Taking the Practice Home

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 55:16

Sometimes just a little bit of conversation, half an hour or forty-five minutes, can really get the thought train going again. It can be hard to settle, and the prospect of stabilizing the attention in rigpa starts to seem a little more ambitious than it was before. But tomorrow we'll get the bigger challenge: taking the practice back into our daily life. So that's what I want to talk about tonight.

I think one of the big questions that comes up is around a feature I want to illustrate by a story. I work out at a gym regularly when I'm in town. That may not be apparent from my physique, but I do it just to try to stay healthy, although I've never been into body sculpting particularly.

While I was working out at the gym, there were these two teenage guys who came in. A lot of young men at the gym, and some of them are very, very buff. It seems to be a thing among this generation to look really good. So they were working out, and I was working out on a set of weights near them and I overheard their conversation.

They were scrawnier than I am. I mean, I've put on weight since I was an adolescent. They were more like me when I was an adolescent. But they were supporting each other and spotting each other and really putting a lot of effort into what they were doing.

There was a guy at the gym working there named Lance. Lance was formerly a competitor in the Mr. America contest, and there was a photo of him when he was at his peak of development. He really looked like one of those Arnold Schwarzenegger look-alikes in his peak, really muscled all over, oiled and everything.

These two kids were talking about him. They said, "Wow, did you see Lance the other day in here? He was on the press and he was pressing 515 pounds." I mean, that's extraordinary. I can probably press at my peak like 135 or something. They were watching Lance press 515 pounds and they were totally in awe that that was possible for him.

That's what I tuned into in their discussion: how impressed they were at Lance's level of development. The fact that that's what they aspired to was going to condition their effort. They were going to make the kind of effort that would lead in that direction, even if they never got to a Mr. America contest. They saw that that's where their training could go, and they aimed there. Whether they reached it or not, that's really what inspired them and motivated them to put in a lot more effort than I was putting in.

So I think this question of aim and motivation is really central when we talk about taking the practice back into daily life. Maybe even more than it is when we're actually on a retreat and we don't have so

much else to do. Because if our aim is high, that will really fuel the right kind of effort on our part. We could even say the right balance between effort and non-effort on our part. But it will inspire what we do when we get home, when we leave here.

Just as an example, Rinpoche the other day mentioned his brother, Minya Rinpoche, who carries a mala around and makes sure that he turns to the nature of mind a hundred times a day when he's in a daily life situation.

So, for those of you who just went through maybe a little bit of conversation and then tea, any idea how many times you turned? Were you noticing anything?

"I did," Leslie replied. "I stopped counting at a certain point because I had to wash dishes. But it was 108. I only did a short period of time, really. I did the break to silence, though."

Excellent. Gold star. 108 times.

I couldn't really do it while talking. She mentioned it's difficult to do while talking, which I think is true. It's easier to do while listening, so you can start to develop the practice first while listening.

Even in this supportive setting, I'm sure you got a sense of how easy it is for the mind to wander. Even when we've just come out of doing formal practice, it's hard to remember to tune back in to that factor. Are we checking in? So the motivation in daily life needs to be high so that we have this interest in continually checking: Where is nature of mind? Am I in touch with mind essence? Am I in touch with emptiness?

Because mala beads look a little bit odd in daily life in the West, some friends of mine gave Joseph Goldstein—who's a colleague and longtime teacher of mine—a more Western artifact to do the same thing. It's a counter that you use like when you're counting people through a turnstile. You can slip it in your pocket, and every time you turn back to nature of mind, you click it once. At the end of the day, there's your counter.

I think we should probably buy a bunch of these for the bookstore. Office Max has them for about fifteen dollars.

The good thing about rigpa practice is that it's really well suited for daily life. I've been working with it for a number of years, and I've worked with mindfulness for a number of years. They're both excellent. But there's something about rigpa that's more immediate in any situation. It doesn't matter what you're doing. With mindfulness, we can find objects also, but the objects keep changing. If you're sitting, it's one thing. If you're walking, it's another. If you're working at a desk, it might be another. With rigpa, it's just one practice: look and notice the nature of mind. And it works very well in daily situations.

I hope you've been experimenting with this during your time here, because its practice is very well suited for taking back into daily life. The trouble is we have to remember. As someone said, it's not hard to be

aware—what's hard is to remember to be aware. This is really true. But as we develop that, the counter can be a very good reminder. You think, "What's that thing in my pocket?" and it will remind you to turn and notice.

Please try to fill in your daily activity with this practice. Also, in your daily life, there really is no substitute for formal practice. There's no substitute for putting your seat on a cushion and just devoting yourself one hundred percent to meditation—or non-meditation, as the case may be—because the intention is not divided in that time, or is not meant to be divided.

Of course, our intentions go in countless directions, but we maintain one primary intention: to notice. With that wholeheartedness, it becomes much easier to cultivate awareness when we transition from formal practice into our daily lives.

How much should we practice? I was recently reading Rinpoche's book, *Carefree Dignity*, and found it quite interesting that he recommends two hours a day. This aligns with what we would suggest at the end of a Vipassana retreat, if you can manage it.

When I first connected with meditation practice in my twenties, I was single without family obligations, so I could maintain this schedule. I practiced my two hours daily quite religiously for many years—some years even three hours a day. It becomes more challenging as life grows more complex. Many of you are beyond your twenties now, with family responsibilities and other obligations that make such commitment more difficult.

See what's possible for you. Perhaps thirty minutes in the morning and twenty minutes before bed. Maybe forty minutes in the morning and that's it. Do what you can. Every moment helps—none will be wasted.

I often speak with people at retreat's end who have heard this advice many times. They say, "Yes, it sounds wonderful, but I simply can't do it. I lack the discipline for a steady daily practice." When they ask what I suggest, we have one final approach for such situations.

Make a vow that once daily you will assume the meditation posture. There's no excuse not to, because there's no time commitment—not forty minutes or an hour. Simply commit to reaching your cushion before your altar and sitting down once each day. If it's not a suitable moment, you can rise after a minute or five. But I suspect that most times you sit, you'll discover how good it feels and want to remain longer.

The challenge lies in shifting mindset—moving from busyness and the seeming urgency of our tasks into releasing that entire chain of obligations. That's the difficult part. If you can make this shift—and there's no reason you cannot—you'll find yourself in place, and likely you'll stay awhile. This is the vow to take if daily routine proves challenging.

I also strongly encourage everyone to continue silent meditation retreats. There's no substitute for the deepening that emerges through silence and continuous attention. When you examine the great masters

of this lineage, you see this pattern clearly.

Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche's biography was recently published as *Blazing Splendor*—a truly wonderful book. Born in old Tibet, he shares stories of the masters he knew as a young practitioner. They're extraordinary accounts that genuinely capture the magical flavor of Tibet. In the preface, one author noted that Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche had spent half his adult life in retreat. That's what authentic realization requires.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, head of the Nyingma lineage along with Dudjom Rinpoche when both were alive, spent twenty-two years in retreat beginning around age thirteen. He left home at thirteen with tremendous motivation for retreat, embarking on years of solitary practice through his teenage years and beyond.

Compared to such dedication, one week yearly might not seem too demanding. I suggest aiming for at least a week of silent retreat annually. If you connect with this practice and find it beneficial, aim for a month. If a week deepens understanding, a month deepens it immeasurably.

Consider this honestly: we spend the first three days of any retreat simply arriving. Only after three days does practice begin to deepen. Then today—when did you start thinking about going home? Probably quite early this morning. So perhaps two days of this retreat found you truly settled. This is my estimation, but it serves as a useful guideline.

In a month-long retreat, subtracting three days at the beginning and perhaps two at the end, you have twenty-five days of settled practice.

The deepening simply continues, making longer retreats highly recommended.

Yesterday someone expressed enthusiasm: "I really do love this Dzogchen practice. Where can I go to do a month-long retreat in this style?" I know that Lama Surya Das offers a month-long Dzogchen retreat on the East Coast each summer. But our primary connection is with Sogyal Rinpoche, and there are other wonderful Dzogchen teachers available.

However, in my experience, most teachers require that you have completed—or at least begun with a firm commitment to complete—the ngöndro, the preliminary practices Gerardo mentioned earlier. These may take four or five years to complete, creating a very high bar for entrance. Sogyal Rinpoche is quite rare in his generosity, offering these teachings to people who haven't completed such prerequisites.

The reality is that there simply aren't many open month-long Dzogchen retreats available. When I asked both Gerardo and Rinpoche about this today at lunch, they both just shrugged.

One option I've pursued—which I mentioned in an earlier talk—was traveling to Kathmandu to practice near Rinpoche's monastery. He now has twenty single rooms for Westerners, so you can actually stay at his monastery. When he's in town, you can meet with him periodically for interviews. This is actually one of the better situations if you want ongoing guidance in this practice. It's difficult to find a qualified guide

you can be near for extended periods, especially since the great teachers travel constantly because everyone wants them to come and teach. It's challenging.

For Vipassana practitioners, please don't think, "I'm only going to practice under a qualified Dzogchen master, or I won't practice at all." A month of samatha practice is far more valuable than zero time spent in Dzogchen practice. Please continue using the facilities at Spirit Rock, IMS, and other centers to deepen your practice.

Rinpoche has spoken about—and I would also outline, especially for Vipassana practitioners—four main areas of practice that you should aim to develop some competency in during your lifetime.

First is basic Vipassana practice characterized by choiceless attention, enabling you to be mindful and fully present with any phenomenon arising at any sense door without losing awareness.

Second is developing familiarity with loving-kindness through intensive practice. We offer seven-day and month-long loving-kindness retreats for this purpose.

Third is some degree of samatha practice to discover whether you have the capacity for jhana practice and entering absorptions. This can be accomplished through loving-kindness practice in long retreats or through breath meditation, probably in month-long retreats.

Finally, now that you've had this introduction, some integration of a non-dual perspective. I personally believe Dzogchen or Mahamudra are the finest approaches available. While there are other forms like Advaita, I deeply appreciate the elegance and philosophical foundations of Dzogchen and Mahamudra. I believe they're unparalleled in the entire spiritual universe of non-dual teachings.

What I most appreciate about their understanding is that while they honor the non-dual—the ultimate pointing to ultimate truth, always accessible here and now, not requiring passage through time but available in any moment as you open to the truth of the ground, or rigpa—this is the heart of Dzogchen teaching. Simultaneously, it rests on a foundation that is a developmental path, acknowledging effort and progress over time toward the goal of liberation.

This combination of ultimate truth of the ground and development over time representing the conventional understanding of spiritual practice—the union of these two—is the height of dharma wisdom. Any path that doesn't embrace both is incomplete.

In Zen, they say that once someone achieves satori, they must wait ten years before teaching. This decade allows the practitioner to integrate understanding of the ultimate level with understanding of the conventional level. Until one has fully integrated and merged these two understandings so they're no longer in conflict, one's spirituality isn't mature enough to instruct others in this view.

Some non-dual teachings cling to the non-dual and use it as a platform to discredit the dual—to dismiss notions of development, progress, practice, time, and refinement. But true understanding of the non-dual

does not deny dualistic truth. The conventional and ultimate live alongside each other and need each other. Denying either means missing something essential.

It could be said that the dualistic vision of progress over time from defilement to liberation is the expression of compassion. The non-dual is the expression of emptiness—the wisdom that understands emptiness. Emptiness without compassion is cold, while compassion without emptiness remains entangled in samsara.

So we need both. The systems of Dzogchen and Mahamudra, in my view, are the most philosophically sophisticated at explaining that mutual dependence. Because of this, they offer very satisfying views. All the relative practices are encouraged, as you've heard Rinpoche discuss—the development of faith and devotion, the development of love and compassion, the development of shamatha. All these practices form an integral part of the foundation that prepares one for realizing the ground, realizing the ultimate.

For Vipassana practitioners, any cultivation we do in these four main areas is invaluable: the wisdom of relating to all phenomena, the development of the heart through loving-kindness, the deepening of concentration through shamatha practice, and the non-dual understanding of touching the ultimate. All these are areas we each need to develop significantly. None of us have reached the peak of any of these four areas, so any time you spend developing any of them is time really well spent in your maturation as a dharma practitioner.

Which practice calls to you at any given moment depends entirely on your own discernment. Look into your own heart and explore two essential questions. First: What do I really feel drawn by and inspired by? What's pulling my heart? Listen deeply, for different practices will call to you at different times. Second: What does my heart and mind really need at this point? Where is my practice strong? Where is it lacking? As you examine your current life situation, what are the strengths and weaknesses in your mental-emotional makeup right now? What style of practice would best balance these or cultivate what is underdeveloped?

This is primarily something you can discover for yourself, though having a conversation with a teacher to gain their perspective can be invaluable.

You don't need to wait for a month-long Dzogchen retreat to arrive in your area. There's tremendous valuable work to be done in the meantime. If possible, please connect with a local sitting group. The support of like-minded practitioners is invaluable.

Dharma practice goes against the mainstream of this society—the Buddha said this himself. We are swimming against the current. Most of society moves in the direction of acquisition: having more possessions, money, status, reputation. It's always about more, more, more. Dharma practice flows in the opposite direction—toward renunciation, letting go, giving away, becoming less, realizing emptiness.

Without the support of people who share this understanding, it becomes difficult not to get caught up in

the acquisition mindset. It's challenging to live in the world without being influenced by worldly values. Contact with like-minded practitioners helps keep our sights clear, keeping us aimed in the right direction.

So please, if you can, connect with a sitting group near you. I know Choknyi Norbu Rinpoche has a group in the Bay Area—Larry Garcia is a contact point. There's a Dzogchen lama in Casadero, near Sebastopol. There's a Mahamudra group in Petaluma with Peter Barth. As most of you know, there are many Vipassana groups throughout the Bay Area and the country. Please try to connect with like-minded people and maintain your orientation toward dharma values.

Now I want to discuss some specific understandings from this retreat that may differ from other practices you've encountered. If you've practiced traditions other than Dzogchen or Mahamudra, some of these emphases will be new.

The concept of Buddha nature—not merely as philosophy, but as direct experience—can transform your practice completely. Someone mentioned to me recently that this gave them an entirely new basis for feeling held and supported. To know that reality isn't limited to the five senses, or even the five senses plus mind, thought, and emotion, but that there's something deeper holding all of this—this changes everything.

Theoretical knowledge of Buddha nature is one thing, but experiential knowledge penetrates far deeper. Being able to touch this in rigpa practice provides a new foundation for faith in life itself. And it's precisely this faith that gives us the capacity to surrender.

It's to surrender into the flow of the Dharma, to let go of egocentric vision and intentions.

Another thing that this practice highlights is the centrality of grasping. After doing the Rigpa practice for a while in my first retreat, I started to notice that what I was turning to again and again wasn't physical phenomena—sound, sight, smell, taste, touch. It wasn't so much moods and emotions. What I was noticing was whether the mind was in a state of grasping or whether it was in a state of freedom.

This is the heart of the Dharma. This is the pointing of the Four Noble Truths: grasping, its cause which is craving, the release from grasping, and the path to it, which is wisdom. So one way to look at this practice is to notice if grasping is present. If it is, the ego is present. Ego and grasping are synonymous. Then notice what happens when you can release. And then there's the dropping into the seeing of Rigpa, and the freedom in that.

Don't get too idealistic about letting go of grasping and think that it should happen easily. Ajahn Chah, who was a great teacher in the Theravadan tradition, said that 70 to 80% of spiritual life is knowing that you're grasping and not being able to let go. So if you feel that moment when you're thinking, "Oh, why can't it happen? Why isn't Rigpa today like it was yesterday?" and you can't just release and be there—know that you're in good company.

Just one little tip: if you find yourself straining toward Rigpa, trying to recreate that experience with your body leaning forward, wanting that experience you had yesterday—of course that will block it. It might be simpler to go back to a simpler practice just to calm the mind for a few minutes. Go to the breath or body, even close your eyes if you like, and just feel a little bit calmer. That might release the grasping, and then when you feel that release, turn to mind nature again.

One of the beauties of this approach is the introduction to non-doing. I think it's a very elegant way to present non-doing, giving it great philosophical support. If you walked up to someone on the street and told them to stop doing, they wouldn't have a clue how to go about it. Even meditators who have practiced for years might not quite know how to approach it. But through this presentation, as you get close to non-doing—and "close" means the mind's oscillations have slowed down quite a bit, not swinging so much into past and future, which means some degree of shamatha is present—you're ready to move into non-doing. This really gives you a very elegant way to do it.

So it suits very well that still time in practice. But it's also important to know that it also tells you when to make an effort. Non-doing is great and non-effort is beautiful when practice is effortless. But this teaching also says when we need to make an effort, and that's when we're in what Rinpoche calls post-meditation, which means that we've fallen out of Rigpa and have gone into distraction or some form of grasping. Then we need to apply effort again, and the effort is just to look. But still, it's a practice of non-effort that also highlights the importance of effort when needed.

Where is effort not needed? When we're in Rigpa. Because any effort within that, as you've been discovering, will just disturb it, including the effort to prolong. So we start to learn this trust and surrender in the meditative state itself. When it's there, we accept it and we don't try to make it last longer than it is. It's really just a way of opening without clinging to that meditative state that comes.

This is really supported, or you could say enabled, by the factor of relaxation. So again, it's a critical component of this whole path. As you start your sitting, as you continue to turn and look, just continue to plant the seed of relaxation in the mind and the body. That's really what enables the Rigpa to open up. It opens up from a place of being relaxed and trusting.

This is a quote from a Christian contemplative named Angelus Silesius: "God is a pure no-thing, concealed in now and here. The less you reach for it, the more it will appear." Could have been a Rigpa practitioner. The less you reach for it, the more it will appear.

Rinpoche's teachings also highlighted for me the importance of devotion. I was a very non-devotional practitioner when I encountered Rinpoche for the first time. I wasn't quite anti-devotional, but nothing in devotion had touched me before. And with him it sort of came alive for me.

Also in those early years we did a lot of Vajrasattva chanting. It's a very beautiful mantra, and the image is very striking too. That became a doorway for me. And then I discovered a doorway within our tradition,

which is the loving-kindness practice.

Rinpoche separates out faith and devotion from love and compassion, but there's one particular component of the metta practice I want to mention, and that is loving-kindness directed to the benefactor—which for me has always been a spiritual teacher. As I would do loving-kindness for the benefactor from a concentrated and meditative state of mind, I found that there was a fusing of our natures.

I haven't done guru yoga, so I can't say it's the same thing that happens in the Vajrayana practice, the Tibetan practice of guru yoga, but it was definitely happening for me in the metta practice for the benefactor. This melding of the benefactor's wisdom mind and my mind took place very strongly in that loving-kindness practice.

Someone in an interview mentioned that they like the idea of devotion but don't particularly feel it for any one individual and asked if it was possible to be devoted to the Dharma. Absolutely. Absolutely.

Some of you know the story of James Baraz, who was starting a course with Ram Dass. This was in the mid to late seventies. Ram Dass, of course, is a bhakti. James was coming out of having practiced with Joseph and in the insight mold.

And Ram Dass said, "I don't know if you're going to be enough of a bhakti for me. What do you love? Do you love God?"

"I can't quite say that."

"Do you love Jesus?"

That didn't quite work.

"Krishna?"

"Not really there."

"Well," Ram Dass said, "what about the Dharma? Do you love the Dharma?"

James said, "Yeah, I love the Dharma."

Ram Dass said, "Okay, say it with meaning. I love you, Dharma."

And then Ram Dass said it back to him. "And you're not getting enough feeling in it. Say it again. I love you, Dharma. No, say it some more. It's not quite strong enough yet."

He made James keep saying it until tears started coming out of his eyes, out of his love for the Dharma. So that was his bhakti relationship.

But even before James Baraz, there was the Buddha. In a section of the Pali Canon, the Buddha says after his enlightenment, he was looking around for someone to be devoted to. He said, "I surveyed all the ascetics and Brahmins and wanderers and practitioners of the era, and if there had been someone more developed than me in concentration, I would have lived honoring and respecting them and lived in dependence on them. I would have taken refuge in them and been devoted to them. But I couldn't find anyone.

"I looked to see if there was anyone more developed than I in virtue, in wisdom, in their degree of liberation. And I couldn't find anyone. So there was no one for me to live in that devotional relationship with. So I decided to live honoring, respecting, and in dependence on the Dhamma." That became his devotional focus.

I really appreciate the pointing through the Dzogchen practice of where to look for the unconditioned. This had been a big mystery for many years in my practice. I was always told that it was beyond the six senses, but I had no idea where to look because I didn't know what was beyond the six senses. And to know that it's in the realm of awareness, that's the direction to look in, is a very big clue. It's a big clue.

So that's a great refuge, even to know the direction of the unconditioned.

These are some of the key points that have shifted in my view and understanding of practice through my encounter with these teachings. They've enriched my practice tremendously, and I hope they're among the things you'll be able to take home and continue to develop and work with.

Now, in terms of how to integrate diverse practices—because most of you had some spiritual practice before coming here—the great thing about Dzogchen practice is that it integrates really well with other practices. I think Gerardo may have spoken this afternoon about combining it with visualization.

Early on in retreats, Rinpoche used to describe his tradition's standard format for a practice period. He said it would typically begin with taking refuge—the chants we've done—and acknowledgment of bodhicitta to set the intention for the period. Then it might move into visualization, visualizing a yidam with its mantra. At some point—and I think this is what Gerardo discussed—you dissolve that image into the nature of mind, into emptiness, recognizing that the image is fabricated. After that dissolving, one rests in the nature of mind with the energy of that former practice. Finally, at the conclusion of the sitting, one dedicates the merit.

Throughout all of Rinpoche's teachings I've heard, this has always been presented as one piece alongside other practices. He's very open about recommending that we combine it with our vipassana or samatha practice.

The way I like to think about integration follows very much how we entered this retreat: starting with samatha with support—a simple object like the breath—then moving to samatha without support, basically opening up the field of attention. At that point, with some prior stability, we move into the rigpa

practice.

For vipassana practitioners, I think the spectrum of practices that this new approach offers is very complete. We can start with a simple object like the breath to develop stability of attention, move into slightly more expanded attention with an intermediate field like the body, and combine both—stability of attention with understanding of the nature of things through the three characteristics as seen through the body. Then we open further, with greater stability, into the choiceless attention that relates equally with all phenomena. This practice adds one more step in that open direction.

As the stability of mind grows, that becomes an excellent platform for opening into rigpa. So for vipassana practitioners, you can think of it as the fourth step in a spectrum: breath to body to choiceless attention to rigpa practice.

One thing you'll definitely notice—and I'm sure many of you sensed this during the retreat—is how, as your samadhi deepens, the vividness of rigpa becomes much stronger. As you progressed through these days, several people mentioned to me that they weren't feeling much effect early on from the looking, but as the retreat continued and there was greater stability of mind, greater concentration, rigpa really became more evident—easier to connect with and more vivid.

While this may not have been everyone's experience, it has generally been mine that as samadhi strengthens, rigpa really awakens.

On the other side of the spectrum, to prepare you for what might come, as you return home from this retreat, you may find that rigpa is very alive for you immediately after. This was my experience. Then, as I remained in daily life longer and my samadhi gradually decayed—which it will—the vividness of rigpa became less pronounced. The immediate recognition of it became much harder over time.

Be prepared that this might happen. When it did for me, not getting much response from the looking, I returned to vipassana practices. Of course, Rinpoche would probably still recommend continuing with the looking. So experiment with all your practices. See what works for you. Be pragmatic.

I want to touch on one point. Earlier in the retreat, someone asked whether Rinpoche thought people with vipassana practice could open in a significant and deep way to rigpa practice. There was an interview with him in the Tara Mandala newsletter, probably close to ten years ago now, in the late nineties when he was teaching a Dzogchen retreat at that center in Colorado founded by Tsultrim Allione.

In that newsletter, he was asked whether he thought vipassana practice was good preparation for Dzogchen practice. He said he considered it excellent preparation. When the interviewer asked why, his reply was that vipassana meditators know very well how to meditate—they've learned technique really well. So when they come to Dzogchen, they pick up very quickly how not to meditate.

That's an interesting observation. In my experience, Rinpoche doesn't believe there's any prejudice

against us as vipassana practitioners, but rather that our background can work very much to our benefit.

The last thing I want to emphasize about what to take home is this factor of trusting your own experience, which I discussed a few nights ago. Whatever you discover when you turn and look, really trust that as your vehicle in rigpa practice and development of the view. Whether it represents the deepest view or the final view or meets some standard of view doesn't matter so much. It's what's closest to your mind right now, and that's what to follow.

It's like if you're walking down the street in a neighborhood and you catch the smell of fresh bread really strongly in the air somewhere, you know that a bakery is not far away. And so if you're looking for the bakery, you can just follow that smell of the fresh bread. It will lead you to the bakery.

So as you turn and look, whatever you get is like the aroma of Rigpa. If it's not the authentic thing, it's the aroma of it. And as you follow that, it will lead you to the deeper experience, the authentic Rigpa, the direct realization—whatever you want to call it, it will lead you there. And again, a few people have expressed how they've seen what I would call development of the view take place even during this retreat. So the important thing is to have confidence in that and follow it.

If you smell the bread but you walk the other direction, you won't reach the bakery. So really have confidence and follow that. That's your view.

I think I just want to close by reading a quotation from the chant book that I don't think we've done yet. It's called "The Four Dharmas of Gampopa" on page three. I think we'll chant it at the sitting tonight. But it really kind of sums up the whole of our endeavor:

Grant your blessing so that concepts turn to Dharma.
Grant your blessing so that Dharma turns into the path.
Grant your blessing so that the path's confusion is dispelled.
Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

A good one to take with you.

So we have time for just two or three questions maybe. You all have listened to a lot of talk today, so I'll give you an early night.

Someone at the very back asked: "What is Mahamudra?"

Mahamudra is this teaching of Dzogchen. Did you all pick up the little sheets on the overview of Tibetan Buddhism? They were out in the foyer—they are out in the foyer. They have a translation from "Flight of the Garuda" on one side and an overview of Tibetan Buddhism on the other.

The teachings we've been receiving are from the school called the Nyingma, the ancient school. And Dzogchen is integral to that lineage. Mahamudra is something of a practice and philosophy equivalent to

the Kagyu school. It's slightly different in that I think it has a little more developmental aspect, but in the non-dual understanding, they're very, very close.

Another question: "Where would you put Ajahn Sumedho's sound of silence in this?"

The question is about Ajahn Sumedho's Sound of Silence. He's a Vipassana teacher who uses this sound—you know, the ringing in the ears that's a kind of steady background noise—uses it as a meditation object in doing Vipassana. I personally put that in the field of sound, in the sense base of sound. So I regard it as using one form of sound. Now, through that, he uses it and accesses emptiness. But as a meditation technique, I would put it in the sense door of sound.

"The experience that I'm having is, you know, when these windows are open and you can hear the stream out here? Since he told me about that, I feel like I have been infected with it. I wake up hearing it. I go to sleep hearing it. I hear it all the time. It's like in the background all the time. It's like I can't not notice it. And so I'm trying not to let it drive me crazy. I swear I hear it all the time. I do wake up hearing it and I go to sleep hearing it."

It could be a useful object. When sounds get to have that irritating quality, it's good to kind of surrender for a while and make them a clear object of mindfulness so that we drop the resistance to them.

And then having opened to them enough, maybe we can take our attention somewhere else. Either that or earplugs.

A question about jhana practices: why do jhana practices if they don't lead to liberation? Saying that they don't lead to liberation isn't quite the right way to express it. It's more accurate to say that one does not achieve liberation within the jhanas themselves. Most people would understand it this way, although there are some passages in the Pali texts that suggest the jhanas can be used to develop insight as well.

Generally, the understanding is that the mind is too absorbed for insight to really flower in those states, and I would agree with that perspective. The main reason for developing the jhanas is to deepen our level of samadhi. Samadhi is one of the factors of the Eightfold Path—it has to do with the unification of mind that makes the mind strong and stable. A strong, stable mind is the best platform for insight, and it's the wisdom that comes through insight that truly liberates us. So the jhanas create a stronger platform for insight and wisdom to arise.

I had a discussion with Rinpoche at the start of the retreat about the jhanas, and he asked me the same question: why practice them? When I explained that it was primarily to develop the platform for insight, he said, "Oh, it's just the same in our system. That's why shamatha practices are undertaken in our system as well."

A question about inquiring into emptiness on the conceptual level so that we actually recognize emptiness: I mentioned in a talk the other night that there's value in conceptual investigation into the

quality of emptiness. For practical application, especially in daily life, I suggested three avenues. One was the analogy of the mind as being like vast space. You can do a meditation based on that—when you sit in your daily life, simply have the sense of the mind as being like vast space with all objects arising and passing within it. This unfolds in the direction of emptiness.

Emptiness of self is equivalent to the Theravadan concept of anatta, or not-self. This is difficult to really grasp in daily life—to me, that's more of a retreat understanding. But the emptiness of objects is quite accessible in daily life. This might mean reading some books that explore this topic. Nagarjuna is a wonderful way in, and you can start by simply reflecting on the readings.

It's all about deconstructing the solidity of the five senses especially. I mentioned one way to deconstruct the sense of sight in that same talk. Go through each of the five senses and see how they can be deconstructed to reveal their insubstantial nature. This will give you a good sense of the insubstantiality of the physical world. Thoughts and emotions—perhaps that's more of a retreat practice as well—but be aware that the same kind of flimsiness or mere appearance quality can be found in thoughts and emotions too.

This is something you can truly work with in daily life, and it will bear fruit. It's one of those things that you investigate for a while on the conceptual level, and then at some point in meditation the experience comes and you recognize that's what the texts were pointing to.

This is a good place to stop.

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