
Ignorance: how it arises and how we find ourselves at home in it.

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Transcribed by Sarah Allen

Our buddha nature is something that we can, of course, trust. The problem is that we are out of touch with it.

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We exist in the world, as part of the world, and the world reveals itself to us through our participation. We are revealed to ourselves and to others, through our participation.

...

The real nature of the mind of the deity is emptiness; open, unlimited, pure awareness, which is the ground of everything. Everything arises within that mind. This mind is never moving towards objects as if they were external to it, but is the very cornucopia, the very womb of existence.

...

In this flow of experience what is the source of the flow? It is the well-spring of the dharmadhatu—emptiness itself. Emptiness is flowing out of emptiness, through emptiness, into emptiness.

...

The essential point is very simple. Don't take life too seriously! If you look back, you will see you have already had many troubles in the past, and now they have gone. Now you are struggling with the problems of this moment, and if you are lucky enough to stay alive, you will have more problems in the future. So don't take your current problems too seriously; they are not the end of the line!

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Life has a purpose

We have some time together this evening to think about the nature of ignorance: how it arises and how we find ourselves at home in ignorance. We will also look the function of Padmasambhava in the tantric and dzogchen tradition as a means of awakening or liberation.

In the west the darwinian theory of evolution is generally accepted as more or less true and buddhism would partly accept this, but it wouldn't accept the sense of purposelessness which is inherent in a darwinian worldview. From a buddhist point of view life does have a purpose.

Our intention, in relation to that purpose, stands against the direction of our impulses and our tendencies, and so the basic fundamental act in buddhism, is to take refuge. The idea of taking refuge is that we can't trust *ourselves*, but we *can* trust the Buddha. Our buddha nature, our most profound potential, is of course something that we can trust. The problem is we are out of touch with it. What we *are* in touch with is our karmic tendencies, our habitual ways of construing the world, of making sense of it, and participating in it.

Generally speaking, we act on the basis of assumptions and most of the time the assumptions that we operate on, are invisible to us. They are so close to us that we can't see them. We assume, for example, that the world we encounter is made up of real separate objects. We assume that our thoughts, our feelings and our sensations tell us something important about our situation. We often also assume that we have to struggle hard to make our lives work, protecting ourselves in a world which often may seem hostile towards us.

However, each of these assumptions I have outlined would be put into question by a basic buddhist view. When we look around this room we find that we are sitting with fellow human beings. Human beings are familiar to us because we think we are also human beings, and although we may not be very good at it, we somehow *know* how to be human beings. From the point of view of the buddhadharma this is erroneous. It is an idea arising from ignorance because actually, we *are* buddhas.

A buddha is not a human being and buddhism is not a humanistic philosophy. According to traditional buddhist views, to be a human being is to be living in a kind of delusion. It is because we

don't recognise our own nature and who we really are that we become fixated on the concerns of this life. We 'know' a lot about this life—when we are small our parents tell us things about it, then we go to school and we learn even more things about it. If we go onto further education we may develop more sophisticated kinds of critiques but generally they are embedded inside a paradigm of belief in real separate entities, and belief in the centrality of human condition.

A buddhist world view

Padmasambhava gave many explanations about how the world is constructed as we experience it, and how it actually is. He described the *real* nature of our existence as something infinitely open that cannot be defined, cannot be summed up, cannot be conceptualised. This quality is called '*being pure from the very beginning*'.

Let's think about how things become dirty or impure. They don't become dirty, or impure *out* of themselves; things become impure because of contact with something else. If you keep your shoes in a cupboard they won't become dirty; if you wear them out on the street they become dirty. So Padmasambhava is saying that our real nature is pure because it has never come in contact with anything. '*But we are in contact with lots of things!*' you might say. So is he saying then, that our real nature is perfect because it has nothing to do with us? No, this is to misunderstand. Our real nature is pure from the beginning, untouched by anything because we are not a *thing*. Our body is not a *thing*, our feelings, our sensations, our thoughts, these too are not *things*. They are moments of experience which are fundamentally ungraspable.

Linked with this idea of *pure from the very beginning* is the notion that everything is *effortlessly arising*. We exist in the world as part of the world, and the world reveals itself to us through our participation; we are revealed to ourselves and to others through our participation. And this participation is brought into being by many different factors.

On an ordinary level, we could say that due to causes and conditions we find ourselves doing many different things. For example, if you are a mother with small children there are many things to do, and you could think, '*Well, the reason I have all these things to do is because I have small children. It's the state of motherhood which brings these many activities close to me.*' But what is the real ground of these activities? A child cries and the attention goes towards the cry. Where does the cry of the child come from? Clearly, there are thoughts and feelings involved: if a child falls over it feels hurt and wants comfort. It makes a cry and the mother arrives. But if you have a small child you know the child rather well: you know its *name*, you know its *habits*, and you know lots of *stories* about it—so you know *about* it.

Also in the moment that it's doing something, you know *it*. Or is that true? Do you really know it, or do you know you're in a state of awakened alive response to something, which only by linking it back into knowing about the child—weaving that into the narrative you already have about the child—do you know *it*? Later in the day you say, '*Oh, Johnny fell over and he was so upset and I went to...*' In the moment the child is crying—who is crying? We can say, '*Johnny is crying,*' but you are adding something. There is a cry coming—where is that cry coming from? Going back to the idea of '*pure from the very beginning*', it means no entities have been born, so let's remember that contamination arises when *things* come into juxtaposition.

As many of you will be aware, according to the meditation instruction, one has to look again and again for the mind itself. When the mind is busy with thoughts, or when the mind is very quiet, relax and open yourself. Be aware of the process of your own existence, try to find who is the one having this experience. Our mind, the basis of our existence; our awareness, is not a *thing*—it is nothing that we can grasp.

In this awareness many things arise—all things arise. The sun and the moon arise, our bodies arise, our thoughts and feelings arise. If all things arise from the mind itself, which is not a *thing*, how could nothing give rise to some-thing? There are no 'some-things'.

This is what the buddha teaches in the *Prajnaparamita* literature, in the *Heart Sutra*: form and emptiness, emptiness and form. Everything which we experience is inseparable from emptiness and yet manifests. This is the essential truth of non-duality. Non-duality doesn't mean there is only one thing and it doesn't mean there are not many different things. Clearly, in this room as we look around, we see many different things. We see different people, different colours, different shapes and so on. But if we look into the details of these so called *things*, of these entities, which seem to present themselves as already formed, already given, already truly existing, they reveal that they have no inherent essence.

We have no access to anything but experience. Mind is chief.

So, non-duality is the inseparability of all phenomena from each other and from their ground. That is to say, what we experience is *exactly* what we experience. We have no access to anything but experience. In all the many different teachings of the buddha, this is the one central position which is set out. Mind is chief!

The mind's nature is empty. Yet this emptiness is not dull. It is radiant; it has a presence, an illuminating capacity. What is illuminated? All the seeming phenomena of *samsara* and *nirvana*. So, the primordially pure nature of the mind gives rise to the effortlessly arising experience of all phenomena in a state of non-duality. This is the nature of primordial buddhahood.

Here, in this room, we have a statue of the Buddha, which is a cultural phenomenon. This is not *actually* the Buddha, this is a statue! And it's a statue with certain cultural concepts. Padmasambhava explains this in reference to the Tibetan word for 'buddha', which is *sang gye* (Tib. *sangs rgyas*). *Sang* means: pure or purified, and *gye* means: expansive. From the very beginning our nature is pure, which is the original proposition we have been looking at. Primordially pure, it is vast, full of all possible things effortlessly arising.

Now this is not abstract theory; this is the illumination of our existence as it is. So, to take this back to the example of a crying child, the *ground* of the cry from the child is emptiness, and the cry itself is a movement of energy in space, which has no substance to it, but it is a communication.

It is often said in the dzogchen teachings that '*there is one ground and two paths*'. The 'one ground' is the infinite purity of emptiness, the *dharmadhatu*. If you recognise this ground, it is called nirvana; if you don't recognise it, it is called samsara.

So, the baby cries and you think, '*My god, what's the matter?*' We feel an anxiety because someone important to us is suffering. We can say it is a good kind of suffering, it is an ethical kind of suffering, it is a socially responsible kind of suffering, but nonetheless, it *is* a kind of suffering. If you were very delinquent you might just sit on the sofa drinking beer and thinking, '*What a nuisance that the baby is crying!*'

Is there a middle way? A cry is arising, the cry is arising from emptiness; the cry's nature is emptiness. Hearing the cry, a response arises. From where? From emptiness. The response moves towards the child and comfort is given, ease is given. What is that comfort and ease? It is a mood of emptiness. The object of the action, the subject of the action, and the link between them are all empty. Now clearly, this is difficult to do when we are beginners because we tend to start with the

visceral reaction. We *feel* something and then maybe we remember, *'Oh this is emptiness.'* So the **feeling** is very strong, and the idea it is emptiness is **not** very strong.

Concepts are like patches on an old coat—they will fall off

Tibetans have a saying, *'Concepts are like patches on an old coat—they will fall off.'* So although one's conceptual understanding of dharma is correct, it may not be useful to you; it may not be practical in a hot situation. This is one of the reasons Buddha Shakyamuni taught the practices of tantra. Because, in an ordinary sense, or we could say in a *hinayana* sense, the world is full of problems. We try to work with the problems of the world, but this condemns us to having a response which comes after the situation. There are many forms of psychotherapy like that, particularly cognitive behavioural therapy, where you can learn how to manage your anxiety. Stimuli for the anxiety manifest, the anxiety starts to manifest, and then you seek to manage it so that it is not as bad as it would have been otherwise. If one is always trying to catch up with oneself, if experience is always preceding the understanding, no matter how hard you try there will always be a gap.

From a buddhist point of view, what we experience here—what we take as our ordinary life, as something which is given, which has a definite reality, like walls, like floors, like the snow outside just now— is all the result of a way of seeing. If we think that the wall and the floor and the snow are real and true then all we can do is change our interpretation about them; develop a new story about them.

Buddhism is saying something completely different. It is saying there is no such thing as a fixed reality, anywhere, at anytime. What we have are certain kinds of views or perspectives or ways of seeing. We have our karmic view, which is generated out of ignorance,

- an initial forgetfulness of the ground nature of emptiness,
- followed by an elaboration of identifications of many particular things
- followed by a falling asleep into the realm of assumptions, where we take our beliefs about things to be a true definition of how things actually are.

This is the sequence described by Padmasambhava. In the realm of being under the sway of karma, we act as if we have freedom, as if we are making choices but actually, these choices are directed largely by tendencies and impulses which are the consequences of our own past actions. When we don't recognise this, our actions reinforce the sense of the given-ness of solid substantial entities, real separate other people, and ourselves as a separate individual person. This is the view that 99% of our experience confirms to us again and again.

Luckily, we have some contact with the buddhadharma, so some new vision starts to open up. The Buddha taught many many different methods, many different styles and interpretations, traditionally described as eighty-four thousand methods. In the nyingmapa tradition, the tradition coming from Padmasambhava, these are organised into nine vehicles or nine groupings. Each of these *yanas* or vehicles has *a view, a meditation, an activity and a result*. What we need to be very clear about is that these views are not some kind of add-on to our ordinary existence; they are a **displacement**, something radical which takes us back to the whole issue of refuge.

Refuge: living in the view

According to the tradition, refuge begins with the sense, *'How I am in myself, how I understand my life, how I behave in situations doesn't work. Therefore, I need to stop doing what I do and do*

something else. That means I have to do something different. Children often like to run around and do jumping laughing games. Then they fall over or crash into the wall and hurt themselves and then run crying to their mother. The mother gives them a hug and says, *'But I told you not to run inside the house.'* After a while the tears stop and the running starts again. This is not how to take refuge. Refuge means, *'I have been running, I am hurt, I am going to stop running.'*

If you use buddhism just as a kind of holiday, as a kind of time-out, **it may give some kind of alleviation**, some kind altered experience of the world, **but you then go back to your ordinary life**, your 'real life', 'how things are'. So we have to see that it's not just what we've been **doing** which is wrong, it's how we've been **understanding** the situation.

The world is *not* how we take it to be. That is to say, we live in a state of ignorance. So we have to try, if we want to reduce our suffering, to not live in a world of ignorance. But one of the qualities of ignorance is that you feel that you know what you're doing, and so when you try to do something new it doesn't feel quite as authentic. Being stupid is comforting. We know how to do it even when it gives us difficulty! Being aware is more difficult.

The nine different vehicles of the nyingmapa tradition move from being quite external, to being more internal. The dzogchen level, is almost entirely internal, which means there is nothing to do externally. It requires the highest level of refuge, which is to say a non-dual refuge; not taking refuge in something external but taking refuge in the nature of one's own mind.

Tantra: living in the flow

The various levels of tantra have more elaboration. Tantra uses the qualities of energetic manifestation as a way of recognising the link between the openness, the empty nature of the pure natural condition—which in the discourse of tantra is called the *dharmakaya*—and the level of manifestation, *nirmanakaya*, where there is an energetic presence-ing in the world with other energetic presences. And the bridge between the two is the *sambhogakaya*, which is the quality of potential manifestation, revealed through forms which exist within the realm of meditation. That doesn't mean that we invent or create Padmasambhava by our own meditation, but it means that without meditation you have no access to Padmasambhava. The *nirmanakaya*, or the compassionate acts of the buddha, are present in the world all the time; opportunities are everywhere but they are not recognised. It's through the practice of tantra, through initiation and coming into the lineage, that one can find a new vision of one's lived existence. And with that vision one starts to be able to participate in a different world.

This world that we experience is a ceaseless revelation. That is to say, there are no entities and yet experience is ceaseless. What we experience *is experience*. When we experience entities, the entities that we experience are a construct of our own conceptualisation.

Example of water, snow and ice

Today the snow was falling. You could see these little flakes circling in the sky. Some of the snow was landing on other snow; it was welcomed by snow. It said, *'Hey, you managed to get over the border, you have landed in a good place.'* But some of the snow landed in the road with this wet dirty slush, and the slush was saying to the new snowflake, *'Sweetheart, this is Guantanamo Bay—abandon hope!'* How water manifests depends on causes and conditions. If it's cold it becomes snow or ice; if it's warm it is flowing water; if it is very hot it becomes steam and clouds. So what is water? Science might provide the answer that it is H₂O but our experience of water is contingent, contextual. We cannot clearly know what something truly is. 'Water' is the **name** of one state of

something. The flow, the water-like flow of experience, when it hits the chill wind of conceptualisation will take on forms like snow and ice; but when the conditions change, things resume flowing. The function of the practice of tantra is to bring the whole of our lived experience back into flow.

The root of the word tantra and also of the Tibetan word *gyu* (rgyud) means connection. It means things linked together, strung together, flowing together. That is to say, it is against separation, isolation, fragmentation. So when we practice tantra we want to renounce (or not manifest), the view of karma—which is the view of entities, of reification—and to move into the flow, into alignment with the natural flow of existence, the aesthetic revelation of the mandala of the guru, in this case Padmasambhava.

How the world and everything that we experience, has the nature of the deity

That is to say, one has a connection with the view, takes that view and holds it in one's heart as one's intentionality toward all experience. Which means at all times, in all situations, before events occur, you know what is going to happen. This doesn't mean you can set up stall as a mystic who reads people's futures. You won't know which team will win the football, but you will know exactly what is going to happen. Through the practice of the mantra and visualisation of the deity, you gain a key into living in the heart of the truth of the *Heart Sutra*. Form and emptiness, sound and emptiness, taste and emptiness, memory and emptiness, hunger and emptiness, needing to pee and emptiness—everything is empty.

Here, emptiness is not some abstract philosophical concept. It is simply the immediate ungraspability of that which is there right in front of your face and so we become able to respond to the world without appropriation.

In the mandala, the gods appear as the radiance of the dharmakaya. That is to say, the forms that we see, these beautiful brilliant forms, are shining forms made of light; the five elements are present in them in the form of light. And in the heart of the deity is the seed syllable, around which the mantra is turning, with sound and light radiating from the heart of the deity. The real nature of the mind of the deity, within which this seed syllable is present, is emptiness, is the open, unlimited, pure awareness, which is the ground of everything. Everything arises within that mind. *This mind is never moving towards objects as if they were external to it, but is the very cornucopia, the very womb of existence.*

So if we enter into that practice we also can experience that the world, and through that everything that we see has the nature of the divine body. We see that the body of Padmasambhava is, if you like, the ground form, the mother of all forms; so that each form partakes of that as its essence, no matter how it shows itself. Thus each thing that we experience is Padmasambhava, whether it's a beautiful thing or an ugly thing, a holy thing or a disgusting thing. Just as we can understand that there is the mandala of the peaceful deities and the wrathful deities—and that in offering practices we have sweet and pure offerings as well as very intense, complex, dangerous kinds of offerings—so this world that we experience has many different flavours to it, some sweet and easy to access, some very challenging and very difficult.

From the point of karma—from the point of view of being our individual self living in a fragile body wanting to protect it from danger and hoping to get some brief moments of happiness before we die—we become very concerned to push away bad things and pull in good things. Within this position we might think, *'Yes it would be much nicer to be in Havana than in Guantanamo Bay.'* though both are in Cuba. The view of tantra is completely different from this. **Everything** which arises has the nature of Padmasambhava. Hospital operating theatres where people's lives are

saved, torture rooms where people's bodies are destroyed, are both the manifestation of Padmasambhava. This is not something you can understand by intellectual thought, since it is not a concept. It is only through meditation that you can awaken to the truth of non-duality.

Also, from the nirmanakaya view, Padmasambhava manifests in the world to help all sentient beings and remove them from states of suffering. However, as it says in the *Diamond Cutting Sutra*, one of the great sutras of the prajnaparamita tradition, a 'bodhisattva' who sees sentient beings to be saved, is no longer a bodhisattva! Given that a bodhisattva is somebody who has vowed to save all sentient beings, how can it be that when he/she sees someone who needs to be saved, they have broken their vow to save all sentient beings? This is because the beginning of the salvation of sentient beings arises in the understanding that they are empty of inherent self-existence.

When we experience that what is in front of us are the forms of emptiness, and we ourselves in our familiar body are form and emptiness, then we experience that form is energetic and dynamic; the ice melts into water. In this flow of experience what is the source of the flow? It is the well spring of the *dharmadhatu*—emptiness itself. Emptiness is flowing out of emptiness, through emptiness, into emptiness. So we practice, through participation in the world as it is, and the very acts of ordinary experience maintain us in the view of the unborn nature of all that appears.

From the Menu of Life, we eat the balanced diet of happiness and sadness

All the points that we have touched on this evening can be unpacked in many different directions. The Buddha's teachings are infinite and there are many explanations to be given about each point.

The essential point is very simple. Don't take life too seriously! If you look back, you will see you have already had many troubles in the past—and now they have gone. Now you are struggling with the problems of this moment, and if you are lucky enough to stay alive, you will have more problems in the future. So don't take your current problems too seriously; they are not the end of the line!

Problems are impermanent and happiness is impermanent. If we say we only want happiness and no problems, it is very difficult, because the Great Mama, in the Great Kitchen of Reality knows that you need a balanced diet [*Laughter in room*]. Too much happiness and it will rot your teeth—we need some green cabbage now and then!

And that's what you get: you always have happiness and sadness, everybody has this, whether they are very ordinary people or very great meditators.

The view and practice of tantra can help us see that mistakes are not a sign that we are very bad people. We are not being punished because we are bad, but rather, we suffer because we don't understand what is happening. If we approach the world with our small menu trying to order only the things we like, much of our experience will be inedible. We will be vomiting and full of diarrhoea.

Part of it then, is to open ourselves to life as it comes. The more we can stay in the view, the more we will be free to see that there are no mistakes. Mistakes occur when we step outside our life and start to judge and evaluate it: '*If only I had done that...*', '*It would be better if I had this thing rather than what I've actually got...*' Although such a critical review can help us to manage our life situation better, it keeps us within the view of samsara, the view of existing as a 'real person' in a 'real world'.

The practice of the higher tantras and dzogchen is to help us *relax* into existence, to be *present* into our existence as it reveals itself, recognising that we are not in charge of our lives, *we are not the masters of our existence, but neither are we slaves to it. We are a presence which participates.*

Tantra is sometimes described as a path of transformation, in which we transform this world into the mandala of the enlightened ones. In actual fact there is no fixed world *here* to transform into something else. This world itself, when we really look at it, will reveal itself as something other than what we thought it was. Transforming something which is dynamic is very easy—much easier than trying to make something static into something dynamic.

This is why impermanence is the key teaching of all the different buddhist schools. On an outer level we understand impermanence to mean that our environment and our possessions and our bodies are impermanent and therefore we shouldn't be too attached to them. On an inner level we recognise that our thoughts and feelings and sensations are impermanent and therefore we don't need to be so caught up in them. And on a deeper level, we could say a more open level, we can see that everything that occurs is dynamic, moving and changing, without ever becoming 'something' as such.

Our meeting together here is also impermanent; it comes to an end now. For those who like, we will be here again tomorrow. For those who don't like, you will do whatever you do....

So, goodnight.