole. Now normally we wouldn't want to think that, but we might think *oh, I know that one, so provocative, I'd have stabbed them as well, what a wanker, how come they're a therapist, it's a disgrace, isn't it?* And then you'd be right in another kind of conversation. And if you start with the formal thing, "And have you had a risk assessment? Should I have someone else in the room with me? Maybe we should check what's in your bag." So immediately you start with suspicion, because *we know you did this and on the basis of what you did we now have some information to give us a future.* Of course, we do this all the time. We're wanting not to have risk, we're wanting to profile people — the police do it all the time, psychologists are trained to do it, to try to predict. What we're talking about now is that it always involves your own projections, your own bias and your own prejudice. It's much better if you can stay with the freshness, because what is it that makes us feel most alive in our life? Can you think of times when you felt really just connected and alive? It's usually because somebody has seen you. Somebody looks at you and their eyes are clear, and you come through their eyes into their heart and they start to have a sense of you. That you are received by them and you become whole, the more they receive you. Would that make sense? And when you have people who are blinkered or biased or prejudiced, and they're only looking for a bit of you — it could be your body, your intelligence, it could be any part of you — and they're chopping you up, then you're not seen, because you're not fully welcomed. You get a constricted entry. It doesn't make you feel good.

There we start to see, from the Buddhist point of view, that the great medicine, the deep medicine, is total welcome, open welcome, full receptivity. That is what everyone is yearning for because the ground is infinite and it already welcomes everything. The ego is limited and welcomes very little, and mostly in our life we meet ego-people who give us a very limited welcome. When we're more able to open up and welcome more we feel different because we are loosening our bias and our prejudice. We've got more space inside ourselves, which feels good, and we get more sense of the other person, which feels pretty good too. So mutual benefit through mutual opening gives us this full meeting. This is what is represented by the tantric yab-yum images of a naked male and female deity in sexual union. The naked bodies are very intimate, undefended against each other. Unimpeded intercourse — how rare do we have that in the world? I'm not talking about sex here, but just the sense of people being available, because we get shy, we get cut off. We're afraid, we're not sure what to do with our feelings, and we spend so much time managing our inner relationships that we can hardly connect out.

So this is the function of meditation: it's to let us see how much furniture we have in the room, and that because we focus on the furniture we never see the room itself. So here in this room you look around and you see people, cushions, paintings and so on, but there's also space. The space is the basis for our being in the room. If there was no space in the room we couldn't be here. But this space we ignore

because we focus on the people and the chairs and the cushions. So the more you have the sense of space, of the infinite hospitality of the field in which you live, you start to loosen up, you start to think it's possible, because if I move this way I can also move that way, so if I'm a bit much I can retreat, and if I'm a bit hidden I can come forward. There is space to move, because if I'm too much I can apologise, and I can retreat: "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to intrude." But I don't need to collapse — *oh, I fucked up, I shouldn't have done that!* — because then you become dense. Stay with the pulsation, come back out again, come back out again. In terms of practice this is called 'cho-ying yeshe', or 'dharmadhatu-jnana', the wisdom or the clarity of the dharmadhatu. In the tantric system this is the purification of the obscuration of stupidity, of mental dullness, mental darkness. So in the mandala system this is the central point of the mandala. On the basis of that we purify the other so-called poisons or afflictions.

### When the poisons are purified

The purification of desire is the wisdom, or the clarity, which sees each thing as it is. So, we say, "Love is blind". Desire is blind: when you desire one thing it becomes very important and the rest recedes. So the purification of desire is to stay with the field of phenomena and give attention to everything. You get the flavour here of equanimity: everything has value, so you give your attention fully there. You engage with whoever you're engaging with, rather than thinking, *I'd rather be with this other person, or, that would be better than this*. You step out of comparing and contrasting because everything has value. And we're more and more clear: I will never experience the value of this tree, this flower, this person, if I don't attend to them. Attention is the sun that allows everything to blossom, for the bud to open, for people to show themselves. So if you talk with someone and you are distracted because you'd rather be somewhere else what you get is their 'bud' response: they can't show themselves, or if they do show themselves a bit and then see that you're bored or uninterested, that is so hurtful. It feels humiliating. It feels awful. So you can see that the purification of desire is that you catch yourself in the moment where you really like something or you really want to do something, you try to catch the feeling tone of that and then stay with that feeling tone and see if you can expand it out — to a tree or a motor car or a little bird in the bushes. How amazing! The more you give that focused quality of attention to each thing that's arising the whole world starts to shine.

So from the practice point of view that's how we come to see the intrinsic clarity, or the luminosity, of the mind. Everything is shining when we let it shine. We dull the world by projecting our fixed categories and fixed interpretations onto it. Knowledge makes you stupid. Presence keeps you bright. Presence is more important than knowledge. But, again, these are difficult times because we're in a world of data, of information. There are volumes of information going around, as if that was where truth was. But you can meet someone, maybe you're in a foreign country.... Remember as a kid when you'd go on holiday, and you run along a beach and you meet another kid and you play for hours and hours and you don't know what their name is. You're just playing and you're looking in their face and it's jumping and

hopping and doing all kind of things and you're just there because you were open to them and they were open to you, small kids being kids. And we are so wrapped in our interpretations of who we are.

So then, the purification of anger is the mirror-like wisdom, because with anger you see the faults of something, so you see quite clearly but it's got an edge to it. It's over-highlighting faults. The mirror shows faults and benefits at the same time, so if you get really angry about something, it could be politics, it could be family issues, stay with the clarity, don't try to jump away from the anger. See the sharp intensity of your attention, and then, like a dimmer-switch on a light, just try to increase that attention so you see the whole of the person: *I really hate this about you* and *I really love this about you*, and both are there in the same moment. But if you intensify the hate it shrinks the other person. The thing is, "The reason I hate you, and I'm going to tell you point by point: you're just an asshole!" — there's a lot of clarity in that. It's incredible clarity, and if you start to widen the clarity to the good points of that other person you start to get a more balanced picture. 'Cause when you say, "Oh yeah, we get on okay. We've sort of known each other a long time now, it's okay," I don't know who the fuck you are, because I'm kind of a bit hazy with you, because you don't really register. But now I'm pissed off with you, now it's getting clearer. And with that clarity, imagine: if you brought that clarity over to the good qualities it becomes vibrant, doesn't it? That's what the purification of anger means: everything is bright, you see very precisely, you see the whole rather than splitting into good / bad, I like / I don't like.

The purification of pride is called the wisdom of equality, 'nyam-nyid yeshe'. When we have pride we think, *I'm superior, therefore you are inferior*. When we have the inversion of pride and we have self-hatred, we think, *you are amazing but I'm a useless kind of person, I can't do anything*. We are creating mountains and valleys. When we see that everything is equal it means that I see the phenomena as they are: they are complicated, they are rich, and they are each what they are. So if I were to say, "If you go out walking in the hills and you see these hill-peaks and the shapes of the rocks and maybe the snow and then you look down and see the valleys and the trees, which is better: the peaks or the valley?" it's kind of a crazy question. It's all amazing, *it's like, wow! it's all of that!* It's equally wonderful, equally fascinating — yet different, and that brings us back to the real issue of equanimity. It's not in the blender. Everything has this amazing specificity of its value. The mountain peak with the sunlight on the snow, the valley with the trees: each detail is just there, equal, because you are giving equal attention. The differentiation in the showing of the phenomena belongs to the phenomena. Does that make sense? That is to say, if a tree is very big it's very big, and if it's next to a tree which is very small, the fact that you can say 'big' and 'small' doesn't make one tree big and one tree small: this tree is, actually, in its presence, big, from our human point of view, and the other one is small. So, these differences are there. The difference which is not there, but is here, is saying, "I like this one, I don't like that one." So, sometimes people worry, "Well, if I say everything is the same it'll all become kind of flat and undifferentiated." It's not true. The specificity of things, the shining, exactly this-ness of each leaf, of each bicycle parked against the wall with the rain on its mudguards, that unique showing of colour and shape is there. What's for me is, "Why do people

have to park their bikes there? I could have slipped and fallen on it, da da da da....” I’m layering ‘there’ with ‘this’, and I’m saying, *this is good this is bad*: “If he’d just parked his bike ‘round there that would be better.” That’s not necessary. That’s saying, *this is good, this is bad*. So when we say ‘evenness’, it is to see that in the absolute uniqueness of each form, each moment, is an evenness of value. It just is. What destroys that for us is our evaluation, our fitting the world into our criteria for no purpose. Because now I’m angry that people park their bicycles in the wrong place. I’m walking along the street thinking about bicycles and *why do people do that, and if I had done that as a kid I’d have got in trouble....* And where are we? You’ve entered some nowhere-land, some labyrinth of the mind — no joy, no fulfilment, no possibility of solving anything. So that’s the meaning of the wisdom of equality.

Then the last is the purification, or the true quality, of jealousy, which is the wisdom that can accomplish everything. When we feel jealous it’s an anxious feeling in which something that we like or want may not be stable in our world. So if you’re in a relationship, and you see that your partner starts being friendly to someone else, you think, *oh... I’m going to lose them because they would prefer to be with that other person. What can I do? There’s nothing I can say. If I complain they’re going to get more pissed off, if I try to be more friendly, if we try to have more sex it’s not going to work because they’re already thinking about the other person*, and so on. These are very difficult situations for people. There’s a kind of paralysis that comes with jealousy. So, its purification is wisdom which can do everything, ‘ja drup yeshe’. It means accomplishing every activity, which means you have to recognize, *wow, I’m shrinking myself, I’m shrinking myself! Before I met this person* (if we stay with the romantic example) *my world was not turning around them — I have elected to invest this person with so much importance that I’ve gone into orbit around them and now each thing that they do is disrupting me because I have made them the centre of my world*. What is the centre of my world? It is awareness of open emptiness. I’m here. So jealousy arises because you have an over-invested object: *I could not live without you*. Of course you could, of course you could! It would be a different life, it might be a life that you wouldn’t want today, from your current position, but it would be another life. People die, people get sick, they become other in all sorts of ways. And they leave us, they abandon us, they prefer something else. And we are still here and life goes on. But *it’s terrible* because we have created a concrete structure of reliance on that form. Know what Buddha says? “But it’s impermanent.” *But I’ll always love you....* When people say, “I’ll always love you”, they are lying. Romanticism is deception. And romanticism is very popular because we like to be deceived.

One history of romantic love is to say that it came back with the troubadours from the Middle East, who had been musicians playing in the Middle East. And when they were in Damascus and so on at that time, they learned the songs of the local people, which included Sufi songs that were songs of loving devotion to God. So people are saying, “God, you are the Beloved, I pine, I cannot sleep, I wait for you, please come, please come....” Many beautiful lyrics, and they brought these back. At first they were sung in the south in France at Aquitaine, as songs to the wife of the lord of the manor, the unattainable woman, “I love you, I love you”. But it was a love that could never be consummated so it’s the projection of the heart’s longings. And gradually

through time it became projected onto real people — *you are the centre of my world, without you I am nothing*. That's an amazing thing to say: '*without you I would die.*' Wow! 'I willingly enter into slavery, make me your slave' is a set phrase that you get in a lot of Sufi songs, 'I am the slave of God.' 'Islam' means 'submission', but submission to God is very different from submission to a man or a woman.

And so jealousy binds you into a fantasy projection that the meaning of your life can be held in another person. You can be kind, you can be loving, you can be erotic in all sorts of connections with people, but the fantasy that someone else would give you the meaning of your existence is insane — because the meaning of your existence is that you have an enlightened Buddha nature, an infinite ocean of wisdom and compassion which links you to all beings, and you can help all beings, especially all beings without bias. *I want to help all beings but in particular my beloved....* Which is why in the traditional Tibetan Buddhist practice, when you are praying to the deity, like Chenrezig or Tara, and they're in front of you and they're sending rays of healing light, you always have your enemies in front of you and your friends behind you — because you want your enemies to get the healing light before your friends. These practices, they are so beautiful. They are so exquisite because they are constantly trying to rectify the bias and the prejudice that we carry. Why shouldn't your enemies get more benefit? You don't like these people because they have a lot of faults. Well, if they have a lot of faults they need more blessings so we'll give them the blessing first. It makes sense. You like your friends because they have a lot of good qualities. Put them last in line, they've got good qualities. Get the people you hate up front — wow! *But it doesn't feel like that, I love them, I love them and I want them to be safe.* And what about them? *Oh, I don't like them....* Then you see, *oh, how small I am, I'm just this little, anxious, frightened ego trying to protect its own domain, I don't have a big heart.* It doesn't mean you have to support everyone or have sex with everyone, You can be an intelligent person. You don't have to indulge other people's whims about you, but you have to be very precise: *what is this situation, who is this, how is this person presenting themselves to me?*

Okay, let's do a little more sitting.

[fifteen minutes practice]

If you wish to practice that at home usually we practice four periods of five minutes, ten minutes, gradually building it up. But you're better to have a short period of open relaxed presence than to try to push it. You don't want to do things in an artificial way.

### Key principles of our practice

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We've covered quite a lot of ground today. The key principles of our practice are: firstly, being respectful to everyone, being respectful to ourself and respectful to everyone we meet. Everyone has Buddha-nature, everyone has the basis for awakening. We all arise moment by moment from the same open ground. The obscurations which cover that ground and the tendencies that arise from that

obscurations are all transient patterns of energy, like cloud formations in the sky. So, when you get the chance and you're out in nature — say, for example, you're by the sea or by a big lake and you watch the waves moving, they're moving because of the stillness of the lake. On the surface there is all this turbulence and beneath there is this vastness. Everyone I meet is a wave on the ocean. I see the wave, I see the patterning of how they are — their energy — and I'm attracted or not attracted, but they are a wave of the ocean. So if I only catch the wave and I reduce them to the definition of my strong reaction I'm making myself stupid, and I'm not in any way opening to their potential. They are the delightful play of the infinite ocean. And the waves come in many sizes and shapes and moods. If you have friends who are depressed or angry or very competitive and always have to be right in an argument, these are just patterns of energy. So rather than consolidating that as *oh, it's really difficult speaking with him because he's always like that...* it's *oh, this is a patterning of energy!* What should I do with a pattern of energy? When these big winds are blowing across the Atlantic and they're moving up through the Caribbean to Florida and so on, when they are over the ocean they don't cause much trouble. It's when they hit land that they start to take the roofs off the houses and blow the cars in every direction. Oh! If I let the other person's energy move through the sky of my mind no damage is done, but if I sit in my little ego house their energy takes the fucking roof off: I get upset, I get disturbed — *why are you making me feel like this?* Because they're a wind, that's what the wind does.

So if you're with someone who's angry or stormy or in a bad mood, be spacious. If somebody's had a bereavement they don't need you to say anything. You just sit with them. Relax into your breathing and be available, and if they need you they'll tell you. You don't have to rescue people, because you don't know what to say anyway. We become problematic when we over-form ourselves, as if we knew what the right form would be. Relax into spaciousness, kindness, collaboration and connectivity. And when we find that we have entered into judgment and we've frozen other people and come to some strong conclusion about them, and this has created conflict and confusion between you, it's so important to apologise, it's so important to be wrong. We are going to be wrong a lot in our life, we're going to misjudge things, misunderstand things. We can just say from the heart, "I'm sorry," if it's what we feel, "I'm sorry." Then what we do is we normalise mistakes. Mistakes are part of life, so if we want to have equanimity we have to be equanimous, peaceful and open to the fact that we make mistakes. "I upset you. I'm sorry." So if I can have that, not as an excuse, not as a cover-up, but as an inclusion — "Sometimes, maybe a lot, I'm not quite here the way you need me to be here, I'm sorry for that" — what you're doing is re-connecting and re-connecting, because the worst thing that can happen between us is collapsing bridges, where no communication is possible. Because if the dharma teaching is correct and everything arises as an undivided whole, to divide that whole is an insanity. It's a madness because you're introducing isolation, separation, consolidation into a field of soft, gentle communication. So emptiness is the space out of which the clarity of the inter-connectivity of all living forms arises, within which we are moving moment by moment in our particular ways. And if we are a bit off-balance we rectify, and then we communicate, and rectify, and communicate. In dance we have fall and recovery: falling is part of the movement of the dance. So we fall in connections, we make mistakes, we get upset, and then we recover and we

come back. The most important thing we've covered in all this time together is: don't freeze the world. The world is flow, movement, inter-connectedness, so when you judge, when you consolidate, it locks, And then you grind, then you have friction and all the rest. So when you find yourself locked come back into flow. How do you do that? You can release yourself in the breath, you can go out and look at the sky, you can put on some music and dance, you can apologise to the other person. The key thing is to get to know your own prison, get to know how you tie yourself in knots and to observe yourself tying the knot. And if you remember the sequence of tying the knot then you can remember the sequence of coming out. It's like Ariadne's thread: if you're going into the labyrinth you mark the way, or Hansel and Gretel dropping the little bits of bread along the path. You see how you get into an argument with your partner — *oh! so I could reverse out of that! I'm intensifying*. Equanimity means 'not intense'. It doesn't mean without life and vibrancy, but not intense, but connected.

So, our brief time together comes to an end. Hopefully it's useful in some way and you can weave this into your own life and through your practice. There are a lot of recordings of this kind of material on my website, [www.simplybeing.co.uk](http://www.simplybeing.co.uk) with videos and so on. You can look at these. And the ocean of dharma is big, it's always available, and it's always nice to swim!

It's been a pleasure to spend this time with you.