



MINDROLLING INTERNATIONAL

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Transcripts & Documents

On Buddhanature – and What It Is Not

The following is adapted from a teaching given by Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche in Amsterdam, 19 June, 2008.

Prior to any discussion of buddhanature, it is important to reflect on one's intention and motivation. We all have the aspiration to receive and practice Dharma. At the same time, habits die hard, and distracting habitual tendencies are always creating disturbances. Thus the genuine fruition of the exertion we put into meditation may not come about.



Therefore, bringing your body and mind together, generate sincere dedication to the path of meditation and practice—knowing that any exertion you bring to it is for no other reason than to make this life a true cause of happiness for all sentient beings. It is essential to understand this. Otherwise, you may become learned in philosophy and capable of accumulating great numbers of mantras, but you may not become a true Buddhist practitioner. And that would be very unfortunate.

The Simplicity of What the Buddha Taught

When we begin to investigate the various teachings on buddhanature, we see that buddhanature is the wisdom essence of all Dharma teachings. As with all Buddhist subject matter, however, this topic has been made unnecessarily difficult and complex—because this is our human habit.

When I was growing up and studying Dharma, I was very lucky to also attend a Catholic convent school for half of each day and experience that form of education. The Catholic nuns were generous, kind, and very simple and direct: you *should* do this, you should *not* do that; and do it *this* way, not that way. Which was nice—because the other half-day was spent in the monastery, where nothing one said was right, particularly during my rebellious teen years when the khenpos were teaching us the madhyamaka texts.

Now, the basic logic of Buddhist philosophical examination is this: one does not state what truth *is*; one simply refutes whatever is stated to be true. This is the madhyamaka approach, which deals primarily with buddhanature, or absolute

truth in Buddhist philosophy. Since absolute truth cannot be expressed by any concept, to state what it is would only be my perspective of absolute truth. So, similar to some Greek philosophies, the Buddhist philosophical approach cannot say what truth is; it can only say what truth is *not*.

For a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old, never getting a real answer is very frustrating. This isn't right, that's not right. It's a fabrication, a mental concept, a thought—and yes, it's empty in nature; no, it is not empty in nature. When you are told to meditate, you meditate as best as you can, trying not to get attached to thoughts. When asked what thoughts are, you say, "Well, they're just mental concepts that seem to be empty in nature." But that answer is still not correct. And so you go on. But no matter how you look at it or what answer you come up with, it's not right. You are told you're grasping, getting arrogant, and so on.

As the frustration grew, I went to His Holiness Mindrolling Trichen, my root teacher and father, and asked, "Why is Buddhism so complicated? It seems to be so unnecessarily complicated." To which Rinpoche replied, "When the Buddha attained realization and enlightenment, he tried to expound on what he found to be true, but nobody seemed to understand."

It is said that the Buddha didn't teach for almost seven weeks after his enlightenment. Finally, he began teaching what is now known as the "origin of Buddhism." He turned the Wheel of Dharma once, then twice—and later gave many different teachings referred to as the Third Turning of the Wheel of Dharma.

The simplicity of what the Buddha taught in the First and Second Turnings may seem almost ironic to our human intelligence. We are told there is suffering. There is a cause of suffering. And should we want suffering to cease, there is a path of practice that leads us from the causes of suffering to cessation. It is very simple—yet, thus began a very complex philosophy.

Growing up, I always blamed that first group of people who failed to understand what the Buddha discovered. If they had just been intelligent enough to comprehend the direct presentation of absolute truth, we would not now have to suffer all the analysis, meditation, methods, rituals, and highly complex philosophy that is Buddhism today.

Intrinsic Wisdom and What We Do with It

Our fundamental nature is intrinsic. No sane, intelligent human being is impeded from being in touch with this basic nature. There is no one standing between you and it, no one is appearing like a *mara* to perform dances of distraction. At any given moment, each one of you—even with no understanding of Buddhism—has the natural potential to realize you are completely and inseparably united with your intrinsic wisdom nature. You have never been separate from it for a moment. It is not a sometimes-there-sometimes-not quality or an adornment that's been attached or added on to you.

How do we actually know where, how, or what “intrinsic wisdom” is? The answer is simple. It is the basic wisdom mind that discerns what is good and what is harmful for us: the intrinsic awareness that tells us we're at the edge of a roof and shouldn't step any further; or that knows when to stop holding the match as we light a candle. We call this intrinsic potential for discernment “buddhanature.”

This fundamental powerful nature—with all its capabilities, qualities, and immense potential for growth and genuine goodness—must be recognized and realized. Unfortunately, many human beings effectively recognize and use their discriminating awareness, but do so unwisely. Instead of using their potential in constructive ways, they inflict harm on themselves and end up destroying their lives through alcohol, drugs, or other bad habits. Thus human beings endowed with so much potential end up destroying it, rather than using it properly.

Each one of us has the capacity to know what is good for us. But do we use the discerning capability of our wisdom mind properly?

Ask any group of Buddhists to write about how to live an ideal life, and we all know what they'd say: happiness, kindness, generosity, silence, meditation, prajna, nonduality, nonattachment, unbiased equanimity. We can enumerate hundreds of good qualities that we know we should cultivate. When we walk into a church, temple, or shrineroom, we do so because the wisdom mind knows what is good. Seeing others do good actions makes us happy, because the wisdom mind recognizes what is generous and good.

On the other hand, when human society does something negative, later generations say, “That was a mistake. That should never have happened. Such a

mistake should never again happen in the future.” Recognizing our own discriminating wisdom, we are able to discern between right and wrong. But as an individual meditator, look within and ask yourself how often you exercise that wisdom of discrimination. Every day?

Theoretically, we know what is right and wrong. In Buddhism we talk about ten fundamental disciplines: the ten virtuous and ten unvirtuous actions. Not killing, for example—the opposite of which is to save or protect lives. But how many of us actually refrain from killing sentient beings? It is very difficult to teach Buddhists to become vegetarian. Or, not lying—the opposite of which is telling the truth. Knowing what is true and what is false, how honest are you in a span of twenty-four hours? So you see the paradox: what we know we don't necessarily put into action.

Until the day that I took my vows, I thought these disciplines—to not kill, steal, or lie, to refrain from sexual misconduct, to not take alcohol—seemed easy. It would be easy, for instance, not to lie. But I've since found that, other than remaining silent, nothing I say is completely truthful. It is often an exaggeration or an assumption about something I've heard by chance, without any basis in reality or true knowledge.

And what about generosity? We love the idea of being generous and kind. On the other hand, are we really generous? In the same way, look at kindness, love, faithfulness, and avoidance of harsh speech or any intention to harm. These are some of the most basic disciplines that a Buddhist meditator should cultivate. But how many of these things do we actually incorporate into our lives? We may find that we don't necessarily practice the many things we know. This, I think, is what the Buddha discovered.

And so we can't blame that first group of people for not understanding the Buddha's direct teachings. What happened to them happens to us. We do not do the most obvious things; instead, we find ways to avoid doing the very things we need to do most. And then we find ourselves in a very tricky situation. Having the inherent wisdom and ability to know and discern, we come up with excuses for not using that discriminating wisdom.

What would you call that other than ignorance? It was inevitable that the Buddha's first teaching had to point out these habits.

Buddhanature and the Truth of Suffering

The First Noble Truth that the Buddha taught when he first turned the Wheel of Dharma was the truth of suffering. This is the fundamental view of Buddhadharma—and oftentimes, resistance to the truth of suffering is the reason for resistance or obstruction to a genuine, direct understanding of Dharma altogether. The Second Noble Truth, the cause of suffering, is ignorance. These two truths are as true today as they were 2500 years ago—and until we understand them, we will never understand buddhanature.

The Dharma has never been taught as much or been as accessible as it is today. Many people are practicing sincerely and with great diligence and devotion, which is remarkable. At the same time, when we look at the fruition, we find that something is definitely lacking. We do not see the kind of result that should come after 25, 35, or 40 years of sincere practice of meditation and devotion to Dharma.

After so many years, what is it that modern day meditators lack? It is the Noble Truth of Suffering—the very foundation of Buddhism—that is absolutely lacking.

This is not a mere misunderstanding about there being pain and suffering in the six realms of samsaric existence. Rather, a profound understanding of the truth of suffering must generate a deep and intimate revulsion towards our failure to use our own wisdom of discrimination. If we really understand the First Noble Truth, we are desperate to find out why we succumb to the causes of suffering. Why—when our fundamental nature is so capable of purity and goodness—are we still pulled away from the constancy of that basic nature by habitual tendencies?

Think about your own habits and watch carefully. You will see that every moment holds the possibility of nothing but genuine goodness. There is no need for anger, egoism, jealousy, or hatred. You don't want it, others don't want it, and you don't need it. Still you are easily drowned in jealousy, easily angered, insecure, stingy, miserly, and selfish. As a meditator, you observe these patterns in yourself, knowing that it is possible to be good—but you aren't good. It is possible to remain honest, but you lie. Seeing your patterns, a very direct and thorough understanding of revulsion towards suffering and samsara arises. Mistakenly, many people think that “revulsion to suffering and samsara” means not liking suffering, not liking samsara. But that's not it. Revulsion means that

you have a very strong motivation to find out why a human being endowed with all good qualities is unable to remain true to them. It is a strange situation.

Lemon Seeds and Mango Fruit

As intelligent, thinking people, we all have something to complain about, don't we? The government, the environment, the political and religious leaders—we express our concerns about every negative thing that occurs. And in this way, we do the very thing we're complaining about: we constantly move away from the potential for good.

Therefore, if the situations facing the world today are violent and aggressive, we are all responsible; we are all contributing to it. If the environment is suffering, we are all contributing to it. If society is unstable and unfriendly, we are all contributing. Individually our contribution may not seem like a very destructive force, but from a Buddhist perspective what we are doing is irresponsible.

We speak of the preciousness of human existence and its potential for constructive productivity, yet few of us manage to put this into practice before we grow old. We spend decades of our lives wanting happiness, peace, and contentment—without sowing the causes for that aspiration. Why did we not plant the seeds of the fruition we aspire to? Buddhist logic says that if you plant a lemon seed and pray for a mango fruit, logically it won't work. But this is what we do: we wish for happiness without planting the seeds of happiness.

In fact, we do the exact opposite. We plant the causes of carelessness, thoughtlessness, mindlessness, and a lack of awareness, conscientiousness, and consideration for others and their well being—all the time hoping for happiness and cessation of suffering. Call it karmic patterns, habitual tendencies, neuroses, or whatever—it is essential to understand this human behavior.

Then we will understand why the simple fact of buddhanature became so very complicated 2500 years ago. It became complicated because the Buddha had to transmit his experience of absolute truth through the many teachings we still need to hear today. It is humbling that we struggle with the same habitual tendencies that people struggled with then—leaving the Buddha no choice but to teach the subject in various complex ways.

Generating Certainty

Our understanding of buddhanature could be a very simple and direct. All the various teachings and meditations we apply today are no more or less than antidotes to our doubt, hesitation, and distrust of the basic goodness, or true nature, inherent in each of us.

From the very beginning, therefore, it is important to supplicate all the buddhas and bodhisattvas for the blessing of uncomplicated wisdom. Such wisdom allows you to free yourself from doubt and hesitation. And it generates certainty in the goodness of your intrinsic nature and your potential to manifest such wisdom at all times.

Certainty is simply the courage to face the truth of your own wisdom mind. The stronger your doubt and hesitation, the longer it will take and the more methods you will need for doubt and hesitation to be eliminated, abandoned, or purified—which is why the Buddha's teachings are made up of three main levels.

But we could begin very simply: “Buddhanature is inherent within you, and you should truly remain in touch with your fundamental nature at all times.” This should be sufficient. There is no need to go beyond that. Hearing these words or experiencing this in meditation, if you conclude that your fundamental intrinsic nature is primordially enlightened—perfect. No more input is needed. Your only requirement is to always remain inseparable from that. If you can keep this in mind, this is the simplest, most direct way. Generate this as much as possible.

Traditionally, this is the way things would be done. The teacher would then send the student away. The student's challenge would be to try and put the teacher's words into practice. Those who are able to hold to this realization for the rest of their lives are called “liberated upon hearing.” For others, the insight may last for a time before fading. Others will have forgotten before putting on their shoes. Even worse, some will listen and hear nothing of what is said. These are the different potentials.

Certainty and Potential

All the different categories of Buddhadharma—hinayana, mahayana, and vajrayana, with its nine or eleven yantras—are the diverse teachings devised to address the diverse potentials of meditators. These potentials refer to individuals, not groups. For example, each individual within the hinayana,

mahayana and vajrayana will have different capabilities, reflecting varying levels of doubt, hesitation, or certainty.

“Good potential” is said to arise from a high capacity for generating certainty; becoming more certain of the truth is reflected in greater potential. At this point, however, do not mix up doubt and hesitation with any criticism of your potential. This is not a criticism. We all have doubt and hesitation—which simply means not being certain.

How does one break through doubt and hesitation? Apply the skillful means of hearing, reflecting, contemplating, and meditating on the Dharma, then putting the Dharma into practice in your daily life. These are the means for working with doubt and hesitation. In this way you will come to understand the truth of what has been taught or meditated upon from your own experience—and certainty will become your own.

When certainty becomes your own, Buddhism is seen as just a method, or means, for realizing what is fundamentally and naturally your intrinsic nature.

Realizing Buddhanature: the One True Miracle

It is fine to call Buddhism a religion. In the beginning Buddhism can be taught as a religion. Essentially, however, Buddhism must always be seen as a skillful means for realizing the most basic aspect of human life: one’s inherent buddhanature. If we could remain true to this basic nature, Buddhism and its philosophy would have never become necessary.

Why do we move away from our fundamental nature? The answer is because of ignorance. Because doubt and hesitation keep getting in our way, many teachings and methods have arisen as antidotes. Freedom from doubt and hesitation comes from generation of certainty: certainty of who you are as a human being. This discovery is called “realizing buddhanature.”

Buddhanature is not about growing wings and flying here and there, or becoming clairvoyant, or experiencing great luminosity. Twenty or thirty years ago, Buddhism was wrapped in mysticism. Films about Buddhism made things much more mysterious than they actually are. When we Tibetans watch documentaries about Tibet, we often wonder where such profundity came from. We never realized we were as profound as some western documentaries on Buddhism would have us believe. Things have improved somewhat.

Nevertheless Dharma has been wrapped in a lot of mysticism accompanied by much fanfare and magnificent ideas.

His Holiness Trichen Rinpoche would always say, “If that is really attractive to you, you should learn magic tricks. Magicians can perform better miracles than yogis or true meditators.”

A true Buddhist practitioner isn't someone who can perform miracles or magic tricks. A true Buddhist practitioner is someone in absolute control of his or her own mind—a mind that has generated certainty and allows for fundamental human goodness to be ever present.

Many years ago, when Jetsunla and I were reading about the great masters and their miraculous activities, we asked His Holiness, “Why don’t teachers perform miracles like they used to in the past? It would be inspiring for us to be able to say that our teacher performs miracles.”

Rinpoche laughed and said, "The greatest miracle I have done in my life is never having actually hurt anyone. And if you think that isn’t a miracle, then I don't do miracles.”

In today’s world, a true miracle would be to simply be a good human being. If cultivated properly, Buddhism is a very important method for bringing us closer to that truth—not as we hope or would like it to be, but the truth *as it is*.

To realize the truth of who and what we are as human beings is to realize our buddhanature.

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