**Session One: Introduction**

(Preceded by practical introduction to retreat and retreatants.)

We’ll do most of the meditations in these morning and afternoon sessions and there’ll be some guidance. But if the guidance doesn’t work for you, then do your best just to ignore me. In this one we’ll just settle a little bit and then feel our way into the context in which we’re practising.

So starting with a sense that there’s nothing to do. After all those things we had to do in order to get here, or to be ready for the retreat, all that has gone. Have a sense of breathing out the effects of all that, and then just breathing in this moment now, this fresh, alive. moment.

Then we can allow ourselves to relax. Not require ourselves to relax, or demand that we relax. Just let everything be as it is.

And with relaxation comes a downward movement of energy, a greater connection with the earth. Feeling our connection with the ground, relaxing, letting it take our weight.

Now letting the spine and the upper body open upwards like a plant growing out of the ground, opening towards the sky. Bringing awareness into the body, a kindly awareness. How is it to be embodied now? How is it to be alive in this moment?

As best we can, letting the whole body be a field of kindly awareness in which the feelings and sensations come and go.

Last night we dedicated ourselves and our retreat and we created circles of protection, going right round Vajraloka. So let’s be aware of the great circle of lotuses.

Letting the lotuses support our practice to be receptive and open-hearted.

Outside the circle of lotuses is a vajra wall, diamond thunderbolts.

Letting it support our practice to be stable and dynamic.

Beyond the vajra wall, the wisdom flames. Supporting our practice to be unconfused, clear, knowing.

We’re within the three circles, in the mandala, in this Dharma space. As a community. Practising together, doing what we can to help and support one another, practising for ourselves, for one another and for the world.

And on the shrine and all around are Shakyamuni, Padmasambhava, Tara, Avalokiteshvara, Manjusri, Vajrayogini, Vajravarahi, etc. All the qualities of awakening.

So there’s nothing we have to do, we’re supported by the earth, we’re protected by the lotuses, vajras and flames, we’re surrounded by spiritual friends, we’re in the presence of great love, great wisdom, great freedom, all the qualities of awakening. For the last two or three minutes of the meditation just savour that. Let it in.

**End of Session One**

**Session Two: Background**

This morning I’m going to give some background. It’s not going to be as directly meditation-oriented as the rest of the retreat. We are going to be looking a Mahamudra text, or small parts of quite a big Mahamudra text, called The Ocean of True Meaning by the Ninth Karmapa. So I need to probably say a little bit about Mahamudra, a bit about the Ninth Karmapa, and a little bit about the book, just so we have some kind of background and context for it all.

Mahamudra literally means great symbol or great seal and we’ll see what that might mean as we go on. And it covers, when people talk about Mahamudra they can mean a number of different things. There is a Mahamudra lineage which goes back to India and some of the great mahasiddhas and the great realised Tantric practitioners, and from there it comes into Tibet and particularly there’s a lineage which goes from Tilopa and Naropa in India to Marpa the Translator, who travelled three times from Tibet to India to receive teachings and brought them back to Tibet, who was then the teacher of Milarepa, the great yogi, who was then the teacher of a number of people, including Gampopa, who wrote The Jewel Ornament of Liberation, and - I won't get into too much complexity about all this - and then from there particularly comes through the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, including the Karmapas. The Karmapas are a lineage of masters who are all considered to be reincarnations or rebirths, tulkus, of the same person, a sort of series of rebirths, of which we’re on the 17th currently. So if you talk about Mahamudra you can be talking about that lineage of teaching being passed down from ancient India from Saraha, and Tilopa, Naropa, right down, right down, right down, to the present day.

Alternatively you can talk about the view of Mahamudra, a way of looking at how things are, and Mahamudra combines the two great schools of Mahayana Buddhism. There is Madhyamaka, which is exploring the empty nature of all phenomena, the ungraspable nature of everything, how words can never do justice to experience. This comes on one side from the Perfection of Wisdom tradition with Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti and other people, who gave expression to seeing that nothing exists in the way that we tend to take it as real and then grasp at it and suffer as a result. Then on the other side there’s Yogacara, which is particularly concerned with the looking at the nature of mind. Mahamudra combines these two.

There is a short summary of Mahamudra which starts by saying that *everything* is mind, which would be a very Yogacara point of view, and then, in case we were going to take mind as, ‘oh right that’s what really exists’, the second line of the summary is ‘mind is empty’, so there you have the Madhyamaka, there’s nothing you can get hold of. Those two are combined.

Mahamudra can also mean a flow of realization, the *result* of the practice. And for Mahamudra that result of the practice is a non-dual awareness where mind isn’t organizing itself in terms of a subject and an object. So there’s a flow of experience which knows itself. Let’s explore what all this means. Usually we feel like there’s me the subject bringing awareness to the experience, the object, but that’s because we’re putting a conceptual filter onto our experience, so the state you arrive at, or the way of being, the way in which mind functions that’s arrived at, is one in which there isn’t that kind of creation of a split between the subject and the object. So from the Mahamudra point of view that split is an illusion because it’s not as if we ever really create something real, but mind loses track of its nature, and then starts interpreting experience in terms of subject and object, and then starts trying to find a way of bringing those two together. But you can’t bring two impossible things together and create a fusion out of them. It doesn’t work.

We will go into some of this over the course of the retreat.

Mahamudra as realization is a very flowing, easy, natural, relaxed way of being. It’s what happens when mind isn’t busy creating the subject/object tension and then trying to work out how to resolve it. That in turn affects Mahamudra as practice, which we could say is the fourth way in which it is used: it is used as a lineage, as a view, as realization, a sort of description of where we’re hoping to end up, and it is also used as the practice that helps into that state. Because where things end up is very relaxed and natural and easy, Mahamudra practice aims to be relaxed and natural and easy as much as possible. It still will require effort, but that effort always aims to be as unforced, as relaxed, as uncontrived as possible.

Q: Vessantara, could you just say the four again please?

A: There is Mahamudra as lineage, so you can talk about the Mahamudra lineage coming down from India; you can talk about it as view, which is a combination of Madhyamaka, emptiness of inherent existence, and Yogacara, looking at the nature of mind; you can talk about it as realization, the Mahamudra state - not that it’s a state in any sort of fixed way, but that’s how people talk about it, which is this flowing, non-dual, awareness, it’s the most relaxed state of mind possible, actually; and then there’s Mahamudra practice, whatever moves you in that direction.

Mahamudra uses all kinds of methods to lead you in that direction. There’s a path of what’s called within Mahamudra the Path of Method and the Path of Freedom. And the Path of Method uses lots of different visualizations and other practices and the Path of Freedom is basically formless meditation. They both eventually end up at the same point and a lot of Mahamudra practitioners will use both. So you might be using sadhana some of the time and you might be just sitting some of the time.

Out of this Mahamudra tradition we’re going to be focusing on a text called The Ocean of True Meaning, which is a pretty large text. It is by the Ninth Karmapa, who lived from 1555 to 1603, I seem to remember (because I’m a Tantric nerd and I know things like that!) He wrote three different texts on Mahamudra, of which this is the largest one. It goes through the whole path, so it starts with the Four Reminders, the four thoughts that turn the mind to the Dharma, and then it goes into the Mula Yogas in the form that they’re done in their tradition, with Going for Refuge, Bodhicitta, and then Vajrasattva practice, Mandala offering, and Guru Yoga, all of which are kind of enriching the mind and purifying the mind as a basis. After that it can use different Tantric methods, although in a way the Mula Yogas are Tantric methods but there are also other sadhanas described. The book then talks about shamatha and vipassana in a lot of detail. There’s a further section which is about enhancing the practice once you’ve gained some real insight into things, how to deal with difficulties, and there’s also an outline of how the path unfolds.

We are going to take a few teaspoons out of the Ocean of True Meaning over the next nine days and we’re going to look at some passages from the shamatha section and the vipassana section, so we’re going to work on calm and relaxation and ease and that side of things, and we’re going to look at the nature of experience. I’ll see how much text we actually need. I selected a few passages a bit quickly before I came away, and may decide we need some other passages half way through, let’s see how we go.

**End of Session Two**

**Session Three: Receiving the Text**

Before the break I was talking about Mahamudra as lineage, as view, as realization and as practice and saying a little bit about the Ocean of True Meaning. In Triratna we have connections with all this. Bhante was always very moved, particularly by the life of Milarepa. He describes being in tears when first coming upon Milarepa and his story, and as we know did a lot of seminars on different songs of Milarepa, which are all … As we know, Milarepa’s whole approach to the Dharma is based on this.

Personally too, I’ve got quite a strong connection with this text. Lama Tilmann, who guided the three-year retreat that I did in France, he’s part of this tradition and over recent years he’s been going through the whole text in a series of retreats, more or less line by line, all whatever it is, two hundred and fifty pages of it. So I’ve been on seven retreats with him that he’s done where he’s gone through the whole book, ten days of retreat, six hours a day, of teaching and meditation. So I don’t know that I’ve taken very much of it in, but at least the words have all gone in. That’s something!

What I’d like to do now to finish the morning is, rather than just hand you out a piece of paper which you then instantly start to read, I think it would be good if we just received these bits of the text more ritually. On the shrine we have Avalokiteshvara, which is very fortunate because the whole Mahamudra tradition comes very strongly out of Bodhicitta. I remember when Lama Tilmann started giving us this text, he said, You really need to take the tradition in with your heart. The words are in the book, but it’s a heart transmission and, as with all Dharma, it’s something that we take in in order at some point to be able to share it and pass it on and so that it goes out into the world through us, directly or indirectly. We may never teach, perhaps, any Dharma directly, but still, through taking it in, it has an influence on us, and we then take that influence into all the different situations in our life. So it’s good that Avalokiteshvara is there. And then to symbolize the fact that we’re receiving this from this Mahamudra lineage, there’s a picture of that lineage there, with Vajradhara who’s the sort of central figure in their refuge tree, but then coming down from all those early teachers, Naropa, Marpa, Milarepa, all the Karmapas, the Ninth Karmapa; but there’s a whole refuge tree just to symbolize the fact that we’re not just picking this up from somewhere. You know, you can pick up a piece of Dharma in a bookshop and read it, and that has a certain kind of effect, but actually the more that you link to the flow of realization that has been expressed through those texts, through those words, the deeper the whole thing goes.

We’ve also got Saraha, who is one of the 84 Mahasiddhas, who is particularly associated with the Mahamudra tradition, and Tilopa, who is also a very important figure. There’s something called the Six Dharmas of Tilopa, which we might mention at some time during this retreat. And then there’s a copy of the book, there in the middle. It’s a pretty pristine copy. It’s not how a Dharma book should be really. A Dharma book should almost have the pages coming out of it and be very dog-eared with thumbprints all over it and maybe little notes and things… that’s how you want a Dharma book really, that’s a proper Dharma book! But this is a symbolic Dharma book.

Q: Vessantara, who is the translator?

A: There are two translations of this text. One is by a woman called Elizabeth Callaghan, but it’s very difficult to get hold of. This one is by Lama Henrik Havlat, who I think but I’m not absolutely sure might be Czech. He did the translation from Tibetan into German and into English, but the English is not that good. It’s not his second language even, I don’t think, but it does the job. It’s fantastic that somebody put that amount of work into something so that we can use it.

OK. So we’ve got some texts either side here so let’s meditate for a minute or two and then, could somebody lead the Avalokiteshvara mantra? Thank you very much, Maitrisara. So we’ll just chant the Avalokiteshvara mantra to connect us to the lineage, like the Karmapas are believed to be embodiments of Avalokiteshvara, so that’s another reason to have that mantra. To really evoke that feeling of compassion and benefitting ourselves and also benefitting the world. So the mantra can start, and then you can come up in at least twos and just take a text with the sense that we’re receiving the text from all those who are associated with it, all those who are connected with the teaching which, as I say, can very much include Bhante and some of his teachers, but also the lineage going back to the ninth Karmapa, right back to Milarepa, Marpa, back to India. Then when the mantra dies away, we might just sit for a minute or two, and that will be it for the morning. So we’ll just sit quietly and then when Maitrisara feels the moment has come we’ll have the mantra.

Om Mani Padme Hum

**End of Session Three**

**Session Four: Relax!**

This morning we started with a meditation about just how much support there is in this situation. We’re supported by the earth, we’re supported by one another, we’re supported by the three circles of protection, we’re supported by the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we’re supported by the Mahamudra lineage, and Mahamudra being about relaxation, hopefully somewhere out of all that there’s some kind of sense that *maybe* in this situation it *might* be ok to relax a bit!

We can dwell on that a bit. These things aren’t straightforward and linear, and we all have our things that go on, but if we’re going to let ourselves relax, well, maybe these are quite good conditions for that to happen.

Then I was talking a bit about Mahamudra, and Mahamudra as the lineage of Mahamudra, the view of Mahamudra, Mahamudra’s realization and Mahamudra as practice. Then I talked a bit about the Ninth Karmapa and his text, The Ocean of True Meaning, and then we received something of that text which symbolically is a link to that whole text and that whole teaching and that whole tradition.

Mahamudra aims to be a very relaxed way of practising, so as we’re here - well, during the whole time but especially the first few days - do really give yourself as much opportunity to just relax and take things as easily as you can; sleep as much as you need to; really look after yourself, so that your mind and body start to feel rested and resourced and at ease, as much as possible. Sometimes on retreat we can feel like, I’ve only got a week, I’ve only got is counter-productive, so in this way of practising we can really give ourselves space and trust that as our mind relaxes and opens, good things will happen.

In Mahamudra we’re looking for or feeling into, in general, the simplest, the most authentic, the most sincere, the most relaxed way of being that we can find. That means taking the pressure off.

Maybe having given you this text, we should start to look at it a little bit. So where shall we start? At the beginning? Yes, maybe. For once we could just do the natural thing and start at the beginning. This text as I mentioned is written by the Ninth Karmapa, but he quotes a lot of sutras and different Tibetan masters and Indian teachers as well. He starts off here in this extract by quoting someone called Kyeme Shang, who is one of the early Kagyu masters. The Kagyu tradition is divided up into different schools, and he founded one called the Tshalpa school. He’s twelfth century. A lot of his writing is really strong and clear. He starts by saying:

“It is said you should cut” (and ‘it is said’ is in earlier texts and by earlier awakened people) “that you should cut through the elaborations concerning the three times. Do not create the concept of past. Do not create the concept of future. Do not create the concept of present. Let your awareness be completely relaxed in its natural state without any fabrication or contrivance. If you do not know how to relax, the mind will not arrive in its natural state, and primordial awareness will not be experienced.”

Most of the instructions are all about things not to do! They’re not a whole list of things that you have to do, they’re all about, Don’t bother doing that! Don’t bother doing that! Don’t put any energy into that! You can if you want, but no need! Although at times in our practice it can be useful to do and to create things, we also need to learn in the practice to undo, and to let things just be, and so the Mahamudra practice is very much on this level. In that way, that’s partly why it’s advanced practice, or it’s sometimes seen as advanced practice, because in the early stages of practice you need to do and you need to work with mind. For instance, if you just sit as a complete beginner, and you’re told, ‘Don’t do anything, just sit’, well your mind just does what it’s always done since beginningless time and it just drifts from one thing to the next and there’s no real awareness there and now half an hour’s gone! That doesn’t seem to be the way to awakening, otherwise we would all have been awakened a long time ago!

So we need to come to grips with things, and use those antidotes, and all that kind of thing. But then, as your practice goes on, there comes a point, and it’s not that it’s just all linear, but as your practice deepens, what was really helpful starts to become an issue, so the me that was working with the mind, and working to gain enlightenment, and working to be free, and working on this and working on that, all that working and the wanting that’s underneath it starts to become the problem. We go from a situation of being very engaged with the kleshas, and out of that, whether through an ordination process or whatever, however it happens, we get to a point where we still have our issues but we’re a Dharma practitioner, and then the issue is that we have the problems of the good Dharma practitioner, and the problems of the good Dharma practitioner are that there’s still a sort of selfing going on, there’s still the wanting to go further, to take things deeper. At a certain point that in itself becomes the problem. We perpetuate the selfing by wanting to be someone who realises no self! We perpetuate the selfing by wanting to be someone who’s developed Bodhicitta, and so on. We perpetuate the selfing by wanting to get down that path.

So although on one level that’s okay, as it gives a kind of impetus to the practice, if the practice is caught up with that way of thinking all the time, it brings the practice, if not to a halt, it puts a big brake on it. So there comes a point where there has to be more self forgetting and the whole ego project, even the ego project of me attaining non-ego and gaining enlightenment, just is let go. Mahamudra in the full sense is when that happens. So that involves just relaxing. It’s not something you have to do. It’s just letting go of the whole darn thing.

The fact that that’s where we’re going to end up can influence how we practise, right from early on, in fact I’d say right from the beginning. Even if we’re teaching beginners, somewhere there needs to be a sense of that really relaxed, easy way of practice. People are so wound up to start with that getting them more wound up about ‘having to gain enlightenment’ tends not to be that helpful.

So, “It is said that you should cut through the elaborations concerning the three times”. Or we could say that we could just let go of the elaborations concerning the three times. The three times of course are past, present and future. When we’re involved with the three times, usually we’re involved with a sense of self, because how we keep a sense of self is by having a sense of a me that’s perpetuated through time. Without that sense of me going through time you can’t really find a me. If I want to create a good solid sense of self, I have to turn ‘me’ into some kind of thing, and then I have to see it: there it was in the past, and there it’s going to be in the future, and I hope the future turns out like this and not like that, and here I am in the present.

Me is the **story** of me. So the story of me has to have lots of episodes; it has to have the back story, and it has to have today’s episode, and it has the future, all those 4028 episodes that are still to come! It all has to keep flowing along like that. That’s how we create the whole thing. We do that by creating a sense of a real past and a real future and a real present and a real me that this is all happening to. Wherever there’s selfing, there’s tension. These quotes are from the shamatha chapter and with shamatha the aim is to let the tension flow away and for there to be calm abiding. So then mind starts to settle and to rest and it can rest wherever it is placed, if you place it somewhere.

“Don’t create the concept of past. Don’t create the concept of future and don’t create the concept of present.”

Even in meditation very often there’s this subtle sense of positioning ourselves. It’s like, ‘okay, how long’s this meditation going to be .. okay, it’s forty minutes, so now we’ve had fifteen roughly have kind of gone, and it’s about twenty-five to go, and it’s been like this so far, and it’s probably going to like this for the rest of it’, so all the time there’s this kind of reference to a kind of scheme. We keep that sense of positioning going, which is the positioning of me. Where am I in the scheme of things? Again, on a relative level, sometimes it’s useful to be able to do that, but when you take it all as real and you hold onto that, it’s a way of holding yourself out of the actual flow of experience, because when we really go fully into the flow of experience, then there’s no sense of time.

“Do not create the concept of past. Do not create the concept of future”.

In the last couple of years, I’ve been very struck just by what almost seems like the major hindrance for most people in their Dharma life, which is that they’re just so forward leaning. The whole of life is encouraging us to think in those terms. It’s like ‘Progress’ and ‘We’re Moving Forwards’ and it just gets carried into all our experience. There’s constantly a goal that we’re moving towards, and that means that what’s happening **now** never gets its full value, because what’s happening **now** is always just a step on the way to where we really want to be or to where we really ought to be. So whether it’s a practical thing, about work or whatever, or whether it’s meditation too, there’s this sense that this meditation is just another step on the way to where we want to be or where we ought to be by now. Even in this meditation, ‘I ought to deepen over the next twenty-five minutes, so what’s happening now is just a step on the way to that deeper state that we hope to get to’. So it really just takes away the richness and the beauty and the depth of **this** because ‘this isn’t important’. We project all the richness and beauty and depth into the future and then kind of trudge towards it. So not creating the concept of future means that everything that we’re looking for, certainly from a Dharma point of view, is right in the depths of this moment. We find it by going deeply into what’s happening now, rather than ‘none of this is good enough and eventually the real thing will happen’.

“Do not create the concept of present”.

Present doesn’t mean anything, except in relation to past and future, so if you’re not engaging in the past and the future, then you’re not actually thinking about the idea of the present either and you really get into it. You can have the whole idea of ‘Be here now’ and ‘nowness’, and that can really help to draw energy into what’s going on, but then again at a certain point, something which is helpful can stop being helpful, so the idea of ‘being in the present’ becomes another thing that you have to do, and actually you’re being in an idea of the present rather than in the present, if you see what I mean.

So what are we supposed to do? Well, we’re supposed to let our awareness be completely relaxed, without turning that into another thing that we have to do … ‘I’ve now got to be completely relaxed!’ (pants)! If I’m very tense, if my shoulders are up around my ears, I can become aware of that, which gives me some choice, and then I can ask my shoulders, or I can even relax them to some degree, but beyond a certain point all I can do is leave my shoulders to relax themselves. I can’t make it happen, because as soon as I’m trying to make it happen there’s me and my shoulders and I’m trying to make something happen, and all that is tension-producing.

“Let your awareness be completely relaxed in its natural state, without any fabrication or contrivance.”

Contrivance means making something happen, so without manipulating ourselves.

We’re being invited to have a deep trust in our own experience if we relax and allow things to unfold, if we’re as simple and natural and easy as can be, if we can catch where we’re manipulating our experience and just invite that to let go. It kind of connects up with Vajrasattva in a way. It’s like the Vajrasattva practice - you purify yourself through realising that there was a level of yourself which was never impure. So there’s a deep trust in *mind*. Sometimes Mahamudra talks about Buddha nature and, as we know, Bhante was very wary of that term because he thought people might just take it as ‘Well, I’m already enlightened and there’s nothing to do’, so out of respect for his wishes, and I kind of see something of where he’s coming from although I think we could have just been warned about the possible danger of Buddha nature, that might have done it, if we go to what that Buddha nature teaching is talking about in experience, it’s saying that when we relax deeply, good things happen. That’s really what it boils down to. When mind and body are really relaxed, what tends to come out is ease and positivity, and it’s the tension in the system that perpetuates the kleshas. So, we’re exploring relaxing, we’re exploring what happens if we don’t manipulate experience.

**End of Session Four**

**Session Five: Led Practice, Feeling Supported**

Enjoying that sense of ‘nothing we have to do’.

Feeling the support of the earth. Finding a supportive posture. Feeling into the body. How is it to be embodied, right now?

Doing our best to bring a relaxed, kindly awareness to whatever we find.

Now let’s add in whatever we can hear. If we can’t hear anything, just being aware of the silence.

Not putting any energy into trying to hear. Letting sounds, as it were, come to us. No need to label them, do anything about them, they’re just there, coming and going.

If we like we could add in the other physical senses: we could open the eyes or be aware of the patterns on the backs of the eyelids; again, nothing to do about it, just whatever’s there in our visual field, and a relaxed, kindly awareness in relation to it.

If we like we could include all the mental movements, so any emotions that are there, or our mood. Again, just relaxed, kindly awareness. No need to get caught up in it, just letting all that flow. And any words and pictures.

So all this experience is going on in the six senses, registers, awareness, there’s no need to engage, change it, be for or against it, just as relaxed as possible, in relation to all of it.

Bell

**End of Session Five**

**Session Six: Just relax into what’s happening**

Let’s do another meditation.

Noticing how much is happening before we have to do anything. So we’re supported by the earth, we don’t have to do anything to gain that support. And although maybe we could make one or two little adjustments, after all these years of practice our body already has a sense of what helps it to be aware and relaxed in terms of posture. All these processes going on in the body without us having to make them happen: we don’t have to make the blood flow, we don’t have to make the air come in and out. Don’t have to make all the different systems work. It’s all just going on. We don’t have to make the feelings and sensations in the body happen. They just arise and pass all by themselves.

And because our ears are open there are sounds. Don’t have to go and hunt them down. They just naturally appear.

And the same with sight. Because we have eyes and we’re conscious, sights appear. If our eyes are open, there’s all the rich tapestry of colour and form. We don’t have to make any of that happen - it’s just here.

The same with smells and tastes. And with the mental sense as well: feelings and emotions, words and images, they all just arise by themselves. We can never quite predict what’s going to happen next, and then they transform into the next experience.

No need to go into the past or the future, no need to go anywhere, relaxing into what’s happening.

Bell

**End of Session Six**

**Session Seven: Led ‘recap’ meditation**

On a retreat focusing on Mahamudra when somebody says, ‘Let’s meditate’, the first thought to that is, ‘Ah - just relax! Nothing to do.’

We can help that relaxation process along by feeling or imagining energy or awareness going down into the earth. Any tensions can just drain down through the body into the earth.

So become like some old stone buddha that’s been in the same position for maybe hundreds of years. It’s hard to tell where the earth finishes and the body of the buddha begins - completely connected and stable.

And that solidity and stability allow the upper body to open and rise up.

We’re feeling into the body, into this flow of feeling and sensation.

And as much as possible, knowing these feelings and sensations with a warm, kindly awareness, so each moment of experience arises, and is cared for, and then transforms into the next.

And now, if it feels right, we could open out our awareness and let mind roam free in experience, just aware of whatever in the six senses appears, sounds and visuals and so on, emotions, words, images.

All experience within a field of kindly awareness still.

So each sound, each thought, each feeling and so on, arises, is known and cared for, and then transforms into the next.

Bell

**End of Session Seven**

**Session Eight: The Natural State, Levels of Awareness, Questions**

Yesterday we received the Ocean of True Meaning from the lineage which goes back through the Ninth Karmapa, back to people like Milarepa and Marpa, and back to the mahasiddhas of India, and we started looking at an extract from the shamatha section, and in that it talked about not getting caught up in the three times. As a shamatha instruction, one of the ways of helping us into shamatha is just to notice, is mind in the past? Is it in the future? Is it in the present? And if we use that teaching to settle us in the present, then are we talking to ourselves about the present and could we let that go as well.

And then we were invited to ‘let our awareness be completely relaxed in its natural state, without any fabrication or contrivance’. Relaxation is one of the keys to this approach, so we just keep relaxing and keep relaxing and keep relaxing, and in meditation, say there are thoughts and you’re starting to drift, the first approach can be to see if you can just relax out of that thought, just not make such a big deal out of it. Just let it come and go. We’re always making a big deal out of everything, so during this retreat let’s try and be as relaxed as possible, in the shrine room, outside the shrine room, let’s not make a big deal out of being on the work rota, or not make a big deal out of the fact that it’s raining, or not make a big deal out of the fact that we didn’t sleep very well. OK, yes, all those things, sad that they happen, but the thing is we turn something which just happened into a drama, of some sort. And it’s all part of the melodrama of me. It’s all a way in which we keep a strong sense of me, I’m here, I’m in the middle of this experience, having it, because I feel really bad about that… or whatever it may be. So let’s see if we can just relax out of more of that, just keep things simple. We’re going to keep things simple. We just do the work. We just put on some wellingtons if we can find them and go for a walk. We just go, OK, I didn’t sleep much, I’ll rest up when I can. Or whatever it is. But not a big deal.

So the text goes on to say,

“If you do not know how to relax, the mind will not arrive at its natural state and primordial awareness will not be experienced.”

Or, to put that more positively (!) if you know how to relax, the mind will arrive at its natural state and primordial awareness will be experienced.

So there’s one or two ways of understanding that probably need unpacking a little bit so that we’re sure how we’re practising and how the practice is aiming to work. There’s lots of talk about the natural state in these texts. In fact, often realization or awakening isn’t described as ‘supreme and perfect realization’ in Mahamudra texts; it’s often referred to as ‘ordinary mind’. Ordinary mind. Again it doesn’t make a big deal out of awakening and enlightenment and all that. But what does ordinary mind or the natural state, what does that mean? Because often the average person, if you say, just be natural, or just be spontaneous, what comes out isn’t particularly enlightened. ‘He was rude to me so I spontaneously got him by the throat! And it felt very natural at the time - just the thing to do!’ So we’re not talking about that sort of egoic state, which is actually quite **un**natural, in the sense that it’s based on a whole big sort of superstructure of ideas about how the world is, and about experience, which we’ve then taken as real, and which we’re then acting out of. So this natural state is one where we’re not seeing things through those conceptual filters.

And “primordial awareness will not be experienced”. Probably a better translation is timeless awareness, because primordial means from the beginning, somehow, so it’s like there’s some awareness that has been there from the beginning, whenever that was, when God created the world, or whatever. So timeless awareness is a better translation. It’s actually yeshe in Tibetan which is jnana in Sanskrit, so you could just call it wisdom if you wanted. So “wisdom will not be experienced”.

Still, to really get a feeling for this natural state where things happen spontaneously, freely and skilfully, maybe we need to distinguish different levels of awareness or consciousness.

Bhante went into all this way back in some early lectures on The Higher Evolution of Man, as it was then called, where he talks about three broad levels of awareness. He’s talking in terms of the whole of evolution and he was trying at that point to link the Dharma and link it to Western ideas as a way of making more connection with people in Western culture. So you have the level of simple awareness which, in the way in which he was talking about it, it’s more the animal level of consciousness, where there’s very little or no self awareness. I suppose if I think back a long way to times when I got very, very drunk, there was obviously some awareness there otherwise I wouldn’t have seen anything or heard anything - well, I did get to that point once or twice where it had all just gone! But we won’t go there! I was still staggering around and although the awareness wasn’t very steady there were still visuals happening, so it was going on. But there was no self awareness or hardly any - I didn’t really know what was happening, I was just kind of rolling around. So there was that sort of simple awareness. Often at that level there’s not much sense of separation either. One of the reasons why people get quite drunk sometimes is that you feel quite close to everyone else: Hey! I’ll buy all of you a drink! Euaarh!

That sense of self awareness which is the next level is where you’re aware that you’re aware, you know what you’re doing, but at that point you’ve separated out from everything else. You’re clearly distinguishing between me and everything else out there. You’re aware to a reasonable degree of what you/re doing, so if you/re making a gesture with your hands then you know that you/re doing that (so you can stop doing it!). So there’s a reflexive awareness, as Bhante calls it. There’s a self knowing. I know that I’m speaking, I know that I’m making this gesture which is pointing back to me to illustrate something about being reflexive, like that. Usually in our Dharma lives we start off from simple awareness with some self awareness, and through the power of mindfulness and in other ways we strengthen that sense of self awareness. We know what we’re doing. We’re mindful. We know what we’re thinking. We know what we’re feeling. We know how we’re acting, to some degree.

The simple awareness level is what Bhante used to call the lower evolution, and that self awareness is what he called the mundane path, but then there’s a further level of awareness where you’re no longer objectifying your experience. You’re no longer creating that sense of me the subject aware of what’s happening as an object. If I’m on the level of self awareness, there’s me the subject aware that I am talking, making these sounds. There’s me the subject aware that I’m gesticulating with this right hand, and so on. But on this level we feel cut off and separate from everything else. I don’t know what it was like for you, but if I think back to adolescence, there was a growth of self awareness but it became acutely difficult and unpleasant. I was all arms and legs and very aware of what everybody else thought of me and I had more of a sense of self - I was no longer like a kid playing freely. Suddenly I was becoming a bit more adult but there was a sense of separateness that intensified with the self awareness. We want to go beyond that.

As awareness intensifies, that sense of objectifying awareness becomes less. If you move into dhyana, yes, there is a sense of a subject, but the sense of a split between awareness and what it’s aware of becomes much, much less. It becomes very, very fine. That’s why dhyana is really satisfying, or one of the reasons why.

Even in high dhyana there is still a separation there. It can feel like there almost isn’t, because there’s just a silent observer there and we’re no longer talking to ourselves about how things are going, or anything like that, but still there’s a sense of a separation between the awareness and the experience, or an aware me that’s not calling itself me at this point, and what’s happening.

But then there’s a third level of awareness where that whole conceptual framework has completely fallen away. At that point there is just aware experience. It’s not that we have to create a sense of a me or an observer or anyone having an experience, the experience knows itself. It’s like it lights up itself. The image I often use is that it’s like the difference between shining a light onto something to light it up, say you’ve got a picture of Snowdon, a mountain in Wales, if you’re in the dark you can take a flashlight and shine the light onto the picture and you can see it, or you could have a computer screen and bring up a picture of Snowdon, so you’re not shining any light of awareness onto something, the actual experience is lighting itself up. There’s the content, the display of awareness, and the awareness itself, and they’re inseparable.

That’s the level that is timeless awareness. That’s the level that is a natural state, and it’s natural because we’re no longer producing any kind of conceptual framework which we’re imposing onto the experience. It’s actually how things are all along, but we lose touch with how things are.

So the natural state isn’t about creating anything, it’s about seeing through how we create that sense of a separation and a split and relaxing and trusting that mind functioning fully and deeply is really satisfying.

There are one or two ways in which all this gets misunderstood. One way is where we mistake the first level for the third level, which is the transcendental level in Bhante’s terms. We can feel like we’re becoming increasingly spontaneous and free and natural, but actually we’ve just taken the censorship away from the self awareness and we’re just following our energy more, and going back to a simple animal way of being, rather than arriving at a transcendental way of being. Another technical issue, for those of you who read those sorts of books, is that this natural state, this timeless awareness, is sometimes translated as the self aware state, which is rang rik in Tibetan. That sounds like that middle level. In the middle level I’m self aware and I know what’s going on. But it’s not talking about that second level where there is a sense of me who knows what’s going on; it’s actually talking about the third level where the experience knows itself without any reference to a me.

Any immediate questions or issues?

Q. Can you experience the (?) level in dreams, in the sleeping state?

1. You can experience it in the sleeping state, you can experience it in the waking state, you can experience it in meditation. Yes.

Q. If your mind became quite tranquil and simple, how do you know you’ve not got back into the first (level)?

1. There wouldn’t be the same level of awareness there. In that simple awareness, ‘you’ don’t know what’s going on. The feeling of it is completely different.

Q. When I think about my children, they’re just a bit bonkers. They’re very free, …(/….) crashing into each other and stuff, so that would be like the first level?

1. Yes. We don’t want to make this all too hard and fast, but if we take it more like tendencies of mind, where they’re at, there’s some self awareness there probably, but they’re exhibiting what we could think of as the first level. The best way to get to the third level is to practise self awareness and practise mindfulness, but certainly after it’s established a bit, you want it to have as much of the qualities of the first level as possible. Sometimes people get into Buddhism, and they have a strong ethical sense, and they’re really watching themselves for any hint of unskilfulness, and they really want to practise intensively to get to awakening, for the benefit of all beings and so on, and in the process they turn themselves into a police state internally. Big Brother is watching you and there’s that sense, a really tense way of being, and we don’t want to set up that kind of self awareness which is too polarised from our life force and energy, and talking about relaxation and Mahamudra is one way of softening all that.

Q. Another way of looking at that is the grosser aspects of self can fall away in practice more generally, but then a subtler maybe less obvious sense of self can establish a way of being which can look as though positive way but it can be almost authoritarian in that sense of ‘this is how it’s done’, ‘this is how I am’.

1. Yes, it’s one of the near enemies of the Dharma life is that you end up with a positive self that looks like a really good Dharma practitioner, and from a certain point of view it is a really good Dharma practitioner, but it’s a limited Dharma practitioner and if we explore into our experience we’re being very good but somehow we don’t feel very happy and at ease, and there’s not a deep sense that aaah! everything’s all right. It’s just not there. That just shows us that there’s further to go and we could just soften that Dharma practitioner more and more until at a certain point they’re not needed. Another aspect of this that Bhante talked about was that with that self awareness you can create too much of a gap between you the aware subject, and your experience, and he talked about that in terms of alienated awareness as opposed to integrated awareness. You can either be alienated in the sense that somewhere in the control tower in the back of your head you’re aware, ‘I am raising my arm and being very mindful of the entire process’, which, if we can really do it in the right spirit, is ok, but the danger is that the awareness and the experience are distanced and there’s no feeling, there’s no real flow. Or, you can be completely in the experience, Raising your Arm! Ha! That’s different. Even what Bhante was usually referring to as integrated awareness was still subtly alienated because as long as there’s a subject and an object there’s still an alienation from the flow of experience. It’s important to have a sense of where we’re at with this, and Mahamudra uses a lot of methods to build self awareness, but it’s always worth bearing in mind that where we’re aiming to get to is just this free flowing aware experience that doesn’t need anyone to know it’s going on, and it’s always trying to find ways of taking us in that direction.

I don’t know if this story will help, but it might do. If it doesn’t, just forget it. A few months ago, I read - don’t ask me how! - in the Daily Express (a tabloid newspaper) a story about some American tourists. They came over to the UK and they were travelling round Scotland on holiday. They went to different places and at some point in their travels they came to Balmoral. Balmoral is one of the estates owned by the Royal Family. They Royal Family has quite a lot of different places in the United Kingdom: it has Buckingham Palace in London, and it has Windsor Castle, and it has Sandringham in Norfolk, and it has Balmoral which is a big estate with a mansion in the middle in Scotland. Because it’s a big area people are allowed to walk through it, and they were walking through it and they met this guy who was middle aged, maybe even late middle aged, and he looked pretty fit, and he looked like you wouldn’t want to mess with him. He looked like he could handle himself. He was walking along quite slowly with an old woman. So the Americans got talking to these couple of people and because they were at Balmoral the Americans thought they’d ask whether they’d met the Queen. So they asked, and the old woman said, “No, I never have. But *he* has.” So they then asked, so what’s she like? And the guy, being put on the spot, had to say a little bit about what she was like, a few very good things about how warm she was, and so on, and that was it. The tourists were really happy that they’d met someone who knew the Queen, something they could go back to Ohio and tell their grandchildren about! And off they went. Of course, this very fit, middle aged guy and the old lady, they went back to Balmoral, and the old lady went and had tea with Prince Philip, and the bodyguard probably put the Land Rover away!

It’s a nice story because you’ve got three people there. You’ve got the tourists, who are in the presence of the Queen, but who’ve got no idea that they are. You’ve got the bodyguard who knows the Queen, but only from the outside, so to speak, only by being aware of her, and you’ve got the Queen, who can never meet the Queen because she is the Queen! She doesn’t have to do anything to be the Queen; her whole experience is of the Queen. So they’re a little bit like those three levels. The Queen is always there, all the time, in each case, but in one case there’s just simple awareness so there’s no real awareness of what the situation is. Then there’s the bodyguard, who stands for self awareness in this little story, knows the Queen as a subject knows an object, and then you have the Queen, who just is the third level, who is that natural state who just is the Queen. With thanks to the Daily Express!

Q. Are you saying the Queen is enlightened?

A. Of course I am. Yes!

(banter)

Maybe that helps a little bit to give you something to see those three levels.

**End of Session Eight**

**Session Nine: More on Mind and Awareness**

Before the break we were looking at the natural state and timeless awareness and Bhante’s analysis of three ways in which mind can function: simple consciousness, where there’s awareness there, but little or no self awareness; there’s self awareness where we’re creating a sense of a me who’s having the experience, who’s aware of having the experience, aware of our experience, which is the level of the mundane stages of the Path, you could say; and then transcendental awareness, where in the full sense there is just an aware flow of experience, where there’s no need to create a sense of this being ‘happening to me’ or this being ‘my experience’.

We ended up with the American tourists and the bodyguard and the Queen, didn’t we? The Daily Express is very clever, because the bodyguard symbolises that level of self awareness which can create a way of being that is aware, but where the ethical, disciplined awareness is constricting the life force of the being, of us, so in some situations there’s somebody who’s important, and the bodyguard could say to the Queen, “You can’t go and talk to those people - they look like tourists but they might be terrorists. Who knows? No, we’re not going anywhere near them.” And if that process continued the Queen could find herself imprisoned in her rooms, not allowed to go out because it might be dangerous for her. That wouldn’t feel very good at all. So the awareness and that helpful mindfulness that is guiding us in the right direction has to allow for as much flow and ease as possible in the experience, otherwise we find that we just end up split. There’s me the good Dharma practitioner trying terribly hard to gain enlightenment, and somehow that seems to keep being sabotaged by this other aspect of me that I haven’t managed to stamp out yet, which also happens to be part of my experience. You can get very split like that.

But even if it’s nowhere like that, it could still be…

“For example a person who’s been locked in will only have thoughts of escape. If they were not locked in, they would have no thoughts of escape.” (The translation is all in terms of ‘he’. Probably there aren’t any pronouns and the Tibetan uses very few pronouns; it’s quite Buddhistic like that).

“It is the same with the mind. If you try to get hold of it, the mental activity will spread.” If you aim to discipline the mind, if you squeeze it, demand that it doesn’t have any thoughts and just stays on the breath, it produces more thinking. Mind’s response to being squeezed, to tension, is to produce more thoughts. On the level that most of us are practising on we’re trying to find a way of being that’s definitely aware, but also as relaxed as possible. We’re trying to find that combination of relaxation and awareness. A lot of the time in everyday life people flip-flop between the two. They’re under pressure; modern life is very demanding, which means that people get very wound up. There’s awareness there, but it’s very hyper. ‘Right, I’ve done that, what do I do next? Do that, do that, do that.’ Finally at the end of the day, when the kids are in bed, everything stops. Then you go from awareness to relaxation, but it’s almost relaxing into simple awareness, so you just sit in front of the TV, or try to find that one page on the internet which is going to make you completely happy, and so on. There’s that kind of movement between the two: a very tense awareness and then at some point in response to that there’s a flop into something which is relaxed, but in order to be relaxed we’ve had to let go of the awareness and go into simple awareness again. Then the next morning the whole process repeats.

What we’re looking to find is that way of mind and body functioning where there’s definitely awareness, but it’s allowing things to be as easy as possible. So we’re looking to bring those two together.

Q. You used the word awareness. This is often used in different ways. Sometimes the way it is meant is the awareness that is always there. It’s never not there. It cannot be changed. It is always there. So I guess this is not what you meant with the word awareness. Did you mean consciousness? These words are used …

A: These words get used interchangeably almost, by different people, so I’m not distinguishing between the two. What I am doing is distinguishing between three levels of awareness, simple awareness, self awareness and the natural state which is where everything is self knowing and there’s no need to create a subject object dichotomy.

Q: Is the natural awareness that we’re talking about the same as what is referred to as the nature of mind?

A: It’s an aspect of the nature of mind. You could explore other aspects of mind, so you could explore the open, ungraspable nature of mind, that would be coming at things from a different angle. The way in which the insight aspect of Mahamudra works is that you look at what mind is like in itself, or what awareness is like in itself, and then when you’ve got some sense of how that is, you then see what the relation of that is to appearances. So you then see how the nature of awareness relates to the body, how it relates to thoughts and emotions, how it relates to what we think of as the outside world, but we’ll get to some of this a bit later.

Q: Can we come back to the police state? I’m wondering how the role of the policeman tends to evolve, helpfully, because it’s sort of my experience that “Now stop that!” And then “Stop stopping that!” There’s an end result, but I’m not quite sure what the journey’s like.

A: I think the journey is partly one of just relaxing. To take another example that’s used in the Mahamudra tradition, it’s sometimes said that the direction you’re going in is more like going from being a young parent, perhaps with a couple of children, and they’re out playing somewhere, and you’re not really quite confident in your position yet. You know how sometimes you can be sitting out on a nice summer’s day and there is a parent with a couple of kids, and they’re constantly onto the kids, “Come away from the lake!” “No. Come here.” “No don’t try and eat that.” “Jim! Come here!” You’re looking after the children, and nobody comes to harm, but it’s tense. Then the Mahamudra image is like a grandparent, and they’ve brought up their kids, and it’s a nice sunny day and they’re sitting on a bench by the lake, and they’re keeping an eye on the kids, they’re not going to let them drown, but at the same time they’re letting the kids play, and they’re enjoying being in the sun, and the whole feeling of it is different. There’s an awful lot of anxiety in the ‘police’, very well motivated, going to make sure that nothing bad happens, but it’s all tense. It’s all tight. So we want to take all that out. We can still be aware of what’s going on and if the mind is going in an unskilful direction and you find you can’t relax out of it, you do something about it because you’re already in a dualistic state, so you don’t think, Maybe doing something about it will be another dualistic thing. You just go and do something about it. But unless mind is obviously heading in the wrong direction you can just relax, and enjoy being. So the more relaxation, the more soft-hearted the policeman can become … yes, they have a job to do but it can be avuncular (like an uncle), quite soft and easy, and a policeman who at the end of the day can sit around and enjoy himself.

**End of Session Nine**

**Session Ten: Meditation with some leading through**

Before we go any further with the meditation, just reminding ourselves of all the support that’s here, the three circles, the lotuses, encouraging our policeman to be open-hearted, gentle, forgiving; there’s the vajra wall, all that strength and energy that we can call on as needed; and there are the wisdom flames, burning up all the confusion, all the unnecessary complexity, bringing clarity and knowing.

We have one another, there’s hundreds of years of Dharma practice in this room and a lot of kindness and care. Just wishing one another well in our shared practice.

There are all the deep qualities of mind that we’re linked to, that we can draw on, from the whole lineage, the lineage of our teachers going back through Bhante and his teachers, there’s the lineage of Mahamudra, all the different embodiments of love and wisdom and so on, with which we’re surrounded in this mandala.

And we could really entrust ourselves to those deep forces, to those embodiments of the qualities of awakening.

Having done that, we could let mind and body rest, still aware of what’s happening.

If mind’s really going in an unhelpful direction, then we intervene before we fall into the lake of unskillfulness, or if it’s drifting and there’s no awareness, you might want to give it something more precise to focus on, like the breathing, or sensations in the body, or sounds. Otherwise we just let it play. We let experience just unfold, each moment new.

And when we’re ready to bring the practice to a close, we can share the benefits of it with all living beings.

Bell

**End of Session Ten**

**Session Eleven: Working with the shamatha aspect and *barlung***

This morning we carried on looking at this extract from the shamatha section of The Ocean of True Meaning and we went on to explore different levels of awareness following Bhante’s way of looking at it. There’s simple awareness, there’s self awareness, where we know that we know, and then there’s the awareness that is the Mahamudra state, which is not creating or not believing in an apparent division between subject and object. Usually we identify awareness as me-the-subject, and I bring that awareness to, for example, the people in the room, or the sound of somebody opening a notebook or whatever it is, and that’s the object. When mind is really, really, really relaxed, there’s no sense of me-the-subject bringing awareness to the object; in fact there’s no reference back to a me at the centre of things at all, there’s just open awareness within which all kinds of experiences happen, and they are themselves aware. They’re self-knowing.

The passage we were looking at was talking about letting the mind be free, because when we squeeze it and try to keep it tight so that it just stays where we want it to be, that creates tension. Mind responds to tension by trying to work out some way out of that. When you have tension about something, you either produce lots of thoughts about something else entirely, which takes you away from the dukkha of the tension, or you try to work out some way of solving the tension. Either way, there’s lots of thoughts that are produced.

The aim in this way of practising is to let the mind be on holiday, let it be as relaxed as it can be. Again, referring back to Bhante, when he first talked about the system of practice, he talked about moving between structured practice and just sitting and going back and forth between those two, so that there are times where you’re asking mind to do some work, you’re asking it to feel its way into metta or gratitude, or you’re asking it to produce an image of a Buddha or a Bodhisattva, and then there are other times where you’re really not asking it to do anything. You really just let it relax as deeply as possible. He was suggesting that we keep moving between those two so that over time the two come more together. Even when we’re asking ourselves to do something that involves structure, the sense of it is that it’s still very relaxed, it’s very easy. Somewhere along the line that balance got a bit lost in some of our teaching practice, so texts like this help to make sure that we’ve got those factors in the right relationship.

“For example, a person who’s been locked in will only have thoughts of escape. If you were not locked in, you have no thoughts of escape.”

The text somewhere else gives the example of someone who comes to stay in a nice place and then the local governor tells this person that they’re not allowed to leave, and immediately of course that makes them feel that they don’t want to be there and they’re not free, and so they start to want to go somewhere else. But if the governor had not said that, they would have stayed naturally, because it’s a nice place. We have to be really sensitive to mind and how we’re approaching it, what we’re asking of it, and there need to be times where we’re just allowing it to be really, really relaxed.

“It is the same with the mind. If you try to get hold of it, the mental activity will spread. If you do not hold onto it, it is not possible for the mental activity to spread. So let your mind relax. In the immediacy of this relaxed state” - again it’s all put negatively - “it is impossible not to experience a clear and unobstructed awareness, vividly awake, totally open, and loose, empty and clear.”

If our experience of our mind is that it isn’t clear and unobstructed, vividly awake, totally open, and loose, empty and clear, we might think, ‘What did the Ninth Karmapa know, he never saw my mind?’ (but probably the Ninth Karmapa knew a thing or two.) That leaves us with the conclusion that probably our mind isn’t that relaxed and we’re still holding on somewhere. We can relax as much as we can, and then when it feels as if there’s a limit to this, we can look to see how that limit feels it’s being produced. We can feel into the body and the energy system of the body and work on that level of things, but we can also notice what we’re telling ourselves. What are we telling ourselves that could be creating tension? Maybe we’re telling ourselves that we ought to relax and experience unobstructed awareness, vividly awake and all that! There’s that desire in there. So the practice is, Just relax, open awareness, and then something.. it feels like the limit of that, so very gently and subtly notice, actually I’m still looking for this meditation to get better, or I’ve still got a subtle view that if I relax and let my guard down something will get me, and this has often been our experience in the past. So we just notice, and just take it as information, rather than thinking, I’m not very relaxed and I should be. We take it as information that that natural flow is being disturbed. Mind loves to relax, actually. You wouldn’t think it from the amount of thinking and churning away that we tend to do, but it loves to be easy, free and open. What’s in the way of that? In that gentle, exploratory way, we have a look around for what we can find.

“In brief, don’t think about previous thought”, so don’t think about the past, “Do not think about the next thought” because we’re just resting in what’s here, we’re resting in what the experience is now; “Think, what thought is going on right now in my mind? By looking directly at this instant, present thought, the wandering mind is cut through instantly.”

Let’s go back to the example that we were given this morning where we are in meditation, and there’s some thought that comes up, and it’s not a very pleasant or helpful thought, and the thought comes up, I need to control this. Then the next thought comes up, I need to stop controlling all this. That inner policeman or critic, or whatever it is, when that is going on there are a few ways we could allow that to ease. One would be to notice how, before the ‘Shucks, I shouldn’t be controlling this’ comes in, what we want to control and the thought of controlling it have already gone, so at that point, what are we doing? The original issue has gone. Our comment on it also has gone and no longer exists and we won’t find it anywhere, but now we produce another thought chasing after this stuff that has already gone and no longer exists, saying that that was all a bad idea! When we really go into it we notice how we keep recreating things; in order to think that I shouldn’t have tried to control that original, unhelpful thought, we have to recreate some sense of the original, unhelpful thought, and the thought about trying to control it, and then we have to produce another thought- well, we don’t have to - but we do then produce another thought going, I shouldn’t be trying to control this, and then whatever follows on from that, and so on. We could just notice how we’re doing that process. The previous moment has gone. At the point where we notice that we needn’t have been doing all that, we can celebrate the fact that there’s now this awareness, and that may help us to let the whole thing go. The tendency is to take it all at face value, with the me that’s not very good, and there’s the me that’s trying to control the me that’s not very good, and there’s the me that’s telling myself that I’d be even better if I stopped trying to control the me that isn’t very good! So we just notice all that, and feel into what all that’s like. As well as noticing how we’re constantly chasing things that have already gone in order to deal with them, which is completely unnecessary, we could also go underneath all that onto a deeper level, into the body and the emotions that are driving all that. Underneath the story of that, there’s the emotion, there’s the anxiety that if we’re not good enough x will happen, or whatever the story may be. There’s anxiety in there. If we can come right down to that and to feeling that in the body, then we’re addressing the immediate issue much more directly.

There are different ways we can work, but then this way of practising that the Ninth Karmapa is inviting us to explore also gives us the option of looking directly at a thought, as it’s put.

“By looking directly at this” - this thought, whatever it is, right now - “this instant, present thought, the wandering mind is cut through.” What does that mean?

Another approach is that we just look into, not the content of the thought, we don’t worry about all that, we go into what is a thought anyway? What is this phenomenon… What is there that we can find? When we do that, it gives us a different way of enabling mind to relax because when we do that it’s as if we’re looking through the thought rather than giving it reality by putting energy into it because we’re taking it as face value.

So what do we find when we look at a thought? Can you just produce not some huge great thought but say about what ’s going to happen this evening? Can you just do that? What’s the experience? How do you know that you’re having a thought about what’s going to happen this evening? What’s that thought made up of?

A: Ideas.

A: Words - “I must find out what time the meditation review is” - about a dozen words.

A: Visualised scenes. So there’s pictures. If I’m thinking about doing meditation reviews I imagine sitting in my room and this person coming and that person coming. So we’ve got words and pictures. Anything else?

A: Feelings. It’s accompanied by a feeling tone, so I have words, “After supper I’m going to see these people, and then I have the image, and there’s a positive feeling tone in my particular case now. Words, pictures, accompanying feeling. Anything else?

A: Energy

So there’s a movement of energy. How do we know?

Sensations in the body. As I create a picture of this person in the room, the words and pictures aren’t static so if they’re moving there’s an energy flow. A dynamic energetic quality there.

Would you always actually have a memory of something from the past or would that just be in the background conditioning? In that instance there are.

There’s something which isn’t just a physical sensation, there’s a mood or an atmosphere, it’s not quite physical sensation, or general feeling tone, there’s something more intuitive feeling response there.

It might be prapancha, or maybe we have a good reason to think about what’s happening this evening but there might not be. There can be a volition, a movement of energy which produces words, pictures, energy rolling along.

Something like the ego function. We’re probably creating some sort of sense of me the one who’s going to do the stuff this evening and me the one who’s thinking this thought now. Some sort of sense of continuity. Let’s leave that there.

We’ve got quite a lot that’s going on. But in themselves all those different things, what do they add up to, and do any of them impel us to act in a particular way? Because whatever the thought is about, we’re responding or reacting to what is essentially some words in our head, some pictures, some sensations in the body, some feeling tone … and it’s all a bit flimsy. What is there about some words and some pictures and some movements of energy in the body that compels us so strongly that we have to do it morning noon and night. It feels like we do, because somehow we give the package of those different components a reality that isn’t really justified when we look into it. Rather than it being a useful thing that we can do, which is helpful for our lives at times to think like that so we turn up for meditation reviews for example, but there’s nothing about the components of thought that mean I have to keep thinking and thinking and thinking.

It’s certainly tied up with the self because most of the thinking is tied up with the story of me, and if there are no thoughts who are we? Where are we? A lot of human beings will vote for Descartes, they think therefore they are, and without that thinking how do I know I’m here?

Because mind has got confused about its nature, and needs to feel that there is a me right here in the centre of things that needs to be protected, that belief has to be really protected. Because there isn’t anything substantial at the centre of things we have to keep shoring it up and reinforcing that sense moment by moment because each moment our previous sense of me has gone and we have to create another one, otherwise I won’t be here and then what will happen!

If we don’t give thoughts so much weight and seriousness, then we don’t put so much energy into them and they wind down over time. We could also look directly at the experience of a thought and if you were to do that fully enough it would just disappear on the spot, then you’d be into perfect vision.

There are times in practice when leaving mind open and free means that awareness is lost and then you just have unaware drift. So at those times you need something a bit more specific to anchor your mind and then maybe at a certain point you don’t need that anchor and you can let go back into formless awareness again. You can focus on feelings in the body, you can focus on sounds, you can focus on the breath, but you can also work with the breath in a particular way, which in Tibetan is called barlung, which is breathing below the navel. Bar in Tibetan means intermediate so the bardo is a state of consciousness between other states of consciousness, or an intermediate state between lives. Lung is the Tibetan equivalent of prana, so it’s associated with energy, but it’s also associated with breathing. In this practice we’re going to focus on this intermediate area of the body, just below the navel. There are quite a few traditions which focus on promoting non-dual experience, and they usually do have practices where they work in this area, like in Zen it’s called the Hara. It’s also very much in this tradition. We’re going to bring awareness to the sensations caused by the breathing down in this area. As well as that, we’re going to use images or whatever enables us to feel really at ease. For some people it works to feel like they’re sitting by a warm fire and the body is really relaxed and they just breathe easy. Or some people helpful to imagine that there is a fire or a glowing coal in this area, so that there is a warmth that’s coming from here. For some people it works to imagine you’ve just had a really good meal, like a baby that’s just been fed when you wanted something and then somehow this miraculous thing happened and now you feel really satisfied and easy. So we’re going to be breathing into this area, associating whatever promotes that sense of ease and relaxation. It’s just a normal breath. There is in this tradition what’s called ‘vase breathing’, where you hold breath down in this area, but this is just normal, easy breath. The whole emphasis is on everything being easy and relaxed. You may well find doing it that the breathing does get longer, but you’re not aiming to do anything other than breathe easy and enjoy it.

As usual, we don’t have anything to do, not even this barlung thing. Just as we are.

Connecting with the earth, just exploring our posture, so that as much as possible it’s one that allows energy to flow, allows us to be aware, feeling into the body. How is it now?

Now we can keep a general awareness of the body, but we particularly allow awareness and energy to gather in this area below the navel. Aware of how this area is moved, is affected by the breathing.

Along with that, we can feel our way into any images or thoughts or feelings that help this breathing, the sense of the area below the navel, to be reassuring, to be comforting, to give a sense of warmth and ease.

Whatever’s going on, from this area below the navel, there’s a message that everything’s ok.

In a few moments there’ll be a gong and if we want to come out of meditation there’ll be a five- minute leg stretch. As we come out of the meditation, we could keep using this practice as a mindfulness anchor. We could keep 10-15% of our awareness down in this area below the navel, with the same sense of warmth, ease and reassurance as we stretch our legs or whatever we want to do.

Bell

**End of Session Eleven**

**Session Twelve: Led Practice**

Moving back from barlung as a mindfulness anchor into letting it be the centre of our attention.

If it feels as if energy and awareness are up more in the head area, just imagine awareness coming down through the body and coming to rest in this area, in the movements produced by the breathing.

Feeling free to draw on any images that help promote a sense of warmth and ease, safety and security.

Bell

**End of Session Twelve**

**Session Thirteen: Led Practice**

Letting it all go. Letting it all just sink down into the earth.

And out of that stability, connection and security, letting the body rise up towards the sky.

So there’s the stability of relaxation and the lightness and brightness of awareness. We’re feeling into a way of being that’s both relaxed and aware.

And into that we add the heart. Letting this aware relaxation be as kindly, as warm, as loving as possible. We let that pervade the body.

Now being particularly aware of the breathing. How is it to be breathing now?

Now from the sensations in the nostrils and the throat and the chest, feeling down into the area below the navel, as if the breath is going right into that area. Letting kindly awareness settle and gather energy in that area, and also using anything we can associate with warmth and ease, security, relaxation, a sense of really breathing easy.

If there are thought chains going on, bring them into relation with this warm, easy, reassuring breath. Even let them dissolve down into this area below the navel.

And if the thought chains insist that they’re terribly important and just have to carry on, we could just look straight at them. What are they made up of? What is a thought?

Bell

**End of Session Thirteen**

**Session Fourteen: Looking at Thoughts**

1**4 - Looking at Thoughts**

In that meditation we touched on a couple of practical methods that we went into a bit yesterday. There was barlung and there was looking directly at the thought. Looking directly isn’t the best description really because that sounds that you’re at a distance looking into it, whereas it’s more immediate and closer than that.

Barlung is a really easy, relaxed way of breathing which, in the tradition is said to have a lot of benefits. It’s an antidote to anxiety. I’ve seen a few people practise it regularly over a few years and I’ve watched it make a big difference to them. It also promotes non-conceptuality. It tends to take energy out of the head and down into the lower dantien. Energy naturally gathers in this area and is stored there. There are a number of traditions where that is the case, for example Zen and Taoism.

Barlung is also said to be a very healing practice, and it is said to promote non-duality. You also use it as a mindfulness anchor. Once it’s established you can have this constant reassuring sense from somewhere that everything is ok. If something happens which destabilises you, then there’s this part of you going, ‘Mmm, yes, but It’s not so bad, it’s ok - easy!’ So it has a very warming, relaxing, easy effect on body and mind.

So what else happened yesterday? Oh yes, we looked a bit at those different levels, three different levels so to speak on which mind can function. There’s simple awareness, self awareness or reflexive awareness or consciousness, and there’s non-dual awareness where mind isn’t creating a sense of a subject and an object. We had the story about the tourists and the bodyguard and the Queen. The tourists’ minds are functioning, but they’re unaware of the nature of things, they don’t know that that’s the Queen that they’ve just met; there’s the bodyguard, who is more aware, but only of the Queen as an object, so to speak, so still experiencing within that subject/object duality; and then the Queen who is just the Queen, always the Queen, without having to do anything to be the Queen. To the extent that that story works, it just helps you to remember those three levels.

Mahamudra is taking us towards this way of functioning, in which mind isn’t creating a subject/object duality. I mentioned a couple of days ago, when it’s functioning like that, mind is the most relaxed it can be. Whenever it’s creating a sense of a subject and an object, there’s always tension. Whenever there’s a sense of me and it or me and them, in some kind of way mind is always trying to resolve the tension of that, so it’s moving away from the object, or towards it, or against it, or somehow trying to unite with it, so that that most fundamental tension of there being a subject and an object is resolved.

Without that subject/object creation, there’s just flow and ease. You can’t get mind more relaxed than that - it’s like it’s hit the bottom. From that point on, all that can happen is that mind can learn to be in that state more of the time, so that that state becomes more and more its natural way of functioning, rather than the habitual creation of subject and object. The other development is that without that subject/object delusion, deeper qualities of mind are liberated, so that over time more of the qualities of awakening become expressed, they unfold: more and more generosity, patience, energy, and so on.

That’s where we’re heading with this practice! Things that help move in that direction are relaxation of body and mind, trusting in mind and in the Refuges, though finally mind and the Refuges aren’t different. Over time, we’re wanting to develop confidence that allowing this deep relaxation of mind will deliver the goods, enable more and more flow and ease, and naturally and spontaneously more and more good qualities will arise. It usually takes us some time to be convinced of that. We’ve usually been brought up in a culture that doesn’t see things like that at all. We might have learned to be almost suspicious of ourselves. Also, in the early stages of practice we haven’t been able to just let whatever flowed to flow, because whatever flowed would just be the flow of the kleshas! So we’ve had to be quite careful, but as we go further we only need to be careful if we need to be and otherwise just relax and open. It’s like with metta. If there really isn’t much metta that you can find in yourself, then you have to be careful not to just let yourself express yourself spontaneously because that may well be harmful to somebody else. But the more that metta unfolds over the years, the more you can trust that you can respond to things immediately because that response is mettaful, much of the time. There may be particular difficult conditions where you still have to be a bit careful and not just let the energy flow freely, but more and more of the time you just do, because what comes out you know from experience is positive. If at that point you were to put everything through triple checks and take it to the censorship committee before you opened your mouth, that would actually be limiting and restricting your development, your growth and your energy.

So although we don’t want to underestimate in any way the power of the kleshas, still it really helps if we develop a trust and a confidence in the basic nature of our mind and its functioning in an undecided way.

Helpful steps in this direction are relaxation, trust, confidence, and not making a big deal out of things, without spiritual bypassing. We’re not doing “Oh dear the roof of my house has just fallen in but I won’t make a big deal out of it”, when actually you are making a big deal out of it! We have to acknowledge what’s there, but still we can have an attitude of letting things flow, letting things go, so nothing is such a major event. One of the ways in which we keep the selfing going, keep the sense in which I’m here and good old comfortable me is too, is by making sure that the drama carries on, because all the time that there’s drama - if I’m really furious about this, and really gutted about that, and really anxious about the other - I have a really strong sense that I am here. Also It makes us feel special. The trouble with awakening is that with awakening we’re just like everybody else, in the deepest way. Mind is just open. To be honest, speaking personally, and looking at other people - but who knows, I may be wrong! - we’d rather be special and suffer than not be special and not suffer! I invite you to explore that, a proposition. I put it out there and see what you do with it!

So we could just see if we could make a practice of not making a big deal about things, doing whatever needs doing, whatever it is. Not ignoring it, but not turning it into a major motion picture, particularly if most of what we’re doing with that is the internal cinema. If thoughts really are just rather flimsy concoctions of words and pictures and sensations, then we’re making a big deal out of something that isn’t actually in itself a big deal. Recognise that.

That was yesterday! In brief, ‘do not think about previous thoughts!’ They’re just gone.

Let’s do a bit more of that text. All these extracts are from the shamatha section and they’re from a lesson which is general advice. Some of the shamatha section is about specific shamatha methods, but then there are some which are just general advice, about shamatha, about meditation, possibly about how we live.

“So looking directly at this instant present thought, the wandering mind is cut through instantly, and as long as you are undistracted no thoughts will arise. But as soon as you become distracted, thoughts will immediately arise again.”

Then we have:

“By considering the arising of thoughts as desirable, and looking at them directly, the thoughts will be self liberating and you will go straight into non-conceptuality. In this way, take the arising of whatever thoughts appear as desirable and look at them directly.” So let’s see what there is about this that needs unpacking.

“By considering the arising of thoughts as desirable” - I thought we were trying to get rid of thoughts! I thought this was shamatha - I thought that was what it was about! Hmm. So one of the issues with shamatha is that we can end up in a battle, in tension, where we’re trying to somehow banish thoughts, or hold them out. For a lot of people thoughts seem to come in from the left hand side and go that way (to the right) because that’s the way the script goes. I don’t know whether in Islamic countries they go the other way, or whether in China they come up! It would be interesting to know. Anyway, there are the thoughts waiting to enter, stage left, and we try and close the door on them and hold them at bay, hold them out, No thoughts! No thoughts! I can probably do this for quite a long time, but eventually the tension is going to get very great and the resulting dukkha, so we don’t want to be doing that.

According to this, the thoughts are a good thing. They’re desirable. Gampopa says somewhere, “Thoughts are friends.” Thoughts are friends once you start to become aware of their nature. They can also be friends if you’re reflecting in meditation. Once you start being able to look at them directly, which means not stay at a distance looking at them but eventually feeling directly what they’re like from inside, then you recognise that there isn’t really much there at all. In doing that you see that they’re ungraspable, which is often a better way of thinking than thinking that they’re empty, because empty and emptiness often have not very helpful connotations for people. But if you see that thoughts are ungraspable, and that they’re constantly flowing, then each time a thought turns up it’s another opportunity to see the nature of the things. Ah, it’s a thought, great! Okay. So if we move from looking at the content of the thought to the nature of the thought, then it becomes really helpful, because, for example, there's a thought about Christmas, so I can either get into what I’m doing about Christmas, and how I feel about Christmas, and so on, or I can just look at it, and I seem to have a red background, a bit like a Christmas card, and there is almost the outline of a reindeer though it’s not in focus, and I’ve got the word ‘Christmas’, which this time is spelt fully, not with an X, the whole word is there somewhere in the back of my mind, it’s quite subtle, quite a lot of it is just hovering out of range. And I’ve got one or two feeling responses down in my belly. And actually to talk to you about it, I’ve had to keep re-creating it moment by moment because it just goes. So in exploring that I’ve recognised that what could impel me into a whole “I don’t like all the commercialisation of Christmas“ or “Christmas, I’m not doing much over Christmas, great, I’ll get a bit of space, that’ll be nice,” or whatever, I’ve just gone for the nature of it, and the nature of this experience is ungraspable and even if I could get hold of it it’s gone before I can, and now there’s another one that’s quite similar and I can have a look at that…So (24.11) in that way thoughts become helpful.

To do that kind of work there needs to be enough awareness to be able to catch and look almost thought by thought. If you’ve got a big thought chain going on it’s quite hard to do, although you can have a go, because maybe the wish to look at the thought can cut the chain enough to look at the next thought that followed on from that chain. Then we can have a mind that’s still, and that’s really nice, or we could have a mind that’s moving with thoughts, and we can either not make a big deal out of them and let them come and go, or it’s another opportunity to look at the nature of things. It’s win / win!

Question: One of the things I know I get caught up in is I sometimes have good ideas and plans, so the thought doesn’t feel like it’s not necessary at that time, but it’s helpful in another way if I can put it to one side, but I know that my mind then quite likes planning. So the thought isn’t nebulous because it has a purpose, and the purpose might be very positive itself… or not. So I still see that it’s nothing more than conceptualisation for the future, but I do find it quite difficult to really put it to one side, because it then just goes to the back of my mind and comes up with the next solution.

A: Yes, so you can have planning thoughts which, in principle at least, are very helpful, and they’re hard to put down because they have a good justification for being there and they don’t feel nebulous. However, they’re still finally just as ungraspable and flowing and evanescent as everything else. Their nature isn’t any different from a wispy, half-thought, so in that sense they’re just as nebulous, but they present as more solid and of a piece and brighter.

This is the difficulty in general with prapancha, that usually whatever state we’re in unless we’re really, really drifting, there are some thoughts which we think, “I don’t need to think about that,” and they just pass by. If we’re a bit more aware and motivated, there are more thoughts in that category, but eventually at some point a thought comes along which is a VIP thought! It’s got a motorcade and motorcyclists and outriders, and so on! It insists that it’s going to be thought now because it’s a Very Important Thought; it’s a VIT! At that point we go, “Oh yes alright…”. But usually it’s a con. Usually if we really look into it, we could think about it at the end of the mediation, if it’s that important. So you either stop meditating and you decide very consciously, Now I’m going to plan using the somewhat slightly deeper state of consciousness that I’m in as a result of having been trying to meditate for the last twenty minutes, and the planning will be more effective. But I think it’s better to try and separate it out. Put the planning as something that you’ll do in the last five minutes of the meditation, as you’re emerging, if you really want to do it like that, or you do it at another time. I write talks better if I’m in a somewhat meditative state, but I’ve tried to train myself not to write talks during meditation, which I could easily get into, but at another time sit down and let myself be a little bit absorbed, and then turn my mind to the talk. These things are difficult. There are always some things which just feel like they’re justifiable.

Q: It’s not always conscious. It’s not that I was intending to plan, it was in the background, and then it hits me as a good plan.

A: The thing is to make it as conscious as possible. You can go through a period where in meditation, just as you check more generally what’s going on, you can check, Is there any planning going on here? That may invoke the planning of course! But you want to really do it fully consciously as much as possible. It is all these habitual, half-conscious things that ‘get’ us.

Q: If you’ve got a thought that is sticking around because you’re hurting about something and it’s keyed into something painful, those thoughts are quite difficult. They’ve got very long tails that are hard to …

A: I think with all these things it’s best to very consciously give them time, where you consciously explore whatever it is, and you have other times where you’re not doing that and if they come up you let them go as best you can. Often things come up because there is something unresolved; that’s why they keep coming back. So they need to be turned towards. But it helps if awareness is there so you can decide that you’re really going to turn towards it, or not. In meditation if something keeps coming back then often the best thing to do is to stop treating it as a distraction and start treating it as the meditation object.

What’s most difficult often is those thoughts and feelings that lurk around semi-consciously, and we push them away, particularly the views about ourselves, and the views about ourselves as meditators. You can be meditating and there’s a little voice going, ‘It’s not going very well, but what can you expect?’ And you just treat it as a distraction, but it’s been doing that for years in some cases, so at that point it’s much better to consciously bring it into the light of awareness and let’s actually have this out. Is that actually all you can expect of yourself because you’re so useless as a meditator and a Buddhist and a human being, or, are you wrong? It’s those half-conscious, unintegrated bits, that want to do something else and don’t believe in what we’re doing, that take so much of the energy out of the practice. Because we don’t fully believe in them, and some of the time we manage to push them off and bat them away, we feel like we’re dealing with them, but they’re still around, so we want to really have it out with those bits.

Q: I notice that sometimes when I get obsessive thoughts, say I’m on a solitary and I’m obsessing about the ending, I’ve found that I’m able to actually catch them before they form. I can feel that they’re forming and I can actually not allow them to form. It seems to work. It takes a bit of energy, but there’s not much tension there.

A: If you’ve got the subtlety of awareness through being on retreat that enables you to catch things at that early stage, that’s really helpful, because they haven’t gained momentum. It’s like trying to catch something just as it’s beginning to roll down the hill as opposed to trying to stop it when it’s been rolling for a few hundred yards and has really gathered speed and weight.

Q: As regards thoughts, if something is useful and it’s actually helping your practice go deeper, could we leave it?

A: If something’s really helping you go deeper, you go with it by definition. Some things are helpful at one stage, and then they stop being helpful further on. This is true of practice in one meditation and it’s true over the years too. There are things that can be helpful at one phase of your practice that start to be hindrances at another one.

**End of Session Fourteen**

**Session Fifteen: Led meditation - body, sounds, thoughts**

Before the break we were considering ‘the arising of thoughts as desirable and looking at them directly. By doing that the thoughts will be self-liberating’. Self-liberation is an important term in Mahamudra and Dzogchen, and it refers to the flowing nature of everything. When I wanted to produce that specimen thought and my mind came up with something about Christmas, actually it wasn’t just that the thought stayed completely steady and I looked at it while I was talking to you, it was changing moment by moment and so actually what I was referring to when I was talking to you was a whole lot of similar mental events that were arising one after the other. It’s the same if we do a visualization practice. It’s not that the figure is just there like that and it stays; it’s that moment by moment we are creating something which is very similar to what was there the previous moment. That gives us a sense of stability and things being unchanging. Similarly with ourselves, what we think of as me is a continuity of similar experiences. If we go back to when we were five, say, we can’t be the same as when we were five, or we’d have to get some grownups to come and look after us all on the retreat! (Laughter)… all right, we won’t go there! If we can find any! So we’re clearly not the same, but we’re not completely different either, because otherwise we wouldn’t be able to go, That was me when I was five. If it’s not the same and it’s not different, what’s happening? There’s been a lot of similar experience, and it’s been similar enough for us to be able to feel like, That was me, and then that was me at seven, and that was me at ten, and so on, right up to the present. Actually what’s been going on all the time is a flow of experience, and that flow is constantly changing, which means that to talk in terms of past, present and future, there’s this present moment which is constantly becoming the past moment, and then there’s another moment that’s now the present moment and that goes.

That ought to be really helpful because it should mean that if there’s a thought, it comes, it’s there for a moment, and then it goes. So why is there any problem with thoughts? Not only are they ungraspable and not made up of very much, but they only last a fraction of a second or a second, depending on how you want to look at it, and then they’re gone. But part of how we torture ourselves is with thoughts through the day, but actually they’re constantly going. The issue is that we get caught up with them and we keep recreating the same thought - well, it’s never the same thought, but a very similar thought, a thought in the same area, a thought in the same subject - and in that way it feels like the thoughts are still there and still there and still there. If we were to really use that in our favour, we wouldn’t have to do anything about any of the thoughts, because they’d just pop up, and if we didn’t put energy into them, all they could ever do would be to pop down again. Actually they do, they pop up and they pop down, and then because we’ve been attracted to this thought we put more energy into that area, and then so there’s another thought in the same area, and there’s another thought in the same area, and so it goes on.

Something comes to mind, and the first thought is blameless. We have no responsibility for the first thought that just pops up. Anything can pop up. But the second thought is our responsibility, whether we start to follow it or not.

In this approach we can look directly at thought to see the ungraspable internal cinema nature of it, and that there’s nothing really solid or real there. Or we can look at the flowing nature of things, so when a thought pops up, you know it’s going to pass so you just let it go. You just let it do its thing. It will arise in dependence on conditions, and then dissolve away once those conditions change, which they do moment by moment. The issue then is our motivation to be involved with whatever it is. The issue is the energy that we put in to sustain and maintain the thought in existence.

Q: And then the view? I guess a thought is coming out of a view?

A: Yes. And our response to a thought comes out of a view as well.

We know some of the time, when it isn’t one of the VIT thoughts with the motorcade and all that, thoughts do pop up and they just go. We have that experience a lot, actually. So if we have some space around the thought, so to speak, the thought pops up, and then it goes. It pops up and it goes. That’s the beginnings of self liberation. True self liberation in the full, deepest Mahamudra sense, it’s not even that I’m sitting here and my mind is spacious, and I watch a thought come, and I don’t put any energy into it, and I watch it go. In full Mahamudra, there’s nobody watching, the thought arises, knows its own nature, and disappears again. But the more we can get a sense of the flowing nature of experience, the easier it is to allow things to do their thing, and to arise and pass away. We can allow things to go, to the extent that we have choice.

I’m with some people, and somebody’s a bit rude to me, if I’m aware I have a choice. I can either dwell on it and think, they’re a pretty rude sort of person, and I never did like them anyway, and they’re probably like that to other people as well, and I don’t know what’s the matter with them, and I wasn’t being nasty to them at all and they were just like that out of nowhere, and I was in such a good state too and now I feel rotten, and so on and so on and so on! I can carry that on for hours, probably, if I try! Or, somebody’s rude to me and I can not make a deal of it. It’s a shame, there’s probably some dukkha there that’s provoked that. But the thing is that all that is based on them saying something that maybe took five seconds, and that five seconds has long gone. That whole experience has completely self liberated; we will not find it anywhere. So to the extent that I’m aware, and to the extent that I’m motivated to practise, and to the extent I have a choice, I can either do ‘they’re really rude, they’re a horrible person, they’ve ruined my day’ thing, which is all based on something which no longer exists, well it never existed because nothing exists in the full sense anyway, so it didn’t even come into existence, for heavens’ sake! I can either do a whole number on myself and make myself miserable based on something that wasn’t quite ever there in the first place, or I can do the talking to myself, they’re having a bad day, just wish them well, and let it go, or I may be able to drop it at the time. There it was, then it’s gone, and now something else is happening.

It’s not exactly that we’re living in the past a lot of the time, but we’re living in a constant recreation of the past, and adding fuel to the fire of these things. It makes life incredibly complicated. So we’re being invited to feel into the flow of experience and then a lot of things become very simple because they’re just gone, and there’s this happening now.

Q: Vessantara, when you talk about a thought knowing its own nature, and self liberating, what does that mean? Is it just that a thought is impermanent, very fleeting, and it goes, or is it because it’s held in a particular state of consciousness that it self liberates?

A: It means that there’s nobody who’s having the thought, so there’s nobody for the thought to trouble, or nobody to respond to it; it comes and there’s awareness. The thought is itself permeated with awareness, and then it goes. I don’t know what else to say about it really.

One thing we can take out of this is that Mahamudra is inviting us to be aware of the ungraspable flowing nature of experience, and to take that deep enough that it starts to affect how we live our lives, how we look at things, how we experience. And that it’s helpful to notice what is simply happening, which is that there are these arisings and passings and that they naturally arise and pass, and how our mind can either let things come and go and then there’s the next experience, or how through engaging energy with what’s happening, we can then produce chains of similar thoughts, but it’s not that anything ever hangs around.

Let’s do some meditation.

Now taking our awareness to our contact with the ground. Feeling into the actual sensations, warmth and pressure that tell us we’re in contact with the ground.

Feeling into our posture. Noticing how what we think of as our posture in experience is often just different sensations and a kind of mental map: spine, shoulders and so on. Letting the body become a field of kindly awareness.

Now focusing on how in experience the body is a flow of feelings and sensations, constantly changing.

It’s as if the whole body is energy, constantly transforming.

Now let’s widen out a little and include whatever we hear, not getting caught up in the content, but see if we can experience it as a flow of energy.

Now let’s include in the sixth consciousness, the mental consciousness, so whatever emotion, feeling, words, pictures, we notice, rather than going into the content, see if we can experience them as dynamic, part of the flow of energy.

Noticing how everything that’s happened in the meditation, all the feelings and sensations, the sounds, the emotions, the thoughts, all self liberated, right up to this moment now, this fresh new moment. Everything else has disappeared all by itself. We didn’t have to make it go.

Bell

**End of Session Fifteen**

**Session Sixteen: Mahamudra, Shamatha and Vipassana**

This morning we were still in the shamatha section, although in Mahamudra shamatha and vipassana come together as much as possible, so that all the shamatha methods that are mentioned in the Ocean of True Meaning all have some kind of insight aspect to them as well. So, even though we’re in the shamatha section, we’re also looking at the nature of things, and we’ve been particularly looking at the nature of thought. We just got to the sentence,

“By considering the arising of thoughts as desirable, and looking at them directly, the thoughts will be self liberating and go straight into non-conceptuality.”

We looked a bit at what it means for things to be self-liberating and how everything is constantly flowing and therefore experiences come and they go. I’ve made several visits to New Zealand, which is an island quite far out in the Pacific, and they always say, If you don’t like the weather, just wait ten minutes! It’s a bit like that with mind, except that you don’t even have to wait ten minutes; it’s constantly moving on and moving on. We could use that to our advantage. It’s only because we attempt to hold on to things and we get caught up in things, we bring them back, we recreate them and we add more on to them and build great clouds of thought and feeling around certain topics, that life gets so problematic at times. Actually, everything is just flowing along, flowing along, always new. The past just has gone. It’s amazing: here we are, we’ve been alive for decades; how many thoughts have we had in our lives? How many hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of thoughts, and they’ve all just gone? They’ve completely vanished. They’ve left some traces in the mind, they’ve left some effects, but all those thoughts, all those happy thoughts, difficult thoughts, anxious thoughts, sad thoughts, bright thoughts, went. They’ve gone. So it’s worth taking that into our being so that we don’t take things to have a reality and a weight that actually they don’t have. That will make the whole practice of shamatha easier.

So thoughts just liberate themselves, by themselves, without any help from us. All experiences just come and go by themselves. If there’s a thought, you think, Oh, great. There’s another chance to explore the nature of things. You look into the thought, feel into it and the thought self liberates. You can look into the anatta nature of it or look into the anicca nature of it. Either way, there’s nothing you can get hold of and it’s just flowing, ungraspable experience.

This means that whether the mind is calm and still, peaceful, or whether it’s full of rage, fury, jealousy, hatred, whatever, its nature hasn’t changed at all. It hasn’t changed in the slightest. So if we look at the nature of it, if we’re focusing on the nature of it, it matters if we act out of the rage and hatred and so on, but if we’re looking at the nature of it we won’t, because we’ll see that the nature of that is no different to when the mind is calm and peaceful.

On my three-year retreat I spent quite a lot of time with this kind of material and it was really interesting coming back because I’d been buried in the country, in a very rural area of France, with not many people and some cows, really right away from things, so life went very slowly. Nothing very obvious changed, and it changed very slowly. Then, when we drove back to Cambridge and went to the city to buy things, and Cambridge has 8 million tourists a year even though there weren’t so many because it was getting towards Christmas, there was so much more experience and it was coming so much quicker than when I was sitting in my wooden circus wagon. There was a sort of shamatha glow that had built up, but that wasn’t really the important thing. The important thing was that I’d done an awful lot of looking at the nature of things, so that even though the experience in quantity and speed was much, much greater, the nature of it was just the same. In that way it didn’t really make a difference that I was in the middle of reindeer and tourists, as nothing had essentially changed. That can give you a deeper stability than the lovely glow of shamatha, an aura which lasts for a while and things just bounce off it, and then as the hours or days or weeks or months go past it just gradually dwindles if you’re not in a position to maintain it, and then eventually the things that just bounced off gradually get in.

Although we are looking for some peace, some stillness, some calm, there’s a way of seeing the nature of what isn’t externally peaceful and calm, where everything’s moving a lot, which gives you that same stability as when the mind is just calm and steady in shamatha. That’s a whole lot better because you haven’t got to be in the special conditions to produce the shamatha. So if we can get a feeling for this and begin to apply it, it can make a big difference to us in our often very full on lives. It can make a difference to how we meditate too, because we won’t be trying to get to the calm and push away the thoughts in the way that I was talking about earlier.

When a thought turns up, Hurray, there’s a thought! You can look into the insubstantial, ungraspable nature of it, you can just notice how it just comes and goes, and if you really go into the nature of it, it just pops like a bubble, like we sometimes offer at the shrine. Then there is just an open space. “You will go straight into non-conceptuality”. This very relaxed, easy meditation that the Ninth Karmapa is encouraging us to have a go at produces experiences which are usually classified under three headings. It can produce experiences of bliss, clarity and non-conceptuality. These can be so strong that you can feel like this is awakening, but they’re still what is called ‘nyam’ in Tibetan. They are helpful experiences that are good signs that you’re on the right track, but they’re not yet non-dual experience.

In the blissful ones you can have tremendous experiences of happiness, deep well-being, quite a lot of the things we associate with shamatha practice. In the clarity ones, as the word suggests, everything stands out so clearly, and you can see everything so clearly, and it feels like you’ve got a mind like a laser beam, so there’s no distraction. In non-conceptuality, there’s all that family of experiences where there is no thought and the mind has gone really quiet and still and open and it’s completely undisturbed in that way.

Seeing into the nature of a mind movement, it just pops and then at least for a short time there’s just that open space. If you blow some bubbles at the shrine, and you watch them come down, and you watch one particularly, and at a certain point, you don’t know when, suddenly it goes. There’s a moment where you’re looking at the empty space where the bubble was and there’s a slight ‘ah’ (intake of breath) and just for that moment your mind opens. You can have that experience when you look into the experience of a mind moment, which could also be an emotion, but we’ll come to that later.

It’s a different way to work with thoughts, looking straight at their nature. I can’t think of an instance where it’s taught in the Pali Canon in that way, but somebody might be able to correct me. It can be a very helpful way to work with things.

“In this way, take the arising of whatever thoughts appear as desirable, and look at them directly.” That’s just a summary.

“Do not make long practice sessions, but interrupt them while there is still clarity.”

When you’re first practising shamatha in this way, it’s much better to do short periods of practice where the awareness is bright, rather than long periods where after a while things tail off and you start to drift. What you have to watch out for with this sort of meditation is that you end up with a lot of drift and that’s just reinforcing what we do anyway. We know how to do that. We know how to think in different ways, but we’re not so good at letting things go, so that’s what we need to practise.

“Do not make long practice sessions, but interrupt them while there is still clarity.” We need the clarity to know what’s going on and the clarity to be able to keep relaxing, and the clarity to be able to look at what’s there, which doesn’t have to be razor-sharp clarity, but it has to be enough that you can catch what’s happening, and if you’re looking into its nature, you’ve got the awareness to do that. If you’ve got a big thought chain the chances are that you won’t have the awareness along with that, as there’ll be too much investment in the thought chain and therefore not enough capacity to catch the fact that this is a thought chain that I am very immersed in, to be able to step back and do something about it.

“Do short and frequent sessions” The shortest session from this way of practising is one breath. I have sometimes on retreats done meditations with people, where everyone was totally focussed for the entire practice, and it lasted for about three seconds before I rang the bell - there’s success for you! It’s better to build on success, rather than doing a practice that lasts an hour and a half and some people are waiting desperately for the bell to happen. So you can do very short sessions. What you want is for the mind to get into the feeling of, Ah yes, it’s really lovely; I enjoy relaxing and being aware! and just maintain that for as long as it’s still quite bright, and then stop while you’re winning is the way it should be. Ideally you stop when you still feel you could go on a bit, because as we know the end of the meditation sets the tone for the beginning of the next one, and how inclined we’re going to be to do the next session. There’s a lot of awareness in this tradition about not squeezing mind, not tiring it, not asking more of it than it will happily do at the time. If you sit to meditate and mind is really not in the mood, you just get up. You don’t sit trying to insist that it’s going to meditate. We’re looking for something a bit more natural than that, which we’re more inclined to do outside of meditation: we might go and sit and look at the view so long as it’s not raining for as long as that feels like an enjoyable thing to do, and when it stops feeling like that we go and do something else. You don’t insist; you follow your natural rhythm as much as possible. We want to keep doing that.

When we’re practising morning meditation here, it’s not very convenient if some people get up after five minutes and some people get up after fifteen minutes and some people get up after twenty-five minutes and then they start coming back! So the session lasts for forty minutes, or whatever it is, but within that you can make your own mini-sessions. You start your mini-session with other people around you and you do one breath. Ah, OK. You have a break for a minute. All right, I’l do another one now. Or you do fifteen minutes, or follow your own rhythm, whatever it is. In between you can look at the shrine or the thangkas, or just sit and be easy, and if you do sit and be easy between the sessions that you’re doing you may find that the sitting and being easy is the real meditation!

Q: Dear Vessantara, Let’s assume that one can somewhat consistently / randomly relax into the Mahamudra experience. How does one go about deepening it and making it more stable? It’s very easy to fall out of it.

A: Let’s take it that the Mahamudra experience here means that we have the capacity to be in non-dual experience some of the time. While that’s going on, there’s nothing to do because mind is already as relaxed as it can be, so there’s no deeper in that to go. Furthermore, we’re not there. We don’t know anything about it in the sense of me the subject, the good old me that’s always here in the middle of my experience. If it feels like we’re having this experience and we want to deepen it, or make it more stable, then we’re not in it. We’re not in that non-dual experience. Non-dual experience is complete self forgetting. There’s no possibility of doing anything while we’re in it. There’s no need to do anything while we’re in it, and we couldn’t anyway. Let’s suppose that we fall out of it. That’s usually the case. It’s very rare that mind goes into that way of being and just stays there for the rest of time. Usually because our mind has been so used to believing in a self and functioning out of that, revving up those good old kleshas, so at some point we fall out of it. Then we’re back into me. Another way we can tell we’ve been in non-dual experience is what happens when we come out, because if when we come out we go, Wow, that was fantastic! I’ve just had a non-dual experience! I must go and tell Tejananda! That wasn’t it, that was still a ‘nyams’, an experience; it was close but no cigar! That wasn’t quite it. When you come out of it, things are still very simple, it’s just the next thing that happens, but there’ll be the beginnings of a split there.

If our practice has really got to that point where we’re coming in and out of non-dual experience, when we’re out of it the main things to do are to promote that sense of complete self forgetting, of no longer referring back to me at the centre of the universe.

Three things come to mind; in order of importance, starting with the least. The first is that you can practise with a very open mind. When you have the choice, you just let mind be really open. If you want formal practice, you let mind be as open as possible. Sky gazing is very good for that too.

The next most important thing, greater in importance is to be open to the influence of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, to really be open to adhisthana, and offer yourself to that influence, of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, to the lineage of teachers, to your yidam, just as much as possible let them do your life. Another instruction in this tradition is, ‘Let the Buddha meditate’.

So there’s letting the mind be as open as possible, there’s openness to as deep a force of mind as you can find, and then I’d say most important of all is Bodhicitta, doing whatever promotes having an open heart to all beings.

It’s as if there’s a central point which we often tend to close down around, and it has now had the experience of openness and that makes a big difference, so we feed that experience of openness by giving mind the opportunity to be in the most open states possible, and by being open to the vastness of that mysterious …. Open to what goes so far beyond a limited me, both vertically, the depths of the mind, but also heart opening to all life. The more those things are happening, the less the tendency is to fall back into the ‘everything revolves around me’ way of functioning.

That would be the advice, if we’re really experiencing non-duality. We can certainly have experiences of deep relaxation, which aren’t quite there, but we don’t need to bother too much whether we’re quite there or not, because that just stirs everything up with ‘Am I there yet? Can I feel all right about myself finally or not?’ Whereas close is close! Close is really good! Just by fairly fully opening to what is now, if there’s further to go, it’ll happen naturally, easily. The things I talked about will help, whether we were close or whether we were there.

**End of Session Sixteen**

**Session Seventeen: Led Meditation**

Let’s start by connecting with some of the things that I was talking about, Bodhicitta, the fact that we’re not just practising for ourselves, important as that might be, we’re practising for everyone here, everyone we know, everyone we don’t know.

We needn’t practise just from the resources of our everyday self, we can invite or draw on the support, the influence, the energy, of all the figures we have connections with, all the ones that are depicted in this room as images, which are not just images, but qualities and energies of mind. We can invite the support of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the lineage of teachers, our yidam or yidams, all positive and beneficial forces.

With that support and influence, we can relax. Relax and let the earth take our weight; relax into a helpful posture; relax into our experience of the body.

We can relax and let our heart open to all our experience now, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Opening to it, caring for it, letting it go. Whatever it is.

Not just aware of the body, but also the emotions and feelings, thoughts and ideas. Everything held in this kindly awareness, everything cared for. Letting it all come and go.

If there are thought chains, we could see if we could just relax out of them, not giving them energy, or we could look right at them.

Now if it feels right we could widen out this field of awareness and lovingkindness so it could include everything that we hear. This flow of sound. We don’t have to step out of it by analysing it; just aware and caring for it as it flows.

Maybe we could let go of any idea of me bringing awareness and kindness to something; maybe there can just be a warm, aware flow of sound.

And finally we could let heart/mind be as open, as vast, as it could ever be. Just a sense of no limits and in it bodily feelings, feelings, thoughts, sounds, everything just knowing itself, caring for itself, coming and going.

**End of Session Seventeen**

**Session Eighteen: Led Meditation**

Let’s start by taking our awareness out, beyond the three circles and the sounds of the hunters, wishing well to all the wildlife in the area, wishing well to the hunters who are unable to empathise with what they’re shooting at.

It’s as if we leave our metta there to care for that situation, and if there are more noises, see if we can treat them as just sounds, just part of the flow of sound.

Bringing our awareness in, we come to the wisdom flames, the vajra wall, and the soft, open lotuses.

Aware of us, sitting together, our great good fortune in having found like-minded people, just to live in a place where people practise even the five precepts is such a gift.

People who do their best to practise loving kindness.

People we can work together with to explore how things really are.

So we draw on all that support and on the support, the inspiration, the adhisthana, of Avalokiteshvara and all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, to help our compassion and wisdom unfold.

With all that support we can open out our awareness, open out our heart, firstly to fully experience the body and how it is.

Feeling the flow of sensations.

Opening our awareness to all the mental movements as well, all the feelings, emotions, words, pictures, whatever’s going on.

You could add in taste and smell, and the visual sense. And sound. Right to the furthest sound we can hear.

So mind is open to all experience, to the flow of all experience, no need to prioritise anything, just the aware flow.

If we get caught up somewhere, taking it as an opportunity to look into how we’re solidifying the flow.

Before the meditation ends, we share the benefits with all beings, including everything around here, including the hunters.

Bell.

**End of Session Eighteen**

**Session Nineteen: In the Flow, eyes open**

There’s a story in the biography of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche where he goes to a village and he’s staying in a house of some important people in that village and the family have a hunting rifle that’s famed around the local area because it’s so accurate. Dilgo Khyentse has heard about this, so he asks to have it brought to him so that he can bless it. The family aren’t sure what’s going to happen, and they’re not that keen, but you can’t argue with the high lamas in Tibet, so they bring him the rifle, and he just does some mantras and things over it, gives it back, and carries on with his visit. From that day onward, nobody could make that hunting rifle work effectively again.

We’ll go a bit further with this shamatha section. Some of it we’ll have got a feeling for from what we’ve already looked at.

“Again, Khyeme Shang says, ‘Sit on a comfortable seat in the vajra posture or another posture’.” The vajra posture, because of Hatha Yoga, in the West is usually called the lotus posture. The text has a section about practising with the body in the different postures you can use and ways that you can work. Anyway, you sit in the vajra posture, or another posture, which could be leaning against a wall, or anything, because we’re not trying to do anything special here.

“Do not meditate on Mahamudra. In the same way, do not meditate deliberately on the unborn…” (The unborn is the empty, insubstantial nature of things.) “on simplicity” (the technical term in Tibetan literally means without elaboration, so it’s the equivalent of nishprapancha in Sanskrit. You’re not trying to prevent your mind from spreading or doing things).

“Don’t meditate on that which is beyond the conceptual mind, on that which is without characteristics, on that which is without reference point, or on some reference point or on characteristics.” That seems to cover it, doesn’t it!

Khyeme Shang is pointing out the basic errors in our meditation very often, that our meditation is caught up firstly with wanting: here we are and we want to experience Mahamudra and the unborn and simplicity and experience without characteristics and all that, and secondly that we have a fixed idea of how it should be, how this is going to be when we experience it, and that also gets in the way of us experiencing it because experience is always different from how we imagined it was going to be. So long as we’re holding an idea of ‘Right, it’s going to be like this’, we limit the creative, natural flow of mind and experience. We need to be motivated for anything to happen, but motivation and that kind of wanting are different. The wanting that comes out of meditation is almost like a near enemy of motivation. Very often what we experience is a mixture of the two. We can be motivated by a deep longing for freedom and freedom from suffering, and so on, and we can be motivated by Bodhicitta, and we can be motivated by wanting to see suffering around us come to an end; there are all kinds of things which can really motivate us, but along with that are all kinds of everyday pushes and pulls and psychological leftovers which are still in play. Why we’re doing the meditation is usually a mixture of all those. You may be meditating for the benefit of all beings, but also so that you’ll finally feel all right about yourself. When I’m enlightened everybody will have to like me! There can be all these things in there as well, so it’s helpful to pick them out.

Also, when you’re practising this kind of meditation, you set an impetus of motivation at the beginning, and then you really just let go. You can feel into all the reasons why it would be really of benefit to you and others if you were to experience all these things, but then in order to experience all these things you have to just let go and be in the flow of what’s happening now. You give your mind that impetus, and then you just relax.

So, we’re not meditating on Mahamudra because that would be an idea of Mahamudra rather than just *being* Mahamudra. Likewise, with all these things. We don’t meditate deliberately on the unborn, on the deathless, on the empty nature, because if we’re meditating on it, there’s a me that’s meditating on it, so we create a duality where there’s me here and that over there, and we create that split, whereas all experience is unborn, all experience is empty. We could meditate on simplicity, but meditation on simplicity isn’t simple because we want to get away from complexity. You don’t create a simple state by deciding that there are a whole lot of things that you’re not going to experience and you’re just going to experience this one thing that’s simple! That’s not a simple project; that’s quite a complex project.

So we don’t meditate on ‘that which is beyond the conceptual mind’, because that’s your conceptual mind creating an image of what’s beyond the conceptual mind, and then trying to meditate on it. Then there’s ‘without characteristics’ and ‘that which is without reference points’. All these are supposed to be good things that he’s talking about, Mahamudra, the unborn, simplicity, meditation without characteristics, on that which is without reference points, but still, yes you might at points in your Dharma life you might meditate on this, to get a sense of emptiness means, or when you go into the blue sky in your meditation with the sense that this is the ungraspable nature of everything, and that’s really helpful. But then there comes a point also where we need to really let go, even of that constructed meditation, and learn to just be flowing.

When we’re just sitting in this kind of way, we really aren’t doing anything. We’re not even trying to get to a deeper state. Subhuti gave a talk about just sitting a while ago where he came up with a number of stages of just sitting, going through ‘just waiting’, where it felt like there was not much going on, but after a while it deepened into another stage and another stage. As a description of how things might unfold it was fine, but if in your just sitting you’re waiting for something deeper to happen, then you’re not just sitting. In fact, you’re busy creating a way of experiencing that’s not allowing the deeper experience to happen.

“Don’t even meditate on some reference point or on characteristics’. There’s quite a lot of talk in these texts about meditation without reference point and without characteristics because we tend to be incredibly interested in characteristics. There are two different ways that the mind can function. One is that there can just be flowing experience, and when there’s flowing experience mind isn’t picking out aspects of that flowing experience and separating them out, labelling them and then responding to them. For example, as we’re sitting here with our eyes open, there’s a whole lot of light and colour and movement happening, and it keeps changing, it is not featureless because it’s bright and alive but it’s not differentiated. For example sitting here as someone very interested in people, in order to differentiate I start picking out a grey colour, with a blue here, and some spectacles, a beard, and ah! That’s Dhirananda! And I keep doing that - I differentiate something else, the sound of Tejananda moving his blanket, all the time out of this incredibly rich flow of colours and sounds I’m sorting them out and organising them and in particular I’m deciding whether I like them or I don’t like them or whether any of them are a threat to me, so that I make sure I’m secure and safe in here, thank you very much!

Mind does that incredibly fast and from a certain point of view incredibly well, and we need it to survive and to interact in all sorts of helpful ways, but we lose our freedom, because we can no longer so easily just allow things to flow, so that mind is just resting, where there’s all sorts of movement and light and it’s very beautiful, but we don’t have to do anything about it. It just is happening and it’s wonderful, and if we can really get the feeling for it, each moment is like aaah, because we’re not discriminating. Discrimination involves comparing with the past, so for me to decide that’s Dhirananda, I need to refer back to my previous experiences of Dhiranandas, though this one is unique, in order to be able to identify and label. The past is coming in and without that it’s almost like for a real yogin or yogini life is constantly amazing, because each moment this thing happens - wow! And then that happens! It’s more like a child in some ways how you perceive, like when you play that game with a child putting something in front of your face, and you disappear! They keep thinking that’s amazing - you’ve gone and then you’re there! So it’s more like that feeling, that freedom, aliveness. We bury our aliveness under layer upon layer of conceptual add-ons - and it’s very hard for mind to be at ease because having discriminated, we’re usually for or against it in some way. We’re referring everything back to what it means for me. Is there something in this for me, either something to be worried about or something that I might like? Or if the situation or, sadly, even the person, doesn’t have any particular relevance for my ego project, then I don’t really notice them.

So out of this richness, we’re cutting out bits all the time, and trying to hang on to the bits we like and push away the bits that we don’t like, and all that is tiring. What we want to be able to do is when we’re engaging with people we think about things, sure we identify people and recognise their particular value, but we also need to be able to give mind a rest from all that, where it all just becomes open and flowing, and then over time those two ways of being come more together, so you can have more of that open state and still be able to interact, but without being pulled in.

We tend to be very caught up with characteristics. This is what this is all about. This is saying, don’t even focus on meditating on no characteristics, in fact don’t meditate in any kind of contrived way at all. It is saying, just be, with awareness.

Q: What about looking to see what qualities are there, like peace or stillness? I suppose we can just know they’re there?

A: Yes, let’s be clear. I’m not saying and even Mahamudra tradition isn’t saying that you just do this all the time. I had a question about shamatha, that the Buddha recommended dhyana, so where does that fit into Mahamudra practice? Mahamudra in the full sense isn’t terribly interested in shamatha but, as we saw yesterday afternoon, if mind really relaxes it starts to produce these states that can be very blissful and which can be extremely clear and sharp, and where there it’s really peaceful, where there aren’t any concepts arising. But Mahamudra also uses all these methods, like the Mula Yogas, where you do a hundred thousand prostrations and go for refuge, and you make a hundred thousand mandala offerings, and so on. So it seems like the best way to practise is to be aware that there are two ways in which you can use your mind, and to build on what you’ve already used. If you connect with dhyana practice, do dhyana practice, but along with that do what Bhante was originally suggesting, alternate that with times where you really don’t ask your mind to do anything, where you really let it rest, and those two ways of practising will support one another.

**End of Session Nineteen**

**Session Twenty: Rest Deeply**

Before the break we were not meditating on Mahamudra or anything else, including even trying to be without characteristics or without reference points. And we were looking at how out of the field of experience we’re usually discriminating and focusing in and it’s as if all the time we’re creating worlds. There’s a whole choice of possible worlds we could be in as we sit here. In a way we’re in a common world, we’re all in the same room, but out of that we all focus in on different things and produce responses and reactions to those, and out of that we produce a world to live in. It can be a pleasant world or an unpleasant world. I could focus in on the fact that I stepped on a wet mat as I came in so I’ve got a wet foot and surely there must be some other system so we don’t have wet mats! I can produce the wet foot hell to go and live in! Or I can focus on the colour of somebody’s jumper and think, I really like that colour, and that takes me into a different world. And so on, and so on. Or if I don’t manage to create the world that I want to be in right now through the visual field, I’ll go off into some thought chain elsewhere and go into that. Out of that we create our own personal special world that we live in, and the way in which we do that, based on our karma, usually produces suffering. But as we know, we’d rather be special and suffer than be open and nobody special and not suffer. But there we are. It’s what we’re like as human beings.

So we can practise just letting mind be open, not focusing on anything in particular, letting experience flow, letting it be there, and in that way we’re not caught up and then mind gets to rest deeply. Mind can be really peaceful in the middle of a lot of activity if it’s not getting caught up anywhere.

Let’s do a bit more study.

When we’re doing just sitting, we don’t need to do any of the above. ‘But how should I practise then?!’ This then is what you do.

(4.33) “Do not move your body.” Why should that be? Out of the mass of sensations of experience come little itches, and little uncomfortable things, and we’re learning not to react to those and to keep the mind relaxed in relation to things. As we know in meditation, if every time there’s an itch we keep moving to deal with it, your mind and body never settle. Part of meditation is learning to find stability, and as we’re learning the beginnings of absorption some of the unintegrated energy comes out as physical things that are trying to pull our attention. Learning to sit through those and discriminate between those and genuine pain that we do need to do something about is all part of the art of meditation. So, ‘do not move your body’ because we’re practising not reacting, being relaxed in relation to what’s going on. (6.17)

“Do not close your eyes.” I always find this interesting because I do these sorts of retreats and quite often do that basic meditation, opening out the senses, and quite often I’ll say, “Now be aware of sound and everything you can hear, and now you can open your eyes and be aware of everything you can see,” and nobody does! Out of a roomful of twenty-five people somebody might do for a bit, unless there’s someone really into Mahamudra and Dzogchen in which case they might sit with their eyes open. I find it interesting that we are so accustomed to feeling that the way to get to a meditative state is to keep your eyes closed, that we just keep them closed. If I’m feeling overly kind and empathetic, I might say, “If you don’t want to open your eyes, you could just be aware of the patterns on the backs of your eyelids”, but somewhere along the line it is quite a good practice to learn to meditate with your eyes open. Meditation isn’t an end in itself; it’s a practice for life and we want to be able to carry what we’re learning in meditation into activity. That’s the long-term aim. We want to practise that relaxed, non-reactive way of being in relation to visual objects, so doing this kind of meditation with your eyes open gives you the opportunity to work with that. If you find that all the visual stuff is too much information and you’re lost in it, you can close your eyes, but it’s really beneficial at some point to learn how to be in a meditative state with your eyes open, and to be able to access that really easily in the midst of activity.

In the Mahamudra tradition one of the things they teach you to do with shamatha is to take some small object, such as a voice recorder (!) and you just put it in front of you and you rest your gaze on it and you relax. The aim is that you don’t get involved with the characteristics of it, for example thinking, ‘Why does it need this big metal thing on the end to record the sound so well? And is it still actually recording?’ And so on. You don’t do any of that, because the object itself has no importance. You’re just learning to let the mind rest and having something there gives a bit of a focus so that mind can just rest. Usually our eyes are here and there, darting around, making sure we’re not missing anything important or nice or worrying. So when we just let the gaze rest, we’re learning to be really still with the visual input coming in. Having done that, if you are in the middle of some busy place or even in the middle of a meeting and if you feel either that your mind is getting a bit worked up or a bit tired, you just take thirty seconds and you find something to you let your gaze rest on and just let everything relax. Then you go back into what you’re doing. You break things up in that way: the constant engagement with characteristics and what’s going on and doing things about it just comes to a rest.

In Mahamudra they talk about different gazes, more down and more up, but the main thing is that the eyes are open but they’re just resting, not focusing in on this or that, not going from one interesting thing to the next to the next. We’re letting the sights come to us. The eyes are very soft and receptive, not in hunter-gatherer mode, which we usually are, with our eyes going out to look at this, look at that, we’re just openly receptive, open to life, just whatever’s there.

That’s the beginnings of how we should practise, just two more things not to do: don’t move the body and don’t close the eyes.

The thing is, we’re not practising, because when you’re practising there’s a sense of me the practitioner who does things like sit up straight and tense, and we’re trying to relax out of that whole mode, that whole way of experiencing. If we can get a feeling for the flavour of it, and then we can have times where we do our best, we set our motivation and just let go as best we can, and if we find our awareness has fallen away and we’re into drift we can do something to bring things back again, and after a while when mind is a bit more settled again we can just relax, nothing to do. Just practise like that.

**End of Session Twenty**

**Session Twenty-one: Led Meditation**

Letting go of the body, a sense of the weight sinking down to the ground.

Letting the upper body be open in a natural, unforced way.

Letting the body be a field of awareness; no need to focus on anywhere in particular, just letting the feelings and sensations come and go as they please.

No need to label anything; just relaxed in relation to the physical sensations.

Opening out to include sounds; no need to label them, explain them, no need to be for or against them, aware but relaxed in relation to them.

Opening the eyes or, if you insist, being aware of the patterns on the backs of the eyelids. Not focusing on anything in particular, very soft eyes; relaxed in relation to the visual field.

Carrying on opening up to life, including anything we can smell, the taste in our mouth, not for or against, relaxed in relation to the five senses.

We can add in all the mental movements; no need to analyse or investigate them, be for or against them, just relaxed letting them come and go.

Bell

**End of Session Twenty-one**

**Session Twenty-two: Relax into the Thought**

This morning we went into that next piece of teaching from Khyeme Shang, all about what not to do: “Don’t meditate on Mahamudra, or the unborn, or simplicity, etc. Don’t even meditate on some reference point or characteristics.”

We saw that we are very keen on characteristics. In fact we’re quite attached to characteristics. We like to focus in on characteristics and develop a stance in relation to them and think about them a lot, often. But there is another way in which mind can function, where mind is open, and experience is there but we’re not focusing in on anything and we just let mind flow. Then there’s a sense of openness, spaciousness, relaxation. This is Mahamudra, but it’s not anything that you won’t find in basic Buddhism, because in a way it’s all just ‘In the seen just the seen, and in the heard just the heard’ and leaving things there. It’s also about not developing craving and aversion in relation to experience.

We haven’t left basic Buddhism behind; we haven’t left Bhante behind, because his main teaching on just sitting was very, very thin. I don’t know if you’ve seen that seven hundred page book, seminar extracts and other things in his book on meditation, and where is the section on just sitting? Bhante’s classic response on being asked what you do in just sitting was, “When you just sit, you just sit!” I’ve known people at times over the years be quite frustrated at that and think that there could have been more practical advice and guidance, but looking at it from another point of view, that sweet and simple “Don’t meditate on Mahamudra, don’t meditate on characteristics, don’t meditate on the unborn, don’t meditate on simplicity; don’t meditate!” When you’re just sitting you aren’t trying to achieve something. Just relax and let it all drop. I think Bhante was trying very hard not to say things which would mean that we turn just sitting into another practice which you have to do and achieve, and do it right. It’s meant to be a break from all of that. Also we’re in the territory of basic Bhante: mind reactive and creative. Usually we react to things appearing in the senses by focusing in on them, identifying them, labelling them and producing a response to them, for or against, which is usually based on craving or aversion, which as we know takes us round for another lap of the Wheel of Life. As we also know, if you don’t want to do that then you create a gap of awareness between the appearance and the vedana associated with it, and you don’t go on to trishna and around the Wheel again. Within that gap of awareness you can use methods to help you not go on to trishna, but you can also, having made that gap of awareness, just relax. We can just really relax in that gap, and that will do it nicely, because out of that aware relaxation, something new and fresh comes.

With this kind of practice we’re trying to de-condition the mind. We’ve been conditioned by so much, all that’s happened to us, in so many ways, and this practice is taking us out of all that conditioning as much as possible in any particular moment, and it’s just bringing us back to a clean slate, open and simple. Life flows on and responses happen, but they’re not reinforcing our unhelpful conditioning, they’re not reinforcing our limited view of the world and the reactions that come out of that, because we’re just leaving mind really open.

We’re not creating the subjective world in the same way that we usually do, which narrows us down. For example, sometimes you have a good meditation in the morning and then you have to walk to the shops, and people come by as you’re walking along, and some are talking on their phones, some are looking at their phones, some of them are not doing that but they’re not with you - their lips may not be moving but as they’re walking along they’re talking to themselves about what’s going to happen and what’s life going to be about today, and then occasionally you meet somebody coming the other way who is available, open for business as a human being, at that moment! There can be a moment of recognition, out of all the people you’ve walked by, you meet this person who is also here, and there can be a little smile between you, and you carry on. We’re trying to move into that way of being.

Part of us longs for that. We have many positive responses to images of freedom, like great blue skies, or eagles flying, and wanting to leave all this behind and go into the mountains, and so on. However much all the external conditions make a difference, ultimately what we’re looking for is the freedom that there is when our mind just really opens, when we don’t hunker back down. You don’t have to go to the Himalayas or anything. Right in this moment we can let our mind be really open and really free, and there would be that sense of an eagle soaring. That’s what all this is pointing us towards.

It’s a way of practice which is not goal oriented. In that sense it’s more in line with reality because there is no one, no self that has to get anywhere. I think Chogyam Trungpa liked Japanese things (unfortunately sake amongst them!) and he was keen on calligraphy and also kyudo, archery, as a way, a do, as a spiritual discipline. I think it was his group who invited someone from Korea or Japan who had trained in kyudo for a long time. So everyone gathered, and the target was set up in a field near the Centre, and this guy with his bow and his arrow went to give a demonstration. They don’t just do it in an instant, there’s a whole ritual they go through first, so he went through all the ritual, and there was the target, and he pulled the bow - they don’t do it like Westerners, it’s slightly different - so he pulled the bow and right at the last moment he lifted the bow and fired the arrow into the sky. Everyone went aah with disappointment, because they’d really wanted to see him hit the target. He was supposed to be a master archer, so surely he could just spontaneously do that! Right in the centre! But because it’s a spiritual discipline he was trying to show them something, which is that we are very focussed on having to keep hitting the target in life, not being two inches off but on the spot. So there’s a great expansive, open awareness, and you can’t miss it - it’s all there! This is why in just sitting there isn’t anything special that you have to concentrate on or focus on. It can all be there, whatever it is, the thoughts, all kinds of things. There it is! Just let it flow, be relaxed in relation to it, aware and open, and that’s it.

Just going back to Bhante, this takes us into his teaching about the greater mandala, which you find in the Ratnagunasamcayagatha seminar originally, and then in Wisdom Beyond Words. In a way he sets the bar quite high, he says we should - and he does use the word ‘should’, does Bhante - we should deal with the practicalities of our life, but that they should be just one corner of a much greater mandala of aesthetic awareness. When you’re involved in the practicalities of things, you’re dealing with things, and to some extent people, in terms of their use value. He gives the example of going walking with a Nepalese friend and there’s a great huge tree. Bhante is admiring it, seeing how beautiful it is, and says this to his friend, who says, “Yes, there must be enough firewood there for the whole winter!” Bhante contrasts those two ways of being, the usefulness of this, or what’s in this for me, and that aesthetic, open, appreciative way of being, which he associates with vidya. The way he’s saying it is that we should be more in this world most of the time, and venture into the practical one as and when we need to, so leaving the mind much more open. That’s part of the reason why he would promote things like the arts, which are very helpful and enriching, but we don’t exhaust the mandala of greater uselessness just by going to the occasional concert or art gallery. What it’s really pointing to, and Bhante’s trying to find skilful means of leading us into, is a way of being where mind is really relaxed and really open and everything then does become very rich and aesthetic, and there’s a greater beauty to things. Over time we even learn to do the practicalities out of that open, relaxed way of being. They come together. 16.35

Let’s go on a bit.

We finished the morning with, “Well how should I practise then? Do not move your body. Do not close your eyes.” We looked a bit at open-eyed practice, very receptive, just letting things as it were come to you.

Then again, “with your thoughts do not pursue the past. Do not anticipate the future.” We’ll hear a lot about this if we’re exploring shamatha according to Mahamudra. “The essential point is to recognise immediately the instant present thought. In this very instant, when you look directly at the present thought, there is the Dharmata.” There’s how things really are. “Where cause and effect are simultaneous, and characteristics are self-liberating.”

To start with we can have a sense of creating space around a thought and as it were looking at it and almost like (pop sound) with awareness going into it, looking at its nature, it’s almost like pricking a balloon with a needle, realising there’s nothing much there actually, it was all rather inflated by the energy you were putting into it. But where we aim to end up is more like relaxing into the present thought so that there is no observer of it and we’re just in the flow again, but the flow is aware. There’s just aware thinking at that point, aware thought. When that happens there’s the Dharmata.

“Where cause and effect are simultaneous”. How can this be? Technically in the Abhidharma there are different relations of cause and effect, but we’re not going to go there. In order to create a sense of cause and effect, you have to create a sense of the three times, because a cause happens now, and it produces an effect then. Or the effect is produced now, and looking back, we feel that that was the cause back then in the past. When we’re deeply relaxed into experience, there is no observer creating a sense of the three times and looking at it all and seeing that cause produces an effect. So when we go really into this, cause and effect disappear. We don’t really find them. They’re very dependent on one another anyway. For example, if you have a young woman who gives birth to her first child, we might think that the mother is the cause and the child is the effect, but at the moment of birth, that’s the moment when the woman becomes the mother and the child becomes the daughter, so actually the two happen instantaneously.

The important point is that we’re relaxing so much that we’re not creating that sense of past and future, we’re not observing experience in the way that would create that sense. One of the ways in which we hold this sense of ourselves is by constantly positioning ourselves in time. You have a sense of positioning yourself in your life, you’ve lived so long and Allah willing you’ll live for so much longer. We do it even in meditation until the meditation reaches a certain point: there’s a subtle sense of I’ve been meditating for this time, there’s probably that amount of time to go, and in that way we keep the sense of me going through the experience. It’s good to notice if we’re doing that, and see if we can relax that, particularly on retreat. Unless we’re helping with a meal or something we don’t need to know how long there is to go. If we go so deeply that we’re still sitting here half an hour after the meditation finishes, we’ll come out of that feeling really happy, probably.

“Cause and effect are simultaneous” and “characteristics are self-liberating”. We’re not really focusing on the particulars of things; we’re not creating objects and we’re not discriminating in that way. We’re just letting the flow flow. It always does, but we’re not taking ourselves out of the flow - not that we ever do, really! We don’t focus on the different details, we don’t talk to ourselves about it, we don’t develop a stance in relationship to it, we just let it come and go. When we do that, whatever’s happening now, self liberates with all its characteristics, because it’s only through focusing on characteristics that we create things which come and go. Otherwise there’s just flowing experience, and there aren’t any divisions or landmarks. It’s all just flowing along.

**End of Session Twenty-two**

**Session Twenty-three: Led Practice**

It can be helpful at the beginning just to give mind a little impetus, to motivate it so it doesn’t decide to go its own way completely and get lost in kleshas. One way to do that is to turn mind towards Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, our yidam, the lineage of teachers. Invite that inspiration. If it helps, we can go through things to prepare, grounding ourselves and so on.

Whenever we feel the conditions are in place, we give up doing anything in particular, trying to go anywhere in particular, just let whatever’s happening happen.

Relaxing into the aware flow of our life as it is right now.

Bell

**End of Session Twenty-three**

**Session Twenty-four: Recognising and Liberating Thoughts, and questions**

Just to finish off the paragraph, so it’s done.

The text goes on to talk about “By looking again and again at all arising thoughts, eventually the thoughts will be immediately recognized, and in the same instant they will be liberated.”

As we’re getting lost in thought we become aware of that, and we can deliberately look into the nature of the thought and see that it’s just mental cinema happening in the open space of awareness. As that process improves, there comes the point where, as a thought arises, it knows its own nature. It’s not that we produce an observer and see it, it just knows its nature.

“The instant of immediately recognising a thought is called ‘understanding Mahamudra’. It’s called ‘experience of concentration’.” Concentration isn’t a great translation: it’s more like absorption.

“Or, ‘born of meditation’.” What’s born of this meditation is the wisdom that arises out of completely non-judgemental awareness.

“The very instant a thought is recognised, all the unwholesome actions accumulated since beginningless samsara are overcome and purified.” Wow! I’ll have a bit of that please! Unfortunately it doesn’t quite mean what it appears to say. What it means is that in that moment, or that time, of non-dual experience, all our previous karma is inactive and we’re also not creating any more, because, for karma to work, we have to be on the level of some kind of egocentric way of being. They’re overcome inasmuch as we’re not affected by them. It doesn’t mean that they never arise again, or that they’re all wiped out completely. Otherwise, we never would come out of the non-dual state. Usually we do fall out of it.

Q. I wonder if I’ve understood correctly. When it says, “Eventually the thoughts will be immediately recognised”, what does the recognised mean?

A: Recognised in the full sense means that there’s no observer of the thought. We objectify a thought usually. We produce a thought, then maybe we’re lost in it, then there’s some self-awareness, and we’re then able to examine the thought, but in doing that we turn it into a thing to look at it. At that point we’re not seeing the thought in its actual nature. So there can come a point where there’s no longer an observer looking at the thought, but there is full awareness. There’s an aware thought and that’s when it knows how it is. It’s not ‘we know how it is’ because we’re not there; it’s ‘it knows how it is’. Because we tend to be on the middle of the three levels of awareness that Bhante describes, the self-aware one, we grasp at characteristics, we produce an entity of some sort and then we examine it, but we’ve already created a situation that isn’t actually how it is, so what we’re looking into doesn’t go far enough and deep enough.

All the unwholesome actions are overcome and purified, at least for that time. Going back to Bhante and the teaching of the five niyamas, when there’s a non-dual experience we’re on the level of dharma niyama and we’ve gone beyond the level of karma niyama. Karma is the action of a subject and an object somewhere. That’s not happening now.

Q: At the moment of the recognition of a thought, and falling away, deliberating on it, are we having mini moments of this fourth awareness state?

A: I’ve only got three levels of awareness at the moment. I started off talking about Bhante, there was simple awareness, there was self-awareness or reflexive awareness, and then there was what he would call transcendental awareness, which I’ve referred to as non-dual awareness. That would be the level at which the thought recognises itself, so to speak, but not as an object.

Q: I’m very concerned about where conditionality has disappeared to. With that statement a bit further back, “where cause and effect are simultaneous”. But there’s no time … (?). Conditionality infers ‘if this, then that’ in a linear way. Perhaps a slightly different way of defining pratitya samutpada is co-arising. That’s where I went, but where do you go?

A: I go to the Heart Sutra, I think, that’s where I go. Will that do?! If it doesn’t do, we can explore it more. You can go from a more linear view of causality to a huge network of conditions which are all affecting one another, which would be getting closer to a co-arising, but even that is all just ways of talking about it. It’s still all empty in the terms of the Heart Sutra. Let’s put it all down now. It’s good to do that too, even when we’re trying to make sense of things, working things out in that more rational way. It’s good to do some and then let it go for a bit and then come back to it, and in that way there’s more of a dialogue between the mind functioning in that rational way and other aspects of our experience. That tends to enrich the whole process of understanding. This very relaxed, letting everything open, over time it produces thinking that is much lighter.

*NOTE: check the quotes are correct - transcriber may have put inverted commas where Vessantara was just talking*

**End of Session Twenty-four**

**Session Twenty-five: Ultimate and Relative, brief comment**

Maybe I should just say for the sake of completeness that we always need to be working on both the ultimate level and the relative level, and that if you simply move onto the ultimate level where you can’t say anything about anything, and everything is of one taste and so on, that gets very one-sided, so you also need to talk in terms of conditionality and so on. Also you move between the two, the ultimate and the relative, and only in that way do you fully do justice to experience. Otherwise we decide there’s no such thing as conditionality and it doesn’t matter what we do and that ends in tears.

**End of Session Twenty-five**

**Session Twenty-six: Amitabha Mantra and Meditation**

Om Amideva Hrih

Letting the mantra continue internally, in that tune or however it wants to be. Taking the great love of Amitabha deeper into the body, deep into the heart mind.

Letting the mantra and that great love relax us, heal us, open our heart.

Now letting the sound of the mantra, along with light if that also helps, go out to everyone here.

That great love of Amitabha is being shared with everyone here, and received from everyone here.

We don’t even need to separate out someone who’s sending and receiving; it can all just be part of one mantra field, one field of great love. All part of one practice.

And together we could form the volition to send the mantra and that great love out into the world.

Now allowing the mantra to become quieter and quieter internally. Letting it just be a subtle vibration. Now it becomes subtler still, until we can no longer find it, and we just rest in that experience.

Bell

**End of Session Twenty-six**

**Session Twenty-seven: Question of Awareness and Moving into the Vipassana Section**

Yesterday I don’t remember a word I said in the afternoon! Before that we were looking at the shamatha section of the Ocean of True Meaning, a bit of it.

I have got a few questions. One of them says, Is awareness conditioned or unconditioned?

We could spend an awful long time going into questions about awareness and conditioned nature and dependent arising. If this was a study retreat we could start back in the Pali Canon, and look at terms like vijnana and the different ways they’re used, and we could go from there into the Abidhamma and momentary awareness, and then into Mahayana and the Lankavatara and the Samdhinirmocana Sutras, and the system of eight consciousnesses and the alayavijnana, and then we could look at Paramartha in the sixth century and the amala-vijnana, the pure dimension of the alaya, and further developments in Tibet and China, including Tathagatagarbha, and the Rangtong-Shentong controversy in Tibet over many centuries, and how the Thai Forest Tradition seems to have parted company with the earlier Theravada and seems to be seeing awareness more in that way that you find in some Tibetan schools, and how the term alayavijnana developed, and at the end of it we’d be in a good position to answer questions in mitra study and we could also spend a long time in the Buddhist Centre Online showing other Buddhists why they were wrong!

I’m not just discounting all that: it’s important that we have some grasp of Buddhist thought and that also means some grasp of how it’s developed. But for a meditation retreat thankfully we can just try and keep it as simple as possible. Part of the difficulty for a retreat like this is that we want to understand rationally, so the rational mind keeps coming in and trying to produce the Buddhist Grand Theory of Everything and fit everything into it. What we’re more aiming to do on a retreat like this is to awaken an intuitive wisdom which will understand things in ways in which logical thought won’t get us to. In fact intuitive wisdom will get us to ways of seeing which don’t compute logically at all. Part of the practice is learning to trust those ‘non-rational’ insights, and the rational mind being prepared to move over and make space for a different way of functioning of mind.

So I tend on these kinds of retreats is to use language fairly loosely. I don’t define my terms terribly carefully. That’s kind of deliberate because I’m trying not to send us off in the direction of going into our internal Buddhist library and looking things up.

It might be enough to say that there’s conditioned existence, which the Buddha talked about and which seems to be suffering, and there’s also an experience ‘beyond that’ which is lokuttara: it’s beyond the three worlds, beyond the kamaloka, the rupaloka and the arupaloka (not taking ‘beyond’ in some weird, special sense).

So if there’s nirvana, and that’s unconditioned, then any experience must have awareness in it otherwise there would be no experience so there must be unconditioned awareness. If we wanted to keep it really simple and not analyse it to death, we could say we’re aiming to move from a conditioned awareness to an unconditioned awareness.

In this Mahamudra text we’re given two main ways of doing that. We are given Bodhicitta and a lot of other things, but the two main ways are shamatha practice which we saw a couple of days ago is concerned with deep relaxation, not to be conditioned by the content of awareness. There’s a deepening, letting go, relaxing in the gap between what appears and the feelings that appear with it and any kind of a response. That’s the shamatha aspect of it.

Then there’s the vipassana aspect which is looking at the nature of awareness. Usually we’re so caught up in the content that we don’t look at the mind, the awareness that knows that content. So that combination of shamatha and vipassana catalyses experiences of what we can call in this context unconditional awareness.

Coming back to this deconditioning business, there are different ways you can talk about it. Mahamudra talks in terms of letting go or relaxing. You could also talk about it in terms of relinquishing or renunciation, except that renunciation doesn’t play very well as a word in the West because when we think of renunciation we tend to go to what things we have to give up. There may be some things we could very usefully give up, but we tend to do it in a way that isn’t that helpful. But somewhere there needs to be a loosening of our grip on experience, so there’s a relaxing and an ease in relation to whatever appears. That driven quality that takes us into hunter gatherer mode, that needs to relax, for instance.

So we’ve been doing some sitting, and going through different senses and relaxing in relation to them: relaxing in relation to the body and sensations, relaxing in relation to the sounds, with no need to label them, no need to decide what they are, no need to get caught up in them, just sound. No need to even have a ‘me’ in here listening to a sound out there. So just relaxing, relaxing, relaxing. Then we can do the same with sights, the same with any smells, tastes, and then we can do it with mental movements. So whatever mood we’re in, we’re relaxed in relation to it. Whatever emotion is going on, big or small, we do our best to be relaxed in relation to it. Whatever words or images are helping to drive all that, just relaxing, relaxing.

Incidentally, that’s really where the six element practice is going. The six element practice as it’s often taught, is quite complex. There are a number of different reflections on different aspects of insight, so there’s an analytical reflection where you break things down into the six elements. There’s a reflection on conditioning where you’re aware that what you think of as you is produced by a whole mass of conditions outside you. There’s a reflection on impermanence and death.

But the essence of it is that you’re producing a momentum of letting go. When you do that you’re in the same kind of territory as we’ve been doing with the senses, but rather than using the senses, you’re using the six elements. You could do it as a reflection, which is helpful, but you could do it in a more direct experience way and then it would be very similar to what we’ve been doing.

One thing that we do need to be careful of is that we don’t turn anything into a thing. It’s very easy to make mind a thing, awareness a thing, consciousness a thing, etc. When we start looking at the nature of mind we never find anything called mind. As the texts say, not even the Buddhas have ever seen a thing called mind. The passages that we’ve picked out of The Ocean of True Meaning don’t particularly go into this, which is why I’m talking about it a little bit.

Part of the insight aspect of this is that you’re invited to start in quite a naive way, like Milarepa and the shepherd boy, like, what is mind like? How big is your mind? As big as that, huh? I’m working up to that! What colour is your mind? and other questions like that. The important thing isn’t so much the answer you come up with, because there aren’t any right answers. I could also go, What colour is my mind? That’s silly; of course it doesn’t have a colour. But I could also say my mind is all kinds of colours, it’s the grey of somebody’s trousers, the grey of somebody’s hair, it’s this colour or that colour. That’s an experience of mind that I’m having, so is that wrong? It’s not so much the answers you come up with as actually looking at your experience. The whole thing is saying, will you please look at your experience and get underneath the labels and the concepts and the ideas that you have about it and take a really fresh look.

With how big is your mind, it seems like the good Tibetan yogi answer is that mind is vast, but that must be wrong surely, because how can you say what size mind is? If it’s vast then that means that it has dimensions, which means that it must be a thing, it must be an entity, because otherwise you couldn’t measure it, which means it must have characteristics so that can’t be right. So even the good Buddhist answers aren’t always good Buddhist answers.

So we look at the nature of mind, and talking in terms of awareness what we’re more trying to get down to is the fact that there is no entity called awareness. There is no thing. That is because it doesn’t have characteristics. Within the Buddhist definitions of an entity, an entity is something which has characteristics. It has some kind of form, something you can point at and say that’s it and distinguish it from everything else, which isn’t it, but awareness isn’t like that. Really investigating that helps, along with this shamatha relaxing, relaxing, relaxing.

Q So we need to investigate? But then we don’t need to investigate?…

A We need to come directly into our experience, which usually also means noticing. When we start the process of coming into our experience usually mind throws up helpful concepts for us to understand whatever we’re trying to experience, so we need to notice that they’re concepts about the experience rather than the experience itself. Usually there’s a process of feeling into it. If I want to look at what my pen is like in itself, or what my direct experience is of the pen, my mind immediately starts helping me so it produces this idea about it being a pen, so I have to drop that, and I have to drop any idea that it’s grey, or that it’s got black bits, or silver bits, because all those are words that I’m putting onto it. I might want to drop the idea that it’s out there, and so on. In that way I get closer to something that I can’t actually say anything about if I’m going to experience it directly. We do the same with the knowing quality of experience. What is that? When we use a word like awareness, what in our experience is that based on? What is that actually?

**End of Session Twenty-seven**

**Session Twenty-eight: Essentialised six element practice**

Now let’s take our awareness to the actual sensations of warmth and pressure that tell us that we’re connected to the ground.

From there let’s bring awareness to everything about our experience of what we call the body that’s solid, stable, any sense of something which is resistant. Letting ourselves relax in relation to those sensations. They’re still there in experience, but we’re not investing energy in them. Just relaxed.

Now we pay attention to whatever our experience of what we call the body is liquid, is flowing: the experience of saliva in our mouth or the sense of blood circulating, whatever is there. Again we relax completely in relation to it.

Now being aware of sensations of temperature in what we call the body. Again, we feel those sensations, and we relax completely in relation to them. Not holding onto them, not making them go away. Just relax.

Now bringing attention to the sensations that tell us we’re breathing. Again, we relax deeply in relation to those sensations.

Now we pay attention to the space occupied by what we call the body. We completely relax in relation to that.

Now attention turns to the mental movements, whatever feelings and emotions there may be. We let them be there in experience, but without investing in them in any way, relaxing deeply in relation to them.

The same with any words or images, aware but completely relaxed in relation to them. Not invested in any experience, completely relaxed awareness.

Bell

**End of Session Twenty-eight**

**Session Twenty-nine: Ungraspable, Luminous Emptiness**

I’m going to go on to Lesson 49. This is from the chapter on vipassana, on intuitive insight, but in a way we’ve already been working with this in the shamatha section, so some of it is going to look very familiar.

“Look directly at the nature of whatever thoughts arise.” Whenever you’re looking at the nature of something rather than the content of it, you’re in vipassana territory. Buddhist wisdom is what is true of all experience, whatever it is. We can have all kinds of experiences, but they’re all flowing, they’re all ungraspable, no matter what they are, and if we cling on to any of them, whatever they are, there is friction and we suffer.

“Look directly at the nature of whatever thoughts arise.” I got a question from somebody who was looking at thought after thought after thought, and I can’t remember how they put it now, but it was a bit like one bad movie after another, watching B-movie clips! Usually the best thing to do is to spend most of the time with just relaxation and calm, and then from time to time look into the thoughts. We do need to do that an awful lot of times. Sometimes what happens with some of this is that we investigate something, we have an experience, and then we have a ‘been there, done that, seen there’s no self’ moment, and for a while maybe that does it. But very often in a lot of cases, these thoughts of self keep appearing so then at a certain point we have to acknowledge it’s not completely gone. We might think that we know there’s no self and we saw that, but if you know there’s no Father Christmas but you still find yourself writing notes and putting them up the chimney, eventually you have to conclude that you haven’t completely uprooted that belief! So then, we need to do what we did before, which is to look really freshly to see how things are, and we may need to do that again and again, because these tendencies are usually quite deep-rooted.

Often what we do is rather than having another a look, we remind ourselves that we know that there’s no Father Christmas or no self or whatever else it is that we’ve seen. That is helpful, but it only takes us so far. If we do this when a belief is still lurking around, we are importing a memory of a moment of, say, perfect vision, but now when we’re not in touch with that - and not to diminish the value of it - it’s right view, and we import right view as a way of banishing the thought or the belief. What is more powerful than that is to do what we did originally: with a really open attitude look directly at how things are. Even with something that we feel like we’ve seen through, if there’s a sense that something of it is still there, looking fresh at it will produce another moment of deep knowing. That will have a further banishing effect on the belief, not just pushing it away but dismantling it. We may need lots and lots of those. Often we don’t quite want to do that, because we become invested in someone who knows. Once we’re invested in “I know there’s no self, I saw that, during that retreat, or in that dialogue, or whatever”, then we don’t want to really acknowledge that there is some vestige remaining, so we quietly and furtively write the note and stick it up the chimney, and carry on as if we’re not the sort of person who does that sort of thing. *Of course* there’s no Father Christmas! So we don’t need to do any more work on that! That puts us in a really difficult position, because we’re still not doing the work that needs to be done.

You can keep looking and keep looking in meditation if you really want to work like that, but your mind will get tired of that. Usually it’s much better to spend most of a session relaxed and easy, deepening in ease with a sense of nothing to do, just let it all rest, and from time to time have another little look at one of these thoughts. You take part of your awareness and just look into it to see what its nature is. What is made up of? What’s actually there? For most people that’s a better way to go.

“When the thoughts themselves are experienced as an ungraspable, luminous emptiness, there is no need to reject a bad thought or to seek a remedy apart from it.” It’s a bit like watching a movie on a computer screen. If you don’t know it’s a movie, you’ll have one set of reactions to a love story, and another set of reactions to a horror film, and so on. But once you know that they’re both films, that changes the fundamental way in which you’re approaching that experience. You might prefer one kind of film to another, but the content doesn’t bother you in the same way and finally you’re not so caught up in it because it’s a film. It’s just a. movie. When you look into that whole ‘inner cinema’ of emotional ups and downs and all the stories that go along with that, and all those big, enticing pictures that your mind can produce, you can get immersed in the whole world of it. Sometimes when you’re meditating, there’s something like a little cloud appearing on the edge of your blue sky and because it’s caught your attention this little image starts to grow, and three minutes later it’s not even that you’re looking at it and it’s really bright, but you’re in that world. You’ve gone completely into that world. But it started as a wispy image on the periphery of your awareness. Once you’re in it, you’ve invested all that energy in it, and it’s become a real experience and starts to feel more solid, like clouds, huge thunderclouds. So when we see or experience the nature of a bad thought or an enticing thought, that changes the picture, just as if we thought what was happening was real and then we realised it wasn’t, that we were just watching a movie.

If we’re in touch with that, then there’s no need to produce a remedy. You don’t have to banish something if it’s not there in the first place. You don’t have to dispel it. So it completely changes the nature of the game.

“When the thoughts themselves are experienced as an ungraspable, luminous emptiness” Thoughts are ungraspable - yes? We haven’t ever managed to make one of them stay, have we? We’ve had enough of them! There’s nothing you can get hold of. To put it another way, they’re flowing. There’s a flow of feelings and words and images. Then they’re luminous. Luminous is not about light. Although lumen comes from the Latin word which means light, here it’s about the knowing, awake aspect of experience, which allows it to be experienced. You can experience tremendous light in meditation, but that’s some other experience, it’s not the nature of mind. Luminous here is that awake, aware, knowing quality which enables experience. If that weren’t there, there would be no experience.

So it’s ungraspable, flowing, luminous, aware, knowing and then emptiness. The thought has no inherent existence to it, no core, nothing in the middle of it. It’s only a thought because we’ve identified it as a thought, so from that point of view also it’s ungraspable, whether you approach it from anitya or from anatta it’s still just as ungraspable. You’ll never find a beginning or an end to it, so it never really comes into existence.

It’s a bit like watching a projected film where they’re showing a number of B-movie clips where you just see light on the screen, and maybe you were caught up in the last B-movie, but in between there’s just light on the screen, and you realise there’s no difference essentially between when they’re showing a film and when it’s just light on the screen. Or, to put it another way, there’s no essential difference between a calm mind and mind with lots and lots of thoughts. If we really get that, we don’t have to make all the thoughts go away.

“As is said, whatever it may be that is binding you, once you become aware of it” - which means not just knowing that it’s going on, but aware of its nature - “it will become liberated. If you understand this extraordinary way, you will go to the place of the Buddhas in this life.”

Q: Why do you think that some people think that when you meditate you need to make thoughts go away? When I teach meditation, it’s the main thing I come up against again and again. Even my children think that when they meditate, that’s what they’re supposed to be doing. Why?

A: Thoughts keep going such a lot of the time that it feels like they don’t give us any rest or any peace. Because we give them energy, they feel very real, so they feel like they are the problem. It’s only when we do really manage to start looking at their nature, and see that they’re not real in the way we thought they were, that the desire to make them go away starts to quieten down.

 While we’ve got ‘me’ at the centre of experience, we’re in this funny position where we’ve bought into the idea of me, and we want to maintain the sense of me, and to do that we need to keep telling the story of me, but actually keeping that story going all the time is hard work, and also that story becomes a bother, because it’s limiting and it’s repetitive and it’s not a great story. But then, if we were to start thinking about really putting it down, it would feel like we were losing our ground. In its own terms there isn’t a solution to that. You can give yourself quiet and rest, and that feels like a bit of a relief, but if that goes on too long something in you starts to feel uneasy, questioning, who am I now? So then it has to start up again. Most of us can clearly see that happening on retreat. We’re told to relax, and for a couple of days it feels really fantastic, just relaxing, but then at a certain point we hit the limit in ourself, which is as far as we’re happy relaxing, because if we relaxed any more, who knows what might happen! It’s the same stuff.

Q: What do you do then, when you hit the limit?

A: You are very kind to yourself; you congratulate yourself that you’ve managed to go that far and get to the point where you’ve hit the limit, because often we keep well away from anything like that; you take care of yourself; and you also just enquire of yourself what your objection is to relaxing further and letting things get even calmer and stiller, and see what comes out of that. If there are thoughts there that feel like they’re holding it all in place, you could also look into those. That’s what I’d do.

Q: There is another thing regarding the idea of no thought, which is conventional ideas of shamatha, the fact that the dhyanas are supposed to be low thought or no thought, but they’re also a relief from thinking, but only temporarily so.

A: Yes. Dhyana still takes some effort to sustain.

Q: Could you say a bit more about the thought that is holding it all in place?

A: If I’m relaxing and relaxing and then I might have the thought, that’s enough of that, or more likely I might find myself just bouncing off into something, but then I feel into what’s going on, usually there’s something I’m telling myself about what’s going to happen if I just let go. I’m going to lose control, I’ll let my defences down and I won’t be able to protect myself and I’ll be completely vulnerable, or I’ll just fall apart and be a relaxed heap on the floor, I’ll never manage to get up and go to work again. Those sorts of things.

Q: So you find the thought?

A: You feel into what’s going on. You feel into where there’s still tension in the body, you feel into what’s happening in the emotions, you just feel into the situation but you may well find that there is also a sustaining story or thought.

Q: Does that fall away once you’ve identified it?

A: Often. Sometimes it fights its corner and justifies itself, but keep seeing if it’s really true. We often have a catastrophic expectation with things. For example, if I’ve been holding myself away from relaxing into any kind of grief, I have the feeling that if I relax I’ll feel all this grief, and I’ll just be a pool of tears and it will go on indefinitely and I’ll never come out of it. Or if I’ve never allowed myself to experience anger, I get a bit ratty and my energy starts to free up and I start to feel a bit more like that, but then I feel, My god, I’m going to turn into the mad axeman and run amok around Vajraloka, taking people’s heads off! There was that retreat in ’93, wasn’t there, how many retreatants did we lose? It was terrible! And so on!

**End of Session Twenty-nine**

**Session Thirty: An Attractive Object of Passion, and Meditation Practice**

This morning we started looking at this extract from Lesson 49 in the Intuitive Insight part of The Ocean of True Meaning. We ended up doing that essentialised six element practice. I read the first paragraph.

“Look directly at the nature of whatever thoughts arise. When the thoughts themselves are experienced as an ungraspable, luminous emptiness…” We saw that luminosity here means that awake, aware, knowing aspect of experience which, as it were, lights up experience. it’s like light, if there’s no light, you don’t see. Similarly, without that luminous quality, there’d be no experience.

“When the thoughts themselves are experienced like that, there’s no need to reject a bad thought or seek a remedy apart from it.” In this insight practice where we’re just looking at things, we’re doing it in the full way, we’re not applying antidotes to experience, we’re just looking deeply into the nature of whatever appears.

Q: When you say as it were lights up experience, is that using ‘light’ metaphorically?

A: Yes, It’s not actually about light.

Q: If the experience becomes quite clear, might there be an aspect of light? Might things look lighter?

A: Yes they are very likely to. You can come out of a good meditation and everything around somehow looks brighter and as it were sharper. Some of the veils of illusion have at least got a little thinner and so you have more of the clarity aspect of things more strongly there.

Q: Why do you say it’s not light?

A: Because you can have experiences in meditation of actual light, for example of white light. According to some of the Tibetan traditions, after death you go through a number of different experiences, including experiences of whiteness and redness, but they’re not experiences of the nature of mind. They’re going in the right direction, but they’re not it. It’s quite easy to assume that some of those experiences are it, because you’re experiencing illumination, but they’re still not actually the nature of things. They’re still not the nature of mind. The tradition distinguishes between helpful experiences, which are not yet experiences of how things really are, and they come and they go, but they are good indications. For example they can be very blissful, and you could feel like, “I’m full of bliss and this must be what the Buddha talked about”, but the Buddha was experiencing something beyond just bliss in that way. So there are a lot of experiences like that, and they are indications that your mind is opening and it’s all going in a good direction, but they’re not it yet.

“As it is said, whatever it may be that is binding you, once you become aware of it, it will become liberated. If you understand this extraordinary way, you will go to the place of the Buddhas in this life.” ‘Going to the place of the Buddhas in this life’ unfortunately probably means that you have an experience which is the same experience as someone who is realised would have all the time. In that moment, yes, whether it’s a moment or however long it lasts, you might have an experience of how things are, but you tend to fall out of those and so the work is to gradually make mind function like that all the time. So in that moment, you and all the Buddhas of the three times breathe through one nostril, as it says in the Zen tradition!

“Think of an attractive object of passion, so that you completely lose control over your passion. Then develop aggression towards something unpleasant, and develop both of them. When you feel like going to sleep, observe the nature of the mind that desires to sleep. Likewise inspect the nature of pride, jealousy and miserliness and examine them intently with undistracted attention. Don’t follow previous thoughts so you don’t create chains of thoughts. Don’t let other thoughts interrupt you.”

Here it’s not just if something turns up, look into it, which is also a good idea, this is, go hunting for these things. The trouble is that usually when we experience these things we’ve been triggered and we’ve lost awareness and so we’re in them. We can work using meditation as a kind of laboratory to actually go into these areas very consciously and really get to know them. You can do that on a more psychological level, exploring into how you get triggered and trying to produce a new habit, but you can also do it from this point of view where you create a cloud out of the blue sky of your mind and then you really look at it. Here it talks about passion and aggression because they’re the basis for a lot of things, but you can take any characteristic difficult emotion that tends to come up. It could be sadness or it could be loneliness. It could be rejection, or any of these things which keep appearing for you.

Here where it says, “You completely lose control over your passion”; however if you completely lose control over it you’ll just be in it and you might even get up out of your meditation and act out of it! We want to be in it enough that we’re not distracted: as it says at the end of the paragraph “Don’t let other thoughts interrupt you”. Then we can really follow what’s going on, but with the awareness to see how it’s being created, how it’s being sustained, the forces at work, and also how it disappears.

Very often our negative emotions are unintegrated because they’re in a separate box marked “Unfortunate Experiences That Happen To Me”. That means that they’re not full conscious and so with this kind of practice we produce the fearlessness to go and open the box and really look at what’s there and say, “OK, Show us what you’re made of!” Then we see what it’s made of and it is made up of various bits. There’s nothing essentially graspable. Just like any other mind movement it’s ungraspable, luminous emptiness.

Incidentally the first line of this lesson says, “Look directly at whatever thoughts arise”, but it’s not just thoughts, it’s mind movements, which includes all the emotions and as well as motivations and any energetic movements in mind which are for or against things. There are all sorts of things that we can explore.

Meditation

First we want to create the conditions within which we can explore difficult emotion without being completely thrown around by it or lost in it. It’s like creating an alchemical cauldron. First off we want to be well rooted, well connected to the earth.

We need clear awareness so our posture needs to support that. The awareness needs to be kindly, a kindly space in which the difficult emotion can appear. We need to be in touch with the body and what’s happening. Let’s spend some time feeling into the body, how it is.

A relaxed awareness of body and breath.

And now, I invite you to find some object or some situation in which there’s craving. Not the absolute, strongest, most full-on craving you’ve ever experienced, but something where you’re definitely drawn out of yourself, pulled into that … whatever it is. Let’s notice what we have to do to get in touch with that feeling. We can even notice where we go first. Do we go to a feeling in the body, do we go to an image, a memory or pictures in the mind? How do we kickstart the whole thing?

When we’ve settled on something, noticing whether it’s stable or, if not, what do we have to do to keep it alive?

If it feels like there are several factors that are producing or maintaining it, taking time to explore each one. In the body, perhaps, where in the body, what kind of sensations are there? How is the energy moving in the body?

If there are images, how big are they? How bright are they? Are they static or are they moving? And if there are words, where do we hear the words? What’s the tone of voice of the words? How loud or how quiet are the words?

If we want to make the feeling stronger, what do we have to do? What do we change? What do we add?

If there’s a sense of ‘me’ that likes this, that’s drawn to this, that wants this, how do we know that ‘me’ is there? Where do we feel it?

What is there about what’s going on which means we have to act on this? What is there that pulls us? Is there anything in the bodily sensations which means we have to move towards this? Is the anything in the pictures in themselves which means we have to do this? Is there anything in the words? Is there anything in the sense of ‘me’ behind all this or in the centre of all this?

Is there anything about any of this that is in any way stable, that we could ever get hold of?

For a minute or two, let’s see if we can move between taking the whole thing at face value, there it is and we want it, like we often do with things, and going from there into it being just some ungraspable sensations in the body, some ungraspable pictures, some ungraspable sounds which we turn into words, some ungraspable energy movement. We look through the craving, moving between ‘there it is and here am I and I want it’ to take the whole thing apart and then bring it back again so that we get used to that process.

When we’re ready we can let go of the whole thing, noticing how that happens. What do we do to take ourselves out of that world? Then we rest, nothing to do, just aware experience.

Bell

**End of Session Thirty**

**Session Thirty-one: Observations and Questions**

(V = Vessantara; P = various people)

V: How did you find that meditation?

P: Exhausting

Painful

Insightful with a little i

It seemed like a dream or a magic show, just like it says in the texts.

I was surprised how quickly I was caught; the image came to mind and I was just in it. I was really struck by that.

V: We’re really practised at doing that! We’ve spent years of our lives doing that, so we’re very good at it!

P: I liked that it was the feeling and then the image and then the words, so at some point I was with the words and I said, are there some words there? I think it is very testing for getting to know oneself as well.

I noticed my vision became almost like tunnel vision but the breadth and the sense of depth had gone

V: Yes so in order to produce a decent feeling of craving, we have to really focus in, make it come to the fore and stand out, otherwise you can’t get a proper feeling of craving going!

P: I don’t really crave so it’s in opposition to aversion, so I struggled a bit.

V: We all have our favourite emotions that we go for!

P: I noticed that my mind went into planning mode, how I was next going to get this thing.

V: Yes, it’s not very directly satisfying, but it’s a good way of just keeping yourself in that world. If I want to get myself properly lost in craving, I really need a good storyline going, and planning is a good one.

P: Yes and the pictures changed as well to keep it going, so they were all of the same thing but just rotating through different scenarios.

V: Yes, the pictures are never really still, but to keep your interest, scrolling through a lot of related images really helps to maintain the whole thing in place and to keep the momentum of it, the samskaras really going! I’m sort of joking, but it’s quite a good way to think about, if I really want to get into a good state of craving what do I have to do? Because then you notice the mechanisms that are there.

P: For me it was a vicious circle. There was the imagination, the thought about it, that created the body feeling, which created more thoughts, and the two just kept it going. The pain just got stronger and stronger, and it was the pain of craving. I found craving really unpleasant. The idea of craving is really delightful, but for me the physical feeling is horrible.

V: It’s really good to come to that. There are reinforcing processes going on, which also means you can interrupt things at any point. You can really bring awareness to the body sensations, or the pictures, or the story or any of those. If you see into the fact that there’s nothing really there and nothing that impels anyone to do anything, if you can find anyone to do it anyway… That breaks the chain. We have to work incredibly hard to work all these things up. It’s only because we’ve done it for so long and we’re so practised at it that we find it so easy!

P: I had some quite interesting experiences. One of them was that I guessed what the exercise might be about and so at one point I had a real resistance to the idea that I might be doing something that might take the energy out of my craving object… so there was some resistance to doing it. I was like, what’s going to happen? So I had to have a little dialogue with myself, Are you prepared to do that? You know it’s going to be OK, you know you’ve dismantled stuff like this before and you know it’s going to be all right. So I went through that, and then there was a bit towards the end where it was something like, this connected to that or something slightly dismantling it towards the end, and I heard you say it, and I thought about it, and then the whole of my body just relaxed. Everything just went phhhhhh. So maybe some energy went out of it.

V: If there’s a good clear awareness going into it. With strong emotion, even if you see into it to some extent, it still takes a while to calm. If you’re very angry with something, and you say whatever you say, and then it goes, but something often stays in the body for quite a long time and the body is still gradually settling and while it’s in that state it doesn’t take much for it all to come up again. But if you really see, then there’s no decrescendo, it doesn’t gradually settle again, it just goes, in one. It’s interesting that sense of “I don’t think I want to do this” because when it comes down to it, the reason why we don’t look into the emotion is that we want to have it. We want to have it. Our spiritual friends can come along and do their best to help us out of it, but we almost cling onto it desperately. You might have had this experience with someone else because it’s easier to see it the other way round. You can see that there’s somebody trapped in something that’s really not helping, and they do this and they do that, and it’s ‘no, no’, they can’t. It’s too close to their identity and their sense of security. If you start moving in a direction like this and you start experiencing those ‘I’m not sure that I like this’ things, it’s interesting. It’s good if you do then manage to …

P: (inaudible) to the soul because it really worked. (Inaudible). Soul? What would you say?

V: I’d be tempted not to say and leave you to explore a bit more because it’s an interesting question. I suppose I would be still focusing but focusing on different aspects of the experience. Just keep exploring all that. What’s going on?

P: You said something about taking it apart but then putting it back together again, and I got a bit confused there because it did all collapse when I saw that it was just sensations, and then I thought, why would I want to put it back together again? So I don’t know quite what you meant.

V: At times in practice it’s good to just rest in the freedom of having let go of something, so we could have just left it there. But the fact is that at some point we’re going to be back in, if not quite that craving world, another one, and moving between the two strengthens the awareness of how we create the thing in the first place and the awareness of how we can deconstruct it. In general in life we have to move between the more ultimate level and the relative. We have to have the skills of whatever, eating some chocolate and just enjoy eating some chocolate, and also be able to look into the whole experience and take it apart so that we don’t have to have some chocolate every ten minutes in order to be happy, or whatever. It’s interesting, almost like learning to change focus.

P: Moving between the two made it very clear the insubstantiality of it. I really appreciated that. Going back to what you were saying earlier on, I was aware that there was the issue itself, and the underlying deeper samskara around it, which I was very aware of and have been working with for quite a while, and that is where the resistance was coming from, the bit that didn’t want to let go, but finally it did, and there was a tremendous sense of relief.

V: Yes, and you can always choose whether you keep working on the given situation, or when you feel that the resistance and there’s an underlying samskara then you bring awareness onto that and do the same process. You may have done that.

P: Yes, that was about control and wanting to have things sorted and feel secure, which is such a strong one.

V: The aim of this isn’t to end up not feeling and not having any emotions. The aim is to not be driven and identified. You want the flow of life to be there.

P: I found it very interesting when you said, Now, let go of this being, and then said, How do you do it, how do you come back now? That was an important moment for me, warmth in the hands. So the question, How do you / we do that transition? How is it we are here now?

V: Looking at that transition helps us to learn how to transition out of something that we’ve been caught in. You learn the way out, how you do drop something, so that gives you more ability to drop something, let it go. We do this with sadhana too: you build up a whole world in the development stage of sadhana, and then you let it all go. Sadhana is just taking us through, in imagination, how we create a world, how we step into it, and how we step out of it again. And how everything in that world is ungraspable and flowing.

It’s maybe just worth reflecting on that the topic here was craving, but it could easily have been aversion! It’s worth asking the question, what would be the most useful feeling or situation that I could do this with? What are my ‘favourite’ negative emotions that feel very good quite often, because they’re part of how we do create a sense of comfort and security, but when we go into them, we discover that actually the effect in the body/mind is painful, and can add to it.

P: It’s getting rid of the craving that is the object, so if I’m craving chocolate and if I have some, for a little while the craving has gone. That’s the reward, that’s what I’m looking for.

V: Sometimes you can work by thinking, okay, how do I feel when I’ve just eaten some chocolate? And you can give yourself something of the feeling that you’re looking for without having to go to your secret stash in your room and get some out!

P: Which doesn’t work because I don’t know what I’m looking for! I’m then craving another thing. It gets less and less enjoyable.

P: Sometimes it’s interesting to have it when you don’t want it. What is this like?

V: Yes, all the conditions that we have to get right so that the craving is there and it gets satisfied.

**End of Session Thirty-one**

**Session Thirty-two: Amitabha Mantra and Meditation**

**Session Thirty-three: More on Bringing the Passions to the Path**

We’re still out on the Ocean of True Meaning, hopefully in a boat somewhere with our feet up, letting the boat drift happily along, as relaxed as possible and yesterday I was talking a bit about relaxation as the enjoyable form of renunciation, rather than gritting our teeth and tearing ourselves away from things. Just really relaxing in relation to things, and we can do that with the open sense meditation, where everything’s going on but we’re just relaxed in relation to the body, relaxed in relation to the sounds, relaxed in relation to the sights, relaxed in relation to all the mind movements. Then we did the same thing as a six element practice: relaxed in relation to the feelings of pressure in the body, relaxed in relation to all the flowing aspects of the body, to the warmth of the body, to the breathing, relaxed in relation to the space that the body takes up, not having to hold onto it and make any of it me or mine, or be concerned about it, be concerned about losing it. Just relaxed. And then, relaxed in relation to the mind movements, to the mood, to the emotions, to the thoughts, and in that way awareness can just open.

Then we went on to look at lesson 49 from the vipassana part of the book. We were looking directly at the nature of whatever thoughts, which means mind movements, arise. Looking into these mind movements we managed to settle the mind and look clearly without preconceptions what all this seems to be made up, you can’t say, you can’t grasp hold of it, there’s awareness there, there’s movement, but nothing solid, nothing you could ever hang onto. It’s like those Mahayana images as Sinhadakini was reporting at one point yesterday, of the experience of the meditation feeling like a dream or a magician’s illusion. All those images: stars, faults of vision, reflections of the moon in water and so on, we can read them as nice poetic images and feel that they’re somehow not really connected with me and the real world, but actually they are how things really are! We are having to work incredibly hard, moment by moment, to create a sense of the solidity and reality of our experience. If we’re going to practise radically as Dharma practitioners, we’re going to need to keep exploring our experience and seeing how we create that sense of solidity and reality, with a solid me in here confronted with solid experience which I can rely on and, oh dear, it’s gone! I’ve lost it! How do we create all that? Because we are creating it. It’s not inherent in how things are. How things are is that they’re just flowing and flowing and flowing like the stream. You can’t hold onto it. It’s constantly changing. You talk about the stream but that’s just an idea that we put on to it, which again solidifies it and fixes it.

Through our craving and our repeating of the same patterns and the fixed concepts that we put onto things, we turn them into things. We turn ourselves into a thing called me, and then we turn other things into things. If everything is flowing we haven’t got a chance of controlling it. It can’t be done. If we’re to control things then we have to fix them in some kind of way. Once we’ve turned them into objects we can control them. Just for practical purposes, for buying bananas at the supermarket, we need to be able to do that. It is a really helpful way of operating in the everyday world, but the problem is that we take the concepts that we use to help us operate in the everyday world as if they are how everything is. So we need to learn to be able to go between the two, when we need to, lightly, creating a sense of ‘That is Kumuda’, ‘This is my text’, ‘I’m sitting in the middle of Vajraloka talking to you’. But we also need to be able to let go of it, we need to be able to relax and just drop it and come back to that open, flowing, alive, aware way that things are.

One of the main forces which mean that we want to fix everything and one of the main consequences of the fact that we have fixed things is that we produce all these strong emotional patterns and yesterday afternoon we had a little look at how we were creating some craving. It’s quite an interesting question to ask: if I want to produce a good negative emotion, what do I have to do to do it? That will make it very clear how it isn’t just presenting itself. All these things present themselves as absolute. When it was grey and showery a few days ago, you couldn’t quite imagine it would be bright blue sky again. It was just North Wales and it was always going to be grey and wet; I don’t even know if the amount of rain we had counted as rain or wet by North Wales standards! Now suddenly there’s sun and blue sky and it’s hard to imagine it differently. Our emotions are like that: when you’re in one it’s just how it is. Your mood colours everything and it feels like this is how it is and it’s probably always going to be like this. But the more we see how we’re constructing these things, the less seriously we take them. Also, we realise that because they’re all produced by conditions, if we can just take one of the necessary conditions away, the whole thing can’t continue in the way that it is. We build these things up. Say I make some horrible mistake in how I’m teaching and I go back to my room afterwards and then it suddenly occurs to me, that was completely wrong. At that point, I can either think, I’ll just have to correct it this afternoon or, if I want to create a really good sense of shame and squirming embarrassment about it, I have to set a few things in place. First off I have to keep repeating it to myself, I have to keep re-imagining what I said, I have to keep hearing it again in my head. That starts to give it some momentum, it starts rolling then. But also my posture is involved. I can’t just sit relaxed and happy; I have to start curling over a bit and holding my midriff, and my head has to come down, because that helps me feel more foetal and not good about things. Another really good element I could add in would be a voice in my head going, “Stupid! Stupid! Why on earth did you say that!” That will really add to it, and get the feeling going really strongly. Then it also really helps if I think about how all the people who heard what I said are responding. That sense of ‘Stupid! Stupid!’ and curling over is all me doing to myself what I imagine other people who are cross with me doing to me, or laughing at me, or thinking I’m so stupid, why on earth did you do that? So I don’t need any of you to do that to me, I can sit in the room and do it to myself! Then I think, perhaps I’ll just slink off and I won’t go to the afternoon session! Perhaps I’m ill! Perhaps I’ll just lie here! I just won’t go! And the more I think like that, the more it builds up until I’ve got a really great feeling of shame and misery and being a completely lousy human being. That would do it, wouldn’t it?

So I had to do quite a few things. I had to work quite hard and put quite a few elements in place, but I got there, and then it really worked!

It’s good to see how we build these things up, all the things we add in. Often we’re very practised at it and it comes so naturally that we think it’s natural. That’s the trouble. But it’s not.

The text says, “If you examine these mind poisons only briefly, you will not be able to recognise their true nature. You should make for each mind poison at least ten sessions, and enquire with fully sharpened attention.”

Because we’ve got so practised at producing these to the point where it feels natural, we have to get very practised at seeing how we produce these, until the point where it becomes natural that when we start doing it, that knowing that this is something that is being created, that there’s nothing really there, that it’s just ungraspable flow of experience, all that needs to come in with it, and when that happens the klesha knows its own nature and it no longer has any force to it.

Personally I don’t find ten sessions is enough, but I’m a bit slow! You could take one of your favourite negative emotions and just work with it over months. What we want is to really get to know inside out how these things work. It’s like taking apart some piece of machinery and putting it back together again. You never take it for granted in the same sort of way. Or if there’s some illusion you’ve been taking as real, and you go behind the scenes and see how it’s being created, you really understand. Or like the magician’s illusion: once you really know how the lady gets sawn in half or whatever thing it is, you never see it in the same way again.

The more we do this, the more relaxed our practice can be, because we’re not having to fight the kleshas, we’re not having to produce remedies, we’re not having to talk ourselves out of things. Just as we’re practised at producing them, so it becomes easier at the beginnings of something just to look into it. Seeing that it doesn’t have the reality that we thought it had, it loses its power.

All the antidotes and all the effort that we put into working against the kleshas are all temporary things that have to be in place until this seeing starts to come into play. But we use whatever we can use on the day. In some states of mind we can operate in this way and in some states and on some days we won’t be able to. We just do whatever we can do.

“Whatever mind poisons arise, particularly passionate desire and so on,” (he mentions passionate desire because craving is supposed to be a root poison, but it applies to anything you can think of), “Don’t follow them.” Which means don’t go along with them. “But look directly at their true nature. When by maintaining this practice undistractedly, you experience the five mind poisons as groundless and rootless, passionate desire is purified without rejecting it.” In a sense you reject it, but you’re not having to do anything active to push it away. Pushing it away is still putting energy into it, you’re still invested in it. ‘Groundless and rootless’ in any kind of reality; not rooted in how things are. They don’t have any reality, there’s just flowing, open experience. Passionate desire is purified without rejecting it. This is called self liberation. These things arise but because they’re not being built into anything and they’re not being taken as real, they arise and they pass away, because that’s the nature of everything.

Actually this is happening all the time but we tend not to notice it because an experience of some kind of ego-based emotion arises, we engage with it and it passes away, and it’s immediately followed by another one, so we don’t often get the experience of something just passing, because it’s all being stimulated by our misunderstanding of how things are, where everything is related back to me, me on a tightrope trying to keep a balance of everything that’s here. In the next moment there’s another ego-based emotion and we hardly notice the join. We move quite seamlessly from anger to sadness to depression to doubt…. We keep a flow of me going so we keep a flow of me-related emotion going and we don’t notice the change so much. We don’t notice how one does just arise and pass away, because there’s another one very quickly. The more this becomes natural practice for us, then things appear and there’s no energy invested in them because we’re not taking them as real and so they appear and it’s easy to see them just go. Then you see that they arise, and I don’t do anything about them, and they’re flowing, and they go. They arise and they go.

It really can be that simple, to relate to the question that somebody had. Like lots of things, it’s simple with lots of practice! The more we practise like this, the more we are getting to the rootless root of things, so it’s worth it.

Q: In that sentence it says ‘five aspects of primordial awareness’. Have we been through those?

A: OK, let’s do the next sentence! “Precisely this is what is meant by discriminating primordial awareness among the five aspects of primordial awareness, and by Amitabha among the five kinds of Buddhas.” Primordial awareness is the text’s translation of jnana, which means wisdom, as in the wisdom of the five Buddhas. Timeless would be a better translation than primordial. You can discriminate different aspects of awakened experience: the completely open, aware dimension of things which would be connected with the wisdom of the dharmadhatu of Vairocana; the mirror-like awareness, where things appear but it’s clear we’re not attributing a solidity and a reality to them that they don’t have. If you look in a mirror everything appears and has a provisional reality, but it’s not as solid and you can’t grasp your face in a mirror, for example. That’s associated with Akshobhya. Then, whatever’s experienced, it’s all experienced as empty ungraspable flow, arising in dependence on conditions, and it doesn’t matter what it is, it’s all got that nature. In that sense, everything is equal. Just like the appearances in a mirror, in one way they’re all distinct and unique, but they’re all reflections of light on glass. There’s that wisdom of equality. Then, that ungraspable, open nature of everything, even though everything is the same, each appearance in awareness or of awareness is unique, is fantastic, is rich, has never been like this before and never will be again. There’s that capacity of mind to discriminate, to differentiate. In the awakened mind that would be very sharp and clear. Then just to complete the circle we’ve got the all-accomplishing wisdom, which is sometimes described as the active expression of all this, but it’s sometimes also translated as the all-perfecting wisdom. You get a number of different explanations, but one way of talking about it is the mind seeing the perfect nature of all experience, because without any delusion and the craving and aversion it produces, then everything is experienced as perfect as it is. Amongst those five is the ability to look into a particular experience and go into it. Here it’s being associated with Amitabha and that discriminating wisdom, so that’s what we’re using here.

Q: Or is it Amitabha because it’s desire that’s being looked at here?

A: Yes it could be that as well. Each of the kleshas is associated with one of the Buddhas and therefore with one of the five wisdoms, so it might be that.

Q: Isn’t he saying that the function of self-liberation is discriminating wisdom? So it could be any kklesha that is being self-liberated.

A: That’s what I’m taking it as and when I was given the commentary on this that is how it was put, but as he’s talking about passionate desire here that’s particularly linked with Amitabha so you could perhaps see it like that, but I think passionate desire is just being used as an example of one possible emotion.

**End of Session Thirty-three**

**Session Thirty-four: Led Practice on Liberating the Passions**

We’ll do another session, quite similar to yesterday afternoon, doing what’s described here, but this time rather than us taking a craving situation, you could just pick your favourite poison, and I’ll try and guide it in such a way that it’s one size fits all! Maybe don’t pick absolutely the strongest thing, because the tendency will be to get lost in the story.

Upper body light and open, opening towards that big blue sky out there. Letting the body become a field of kindly awareness.

Now we’re going to take ourselves into the world of this unhelpful emotion. What do we have to do to get it started? It may feel like life often starts it for us. How does the body have to be? What sort of image or story needs to be in place?

Is there a way that our energy needs to flow through the body, do we need to breathe in a certain way? For this to be gaining traction, there needs to be a sense of me that it’s referring back to, and what sort of me is that? It might be a poor me, a me that knows that they’re right. What sort of sense of a me that this is happening to does there need to be?

If there are words, are they loud or quiet? What’s the tone of voice? If there are images, are they light or dark, changing rapidly or slowly? Do things seem near or far away?

Now for a minute or two just let it be as real as it often is.

Now again let’s relax a little and notice how although it can feel very real and how things are, it’s just a kind of inner cinema. Feelings in the body, words and pictures, all constantly changing. Nothing we can get hold of.

Whenever there’s some sense of dropping into “Yes that is how it is; it is all flowing, it is concocted, it is all ungraspable,” just let the mind rest in that. Otherwise we can keep moving between the two positions: taking it as real, doing what we often do, and then seeing how it comes about, what’s really there, taking it apart, seeing through it.

We’re coming towards the end of the meditation. We’re going to let go of what we’ve been exploring. We’re just going to relax again for a minute. Again we could notice what happened to allow what we’ve been working on to disappear.

Now we just relax. If there are traces in the body from what we’ve been doing which don’t feel helpful, just imagine them flowing away down into the earth. Relaxing. Letting everything go.

Finally, just noting and making conscious to ourselves that all that we’ve worked with in this meditation, those thoughts, those feelings, have all gone. Everything that happened in this half hour vanished like a rainbow back into the sky.

Bell

**End of Session Thirty-four**

**Session Thirty-five: Observations and Questions**

So all that happened and then disappeared, and now this is happening, and this feels really real, and fifteen minutes from now we’ll be somewhere else. How real is all of it, in the sense we can hold on to it? We can enjoy it all, as it’s going on. So how was that? Was that different from yesterday afternoon? Any issues with it?

A: I had an object that I loved very much and lost and was very sad about losing it, and I was reflecting on the qualities of it and then realised I was projecting the qualities and then. (inaudible)

Vessantara: Yes. Usually how we first make contact with qualities in ourselves is by putting them out there and enjoying them. At some point we need to bring them all home again. Yes.

A: I noticed (inaudible) I could feel the roots of it going very deep, in terms of psychic history. There seems some validity in paying attention to the past, as how that psychic history manifested and see that is in itself (inaudible) and the conditioning factors to all of that, and seeing that somehow enables space to open out (inaudible)

Vessantara: Some teachers would tell you not to bother with all that. You’re just creating the past and you’re not getting to the real deep nature of whatever it is, but I think we can work on different levels, and whatever takes us in the right direction and helps mind to open so we can look more deeply is good.

A: The self can construct itself in a particular way (inaudible) shapes … particular pattern,… uncovering those particular shapes (inaudible)

Vessantara: Certainly helpful, yes. I think a lot of people will be working on different levels, so there’s a level of something that’s more personal, so I can discover some of the shapes of my Vessantara-ing that I do, but then along with that we can also tap into this wisdom of equality where you just see it doesn’t matter what experience it is, it doesn’t matter whether it’s superficial or if it’s deep roots of personality, or whatever, actually it’s flowing, it’s conditioned, it’s ungraspable. Knowing that, you know the nature of everything, so it’s keeping that level also really being fed.

A: Yes. The importance of that is you’re also going back into the story to some extent, aren’t you; you’ve created the story.

Vessantara: Yes. So that work of seeing the fundamentals how we create a sense of a reality and a me, as we do that, the story gets lighter, it gets easier to work with the particular...I was going to say lineaments, but that’s a horrible word for anyone who’s not working in their first language, yes, the particular shapes and patterns of our experience. Seeing the nature of it means there’s less investment in it, and that makes it easier to explore

A (inaudible)

A (inaudible) but I still felt justified, but I could see it wasn’t doing me any good!

Vessantara: Yes, being right, or being the aggrieved party feels like a good position to stand in, or whatever the particular thing is, but actually we’re just losing out. I think seeing the more you go into the flowing nature and those other aspects of it, the more you also get the dukkha part of it as well. Yes, you see how you’re limiting yourself. OK?

We’re out of time. Let’s stop there for this morning, more this afternoon.

**End of Session Thirty-five**

**Session Thirty-six: A Matter of Perception**

This morning we were carrying on looking into difficult emotions and seeing that (when) we go right into them they’re being constructed moment by moment and there’s nothing really there that we can get hold of. They’re constantly flowing. And that if we can leave them in their own place they just come and they go. They self-liberate, as the phrase has it. So we didn’t quite .. did we get to the end? Not quite of the bottom of the paragraph on page 3.

So we looked at Amitabha and the five awarenesses.

“Likewise, by looking directly into all arising thoughts they naturally liberated, being without any real existence. This is called the pith instruction for taking the five poisons on the path.”

So Mahamudra thinks in terms of there being key instructions which, if we can really take those and work with them and see them, are ways of opening mind more and more and more. So one of these pith instructions is that we don’t, we may need to work against the kleshas for quite a long time, but actually in themselves they aren’t an issue. We can look into their nature and when we do that there’s just this ungraspable flow, and then they become more like just energy. There’s just energy there.

“As is said, just as there are mantras to neutralise poison, there is the pith instruction for taking the five mind poisons onto the path.”

In Indian and Tibetan Tantra, they would use mantras for all kinds of things, where they didn’t have anything else to use. So you might have taken something which was really bad for you, and by using mantra you might be able to neutralise it, or at least you’d hope to. So there’s the pith instruction for taking the five mind poisons on the path.

So it’s a bit like there is something that is poisonous around in our environment. I can remember once going to the Botanic Gardens in Cambridge and walking along looking at plants and there were some rather luscious sort of big dark berries. I looked at the notice by the side of them, which said ‘deadly nightshade’. I’m not sure if it’s still there like that, - in the days of health and safety they’ve probably moved it or put a big fence around it or something, but yes, there was the deadly nightshade there, and it was poisonous, but if I just walked on by it, it wasn’t a problem. It’s just something rather pretty to look at. It’s because we’re investing energy in all this, it’s because we’re not understanding its nature, that all these things are a problem.

And we look into them again and again and again until it becomes clearer and clearer to us that there’s really nothing in itself there that we need to do anything about. Just let it come and let it go. Just like we walk by the deadly nightshade and life goes on.

And whatever we look into, whatever difficult emotion it is, as part of it we always find ego-clinging. We always find self-reference. That’s always going to be there. There’s in a way it’s not possible to have a negative emotion that doesn’t just come and go without identification. Somehow we have to have got invested in it.

So whatever it is, we’ve kind of closed down around it, and we’ve related it to me, so the shamatha aspect of Mahamudra is encouraging our mind not to close down around things, but to relax and to open, be expansive, and the investigation makes us aware that there isn’t a me at the centre of things in the way that we’re assuming.

So we could carry on with this, but I was saying in the team meeting today that I feel like this retreat is a kind of series of Mahamudra taster sessions. You know how you can just go along to the Buddhist Centre Open Day and do just a little bit of meditation and then a little bit of yoga and a little bit of whatever else is on offer, but yes, if we really get a taste for it that then it’ll get us onto the right track.

So I’d like to go on and move into some other Mahamudra territory. And before we start reading that, maybe we just need to place things in their context. So I think I mentioned earlier in the retreat that if you wanted a kind of summary of the insight aspect of Mahamudra, and in a way the insight aspect of Buddhism, then one way in which you could sum it up, one way in which Mahamudra summarises what it’s trying to help us to see and live from is firstly that everything is mind, and what we’re just going to look at is very much in that area. And then secondly mind is empty, mind is ungraspable. We haven’t done much just looking at the open, calm mind, but we have done a little bit of looking into thoughts and emotions, and when we look into thoughts and emotions what we find is that they’re just like the nature of mind itself, they’re empty and ungraspable. So we’ve been looking at how mind is empty, but we’ve been doing it in terms of the moving mind rather than the calm mind.

And then thirdly mind appears in or as endless unobstructed forms. And this relates to the first one, so we’ll look at it a bit as we explore this last passage that we’re going to look at. And then fourthly, all these appearances liberate themselves by themselves. They all self-liberate. And we’ve looked a bit at how thoughts and emotions are constantly self-liberating, but how often we then create with the next breath something very similar again, but the process when we look at it is that everything is just coming and going, so if we don’t get caught up in it, whatever it is, it will come and it will go. And that’s the final sort of remedy for all difficulties. The problem is that we don’t let things go. We hold onto them.

So this passage is going to take us particularly into the first one, everything is mind, but also a bit into the third. So it says, lesson 52 abridged, (I took the quotes out)

“Do not forget to carry out the preliminaries and so on as before.“

So if you’re practising in the full way then the preliminaries would be that at some point, either immediately before the session or earlier in the day, you would have reflected on the four reminders. We do those in the morning verses at 7 o’clock. So first off we need to be motivated, so the purpose of those four reminders is to help motivate us. And then usually before a session you would also go for refuge and you’d recite something or reflect on something to open your heart, to put you in contact with the spirit of Bodhicitta. So all that is motivating you and it’s also helping to open the mind before the meditation and before we start to look into experience. And in this tradition going for refuge wouldn’t just be committing yourself to awakening, there would be more of a sense of entrusting yourself to the forces of awakening, a sense of being able to draw on the lineage and the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas so that when you go more deeply into it it’s like you let the lineage meditate, you let the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas meditate as much as possible. So there’s already quite a softening and opening and relaxing of that sort of self-referential tendency, to lay the ground for the meditation. So that’s the preliminaries.

“Now direct your eyes and your mind on a clear visual form in front of you, and look at it without distraction.”

So before we were doing this as a kind of shamatha exercise, well we didn’t do it but it was described at one point, just as a way of relaxing, relaxing mind, as we were talking about if you’re in the middle of a busy meeting, you can just let your eyes fall onto in this case a human thigh bone, but there you go, in this case it’s a bit big! but so yes, and you don’t take in the fact that it’s a thigh bone or anything, you’re not interested in the characteristics of it, it’s just somewhere to just let the mind be placed, and let it kind of, almost let the mind fall onto it, and just rest there. Boomp. And you can do it as a whole meditation, or in the middle of the meeting, you just do it for five seconds, and then ok you’re back into the flow of things, but you’ve just given your mind that little space, that little kind of real mmmha! mind has taken a big out breath and just relaxed and then ok it’s just refreshed itself a little bit. OK so you can do a whole shamatha thing with this. So you look at it without distractions.

“At first the visual form is perceived clearly. Later on you don’t want to look at it any more and then the eyes become numb. At that time - and it doesn’t mean particularly when the eyes become numb, it means at the time of looking at the visual object - examine whether the form appearing in front of the eyes is there apart from the mind.”

So the question is, what is the relation of something appearing in what we think of as the outside world and awareness? So when my eyes fall on this thigh bone here, what’s actually going on? Does the thigh bone come to me, does it come into my mind? Does my mind go out to it? Or is there some other possibility? So we’re starting to investigate how awareness relates to experience of what we call the outside world.

Maybe we should do a little bit before we go any further and that’ll give us something to work with.

Oh that’s why I’m struggling - these aren’t my glasses! I couldn’t see. Oh yes! There’s some sort of metaphor in there, I’m sure!

So what we’re going to do is we’re just going to sit quietly relax to start with just for a minute or two, and then we’re going to find something in front of us so if you’re in some cases there just may be an object or something in the floor one and a half to two metres, say four to six feet in front of you. In some cases you may just need to rest your mind on the back of the person in front of you or whatever works. It doesn’t really matter what we’re looking at. All it needs is not to have our head bent and to just have something specific that the gaze can rest on.

But before we even do that, just having a short break from asking ourselves to do anything;

making sure we’re well grounded;

this can be a rather dull time of day, so it’s good to make sure our posture is one that encourages our energy to flow;

OK, so now let’s open our eyes and find that visual object, whatever it is, and let’s take it to start with as a shamatha object. So we’re just letting the mind rest, we’re not staring at the object, eyes very soft, we’ve given them something to rest on so they’re not looking here and there.

We’re still relaxed. Let’s just explore a little bit what we might be telling ourselves about this perceptual situation. So if there’s a sense of looking at something out there, is there anything in our experience directly that tells us that this object is out there?

If we seem to be looking at something out there, are there any concepts, any assumptions, things we have to tell ourselves, so that that’s how we experience it?

Still leaving our eyes resting as they are, let’s pay attention to our breathing for a moment. Let the breathing be our focus, the air coming in and going out. As we focus more energy and attention on the breathing, what effect does that have on the visual image?

Is it still just as clear? Does it seem to recede or disappear? How is it?

Now let’s listen to this sound of the gong for a moment. So how does the visual perception change when we pay attention to another sense?

Now let’s close our eyes for a minute. And then open them again and rest the eyes where they were before.

So again we’ll just relax and rest the gaze on whatever it is and then see if we can take off any labels that we’re putting onto the experience. So if we’re looking at somebody’s back, just take that label off. And if what we’re looking at has a particular colour, take that label off. Object, out there, let that just drop. Anything else that we notice that we’re adding onto the experience, see if we can just relax out of it.

Gong.

How was that?

A:: I started to get (?) certain concepts, like it’s ‘over there’ so it’s outside of me. I know I don’t stop here but I imagine I stop there. Concepts like that… (inaudible) that is separate

Vessantara: So you know that those things are concepts. Because it may be that to some extent that you’ve heard a lot of Dharma, so you kind of know what the right answers are, so it’s like the views are in place but then there’s something going that those aren’t right. So then it’s almost like you don’t have, you can see if you can let go of what the answers are and just notice where you’re telling yourself something about what’s going on, if you see what I mean. Can you catch where you’re adding something on to the experience, just look as simply as possible. What is this like, just in itself? Before I add anything on to it. Because ‘everything is mind’, ‘no concepts do justice to reality’, they’re all more concepts. So what we want is to look just really simply, and it’s difficult and in some ways it becomes more difficult when we’ve been given some Dharma teaching because it’s harder to just look with beginners’ mind. But just keep looking.

A: Each time we added another thing in, like the breathing or the sound, the object just became more blurred, less distinct. I took all the labels off, and got down to the colours … and I didn’t know what to call it, it was (inaudible)

Vessantara: Yes, yes it is, because we feel like we have to call it something. Reality, this, doesn’t know it’s a thigh bone, it doesn’t have to know it’s a thigh bone. We’re adding on (We’ve got Padmasambhava so reminders of death have appeared) yes, we don’t need to add any of the labels on at all, unless we are wanting to go to the supermarket or do something practical. Can we get right down, can we find our way out of the world of labels? Can we find our way out of the world of concepts and just meet life directly as it is? That’s partly what it’s trying to get us to.

A: About things becoming blurred, impressions, shapes, shadows, you have to give them a name somehow, more like impressions. When you added the sound, there was a whole conglomeration of impressions. The impression of candle flickering out receded, it wasn’t so important, it wasn’t so central, and there was more a kind of overall conglomeration of things, not even things.

V: So what’s that showing us? What does that tell us about perception?

A: (inaudible, something about trying to divide things into lots of little bits)

V: Yes, certainly showing us that, that we make things more solid than they are. Yes. We make things ‘us’ and ‘it’.

1. (inaudible)

Vessantara: It’s interesting, isn’t it, because even if we just take, never mind ultimate questions, if we just take it on an every level, if I look at Kumuda say I feel like he’s got a certain weight to him, but all I have in the moment when I’m doing that is a visual impression, isn’t it? And that doesn’t have any weight. So all the time I’m attributing... My mind knows from past experience that human beings weigh so many kilos, so that gets added on to the simple visual experience. so that I have a sense that I’m looking at you, and you’re all kind of solid, and have a certain kind of weight, but actually what have I got? All that I’ve got is at the moment, apart from any subtle energetic impressions I may be picking up, all that I’ve got is my visual field, which is a lot of colour and shape. Do you see what I mean? And then yes, we kind of, I suppose this is partly showing us just how, just how .. a bit in a way as with looking into the emotion, just how much our experience is a creation.

A: You’ve talked about being perceived in citta, how everything in experience is perceived in the heart / mind, so if the heart is warm and loving and soft, then does that soften the dualistic kind of, that’s an object over there and (inaudible) here and does that bring about more of a meeting of

Vessantara: Yes it does. That’s another whole factor that’s involved

Voice: Sorry I couldn’t hear

A: If the heart was softer and warmer, does that mean that it softens the duality of subject and object?

Vessantara: Yes. Yes. Because… We experience this all the time actually. Say you’re with another person, and maybe you don’t know them that well, and you find yourself sitting and talking to them over lunch, and to start with you’re a little bit kind of wary, and they definitely feel like a separate person over there, and then you start talking, and you discover you’ve got things in common, and you both know so-and-so, and you’re both interested in this, and the conversation starts to flow, and it gets easier. That sense of that separate person and I’m over here thank you very much, being me, that gets much easier, doesn’t it, and the whole thing softens and there’s more of a flow, and the sense of there being two poles to this communication starts to get more and more attenuated, subtler and subtler and there’s no reason why it can’t go altogether, because it isn’t really there in the first place. It’s something else that we’re putting on to the experience.

A: (Dropping away things is much more restful.)

Vessantara: So the more relaxed we are, the less we’ll tend to create the, the less we’ll feel the need to label and conceptualise and the simpler we’ll allow experience to be.

Voice: Concentration creates tension, though. I found a lot of tension … (inaudible) but after at the end I started to get a lot of energy. I’m not sure I (inaudible)

Vessantara: The tension probably does come from the sense that you were being asked to concentrate on something. Personally if I’m teaching, I never use the word concentrate. Lots of people’s associations with concentration are, well, hopefully you had better schooling than I did, but I remember the teacher yelling at me, “Concentrate!” And the tendency, if you feel you have to concentrate, is to somehow produce the effort to close everything else out, and focus down on this thing. Which is why I more like to use a word like absorption or something, because that gives more of a sense of one thing which becomes more and more blended with another. We all have experience of absorption, you know, you read a book, you look at a tree, you listen to some music, and before you sit down to listen to a nice piece of music, you don’t tell yourself you’ve got to concentrate on it, do you? You just sit there and it starts and you just sit there, and maybe your mind drifts and then you think, it would be nice to just listen to the music, and then you’re just sort of in it, ‘You are the music while the music lasts,’ as T S Eliot says. So it’s something very natural but a lot of us have had experiences of making ourselves concentrate on something, or being told to do that, and some forms of meditation give you that impression ‘I’ve got to concentrate’, so if there’s a feeling of that, just feel like you’re not doing anything special. All you’re doing is sitting with your eyes open just looking at something. So let the eyes be really soft. Let the experience come to you, so to speak.

So what are we seeing out of this? Yes we’re seeing how much what we think of as an object out there is the creation of our mind, and if we move out of direct experience we know that, to have a visual perception, our mind has to do a whole lot of work in order to create the visual image in the first place. It has to co-ordinate the images from the two eyes, and it has to differentiate things. I watched a programme about the brain and perception a little while ago and it was pure Yogacara! And so there’s all that work that the mind does automatically, and also to sustain that object out there we have to pay attention to it and so when I asked you to listen to the sound of the gong or be with your breathing, it wasn’t that the object just stayed the same, it sort of became softer and blurred because without the same mental energy going into it and sustaining it, it was starting to just drift off. And then we went from the gong back to it again, and that greater attention and energy meant that it became sharper and clearer and more of a thing out there again. So that thing out there is this extraordinary creation of our own mind. Then we closed our eyes, and there may have been some after-image on the retina, because the retina produces this sort of counter-colours for a little bit, but then it went. So maybe we are discovering a bit in experience that that kind of perception is based on a visual object, whatever that might be, the eye, and a mental consciousness co-creating something. However, we can go more into this. What I’m going to do is not have a break, but finish slightly earlier, if that’s alright with you, seeing as we’re in this.

Yes, we can go into all this more, but exploring things just even to this extent starts to show us more just how decisive our own mind is in, if you like, creating our world, and often our conceptual model is much more (..?..) than just things and people out there and that’s just how they are and we don’t realise just how much we’re bringing to the party.

Voice: (inaudible) do we come into the world with our own sort of baggage (inaudible) or is it what we’ve been told?

Vessantara: Well, this will take us off a bit sort of theoretical, but it’s probably both.

Voice: These exercises also show you that liberation is possible.

Vessantara: Yes indeed, I was coming to that, but please… I’ll let you… please go on!

Voice: Because when you do that, there’s nothing in the experience of phenomena that suggests that they’re separate. They just arise. And when you actually experience that and see that, there’s a moment of liberation from a previously held perceptual holding. And that sense of liberation feels like liberation so it’s a moment of unity without there actually being anything in particular. It’s very difficult to put into words, but it definitely feels like liberation. So this is the value of those exercises as well. It’s not just to see how we create the world we experience, but also it shows us how, well, the (?) of the duality.

Vessantara: Yes and there can be a very strong sense of coming home at that point.

Question (inaudible)

Vessantara: What does the transcendental transcend? That term gets used a lot so we ought to know. In one way you could say it transcends suffering, but that transcending of suffering to a very deep extent comes from having experience which is not seeing things in terms of self and other, me in here and everything else out there. We looked a little bit at how usually dukkha is like that tension between subject and object which then produces craving and aversion because we’re trying to get out of that sense of tension, and in the traditional teaching about the three levels of dukkha, there’s dukkha dukkha which is like everything that we do acknowledge as painful, like having a headache, there’s the pain of change where we’re holding on to something and at some point it’s going to change and then we suffer, then the deepest level is skandha-dukkha, which is talked about as holding on to the five skandhas, but we’re .. that dukkha is being identified with **these** five skandhas here, and therefore as soon as awareness is identified with this psycho-physical organism, everything else becomes other and everyone else becomes other, and we’re cut off and that produces feelings of isolation, existential aloneness, and that kind of level of things is the real, the deep dark that needs to come out through our practice. With seeing through how we’re creating that sense of me in here and everything else out there as separate, when that happens that’s where there’s a very strong sense of liberation and ease, and a very strong sense of being at home in the world in the way that Prajnapriya was talking about.

Question: Sometimes when I go to the cinema and see a film, it’s a weird experience, it’s a bit like I’m in a kind of a dream state, and it’s not like it’s real any more like it was real before I went in. Is that sort of similar?

Vessantara: Yes, well, I suppose when you go and watch a very involving, engaging film, you go very strongly into that world and the film is there and you don’t just sit there thinking this is a film, you enter into it very fully. So when you come out of it, you’re not invested back in this world in the way that you usually are, so then it does seem much more, it’s a bit of a shock, but you haven’t solidified it yet with your investment of believing in its fixed kind of reality.

Prajnapriya: When I was looking at the object and you asked us to focus on breathing … I first thought about (inaudible) sensations and if I want to refer to them without that classification, would that be (inaudible) luminosity?

Vessantara: Luminosity is more just the basic, aware, knowing, awake aspect of experience.

Prajnapriiya: If I hear something, if I don’t want to classify it would that be luminosity?

Vessantara: It wouldn’t just be luminosity, there would be other aspects present. But yes, when mind is functioning much more simply, without having to create a sense of in here, out there, without having to go, right, that’s a bird, that’s the sound of a plane, when it’s not telling stories on top of that, the simpler the experience is, the closer we are if you like to experience, there are fewer kind of it’s almost like each of these layers of conceptualisation is putting another kind of mattress between us and direct experience, so without those, the experience of that kind of aware, knowing quality will be stronger, and things will tend to be sharper and clearer, the experience itself. Does that help a bit?

OK. That might be enough for one afternoon, then. Let’s stop slightly early and carry on tomorrow morning. And this evening we’ve got the last of the reviews. And we’ll come out of silence after lunch.

**End of Session Thirty-six**

**Session Thirty-seven: Padmasambhava Mantra and Meditation**

Om Ah Hum Vajra Guru Padma Siddhi Hum

Letting the mantra continue internally however it wants to. Taking that energy of Padmasambhava into every cell of our body. Taking his qualities deep into our heart mind.

The whole mandala is pervaded with Padmasambhava’s great love, wisdom, energy, which means that the whole mandala is full of the sound of the mantra. It comes from everyone here, it comes from the shrine, it comes from the candles on the shrine, the whole floor is resonating with it, the wallls, the windows, the ceiling, everything is the mantra.

And all around, the forest is giving off the sound of the mantra. The flowing water is giving off the sound of the mantra. Whatever we turn our mind to is resonating with that love, wisdom and energy.

The mantra, Padmasambhava’s love and wisdom, pervade the earth and the vast blue sky.

Now we relax completely. Nothing to do.

**End of Session Thirty-seven**

**Session Thirty-eight: Questioning our Assumptions**

Thankfully things don’t stop being expressions of Padmasambhava’s love and wisdom just because we came out of the meditation!

So, we’re still looking at The Ocean of True Meaning, this Mahamudra text, Mahamudra meaning great seal or great symbol. As we relax more and more deeply and see the nature of things, we see that everything is, as it were, sealed with the empty, ungraspable, flowing nature of things. It doesn’t matter what the experience is, it’s always sealed with that nature. And ‘seal’ is quite an interesting thing, because you take a seal or a signet ring or something and some wax, and you put it into the wax, and take it away, and it’s not like you’ve put anything there, in fact you’ve taken … there’s just this empty space which we then interpret. So great seal or great symbol, and again, it’s like all experience symbolises how things really are, but also the more we go into that kind of experience, it’s like everything takes on a sort of richness and meaning, a bit like you can have a symbolic dream where it feels like the symbol is pointing to something beyond itself, but here it’s not like things are pointing to things beyond themselves, they are reality, they’re expressing that reality.

So we started looking at this lesson 52, which started off being about visual forms, so we spent some time yesterday just looking at something in front of us, and the text talks about first it’s clear, then you get tired of looking at it, and then your eyes become numb:

‘At that time, examine whether the form appearing in front of your eyes is there apart from the mind.”

And we saw how the form appearing clearly in front of us depended on various factors, like whether we’d just closed our eyes or not, or whether we were paying attention to the sound of the gong or our breathing rather than to the form. So it was making us aware of all the subjective so to speak factors that there are … when we .. in any perception. Because a lot of the time we’re just taking experience as given: there it is, out there, like that; this is me, in here, like this. So this is starting to question deeply those assumptions, kind of really go into those assumptions.

And as we practise on the Dharma path, we look at some of our assumptions, but we often don’t push far enough, so through kalyana mitrata and working with positive emotions, and we can not just take everything as given. An example that’s often given is that I can walk into a room and there are a couple of people there and one of them smiles at me and one of them ignores me, so taking it as given, the sort of normal way of thinking, I think that person who smiled at me, they like me, and the other person is off with me for some reason, but then I catch that and I think, no, I don’t need to take those assumptions, maybe that person who smiled at me they’re just in a good mood, or they’re the sort of person who smiles at everyone, and the person who ignored me, well, they may be tired, they may be thinking about something, they may be preoccupied, something might just have happened to them, so I don’t just … I take those assumptions off, but then I don’t notice that I’ve already made a whole load of other assumptions about being a person, going into a room, seeing other people… there’s a whole raft of deeper assumptions that I haven’t got to, that I’m putting onto the situation, just assuming that this is how it is. So we’re doing the same thing here with our perceptions of what we think of as being the outer world and Mahamudra is kind of exploring how what we think of as my awareness, my mind, interacts with what it usually takes to be the outside world, you over there, you out there, nothing to do with me. We look at all that. And one of the ways in which it does it is to point out that all experience is “our” experience of something, so when we looked at the visual object we noticed that it was our experience of the visual object because it changed depending on factors like how much attention we were paying to it, so that was … if it was just an object there, completely as it is, it wouldn’t change in that way, so it starts to make us more aware of the fact that what we have is always our experience.

In a way it’s simple. It’s saying, “Our experience is our experience.” So as I’m sitting here, there are 25 Vessantaras kind of in each of our different worlds here, and they’re all a little bit different. I’m being perceived from different angles, my voice is carrying better to the front of the room than to the back of the room and we’re all bringing whatever experience we have of Vessantaras to this one and so we each have our particular Vessantara experience, and I also have my own Vessantara experience which is my experience of Vessantara, and our world is made up of that experience. So all we’re ever experiencing is our experience of .. whatever, if there is something out there, let’s assume there is, of what it is. So if we looked at the back of somebody’s head when we were doing that meditation yesterday, we can assume that there’s something there but we don’t ever know what it is in itself. All we ever know is what we experience of it. And our experience is built up from very simple sense data. We build up a world. So if I’m looking at the back of somebody’s head, all I see is some colour and shape. But out of that I add on a sense of depth of field that it’s away from me, I add on ideas about the kind of colour that it is, the kind of shape it is, and I look at that and I think that’s hair, and I have ideas about the hair, and I’m aware of the owner of the hair and I have ideas about them and I add on ideas about I’m in here looking at all that, and all that is placed on top of this really simple experience.

So knowing this can be empowering, because a lot of the time, when we’re particularly in not very good states, it feels like the world is how it is and it impacts on us and we don’t like the impact that it’s having on us and we don’t realise that most of what’s going on is what we’re adding. From a very early stage of the process we are building up this world, and that means we could build a different world based on different assumptions, using the mind differently and we could create a nirvanic experience rather than a samsaric experience. And one of the things that sadhana is doing is it’s giving us practice in building completely fulfilling worlds. It’s like we start from ground zero, just nothing, just openness, then we add some sense of blue and sky and things, and out of that we create a world to be in. So that practice is not just about creating nice worlds for forty minutes a day or whatever it is, it’s about learning how we create worlds and how we’re creating a world right this moment that is satisfying or unsatisfying. How are we doing that?

So that’s the sort of territory that this is taking us into, and it’s working with a visual object here, but it’s … what’s true of a visual object is true of a sound, or a thought, or a feeling or anything else.

OK, let’s look a bit more at this text then, and see where that takes us to.

“So the student may reply that when they are examining this, the object of meditation is indeed the object looked at, whereas the mind, the subject looking at it, is inside, and stays with the object. In this case they should be asked to examine where the mind actually is. Is it outside, inside, or in between? How far does the visual form extend, and where does the mind begin?”

So this is the sort of common sense sort of view of things: there’s the object out there and I bring my mind to it in some kind of way. So the student is just having an experience which is being interpreted in terms of my mind, in here, object, out there, and somehow they interact. It’s not quite clear how they interact - does the object come in, does the mind go out, do they somehow meet in the middle; how does all that work? And when you examine this in experience, there are no great answers to that.

And what we’re doing with all this insight practice is we’re always looking at our experience. We’re not introducing theory about light rays and retinas and all that. That’s not going to dissolve away the dukkha of how we’re structuring our actual experience. It may in some ways give us helpful pointers, but it will just keep us in the world of concepts, which is not the level from which the answer which we need is going to come. The answer’s going to come from an intuitive knowing of how it is.

So he’s asked a, or they are asked to look.

“Since they haven’t grasped that the object of meditation is in the mind, they should once more examine how the form its colour and its shape are perceived by the mind.”

So we have the six senses and we have experience in all those six senses, but we tend to interpret the experience of some of the senses as internal and some of it as external, but actually it’s all our experience. So bodily feeling, that’s kind of (this is all broad categories) bodily feeling is mainly internal, bodily feeling is me. It’s not out there, it’s mainly in here. It’s broadly within the boundary of me. Agreed? OK.

Mental movements, thoughts, feelings, emotions, they’re definitely inside, aren’t they? They’re not out there? Yes.

Taste? Taste is a bit close to the boundary, but once it’s in your mouth it’s kind of … it’s more or less me, isn’t it, rather than not me?

Smell? Smell’s mainly out there, isn’t it? Most of the smells we take in are out there. Some bad smells are definitely not me! They’re out there! They come from somewhere over there! They’re external.

Sounds. Unless like me you’re talking all the time to people who are otherwise silent, sound is mainly out there, yes?

And sights, unless I’m waving my arm and looking at it, sight is out there.

So we’ve got three senses that are about in here and three that are about out there, yes? But they’re all just as much our experience as one another. It’s all experiences of … that are appearing within awareness, to put it like that. So if we were to decide to … rather than just identifying with more or less three of the senses out of all our experience, if we were to decide to identify with all the senses which are all our experience, happening in awareness, the world would look rather different. All this would be all just part of our experience. It would all be appearances of awareness. And if we take, say, like the visual field, it’s interesting, isn’t it? If you just look down so you can see something in front of you, and maybe a bit of your leg, or something, so you can kind of look at that and the mind puts on to this, in my case I’ve got this dark blue blanket around my knees, so my mind just has this visual perception, and it puts onto it that it starts to discriminate this and organise it all out of this simple sense data, and it creates colours and it creates shapes, and then it decides that this sort of dark blue shape here is where I end and beyond that the colour of the flooring and so on, that’s all beyond me, that’s all outside. But actually, it’s just one visual field, isn’t it? It’s just continuous. See what I mean?

So this is kind of pointing us at the fact that that subject/object divide that we create is something that we create. It’s not absolutely inherent in the nature of things. It’s part of how we’re building up our world, and because of that we could investigate that and we could create worlds in which we’re not doing that. And within those we could still provisionally discriminate when we needed to, when it was useful, so that we knew that it’s me talking and not Rijumitra talking, but there wouldn’t be that sense of the boundary, that I end here - like the white cliffs of Dover, England kind of stops here and the rest of the world starts - I wouldn’t need to have that sense of strong kind of boundary, closing things off, with the checkpoints and all the things that we have to make sure that nothing comes in that we don’t want to come in, everything could be an open field of awareness - because actually everything is an open field of awareness.

And then, that would take us from an awareness that is closing down around a centre, into a very open, spacious awareness, even a centreless awareness. It’s like our visual field; where’s the centre of our visual field? It’s not very clear, really, is it? It’s like asking where the centre of the sky is!

Q (inaudible)

A: That’s more like the source of the visual field, isn’t it?

Q: The subjective pole of experience tends you to consider that it’s happening to a person at the centre, it’s usually in the head…

A: Well if you want to add on that whole additional lot of assumptions, then yes, presumably it’s back here somewhere, but if we just look at what’s appearing, is there any sense to it and if we go there, is it just that we’re adding on a sense of a somebody who’s looking, because we’ve been taught all this about eyes and how it all works. Does there have to be anybody as we’re just looking out now? There’s a visual field which I don’t know what happens at the edges of it. Do you just sort of fall off the edge of the visual field, like those old explorers who were worried they’d fall off the edge of the flat earth? And does there actually have to be anybody looking at it?

Q: (inaudible)

A: Yes unless we go further. The sense of immersion suggests somebody being immersed in it, if you see what I mean.

Q: But we’re in the middle of it, we’re not that far from…

A: I know, this is the terrible trouble with language. We do our best but so long as we know we’re just using words it’s all right

Q : (….) we’re not separated from it

A: Yes, yes, there’s something integral about it, isn’t there? OK.

So maybe we just add on this sense of somebody seeing. Maybe we do that with all the senses, there’s just like simple sense data or when there’s a gong maybe we add on the sound (V sounds the gong) but there needs to be somebody listening to it.

So with all this work we’re trying to come down to just the simplest experience before we do all the adding on, trying to come back to that. We get right down to that, then life is very simple.

So and this also means that without creating this boundary, which keeps moving by the way, have you noticed that? It moves, so we have a sort of final boundary of me here in the body but then if I lose my leg, somehow the sense of me retreats back away from that lost limb and now this is me. So ‘me’ sort of shifts around, and it goes out to include other people some of the time, so there’s almost a sense of you and I, almost a me or an us, and people put more strongly on the other side of the boundary, or have most favoured status, a bit closer in, and then as we saw the other day, in communication or in experience it starts off with quite a strong sense of boundary, there’s me listening to that, I’m going to sit down and listen to that and it’s something out there, and then we do get more and more immersed. Or another way of saying that is that we start to create less and less of a sense of a division between us and it. Mind doesn’t impose that onto the experience so much.

So then that sense of boundary sort of softens, and the reason it can soften is because there isn’t any real kind of hard and fast boundary between us and them, me and the world, it’s all being added on. So it’s something we’re doing all the time. So samsara is something we’re actively creating all the time.

So all this Mahamudra ‘relax, relax, relax’ all the time, it’s partly so that there’s less and less of that sort of doing. So things become simpler and it’s easier to see where we’re adding on the interpretation, adding on the ways of looking at things ..

And just to complete the picture, roughly, it’s in this direction that Bodhicitta lies, it’s in this direction that compassion starts to become natural because as long as I’ve got a strong sense of ‘me in here, got to look after number one, I am after all the centre of the universe; you may think you are but you’re not really, I am, I’m the centre of the universe’ - as long as I have that, I can work away trying to produce Metta for you people over there as best I can, but it’s constantly being hampered by this sense that you are over there, different from me, separate from me, and so I’m kind of reaching across this divide somehow to meet you and to feel for you and empathise with you. But then when that divide is seen through, then there’s this kind of big field of awareness in which everything is arising, everything I might think of as me and everything I might identify provisionally as you, but there’s no separation. There’s no separation. And then just like I care for my hand (claps hand) because it feels like it’s naturally within my field of care, so it will be the same when we’re experiencing when that conceptual barricade has been taken down. Then it’s just natural that we care for one another. So it’s not effortful in the same kind of way. We’re not having to reach out to the other. And something in us knows that’s how it is and that’s why we’re constantly trying to get beyond that barrier in all sorts of ways, whether it’s by sexual union or some other way, we’re trying to dissolve, or go .. fuse the subject/object into one, but as I said the other day it’s difficult when you don’t realise you’ve created a thing called a subject and a thing called an object and you then try to bring them together. That whole mission is doomed to failure. But if we really look at how moment to moment we’re creating that sense of subject/object, and we gradually see through it, and we see how in simple experience it’s not there, then the whole thing is natural, the whole thing is much, much easier.

So the wisdom and the compassion go together. The wisdom facilitates the deep compassion. And whatever steps we take in compassion are also steps in reducing the amount of self/other way of mind functioning.

**End of Session Thirty-eight**

**Session Thirty-nine: Awareness-Emptiness**

We ended the first part with natural Bodhicitta, a very good place to end on. We’ve been looking at how everything is our experience, and by definition everything which is an experience is an experience of awareness, because no awareness, no experience. And when we come down to a simple experience which we’re not building up with adding on assumptions about subject and object and the boundary between the two, we can move into a world of centre-less awareness, let’s call it that, where everything appears and there’s interaction, but there’s no dukkha created by a me in here confronted by a world out there, which I’m sort of part of but which I feel separate from. All that, all that can go. And this way of meditating as I said is very relaxed and tends to relax you out of a lot of the conceptualisation, and then sitting just with open senses, as we’ve been doing quite a bit of the time, just feeling into the body, adding in sounds, adding in sights, adding in smells, tastes, mental movements, all of that, and then all of that is going on and we’re allowing awareness to be open, including what we think of as in here, what we think of as out there; we’re moving into a world where we’re not making that division.

Let’s carry on now. There’s some satisfaction in getting to the end of things, isn’t there? Let’s do that!

“If the student says that the appearances are in the mind” (which sounds like the right answer from what I’ve been saying this morning), “the teacher has to keep questioning them in order to find out whether they have really made up their mind or not.”

‘Made up their mind’ doesn’t mean thought about it and decided. That isn’t enough, sadly. If that was enough, we’d all be enlightened by now. So this is, have they come to a definitive experience? Have they experienced that centre-less awareness, to call it that? But people inevitably with all these things, part of us tries to work it out. We try to work out the answer. That sometimes takes us some of the way but it might get us to right view, but it doesn’t take us to perfect vision, which is where we want to be.

So yes, some people will have kind of worked it out, or some people will have read a Mahamudra book and know what the answer is, and then brought that answer and somehow convinced themselves that they’ve seen it, when they haven’t quite. All that, it’s just natural, it happens, particularly because we want to do well, we all want to be the ones who understand. So the teacher will keep questioning them to find out whether they’ve really seen or not. And part of the Ocean of True Meaning is a bit of a teacher’s handbook, as well as something for all of us and there are whole lessons where it says, if the student says ‘this’ about this subject, well then you could question them about ‘that', and if they say ‘that’ about it then you should tell them to go away and look more deeply, and if they say ‘this’ then, I don’t know what we do, but try ‘that’. There’s all that in the book as well. The thing is, you could think, well, maybe we shouldn’t let people read this because then they’ll know what the answer is then they’ll come out with the right answer and we’ll say that’s it, and actually it’s really quite unfortunate if somebody is given the impression that they’ve really seen something and they haven’t, because then they tend to stop looking, stop keeping going deeper into the experience.

Q (inaudible)

A Actually no! Yes, get the ? Out and give them 30 blows and find a bit of Rinzai or something. Because an experienced teacher will be able to feel behind the words of the answer and has a sense of whether somebody has, how far, to what extent, they’ve really seen.

“So the teacher” (he or she) “will tell the student to examine whether the mind has gone to the visual form or whether the form has come to the mind.”

So the answer might be neither of the above, but the student has to really explore. And often you go through a phase where there is something and you’re still trying to work it out intellectually and it just doesn’t work, and you get more and more frustrated with it, and you feel, ah, this is useless. What’s the point of all this? It’s stupid. Or you just get really bored of the whole thing. But they’re kind of phases you can go through. But they’re also usually signs that you’re still trying to work it out in some kind of way, and that there needs to be more relaxation, and a simpler .. just kind of, how is it? Just really, really simple.

“And furthermore, the teacher asks the student to investigate labels, such as the four elements in order to see whether the four elements think or report back, or whether the mind labels them as the four elements and just thinks, those are the four elements.”

This is all about labelling and it can be helpful to ask the question, ‘Does this experience know that it’s what I’m taking it as?’ So I’m waving my right hand around; does this (claps) know that it’s Vessantara’s right hand? Doesn’t seem to. So presumably I’m just putting onto this (claps) that it’s right not left, that it’s something called a hand, and that it’s property of Vessantara. All that is added on. So you can look at any experience like that and it’s slightly artificial, but it helps to peel away some of the concepts to think, Does this experience, whatever it is, does it know that it’s a such and such? And the answer, you usually find is no, so it just makes it clearer the ideas that you’re putting onto the thing. This doesn’t know it’s a gong (sounds the gong). That’s just an idea that we’re putting onto it. Or whatever.

The student is being asked to look at, in this case, the four elements, earth, water, fire and air. So are they in themselves earth, water fire and air, or are those concepts that are being put on to them?

“Likewise, the student should focus their mind one by one on sounds, odours, tastes and tactile sensations, and thoroughly investigate them in the same way that they did before with visual forms.”

So all this is true of all experience, but because mind works in quite a compartmentalised way, we probably need to investigate all the different senses in this way. We come at things from different angles. Even if you have an intuitive insight, it’s often like ten-pin bowling! You take out the insight, the ball of insight takes out numbers 3, 7 and 8 out of the ten pins, but it leaves some of them standing, so then you need to do a second one from a slightly different angle to take out more. Even though really penetrating into one experience would do it because everything’s the same nature, actually coming at things from different angles really helps.

“If the student says, ‘When I’m looking, there’s just the meditation object; apart from it there is no mind as a subject looking at it, with no colour or shape whatsoever,’ this is exactly what is meant by the non duality of appearances and mind.”

When they are looking, there isn’t even a meditation object as an object, because an object would imply a subject that was perceiving it. So that whole idea of subject and object is no longer being produced. There’s no one looking at anything, there’s just the simple experience.

“This is exactly what is meant by the non-duality of appearances and mind.”

In that little summary of Mahamudra, the first one was, ‘Everything is mind’. So all experience, which is all we ever have, is an experience of awareness. That’s what this morning’s taster session was about.

Then we saw that the second one is, ‘Mind is empty’. So we don’t find a thing called mind which is what’s really ultimately existent. There’s awareness, but awareness is more like .. I don’t know … if you wanted a vague analogy it’s more like electricity or something - it enables things but you never see it. It’s not like you can point at awareness. It’s more like a force or a power than any kind of entity.

Then the third one is that mind appears in or as endless unobstructed forms. So experience, all the richness of experience, appears, and it always has, when we look into whatever experience it is, there’s always awareness there and it’s always empty of any inherent nature.

Q: What was the second one?

A: Mind is empty, or ungraspable, if you prefer.

This third one is about the fact that usually we experience mind and appearances as a duality. We feel like if I’m anything I’m my awareness, I’m the subject, and I bring the light of my awareness to all these objects. We create that … the final frontier which we put up is between awareness, which we identify with, and objects and appearances which are external. They’re the object. But what this is saying is that the two arise together, inseparably. And we had that example the other day it’s like the difference between shining a flashlight on a picture of Manjusri, where the flashlight is me the subject perceiving my perceiving awareness coming to the object, the picture of Manjusri, the appearance, and a computer screen showing a picture of Manjusri where the light isn’t being brought to it, the picture is itself made of light. You can look at the light aspect, you can look at the colour and form aspect, but they’re inseparable.

It is the same with this. There’s always the sense of me looking at it, me listening to it, me bringing awareness to the sensations in the body, and so on. So when we look into all that, there’s nobody bringing awareness to anything, there’s just aware appearances.

“If a student reaches, through their one-pointed meditation, a decisive personal experience, and if through the pith instruction and the blessing of an authentic teacher, they reach an understanding of this, they should be considered to be extremely fortunate.”

So then if there’s real clarity, if there’s no doubt, then that last sentence is just really clear.

“The meditation object, and all other objects, are just deluded perceptions of the mind.”

That whole idea of subject and object is just a deluded way in which mind is experiencing.

“They do not exist anywhere else outside of it.”

How are we doing? So I’d like to meditate in a minute.

I’ve had a few more questions. I hope I’ve given answers to most of them as I’ve been meditating over the days. If there’s anything left over, well, we’re coming out of silence after lunch and I’ll be happy to answer questions. I’ll be seeing somebody straight after lunch, but as much as possible during the rest of the afternoon and time I’ll try and be around in the dining room or somewhere. If I didn’t answer your question please come and ask me, or if you want to say hello if I haven’t spoken to you, and even if I have, I’m very happy just to hang out with people.

**End of Session Thirty-nine**

**Session Forty: No Labels - Led Practice**

So, meditation. First thought is a chance to just let everything go. Just relax.

Giving our weight to the earth.

Body poised between the earth and the sky.

Aware of the body, kindly awareness.

As we’re feeling into the body, we’re feeling into the territory that we usually associate with ‘me’. The body and thoughts about it, feelings, all our experience, is an experience of awareness, so let’s widen out and include everything we can hear. Start by being aware that this too, just like the body and thoughts, is something that’s happening within our awareness. If you want to open the eyes, you can do the same with the visual field. So we’re widening out our identification to include all our experience, all our awareness, whatever’s happening within it.

So we’ve gone from my more limited field of awareness to include our full range of awareness. But then does this field of experience, this field of awareness need to belong to anyone? Aren’t ideas of I and me and mine more experiences appearing within the field of awareness? If we let those ideas go, there’d just be a limitless field of awareness with all kinds of things going on in it, without anyone having to claim ownership of anything.

And do we need to add on some idea of awareness as like a big container within which everything happens? Could there just be aware appearances coming and going?

Do there need to be any labels? Or anyone behind all this putting labels on or taking them off?

Let’s go back to basics, before there’s anyone doing anything.

Now if there’s any effort to do something or understand anything, just relaxing. Everything happening by itself.

When we come out of the meditation, we dedicate the merits, the benefit, the positive energy, to all beings, from whom we’re not separate.

Gong.

**End of Transcriptions for Ocean of True Meaning at Vajraloka, December 2019, Vessantara leading**

*Transcribed by Tejasvini February 2021*