

# THE NATURE OF THOUGHT

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This evening we have a couple of hours to look a little bit at the nature of thought according to the Tibetan buddhist tradition. In buddhism, thought is very often seen as something dangerous, yet we live in a culture which progresses in many ways: in terms of social justice, public health, education and so forth, all operating on the basis of precise critical thinking. Clearly, we are also living in a culture where there is a lot of stress, anxiety and worry. So we might have the question: *'How can we have the benefits of clear thinking, without being trapped by thought?'*

The basic principle of buddhism is that our lives become restricted due to the power of ignorance and attachment. Ignorance refers to a kind of existential in-authenticity; a way in which one is living one's life without being awake to the nature of ones own existence.

What comes between us and our own authentic existence is a miasma, a fog of thoughts, which weave in and out, linking together with sensation and affect to give us the sense of a representational self.

## **Western Ideas**

Babies, nowadays, are often conceived as a kind of accident, but in the past people maybe thought a little bit more before they made babies. In any case, pregnancy can bring a maelstrom, a turmoil of thoughts, of hopes and anxieties, feelings of not being ready, of being unprepared. So by the time the baby has come out of the mother's body it has already been the subject of thousands and thousands of thoughts. Then as soon as the parents see the baby they talk to it and they say things about it and they develop even more thoughts about it.

## **We are born into language**

In this way we all come into language because people talk about us and talk to us. Our mothers, our fathers, our family, people speak and we accustom ourselves to language. Language involves the development of a particular type of thinking.

Gradually though this interweaving of interpersonal relatedness, our entry into language and our developing capacity for thought, we develop an identity. In this way we come into being through interaction with the thoughts of others, and to a large part through the internalisation of the thoughts of others. So we build up our sense of self, of who we are, like a kind of quilt stitched together, or a carpet that is woven. By taking all these little bits and pieces, we make certain shapes and patterns where some things link, and other things we try to keep far apart.

The sense of self that we develop in this way is fundamentally fragile; it doesn't take much to make us unhappy. Somebody simply has to say: *'Oh you are getting a bit fat'* and we might feel insulted. Like this, have to keep repairing this blanket of the 'self' because in the course of the day bits get pulled out, bits get torn and we want to have something to wrap around ourselves - we are wrapping our self around our self.

The more we develop in our lives, the more experiences we have, the more possibilities we have of relating to other people in a wide range of ways. Yet moment-by-moment we just have one chance. When we speak we can only say one thing at a time, we may have thought about different possibilities but the words come out in one particular way.

I think we are often aware that within ourselves there is a lot of potentiality, there is a lot of creativity and a lot of flexibility. Yet when we come into situations, particularly with other people, we often find ourselves behaving in ways, which seem very restricted and with which we are not very happy. It is not uncommon for people to think after an event of other things they could have said, reworking the situation in their mind: *'if only, if only.'*

## Words create a field of representations

Even from our western point of view we can see how I, if I'm telling my story, I'm having to bring together a series of thoughts, coming into language, to describe myself in a particular way. Then again once we have learned to speak it is very difficult not to speak! Words come like a great fountain, like a spring inside us. Words are marvellous because they allow so many possibilities of moving and changing and yet at the same time they create a field of representations.

No matter how precisely we try to link our experience into our thoughts and then into our language, we are faced with the fact that other people have the freedom to make of our words what they will. So with my friend in London, when I say to her, *'I'm tired.'* she says, *'Oh, you work too much.'* Now when I say, *'I am tired.'* I don't want any comments about work. I want the fact that I am tired, to be important.

It is often the case, that when we express ourselves we would like other people to be open and empty, like an empty mirror, or a black board so that we could make our marks the way we want. And that they would receive us like that, just the way we intend.

In Britain at the moment Mr Blair is waging a war against terrorism. In terms of the traditional labour party in Britain he is himself a terrorist and uses all kinds of nasty blackmailing techniques to get into power, to stay in power, nowadays stopping a fellow Scotsman (*I am Scottish*) Gordon Brown from becoming prime minister.

Politics is all about deception because politics is about the management, the manipulation of representations. Modern politicians all have what we call spin-doctors, these public relations people, who will always tilt news or information in order to optimise the position of the ruling party.

## We are our own spin-doctor

But we ourselves have our own spin-doctor; we ourselves tell the stories about ourselves in ways to optimise, to develop the best reading of ourselves by others. We try to cover up the things we don't do well and we try to maintain a set of representations of ourselves, which is both powerful out and

allows us to hide inside. Because so much rests on the story - if you can present your story and convince other people that your story is correct then you gain a lot of power. On a large canvas we can see more easily how nation states create images of themselves, which they then try to convince the world to accept.

But very often the representation, the story which is presented, then becomes an incredible burden. For example, in Great Britain, which if you have visited recently is clearly not a very great country, there is a very strong commitment to being great. We have to hang out with the Americans, the Americans are the most powerful nation and there is little Britain beside it wagging its tail and saying 'we are with you shoulder to shoulder'. But in Britain we have almost no kindergartens. In London if you want to send a child to a kindergarten you have to pay every week about the equivalent of 400dm. Plus our hospital system is falling apart; we don't have any proper schoolteachers; we don't have nurses in the hospitals but we are still '*Great Britain*'.

## The burden of our attachment to a representation

So you can see the terrible burden of attachment to a representation – which at one time was maybe a cause of expansion and joy but which has now becomes a prison – because you have to keep spending resources to show the outside world that all is wonderful, all is powerful but inside everything is crumbling and falling apart.

I have just been reading a psychological biography of Elvis Presley. When he was young his father was not around very much; he was often unemployed and was in prison for some years. Elvis became the main support for his mother, who was alcoholic. As he grew up, in his early teens he started to have some success playing music and then he got more and more success and he became this wonderful, wonderful thing that his mother had created. So Elvis loves his mother and his mother loves him so much and they live in this huge mutual idealisation. He never criticises her drinking and she never criticises anything he does.

However when he comes out more into the world, his mother dies and he feels the enormous loss of this warm adoring presence around him. So he surrounds himself with people who will always please him, always do whatever he wants. If he wakes up at four o'clock in the morning the whole group wakes up and they do whatever he wants. Inside this he never talks of any of his problems. People who knew him well, when they were interviewed later would say: '*Even when he was completely out of his head on pills he wouldn't talk about his problems, he would just order more pizza and get people to play music.*'

This is a good example of how we create an image of ourselves and become so attached to that image as it gathers over the years many deep psychological associations, that to revise it, to let some fresh air in, would feel as if we are ripping pieces of ourselves apart.

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## Buddhist ideas

So let us now bring what we have been discussing more into relation to traditional buddhist ideas. With the arising of ignorance, which within the traditional buddhist view happens many, many millions of lifetimes ago, there is a slippage out of a natural state of integration.

### The three modes of reality

In that state of integration, there are three main modes, which are moving together without any interruption. One is a state of openness, in which there is nothing of substance whatsoever; a relaxed open spaciousness, in which there is a presence of pure being devoid of any being *'this or that'*. Arising together with this is an energetic potential for expression, qualities of light and sound, essentially qualities of vibration, in which everything is possible. And then the third modality is that of precise manifestation, in which moment-by-moment experience occurs just as it is, being *'this or that'*. These three are inseparable.

Imagine an open stage and then situated on that stage, an orchestra, and then the moment when the orchestra begins to play a particular piece. While the orchestra is playing, there is still moment-by-moment the possibility of them playing something else. So if you had a post-modern deconstructive conductor he might suddenly jump from one script to another, but generally speaking it is a symphony. It begins, it goes through its various movements and it comes to an end. And while the music is playing if the audience is open and attentive they will become interwoven with the production of the music. Being caught up in these moments of progression of the particular score, they may have all kinds of movements in themselves in relation to the music. They may be transported into other countries, or see colours, or feel sensation in the body and so forth. The three modalities are a bit like that.

But what is very usually lost is the sense that the stage is also, in its naked potentiality, open. Because say if the orchestra is on tour, at the end of the evening the road managers come on, they take all the instruments off, everything is taken away and the next evening that stage is hosting a play. So the stage was in its own nature empty throughout. The orchestra even at the moment when they start to play something from Mozart, had the potential to play many other scores.

In Britain where we don't have very good funding for orchestras, many orchestra which have played for many, many years in a hall, start to realize that they may no longer be able to afford the use of that hall. For example, in Scotland, Scottish ballet has a big financial crisis at the moment. There is a big discussion whether they will be able to continue and whether its musical backing can continue independently. So here is a group of people who have been using an environment for a long time and feel an identification with it, but suddenly, it could vanish and the space would be empty again for something else to occur.

## What is meant in Buddhism by 'ignorance'

So let's look at the understanding of buddhist ignorance in relation to this kind of example. When we have these three modalities: the open; the expressive or the radiant; and the precise manifestation, when ignorance arises, the sense of integration with openness is forgotten. There is a kind of collapse, or an exited falling into the level of manifestation. There follows an over-attachment to what manifests and a loss of the sense of spaciousness which is inseparable from it.

When manifestation is integrated with the open spaciousness, although it is precise, it is 'this' and not any other 'thing', 'this thing' is merging from and inseparable from openness. But when these separate out the creativity continues flowing; or almost like sparkling water with the bubbles coming up and disturbing the surface. Moment- by- moment our energy is bringing us into changing expression in the world, but because it has lost its base in emptiness it seeks to find its own base.

Now the quality of this openness, which is always there but is now forgotten, is infinite. So what we are looking for is a ground or a basis, which has this infinite quality. We have lost the direct experience of the openness, but we then seek to find it in things, which are actually quite finite. In this separation out, this slipping away from this open aspect of this tripartite being, there is also an anxiety which leads to a kind of desperation in our attachment to what ever is there as being a true essence.

### **BEING BORN: AS EXAMPLE**

So then we have the experience, if we are going to be born in a human body, of coming into the situation where our father and mother are having sex, of ending up in the womb and then of coming out of the body, still with this desperate need to find a sense of self, a centre, a basis. We come into a world full of language, of thoughts, of ideas of representation and this need in us and the powerful investment of representations all around us - these come together and out of this we develop our sense of identity.

So clearly it is not that this level of manifestation – of being something in the world and of the particularities of the world as it is – is inherently wrong. What is wrong is that it gets over-invested with a desperate reification, with the belief that there is an inherent substantial self-essence in things.

### **NEUROSES: AS EXAMPLE**

Another example is if we take the concept of neuroses; a neurosis is a pattern which has been established usually in childhood and which continues as a way that an individual responds to the world. So we can say that neuroses are unpleasant, they usually have unpleasant qualities when they are manifesting; they are not a cause of happiness. Somebody may be workaholic, or they may spend a lot of time in worry and anxiety. They know that they get no benefit from the worry but they feel compelled to do it.

Worry functions as a way of trying to maintain a sense of security in the world but in the world we live in, things change moment-by-moment; so nothing on

the level of manifestation is particularly reliable. Perhaps I feel I have to keep worrying in order to make sure that everything is safe. Perhaps I worry about my children and I think: *'Oh god, what are they doing, Friday night is coming, the weekend, will they be out? Will they be taking bad substances?'* If the kids are old enough to go out partying they are certainly old enough to tell you to mind your own business. You don't have so much power over the children, they are in a *de facto*, in a *'by their own decision way'* – free. So what is the function of the parental worry and anxiety? Then when the kids come back you start to give them a bad time, even though you know that there is no point to do that. But you have got all this steam built up inside.

So knowing that this is not efficient, why do people, so many, many people continue to behave in this way? There is something quite seductive in the nature of anxious thinking. The thought arises and passes and then the next one arises and then the next one arises and if we can keep them coming fast enough, it looks as if there is an almost solid surface to walk across. Inside that I can feel what I am doing is very important.

But if I slow it down, a gap opens and then comes the question: *'What am I doing?'* Then it raises questions about *me*. It is much easier to worry and worry about the children rather than to think: *'Now the children are leaving home, who am I? What is my life?'*

It is the same with any object of attachment; it has the function of a kind of mirror, which is reflecting us back to ourselves in terms of the image which we are trying to maintain. If we stop then there is a question and in the question there is a space. But we have been used to, for a very long time, all our life – and if we so believe perhaps for past lives too – to trying to fill space.

Ever since we separated out from this dimension of openness, space feels like the enemy, it feels like the thing that will dissolve us rather than having the capacity to be integrated as part of ourselves. So thought – whose nature is to be like a beautiful sunset or a rainbow in the sky, something which manifests clearly and precisely but without any inherent essence and also as something ephemeral – is clung onto as if it was somehow going to provide a basis for solidity, a basis to rest the burden of myself.

Most of the time, we live in a state of intoxication with thought, thought is very exciting especially if you are a kind of bourgeois intellectual. It's as if the product could itself be the seed of its own creation. However, what happens is that it becomes the seed of the next creation, the next thought. In this way thought leads to thought, leads to thought, leads to thought, but thought never finds its own source.

So in buddhism the function of meditation is to allow the re-integration of these three modes of reality.

## Meditation allows the re-integration of the three modes

These modes operate on a cosmological level but more particularly as our own human body. Spaciousness, openness is the real nature of our mind.

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The mind which gives rise to thoughts, feelings, sensations and so on is itself not a substantial entity. But usually we don't experience the real nature of our mind because we experience our mind as the continuous process of thought. In the springtime if you go up in the high valleys, everything is covered in flowers and so you don't see the rock.

Our intelligence is turned to the task of maintaining flowers all year round - we resist the winter. So for example, we all have winter in our life, we have it at night when we fall asleep; everything winds down, all the rich creativity of the day vanishes and most of us just are gone, we don't remember anything until the morning. Maybe some trace dream is there but that is all. Or else we get a bit down, a bit depressed, not so much is happening for us, it is not very exciting. Then usually we want to get out of that state, we make a statement to ourselves about it: *'I don't like this'* and then we go and get some help to get out of it, we talk to our friends, we talk to our doctor or so forth.

What we very often find it difficult to do is to take a direct phenomenological interest in our states of depression, to look directly at what it is to be depressed, to go into the experience, rather than trying to get out of it. We use words and language to fend it off, keep it at a distance. So that is, in some ways, the nature of mind.

Then the second dimension that of energy, or potentiality, manifests in our body in terms of the voice. Most of us have very under developed voices, the vocal cords are not very exercised or developed. More particularly, our breathing is not very deep and relaxed.

This level of voice in the Tibetan tradition means: 'all of breath' and breath includes not just the lungs breathing in and out but the impact this has on the whole of the energetic system of the body, all these small energy channels which pervade the body. When we breathe in a bad way and when we constrict our voice by our psychological states that make us timorous or angry, or whatever, we go out of healthy vibration.

The third level of precise manifestation, represents the body itself with its sense organs. Usually we come out into the world with our senses already captured by the assumptions held by our core consciousness. In the buddhist tradition each of the sense organs has its own consciousness and there is a central consciousness in the heart which organises and collates the information coming from these five sense consciousnesses. So if this organising consciousness or mentation is full of assumptions and representations, maintaining a narrative of self-identity, then our existence through our senses is already foreclosed. It is already limited through these bales of assumptions that we bring out in our attention towards the world around us.

This is the way that ignorance gives rise to these solidifying thoughts, these appropriative thoughts, blocking us both to the innate openness of our own being and to the vibrant aliveness present in the world around us.

## THE FUNCTION OF MEDITATION

So the function of the meditation is firstly to open the possibility of recognising this core open nature. Secondly, it is to relax the energetic tension so that the over-investment in thought can be relaxed, and thoughts can become a vehicle for creativity and playfulness, rather than serious empire building on behalf of the ego. Thirdly, it is to clear away the veils covering the senses so that one has a more direct, less mediated relationship with the world. One can then trust the quickness and directness of the immediate moment of the encounter, so that there is less need for planning and worry and so forth.

Psychology has the concept of parental children, that is to say, children who grow up in a family system where the parents are not very committed. The child recognises early on that if they are to have any parenting from their parents, they will have to parent their parents. Similarly we could say that with the arising of ignorance, the ego, which is the child of this spacious openness, becomes a parental child; it becomes a child trying to carry a task which is too much for it, trying to make the world safe with lots of anxiety and worry and striving. And so the task of meditation, of awakening to the integration of these three natures, is to allow the child to relax, to play again and give up this burden of responsibility.

So maybe we can see if there are any thoughts or questions about that?

## Questions and answers

*Question:* I have a daughter who is two years of age and she is just developing her ego or sense of ego,, which on one hand is very exciting and on the other hand it is actually quite tragic because I see that she is somehow really losing her freedom. On the one hand I feel I have to support her in developing her ego and on the other hand I am really trying to figure out if there is something that I can do to help her and not to lose so much freedom.

*James:* I guess the main thing is play because play is the way in which children take the burden of reality that they encounter and try to dissolve it a little bit. They understand very well that this life is just a game; that our existence is like theatre. Often as parents in our anxiety we want to make the world too serious for them. Of course the world is serious but it is also just a drama. Sometimes when children are a bit sad or unhappy or just because they are full of energy they develop a kind of imaginary friend.

They imagine that they have this special little other who plays with them and that can be very healthy because in fact the practice of tantra, where you visualise gods and goddesses, is really just to have an imaginary friend. So that in an instant out of the clear blue sky, little Padmasambhava will come and play with you sometime. Then when it is time to come in and have your tea he goes back to his house.

*Question:* My question is how do we really have the freedom of free will - I mean that has been for sometime a big question in my life so where does the free will start?

*James:* In the West this notion between free will and determinism has a main ongoing discussion in philosophy. I think from a buddhist point of view until we are free of karma, we don't really have a free will. What we have usually when we think of it as free will, is that this veil of karma. The veil of assumptions, impulses and tendencies from the past is a little bit light so we don't feel too constrained by it, but we kind of identify with it and then we feel that we are making a free choice. But very often when I feel that I am making a free choice, other people can see that I am just doing a number, I am just being James again.

As far as I am aware, there is not concept of free will in buddhism because this dimension of openness is not a possession, so it is not a site of the will, it is not *me* deciding to do something; it is not a kind of existential freedom in that sense. Then energy is arising with infinite possibilities. Which one comes out into the moment of precise manifestation is decided either by the veil of my karma and my assumption, (which is not freewill), or by the attunement to the lived phenomenological environment, where due to the urge of another, (if you like, as a compassion, or as a flowing responsiveness), I find myself saying or doing something.

Like my hands are having about in the air now - why they are up there I do not know? So we find ourselves doing things but it is not really an agency decision, there is not a 'me' inside 'doing this'. I come to myself after the fact of my being, which is given to me as a gift out of this dimension of openness.

*Question:* It is given to us?

*James:* Yes. In dzogchen, they say there is one ground and two paths: the path of *samsara*, ignorance, restriction and the path of *nirvana*, openness and freedom. But they come from the same ground, which is emptiness. So it is not that we are taking a Manichean view and are trying to split good and evil into opposites; it is a non-dual integration.

*Question:* How can I realise whether I am actually in a state of openness, or if I am just performing a state of openness, trying to sell this as the 'big thing'?

*James:* Well one clear path is through analysis of phenomena, which helps to clear away some of the weeds from the garden. Then you have the meditation, which is a tool to shovel all the shit off, when you start to see something underneath. But you really need both: some kind of clarity – being able to think sharply rather than just to have thoughts about something – and then to use meditation of various kinds to utilise the flow of energy; to allow it to harmonise back from its fragmented vibratory cacophony down through to some basic vibration and then into stillness.

There is just a moment when you can see something and then of course it all starts up again because these three modes are turning together all the time. It is not as if we have a cluttered room here but then we can go next door into the zen room where it is all very empty. This openness inside us is not like a room you can go into for half an hour, and then come back. The three modes are turning together; so you switch it off for just a second and then it is back again.

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A lot of the writing on Buddhism gives the sense that if we could just calm our mind, we would all be very open - there will be nothing there – but it is not like that.

## **The difference between religion and meditation**

In buddhism there is a culture of hope and of valuing, a kind idealising of the Buddha and the gods and the whole system. So it is very much a tilted-up system, where you are looking up to all these wonderful things and hoping one day you will go up there.

This is useful for religious purposes but religion and meditation are not the same. Religions deal with representations, with the valuing of representations, for social, cultural and economic purposes. A monastery is an economic system which in order to maintain itself has to have high value. Like a football team, if it has some success in scoring goals, people will go to it and then there will be money to buy better footballers, then they will go up in the league and so you get a positive acceleration. You have exactly the same in the monastic structure. If you have a monastery with good scholars and good yogis, people come to ask for teachings and in return offer butter and tsampa. This can operate like an exchange of commodities, to move food from some stomachs to other stomachs.

Now meditation is a little bit different from this because you are trying to recognise your own mind. The nature of the mind is not so much that it is something marvellous and bright and shining, but that it is something very familiar and very close. It is like your own breath, like the pulse of your own heart, something very, very close to you. We get all these lamas wandering around Europe offering 'introduction to the nature of the mind'. They sit on the throne and they hold up a crystal, *'Did you see the nature of your mind?'*

What we are trying to recognise is actually something very subtle. It doesn't come with a big bang or neon lights or on a throne with a hat - it is something almost unrecognisable. That is why the founding Buddha of the dzogchen tradition, Kuntu Zangpo is dark blue in colour because dark blue is close to black. Black is the colour of ignorance and dark blue is the colour of awakening. It is not bright shining white, it is not a polar opposite. It is very, very close.

So to recognise it we have to look in a different way. It is not like looking at something 'out there', something, which would be shining and wonderful but familiar because it was a representation. We are accustomed to recognising representations.

The problem is what we are looking for is not a representation; it is something other, which is our 'true self'. So there is a turn in that, which requires a particular sensitive aesthetically attuned kind of looking and that is really what meditation is designed to bring.

## Questions and answers

*Question:* Would it be possible that that what you recognise in meditation could be something very familiar, that you are familiar with for as long as you have been carrying this body around? For instance you have been emphasising that we actually are born into certain social systems, with certain languages and these systems represent certain concepts with which we start to identify, which help us to build up the illusion that we are surrounded by, and are ourselves, solid things and so on. And in this process of socialising or socialisation, as a teenager one may feel quite dynamic about all this and may have quite a 'life feeling' about this. Then of course we will not be able to find words for all these experiences that we have because we hadn't met a dzogchen teacher by then.

But for instance our parents tell us: *'What you feel about the world, what you think about the world is completely wrong because you take everything much too easy, you are irresponsible and so on – the world is much more serious than you think'*. Could it actually be the fact that in meditation we find experiences which are very playful, which are very light and which might just a couple of years before, have seemed to be something which absolutely wrong? Could that be?

*James:* Yes, very much so. And part of being able to survive in the world is to be able to speak the language of the world. In Tibet there were many people who lived in caves and who were a little bit kind of wild, I little bit sort of *lost* - but also very *found*. In our culture there is often less permission to live that. So part of this time, this dimension we find ourselves living in, is that if we are going to try to open ourselves, we also have to know how to stay in the world. And this is what I particularly like about this style of meditation. It is not saying that you have to retreat from your ordinary life, it is not saying your ordinary life is a bad thing, it is saying that something is a little bit out of kilter. So, like a kind of osteopath, it is just getting you back into alignment, and then you have a bit more freedom.

*Question:* Could you explain what is mind? I still don't know what you mean when you say 'mind' or what is the general meaning of the word 'mind' in Buddhism.

*James:* There are many, many meanings of the word mind. There are many, many terms in the Tibetan language for mind. Basically mind here represents a kind of noetic capacity, a basic capacity to know something. Just as the sky at night is dark, then when the sun starts to rise and the light goes through it, the sky fills with light, in the same way when you look into your mind and you try to find your mind, you don't find anything. It is just open and open and yet magically, we are aware, we are present, experience arises for us. The one who is experiencing the mind cannot be found as a substance and yet is always fresh, returned in each moment to the presence of being.

That in the dzogchen view is the nature of mind and this mind is unborn, it has never become something in particular, it never dies. Sometimes the sky is full of clouds, or rainbows; thoughts, feelings and so on arise. Othertimes the sky

is just empty, it has no substance. So it is not one thing that we can describe, since it is not an entity.

The more you try to describe the mind, the more you can fill yourself with assumptions and thoughts and you become like a colonialist trying to take over some territory which is actually an open ever-fresh domain of being. Of course, we have the way mind comes in through these other dimensions in a precise moment, in which my mind is the basis for thinking about things. It includes memory, it includes judgement, perception but these are qualities arising from this basic openness.

So the mind is open, radiant and precise, just like the sky with the sun and then the heat and warmth of the rays. These three aspects arise together; they cannot be chopped up and separated.

It is not an entity. Our biggest problem is that we try to find it as if it was an entity. For example I can know what my hand is in a particular way; I can look at it, I could have it x-rayed. If I wanted, I could cut the skin off and look inside. But if we try to do that with our mind, we find something completely different. The mind is not an object, yet it is the basis for the illumination of the world of objects.

That briefly is a little bit about the Tibetan definition of mind.

End