

# Befriending the orphaned self

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## Excerpts

*...We are fundamentally unknowable since we are all the lost children of the ever-fecund, the ever-generous mother of all the buddhas. The womb of the great mother, of prajnaparamita, is emptiness. That is to say, at the heart of all the buddhas there is nothing at all...*

*...What buddhism means when it refers to ignorance is the active process of ignoring the simplicity of the given and the substitution in its place of ever more elaborate confectioneries of meaning...*

*...The ego is very good at hiding in the energy. As long as there is some energy movement, the ego can find a little niche, a little corner, and just hide in there. This is why the primary focus in dzogchen is on the mind itself – to relax and open and be with the spaciousness of awareness which is always here and now....*

*...Our primary focus in dzogchen practice is to relax and open. Gradually we then find that the space of the mind is truly infinite, that we are nothing and everything. And then we are not orphans anymore...*

It's a great pleasure to be here. I have had the good fortune to spend quite a bit of time in the past with Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche and I learned many things from him. Over the years I've seen how his work has developed and grown in so many beautiful directions. So it's a good feeling to be here in one of his centres.

Tonight I want to say a little bit about the understanding of the self or the ego in relation to dzogchen. The general focus of dzogchen is on the nature of awareness or *rigpa*. This is the *vajra*, or unchanging basis, of our existence. This we hear like some echo from the other side of the mountain but we ourselves generally live in the valley of darkness, struggling every day to make sense of what our life is all about.

## Confectioneries of supposed meaning

The basis of our problem is ignorance. Ignorance is not a state that we find ourselves in. We are not the passive victims of a curse. The paradox is that ignorance is the activity of ignoring, while awareness is not an activity at all. The business that we find ourselves caught up in - the business of our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, sensations, memories, hopes, plans and so on - all these tools and resources out of which we struggle to make sense of our lives and find a meaningful way to live, become the tools of our own self-obscuration.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with thoughts or memories or feelings. The issue is: how do we stand in relation to them? Our ego, or our individual and personal sense of self, is like an orphan. Generally 'orphan' refers to a child whose parents are dead. In the past orphans were very vulnerable. They had no one to protect them and they were often exploited. It's the fate of orphans to have to find their own way.

It is like that for us when we are born. Even if you are born into a well-functioning family and you receive love and kindness, it's very rare that the intentions of the parents coincide with the developing agenda of the child. It's the fate of children to feel misunderstood. "*Why does nobody understand what it is like to be me?*" That's because there is only "me". You are not me. I am me. I alone am me. I alone am lonely me. I look out of my eyes and - all these people! I see: not me, not me, not me... But at least I can see who is not me. I can't see **me**. "Not me" is easier to see than "me".

This is the situation we find ourselves in and because we can't see "me", we imagine "me". We imagine things about ourselves: strengths and weaknesses, in fact we imagine a whole sense of identity. What is called *samsara* is the fecundity, the richness, the productivity of the imagination. When we imagine things, they are not real. We go to the theatre to see someone's invention. Somebody has imagined a family drama. It is created. It has no essence to it, its truth is conventional. At school we begin learning to read, moving on to reading plays and novels. We learn to believe in things which are not true. This is a

particular quality of our mind. The more we get caught up in the story, the more the characters become rounded and rich and multi-textured. It is as if they are true people.

The reason we are able to imagine that the characters in a novel are real is because we have imagined that our mother and father are real. We imagine our school teachers are real. We imagine that our daily activities are real. The word "real" indicates something having an essence, a substance. We see people as entities, as individuals. And then we get to know people. As we get to know people we can say more about them, because generally the process of getting to know someone is to develop the capacity to project more of our fantasies onto them.

Essentially human beings have no essence. They are beyond summation, beyond adding up, beyond totalisation. Human beings exist as excess. When you think you know someone, they leak out into another shape. We know that in this world it is very dangerous when people really believe that they know who we are. All dictatorships are concerned to know the citizens in the country very well. They operate on the basis of the perverse equation between the information that is in the file and the actuality of the lived person. However no one can be caught inside a concept in that way. When you catch someone, when you seem to know who they are, you have successfully managed to substitute a representation for an actuality. And this is part of our existential loneliness. We move inside ourselves and around with other people, exchanging narrative depictions of representation.

This is the basic meaning or trajectory of ignorance in the buddhist traditions. It's an active process of ignoring the simplicity of the given and the substitution in its place of ever more elaborate confectioneries of meaning.

The ego is moving. The ego yearns for stability, for arrival; to be sorted in some ways; to be at peace; to know who we are... and yet we are always disturbed. When we look to the past there is so many unfinished projects that somehow never came together. When we look to the future there are so many possibilities. The ego asserts itself by making choices.

- Do you want tea or coffee?

- I'll take tea, thank you!

- We have ten kinds of tea. Would you prefer morning tea? I know it's the evening, but the morning tea is also very nice!

Consumer capitalism is the richness of the imagination of the ego. Commodity-fetishism is everywhere: the idea that a thing will somehow bring a deepening of our life, that the more I have, the more I am because now I can talk about my life in terms of all my possessions, be they aesthetic qualities or objects in the world. The ego does this because the ego is always hungry.

# We are the lost children of the mother of all the buddhas

From the very beginning our mind has been empty, which means that the mind is not a thing. It's not something that can be measured; it has no height or depth or width, it has no colour or shape. You can't find it as something. And yet it's the primordial given. In Tibetan it's *kadag*, pure from the very beginning. That is to say, it's simple, it's not a construct; it's not put together from bits and pieces. This is the missing mother of the ego.

But the ego in its assertion of individuality and autonomy presents itself as being self-existing. Even children as young as two are determined to be in charge. They tell the big people what they are going to do, who they are going to be and how to play the game. For many children it is extremely humiliating to accept that they are quite small. When we spend time with small children we see how quickly there is a sliding, an elision between a kind of helpless needy dependence and the sudden assertion of "*I am who I am and don't tell me what to do.*" The child survives by keeping these two aspects of themselves apart. When we are children, we experience shame when these two parts are brought together, which is to say that our identity develops from denial, from a splitting, from a not-knowing. We hide our faults and weaknesses. We develop a persona we would like other people to enjoy or be intrigued by. This leads to ever-increasing fragmentation of our inner world, paralleled by the ever-increasing fragmentation of the outer world. On a good day there is some kind of collaboration between the two and we have a degree of polyphony. But on a bad day when we don't collaborate with ourselves we have cacophony. In order to function in the world, however, we have to maintain the illusion that we are indeed a unitary subject, that our name refers to a particular person.

It is our knowability which makes us normal and yet we are fundamentally unknowable since we are the lost children of the ever-fecund, the ever-generous mother of all the buddhas. The womb of the great mother - *Prajnaparamita* - is emptiness. That is to say, at the heart of all the buddhas there is nothing at all.

This is represented symbolically by the white letter "A". "A" is an empty sound. It is empty in the sense that it is the basic vowel which is taken by all the consonants in the Sanskrit and Tibetan alphabets. All other sounds are seen as variations or developments of "A". So we have "A", "Mama", "Papa" and so on. But when this basic openness or emptiness or receptivity is hidden from us by the turmoil of the creativity of that very openness, we find that the very energy that we are using to try to bring clarity into our life functions instead to bring more obscuration.

For this reason we can not think our way out of *samsara*. *Samsara* is not an intellectual problem to be solved. It's not that if we build up more and more knowledge or more and more information we would somehow develop a total overview. So long as the unbroken givenness of the integration of the child and the mother is not apparent to us we engage in the work of integration. However from the beginning

there has been no separation between the mother and the child so where do thoughts come from? Where do our feelings come from? We all have these as experiences; they arise; they arise and pass. They seem to come to us. Where do they come from? They come from our mind. They come from our mind to us. Oh! So then it seems that I am separate from my mind? My mind is the factory that makes the thoughts and feelings that I grab hold of?

This is the mood of the orphaned ego. "It's all up to me." "I have to do it." "I have to make things happen." I don't really think my own thoughts, I just grab them like a street child who is eating food out of garbage cans. The nature of the ego is to steal. Who does the ego steal from? From itself. This is very strange. Moreover this is not necessary. The buddha has tried to explain in many, many teachings why we should trust a little bit more.

## Trading something for nothing yet getting everything

From the very beginning the ground of our manifestation, the ground of our existence, is pure, is open. 'Open' in the sense that it has no boundary or limit to it. It can't be defined as this or that and therefore it is the root of everything. 'Everything' includes us. I am the fruit of my mind. I am the child of my mind. My mind was there before I was born, because I was born from my mind. In the Zen tradition they ask a koan: "What was your face before you were born?" That was the face of your mother, which is emptiness. Emptiness is like the sky. The sky is like the emptiness of the mirror. The mirror has nothing of its own inside it. The potentiality of the mirror is its emptiness. It's because the mirror is empty that it can show everything. So there is no contradiction or there is a non-duality between nothing and everything. But in between these two, separating them apart, is a little island that says: "*I am me! I am something! I am someone! I am the unique specificity of me.*" This anxious assertion of inherent self-identity is the very thing which gives rise to our suffering. Something is actually nothing.

This is a very wonderful economic system, much better than anything the World Bank can offer.

- You give us something, we will give you nothing, but you can trade the nothing in for anything and everything.
- But I've got something. Can't I have nothing and something?
- Don't worry! You will always have something, but not this something.

In *dzogchen* this is called *lhundrub*. *Lhundrub* means that something is always happening. The mirror is always filling with images: sounds, colours, the flow of experience never stops. If you have nothing you will always have something, but you can't choose what something. It comes as it comes.

The *dzogchen* texts say again and again, "*chi shar rang drol*", whatever arises goes free by itself. The obstacle which keeps us from freedom is the anxious retraction which says: "*I've got to hang onto what I've got.*" Grasping, attaching, investing phenomena with particular importance is the work of the ego. We live our lives through making choices. Looking around this room, I don't think any two people are

wearing the same clothes. There are a lot of shops selling a lot of things, because “*I want to find the one thing that suits me. I want to express myself.*”

Generally speaking, in the teachings of buddhism expressing one’s inner self is not considered to be a very good idea. Rather we should start with the outside. How I should behave, how I should dress, how I should I speak in a particular situation. We don't need to know in advance what to do. That is to say, our behaviour manifests contextually. It is the co-emergence of subject and object, given the dynamic nature of non-duality. Fitting in, being connected, is probably more soothing and reassuring to us than being ourselves. When we fit in we take our place within. We belong, and our function is given to us simply by belonging. But if we don't find our way into belonging, because we can't attend to the experiential field, it is because we find ourselves stuck in ourselves. The ego's need to work so hard to generate identity is the very means by which it is endlessly avoiding belonging.

Right from the early days of buddhism there was the idea to take refuge in *buddha, dharma* and *sangha*. *Sangha* means a meeting, a coming together. When two rivers meet together in India it's called a *sangham*. When the rivers have run together for some distance the water is the same.

It's our own desire for apartness which blocks us to participation. One of the great things that Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche has done is to bring new ways of allowing people to participate together: through Vajra Dance, through Joyful Dances... These are invitations to participation; not to be a lonely hero, not to be sitting meditating for hours all alone on a mat, struggling to overcome obstacles.

The nature of ignorance is that it creates the split of subject and object. When you look at the waves in the ocean you see them rising to the crest and then descending into the trough. If you don't have the crest you won't have the trough. They look separate, but they are fundamentally united, they are co-emergent. Likewise with subject and object: the object makes us the subject; our subjectivity generates the object.

Coming here now to Cologne I see some people I have met before and I see some people I have not. Some people I greet with a nod of the head, some with a handshake, some with a hug. This is the spontaneous choreography of the energy of emergence. Due to causes and conditions we find ourselves responding or retreating a little bit, but it's all just like the wave in the ocean: when you have a conversation with someone you speak and they listen, then they speak and you listen.

Our life is pulsatory. You can identify two polarities in any pulsation. In a conversation you could say: “I am talking with you, now you are talking to me.” It’s as if I'm taking something out of me and giving it to you and then you take something out of you and give it to me. This is the sort of conversation you have at two o'clock in the morning when you are very drunk! You can't really tell who the other person is, but when you have a connection with someone the words are emerging in the middle. Of course they have to come out of a mouth on one side or the other, but it is co-emergent in the sense that firstly there is the energetic connection. We have the being-here-together-ness, the connectivity, which is vehicle or

the medium through which words can move hither and thither. The semantic content is not the key factor. Rather, it's the joint emergence of receptivity, of availability.

Dzogchen often describes meditating “sky to sky”. There is the sense of the space in front of you and the space of the mind and thoughts and feelings are just moving like little clouds or butterflies through that space. This, of course, can occur with other people. Other people don't exist. That is to say, none of us exists as an entity, as a thing. We are potential. We talk in different ways with friends or with a boss at work. You talk with a small child in a way differently from how you talk with your grandmother. That is to say, we are situationally emergent, at least when we are functioning in a reasonable way. What we call 'neurosis' and 'psychosis' is a limitation on situational connectivity.

All psychiatric disorders are forms of preoccupation. Preoccupation is a foreclosure: before I meet you I am already enclosed, encapsulated in my own concerns, and because you are somewhat opaque to me, I'm going to tell my story; I'm going to enact my obsessionality, my depression, my anxiety, whatever. My story is never fresh. It is always stale, habitual, a procedure which has been run before, which is one of the reasons why *samsara* is a sad and lonely place – because we go through the motions of being ourselves, showing ourselves through the display of self-representations.

This is a strange thing because the cook is, in fact, extremely talented. The cook is awareness. The ingredients, however, are very old. The cook is having to prepare the same thing again and again and again.

Our awareness or primordial ground or buddha nature is always there. In the dzogchen texts it says the mind is fresh, naked, not covered over by accumulations. It's not something situated in the progression of the three times: past to present to future. Our ego may appear to be moving through time, as a fish moves through water. We can remember what it was like to be children. We can think of what we might do in the summer or five years from now. We are moving from the past towards the future. The ego is a moving phenomena.

Many of you will know that the ordinary word for ‘sentient being’ in Tibetan is *dro wa*, that is to say, a mover, someone who is always moving. We move through the six realms of *samsara*. We get up in the morning, we move out of our bed into the bathroom, into the kitchen, out of the front door and so on. This gives us the sense of being eternal and enduring, because I am always here. But you guys come and go! So the phenomena around me are evanescent. They are dissolving in the very moment of their emergence. And actually how *I* am is similar. Not just similar, but the same. I am transient.

“*But I am me!*” This is the root lie, the root self-deception that we have. I'm always changing and mainly that is not so bad, because it makes life interesting, and yet I am me. And that 'I am me' is this core dark stupidity since it is saying that there is an essence, a thing-ness to me which will always be the same, no matter what is going on. And so I go through time, through situations, through different relationships and so on and “I'm just me”.

This is the basic narrative line of the modern novel which then runs through films. These are the stories of my story, of my development, the story of how I become me. *"But I have always been me!"* So you start to see that this little self is pretty cheating. It's very tricky to be a self since the prime aim of the ego is to survive. The ego doesn't want to die, because the ego is eternal. So then we either ignore death or we assure ourselves that we will be in heaven or paradise or some nice place. *"When I die there will be nothing at all."* 'Nothing at all' means: I won't be there, but you won't be there either! *"I'm willing to die if I kill everything else at the same time. Just nothing."*

## Birth and death in every moment

Now, just a tiny tilt away from that is the story of awareness. Awareness doesn't move. Experience moves in, through, as, from, for, to awareness. Awareness has no entry point, no border control. So rigpa is like the Schengen Agreement countries. And the ego is like Brexit. *"We're going alone! Into the darkness!"* Awareness doesn't move, everything is moving through awareness. Time doesn't exist for awareness. Awareness is the still point where everything is showing itself. This is the clarity, the *salwa* of *rigpa* inseparable from emptiness. Awareness is inseparable from what is termed the *dharmadhatu*. *Dhatu* refers to space, the infinite space in which all *dharma*s or all phenomena arise. This space of hospitality, or space of showing, is inseparable from awareness, which is inseparable from the manifestation.

*Rigpa* is sometimes compared to the sun rising in the sky. It's the illuminating quality and its energy comes out as the play of appearance. This appearance has pattern – because patterning is intrinsic to the nature of awareness patterning is self-forming; it's not a construct – and in this space of awareness there is a ceaseless flow.

For example if you do the *guruyoga* practice, just relax, find yourself in the space of the mind of all the buddhas, there is a lot going on. Some things arise which appear to be other, some things arise which appear to be self. But by staying relaxed and open there is a freedom for these aspects to come and go. By sitting in this way regularly you become aware that other is always vanishing and self is always vanishing. Because the self is self-liberating – *rangdrol* in Tibetan – you don't have to try to get rid of it or remove it. You just have to allow it to be as it is. Self is a mode of the showing of the energy of the mind of the buddha, the *dharmakaya*.

But when there is the ignoring of this intrinsic integration you get the grasping at a sense of self as if it were a thing. What I take to be "me" is dying every moment. The particular constellation of myself, my moods, my memories, whatever pattern arises in this moment is then gone. That is to say, I am an aspect of the richness of the display of the potential of awareness. And by allowing this formation to move into emptiness there is a fresh space for the next moment, and the next moment, and the next moment.



This is the quality of *lhundrub*, or instant presence, or effortless manifestation. We find ourselves participating in the unfolding of the non-dual display. And then suddenly we are preoccupied! And in that moment of preoccupation you have the birth of the ego-self.

The texts say that there is one ground, which is the unborn base of all phenomena, and two paths arising from it: The path of being present with and as the ground, the non-separation of awareness and its ground. This is the buddha-realm called the *akanishta dharmadhatu*, the highest buddha-realm where everything is the *dharmakaya*, just the happy open mind of the buddha. That is always available whereas the other path is a kind of nervous twitch in which we have a retraction onto holding on to something. "*I don't want this to go.*" But this has already gone! Because 'this' is always going. 'This' has become 'that'. I might feel that I'm getting used to this tightening up and that if I can grasp quickly enough I can make a sequencing of moments that appear to be continuous. This is an auto-intoxicating self-preoccupation. It is like old cinema film reels where you see the individual shots, the frames. Frame and a gap, frame and a gap... One is there and then it goes and another comes in. The projector speeds up the flow of this film so that it appears as a continuous image.

## Relax into the spaciousness of awareness

When we first started to meditate perhaps we all experienced with horror how busy our mind is? We are very speedy. We are turning our connection, our binding, into whatever is arising; we are turning that wheel at the rapidity that gives the sense of a seamless production.

The task is to slow it down. We have *shamatha*, *vipassana*, various different methods of meditation designed to slow down the speed of mental production so that one can start to see the constituent qualities. As you know, some kinds of meditation are primarily fixated on the object; they are concerned with the content of the mind, maybe transforming the five poisons into the five wisdoms in the tantric system or working with the prana system through the energy channels.

These are working essentially with the energy of the mind, and part of the energy of the mind is the ego. The ego is very good at hiding in the energy. As long as there is some energy movement, the ego can find a little niche, a little corner, and just hide in there. This is why the primary focus in dzogchen is on the mind itself – to relax and open and be with the spaciousness of awareness which is always here and now.

In samsara, in duality, it is as if subject and object hook together. And because of the narcissistic inflation of the ego there is little space for resting in space itself. In the traditional story of Narcissus he is out hunting with his friends one day and he becomes thirsty and goes to a small pond to drink. In the pond he sees this very charming person. "*Oh, I have never met someone like you before!*" After a while his friends say: "*Come on, it's time to go home.*" "*No, leave me alone. This is the best thing in my life!*" he

replies. Gradually he is wrapped in this bubble and as his world shrinks it becomes ever more intense. The only companion he has is Echo. She is not very good at interrupting. This is why we speak of a narcissistic structure, because it is grounded in forgetfulness of the wider field. It is highly selective and over-invested. When we are in this state, meditation is very difficult.

So what should I do? If you go to some lamas they say: "*Pray to Padmasambhava.*" Another lama might say: "*Do some Dorje Sempa.*" or "*Do some prostrations.*" or "*Offer some butterlamps.*" or "*Go to Mount Kailash.*" There are thousands upon thousands of dharma paths. Paths are very important, because a path takes you from here to there.

But we want to go from here to here! We don't need a dharma path. We need a dharma **presence**! Stay with the mind. Trust the indestructible nature, the *vajra* nature of the primordial mind itself, and whenever you seem to get lost, you won't have gone anywhere else. You are only moving within the *dharmadhatu*. Every place in the *dharmadhatu* has evenness or equal status as empty.

The texts say: "*If you go to a land of gold, all you find is gold.*" If you go to the land of awareness and you stay there, you'll find only awareness. But if you follow a thought or a feeling or a sensation, it will take you somewhere. Until you see directly that all thoughts, feelings and sensations arise as the self-display of the unborn mind itself, it is much better to return to the open mind itself. This is the way that the orphan relaxes into the womb of the mother. Then the anxiety of the orphan to be annihilated, to be lonely, to be desolate, this anxiety starts to dissolve.

This is the miraculous transformation that you find in many fables and fairy tales, for example in Hans Christian Andersen's story of the ugly duckling. This baby swan is not going to grow into a duck. The ducks know, and tell him: "*You are not a duck.*" Then the hens say: "*You are not a hen.*" It goes off very lonely and sad. "*I don't belong anywhere.*" and swims out into the middle of a lake and says: "*I want to die. I'm going to drown myself.*" But then he sees three swans flying in the sky above. He looks at them in terror, they are so big and grand and beautiful. When they land on the water and swim up to him and he thinks: "*They are going to kill me!*" But they say: "*Hello, little swan!*" That's a lovely story.

This is also the story of awakening. As long as you think you are a chicken, you are not going to do very well. Likewise, as long as we think: "*I am a human being, I'm born in this place, these are my friends and this is what I do*", we are trying to become fully ourselves inside a fragmented identity. We don't fit. This is the root feeling of lostness and alienation that we carry: "*There must be more to life than this.*" And, of course, there is. But it's not 'more' in a cumulative way, it's not 'more' about getting more stuff. Rather, it is about finding the space or the container which is big enough to allow us to start to display ourselves, to see ourselves. The skin of the ego is too small so we always do some damage to our potential trying to fit into it.

This is why our primary focus in *dzogchen* practice is to relax and open. Gradually we then find that the space of the mind is truly infinite, that we are nothing and everything. And then we are not orphans anymore.