

# *Dependent Arising and Emptiness*

Ven. Robina Courtin

## **DEPENDENT ARISING, THE KING OF LOGICS TO PROVE EMPTINESS**

Paraphrasing Lama Tsong Khapa, Lama Yeshe says that dependent arising is the “king of logics” to prove emptiness.

All of Buddha’s teachings, from grade one to graduation, are based upon the assumption of emptiness. Emptiness is implicit in all the teachings. This is the unique characteristic of Lord Buddha’s view. You could say that the view of self-existence – which is what Buddha argues with, which is exactly the opposite view – is the assumption of all our current views of samsara. All the views – my mother and father made me, or a creator made me, I didn’t ask to get born, it’s not my fault, I’m just the body – are all based upon the assumption of self-existence, and this is the exact opposite of the Buddha’s view. The exact opposite.

And so, the point of it all is, as always with Buddha, we need to make it experiential. I mean, we can read all about emptiness, we can squeeze our brains, as Lama puts it, we can get all very excited when we hear about emptiness, but unless we understand how to internalize it, it’s just filling your head with knowledge.

So let’s try to unpack it, demystify it, and see how it applies to our daily life. Because if it doesn’t, it’s completely useless.

## **EVERYTHING IS A VIEWPOINT**

One way of describing what Buddha’s talking is that everything in our mind is a viewpoint, is an opinion, is an attitude, is an interpretation. Everything in our mind is a viewpoint, is an interpretation of the people and things and events and self that are the occupants of our lives. Everything is view. Everything is how we see things.

Things exist, and we can agree on them – cups, toilets, love, omniscient mind – but it’s

how we interpret them, understand them, their causes, etc., etc., that distinguishes them. There are the samsaric views, the Christian views, the scientific views – they’re all viewpoint. And Buddha has his own very specific views about how things exist.

For example, Buddha uses the term “superior being.” Well, we all know from being Christians that’s exactly how they talk about God. The same term, superior being. You hear the characteristics of God: omniscient, all-knowing, all-powerful, pervading the universe, seeing everything. Well, Buddha agrees with this. He’s also saying: there’s omniscient mind, pervades the universe, knows everything, infinite compassion. You could say they agree on this. But the difference is in the view – the interpretation of *how* that superior being, how that omniscience exists. So in other words, the Christian teaching, the Muslim teaching is that it’s self-existent. It exists from its own side. It’s intrinsic, inherent. The Buddha says it’s the capacity of every mind. And, of course, the creator religions so this superior being is the creator of everything. Buddha disagrees utterly. We don’t need creating, he says; we already exist.

## **WE’VE GOT IT WRONG**

Christianity would interpret the world one way, materialism interprets it another way, Buddha interprets it another way. So, it has to do with interpretation, it has to do with view.

Buddha, then, is basically saying, “We do not see correctly how things exist. We get things right to the extent that we can say, “I’m Robina and you’re Fred.” “That’s a cup and not a knife.” That’s cool. Correct. But we don’t get it right anything after this. We’ve got it wrong.

So, basically, things exist in the world. Things exist. But as Lama Zopa Rinpoche puts it, the delusions in our mind, the neuroses in our mind, the misconceptions, the negative states of mind, what they do is decorate on top of what does exist layers upon layers upon layers of characteristics that don’t exist there.

## **DON'T BELIEVE A WORD BUDDHA SAYS**

So of course, Buddha's would say say confidently that his views are the correct view. But the big difference here is he's not forcing us to *believe* him; he's not saying, "If you don't believe me, I'll send you to hell." It's not his job to do this. He's like Einstein. If I were Einstein here, and I start telling you about  $E=MC^2$  and I say, "This is the truth!" well, you would hope I would be confident that it is true; if I'm sitting here saying, "Well, I'm not sure if it's true," you're laughing and tell me to shut my mouth, don't confuse you. If I'm not confident, keep quiet.

So we want Buddha to be confident that he is right. But he's not asking us to believe him. He's asking us to check it out ourselves. It's up to us; we're the boss, not Buddha. So, it's nothing to do with *believing* anything; it's to do with listening to what Buddha says and if we like what we hear, we're confident in the Buddha, and we're confident in what we hear so far, we're prepared to give it a go – prepared to take his teachings, his views, as our working hypothesis. How else can you work with something if you don't propose it? That's why it's got nothing to do with believing it, squeezing it inside yourself. Nothing like that at all. Nothing to do with liking it or not liking it, because it's either true or it's not. And we have to find out. That's the Buddhist approach.

## **WISDOM MEANS SEEING THINGS AS THEY ACTUALLY EXIST**

So this is what wisdom means. Wisdom's not some – we use this word a lot in Buddhism – it's not some special holy word, all high and fancy. "Wisdom" simply means being correct. If you say there are two cups on my table, that ain't wisdom, honey, that's ignorance. There's one. There's one cup on my table – that's wisdom. You get it right. So, of course, the wisdom Buddha's saying we can accomplish is a pretty outrageous level of wisdom: seeing the universe as it exists without mistake. That's the level of wisdom we can accomplish; he calls it omniscience. I mean, my Catholic mother was shocked by

that! This is what Buddha is saying. So, it's quite radical, what he's saying.

So, what is Buddha's view? When we understand karma we understand how we come into existence, and we understand what mind is, his view of the law that runs the minds, his view about karma; the law of cause and effect. That's Buddha's view. And remember, you have to take it as your working hypothesis. Otherwise, you know, if you read a scientist's book, and you can't even trust that he's speaking from his own experience, then you shouldn't be reading the book, don't get yourself confused. So we have to – having checked – decide that Buddha is talking from his own experience.

That's why you need to check the Buddhist centers carefully, check the Buddha's teachings carefully, check the people who teach, check the Dalai Lama, and if he's a valid person who represents Buddha's teachings, you can be delighted to hear his teachings. If not, be careful. Don't confuse yourself. So, we have to assume that Buddha is a person who has accomplished these things that he states. Otherwise, how can he talk about it if he hasn't realized them himself? It's extremely arrogant.

So, basically, what he's saying is that there are countless minds, countless mind-possessors, "sentient beings." And there are some minds that are "in samsara," and there are some minds that are "not in samsara." You can say like this, broadly speaking, really just broadly speaking. And those of us who are in samsara, the main determining factor, the factor that determines our being a samsaric being – an ordinary being – is the presence in our mind of these delusions. If we look at our mental consciousness, we've got positive, negative and neutral states of mind; there's no fourth category. Let's forget the neutral, you've got the positive and the negative. It's a simple statement. Positive, negative. But don't hear it in a moralistic sense, like we tend to. These are technical terms.

## **NEGATIVE STATES OF MIND ARE NOT IN SYNC WITH REALITY**

A characteristic of the negative ones is that they're liars, they're not in sync with reality, the reality of interdependence. But the virtuous ones are to some extent in sync with reality. The virtuous states of mind have the characteristic of being peaceful – just check the last time you were loving, kind, generous; you felt peaceful. And, there's a sense of interdependence there. You've got a sense of connectedness with others, which means you're in sync – to some extent – with interdependence, which is reality.

When you're caught up in anger, depression, jealousy, it's a nightmare, isn't it? It's like hell. You're not in sync with reality, you've got this vivid, vivid sense of a separate, unhappy self-pity me, as Lama Yeshe calls it – lonely, bereft, not fair, poor me, things are done to me. Hungry, needy, wanting something more, resentful, angry, hurt, low self-esteem – this is samsara, being caught up in this junk, that's samsara. That's what it means, being in samsara.

## **UNAWARENESS**

And the root, the mother, of all these lies in the mind, these neurotic emotions, these wrong views, is simply called "ignorance." Like all these words, it's got a very specific definition. "*Ma-rig-pa*" in Tibetan; "unawareness."

So, unawareness of, finally, how things actually exist. Or, as they say in Buddhist language, the ultimate way that things exist. It means the actual way that things exist in their bones, finally. We are utterly ignorant of this reality. But like I said yesterday in quoting His Holiness from the teachings in (Washington) D.C. recently, you know, this ignorance has two functions: the first one is the mere ignorance of how things are, just merely not knowing; but that's not the main problem. This ignorance also has an added problem of having made up its own fantasy story, and that's the one we're believing in now, which is the story, the belief, that everything exists in and of itself, from its own side, intrinsically. This is so abstract for our minds, we don't even get it.

So, before we even go into the meaning of what ignorance is – you know, what ignorance thinks, that is that everything is intrinsic – there's an inherent I, intrinsic, self-existent, blah-blah-blah...forget that. Don't even go into that. Let's just look more broadly at how things *do* exist conventionally – because even that we don't get right.

## **THE TWO TRUTHS**

Buddha talks about how things exist in two ways, well, many ways, actually. But this particular way of presenting it he calls the two truths: conventional truth, the way things exist conventionally; and the way things exist finally, or ultimately. So initially when we hear these, they, for us, totally contradict. But in reality, they actually are like flip sides of the same coin, and our job is to get to see that, to understand that – even first intellectually, very beneficial.

So the shorthand for how things exist conventionally is "dependent arising." You read it sometimes as "dependent origination." I prefer the word "dependent arising." Things exist interdependently. Things exist *in dependence* upon this and that, conventionally. And then ultimately, the shorthand is "emptiness." In other words, the words they use in the Tibetan – Buddhist literature as you know is that "emptiness" is the nature of reality ultimately. This is the way they talk.

So let's unpack these ideas. Let's look at the use of these words, because part of our problem is we don't even know how these words are used. We can't get our head around the general concepts. You know, thirty years of hearing Buddhism, you still haven't got a clue what emptiness is because we haven't just technically got ourselves sorted out, how to use this terminology.

## **THE WORD "EMPTINESS"**

Before we go into understanding the way things exist, let's first look at this word, "emptiness" itself and how it's used. In the most simple sense, it means "absent," doesn't it? It means "not there." If I say, my cup has no water in it, we would simply say, "My cup is empty." What we mean is there is no

water in my cup; it is empty of water; water is absent from my cup.

### **EMPTY OF WHAT?**

Clearly, Buddha's not telling us that things are empty of water. So, what is he saying? What is he saying things are empty of? We have to understand the way the word is used.

Okay. So, if you're not color-blind, you're going to agree this white cup is not red. You agree, don't you? This cup is not red. So we would simply say, "You're right, Robina, it's not red." The Buddha would say, using this language, "the cup is empty of being red." It's a fancy way to talk, but we can hear the meaning very simply, can't we? It's just that we don't speak it like this. We don't say, "The cup is empty of being red," but the use of the word there is exactly the meaning. The cup is not red. And why would he tell us it's empty of being red – I mean, it's empty of being lots of things. He would only tell us it's empty of being red because we *think* it's red, because our mind is making a mistake, is seeing it wrongly. This is crucial to understand.

### **ESTABLISHING WHAT DOES EXIST**

Okay. You can see the cup is white, right. Well, you could say, "White exists on this cup." It's a quaint way to talk, but you understand the meaning, don't you? "There is white on this cup."

Now, because of that we can see there's no red on this cup. So, we can also say, "The absence of red exists on this cup." Would you agree with that? That on this cup, wouldn't you agree, there is an absence of red? It's a weird way to talk, so let's discuss.

There is a good reason for talking this way. In Buddhist philosophy there are several synonyms for "that which exists" – and Buddha is all about our discovering "that which exists." That's his big thing. Because he says we're in la-la land right now, believing in things that *don't* exist.

So, whatever *does* exist is necessarily a phenomenon, an object, an existent. The definition of an existent is "that which can be cognized by mind," a valid state of mind, obviously – and there are precise ways of

defining what is valid and what is not. And what we're attempting to do in this pursuit of wisdom is to eventually cognize all existents precisely as they exist, no more and no less: that's omniscience.

So, you agree, right, that there is an existent, a thing that can be cognized by the mind, called white? And it exists here on this cup, yes? Would you agree with that? White does exist here on this cup, doesn't it? It is something that your mind can cognize.

Okay, how do we know it exists? Well, we have to first establish it conventionally. We need to label it, define it, then check that it fulfils the definition and make sure there are no other valid cognitions of it that contradict this. Then we can all shake on it and agree that this object, this phenomenon called white, exists here on this cup.

### **COGNIZING THE ABSENCE OF RED**

Now that we've established there is white here, we can deduce logically that it's not red, right? Because we know it's white, we can deduce it's not red.

Now, let's say I am color-blind and when I look at white I see red. I'm making a mistake, aren't I? Remember, we've established the existence of this conventional phenomenon called white by defining, etc., etc., and agreeing upon that – that's what "conventional" means: by convention it's called white.

So, how can you help me get to see the truth? And what is the truth? Well, there are two ways of putting it. The truth is it is not red. The truth is also that it's white. But you need to take me through this, one step at a time. The first thing you want me to realize is how it's not red. I need to see my mistake.

The simple way you'd say it is, "Robina, the cup's not red!" But let's turn it into a noun, a think, an existent: then it becomes this thing called "absence of red," "emptiness of red." It's got huge meaning.

How can you phrase it, then, in order to help me? You will want me to cognize "the emptiness of red on this cup," won't you? And that absence is a very real phenomenon that does exist, isn't it?

So: the phenomenon called white does exist on this cup. I am ignorant and cannot see the truth. So you need to guide me to be able to cognize the phenomenon called the absence of red on this cup, don't you? Because it does exist there, doesn't it?

There is a phenomenon called "white." Easy – no argument. And there is also a phenomenon called "absence of red." And so they've got equal status insofar as they're both phenomena that do exist. There is a phenomenon called "emptiness of red" that exists and there is a phenomenon called "white" that exists. They are both existents that can be cognized by a mind

### ABSENCE OF KEYS

When we hear "emptiness," we tend to think of it as meaning "nothing." But the "emptiness of red" is a very vivid thing that does exist. But for whom? So let me give you another example. Let's say you are running late and you rush to the front door and on the way open the drawer where you always keep your car keys. You *know* the keys are there, you totally expect the keys in the drawer. But when you open the drawer you get a big shock. "Oh my God! No keys!" What did you just see in the drawer? The absence of keys, the emptiness of keys. It's a very vivid thing, isn't it?

Now, if I'm not expecting keys and I open the drawer, all I see is a boring drawer with nothing in it. I see nothing. But you see *something* very vivid – the absence of a thing that you thought was there. And that's the idea about emptiness. And the only person who will see that vivid thing called emptiness of keys is the person who *expects* keys to be there, who *believes* keys are there.

Back to the cup. I am making a mistake. I am seeing something that doesn't exist, which I totally believe does exist. So you can't just bully me into believing it; you have to help me see the truth. And how do you do that? You help me correct the mistakes: you check my eyes, my glasses, the lighting, the various dependent arisings. Then I look again at the cup and what will see? I'll get a big shock – "Oh my God, the cup is not red!" In

other words, I will cognize the emptiness of red.

It's obvious that this is only relevant to someone who sees red; to someone who expects the keys. That person will see the absence of the thing they always thought was there.

So Buddha is saying, "Robina, you need to cognize the emptiness of the self-existent I." Why? Because for eons I have been imposing on myself and everything else a characteristic that doesn't exist there. The mistake we make – our ignorance makes – is seeing inherently existent I where there isn't one, an inherently existent cup where there isn't one, an inherently existent everything where there isn't one. We've been decorating on top of what does exist – a conventional I, a conventional cup – the characteristic called inherent existence, which doesn't exist and never has. So Buddha wants us to see that absence, that emptiness.

And where does that absence of inherently existent I exist? On the conventional I that does exist.

### THE BIG MISTAKE

Buddha's saying for eons we have been believing in this big mistake. Where did you learn this? We didn't. We've believed it since beginningless time. And all of our suffering, all our attachment, all our anger, all our pride, all the wars, all the dramas, all the rebirths are all the consequence of this misconception. This misconception is the primordial misconception that is the source of all suffering.

But we can't see it, because it's totally assumed as the truth. It's the default mode in our minds. We can't even begin to comprehend the meaning of "I see myself as inherent."

So Buddha says we have to *see*, we have to *realize*, the absence of that mistake. So that "absence of inherent Robina" is a very vivid thing that our mind has to cognize just like the absence of red is a very vivid phenomenon that we have to cognize.

You've got to squeeze your brain a bit to get it first. But once you get used to this, then

you read about emptiness, it will start to make sense.

### **SEEING EMPTINESS – THE PARADIGM SHIFT**

When you finally *see* the absence of the I that you think is there, that you thought for eons is there, they say there's this mind-boggling paradigm shift that occurs in your mind. When finally, the penny drops, and you get to realize directly the absence of the fantasy I that you always thought was there but in fact has never been there.

So, "seeing emptiness" is a very meaningful way to say it. It's the emptiness of the fantasy "I" that you thought was there. And, just like with the keys, the person who'd see the absence of the inherent I is, of course, the person who believes it's there. The person who'd see the absence of red on the white cup is the person who had believed it was red. So, you see the absence of your inherent I only if you had inherent I in your mind. It has nothing to do with vacuous space, vague nothingness. It's a very vivid, vivid thing, when you can get it. So this way of talking is extremely important. When we can understand this, it can really help us.

And like I'm saying, the only reason Buddha's telling us that, you know – as the way they use the words "emptiness is the ultimate way that things exist" – it's not some fancy religious trip he's putting on us; it's just the way they talk, you know. But the only reason he talks about emptiness is because we've made the mistake of thinking there is something in us that isn't there. So, of course, to understand the absence of red – red's easy, because we *know* red because it is a phenomenon that does exist in general. But inherent I? There's never been such a thing, and never could be. It's completely made up by our minds.

### **WHAT DOES INHERENT MEAN?**

So let's talk about what it means, "inherent I," "intrinsic I," "self-existent I," "I that exists from its own side," "I that exists in and of itself." They are all synonyms for the mistake our mind makes, for the mistake that this ignorance in the mind makes.

If something existed like that, it would necessarily not depend on anything else. And if we think even roughly, we'll see there is nothing that exists that doesn't depend on something for its existence.

All the delusions see something that isn't there. So attachment projects a delicious, divine cup – the mistake called "attachment," the delusion, the lie; aversion – another lie – projects "ugly, revolting cup." Ignorance informs both and it projects a self-existent beautiful cup, a self-existent ugly cup. In other words, ignorance underpins all the other delusions. It's the deepest assumption underneath attachment, aversion, depression, jealousy and all the rest. Once you remove that underpinning, all the other samsaric views collapse in a heap of nothingness.

So the deepest assumption, the deepest mistake is this belief in the "inherent me." Like I said, it's so subtle, we don't realize we think it. No one taught us this. It's just the default mode. We were born with it. It's in fact the motor that propels us to even take a rebirth in the first place. So, it's pretty primordial.

### **THE MIDDLE WAY**

In the Buddha's teachings, there's different levels of understanding things, and each of them, removes a little bit more of what they think doesn't exist until eventually you get to the highest view, the Middle Way, and within that the view called the Consequentialists, the actual meaning of Buddha's teachings. As His Holiness talked about this in D.C. recently, that when we finally have the true view, according to Nagarjuna, who really explained this fifteen hundred years, whatever, it sounds so radical, it's scary: that there is nothing from the side of the cup, the I, the table, the mala, the flower, there is nothing from the side of a thing that makes it that thing.

We think there is, and we desperately cling to there being something inherent – something in the "thing" that makes it the thing. That's what we think. That's what ignorance thinks, and we desperately want this. We cling to this, because there's panic

and fear to think – it just sounds like nihilism. And that's why it's so tricky.

The moment we hear that there is nothing from the side of the thing that gives it its thingness, we immediately hear it as, "Oh, there's nothing there." Nihilistic. We chuck the baby out with the bath water. Instantly, we hear it this way. We can't help but hear it this way. Buddha says that's one of the extreme views deep in our minds. We go too far, we chuck too much out. And then as soon as we hear dependent arising, that things exist in dependence upon this and that, but we don't hear that properly either. We hear it as, "Ooh, what a relief!" and *grasp*. "Thank goodness there is something there after all." So we reify it. We put too much onto it.

#### **DEPENDENT ARISING MEANS EMPTINESS AND EMPTINESS MEANS DEPENDENT ARISING**

What Lama Tsongkhapa says we need to do is every time we hear "emptiness" – that there is nothing from the side of a thing that makes it a thing, there's nothing in and of itself that is making it that, there is no I from its own side, there is no intrinsic, inherent me in there that makes me, me – instead of instantly going to the nihilistic view and chucking the baby out with the bath water, we consciously bring ourselves toward the Middle Way and we say to ourselves – which is counter-intuitive for us – "Aha, Robina. My "I" being empty *means* it is a dependent arising I." There is an I: there is an I that exists in dependence upon this and this. And then every time we hear about dependent arising, that there is an I existing in dependence upon this and that, instead of clinging onto it and exaggerating it and reifying it, we will again counter-intuitively go towards the Middle Way and say, "Aha, Robina, that means it is empty."

So, right now, these are opposite to us. Because what Buddha's saying and what Tsongkhapa really runs with is that when you think "emptiness," it should remind you it means "dependent arising." And when you think "dependent arising," it should remind us that that means "emptiness." They in fact

are the two sides of the same coin. In fact that's the true Middle Way. That when you think "emptiness," you think "dependent arising," and when you think "dependent arising," you think "emptiness."

We have to practice thinking this, because intuitively we go to the two extremes. And this is very meaningful, this is very tasty, and experiential. It's not just intellectual clever stuff. This is why it is crucial to have the right words. Buddha's main gift is his words. If you can't put it into words, then we're just being lazy. We have to practice, because words are the way of communicating.

There's an old Danish guy in the Santa Cruz called Age, he's ninety-something now, and he was a friend of Lama Yeshe's, and he was a Taoist. Lama asked him one time, "Tell me what you think, what your philosophy is?" and he said, "Oh, no, it's beyond words. You can't describe it." And Lama said something like, "Ah, you're just being intellectually lazy. You're cheating. If you can't describe it, then what good are you to sentient beings? How can you help?"

So, he took this to heart, and he said he spent twenty years thinking through the entire philosophy and writing a book. Because if you don't have words, how can you hear Buddha's teachings? It's not possible. We have to have words and the words have to be correct. If I just sit here and bliss out to you about how amazing, how special the taste of the cake is, wow, it's beyond words – how mean of me! I have to give you the recipe, don't I? And that's words. *Then* you can get the taste.

Buddha's main gift is his words. Words are deadly serious, because they lead you to the taste. So, get your words right. That's why you need to listen to authentic teachings. Check carefully before you read, there's so much junk around, you know, that's called Buddhism. Be very careful what you listen to, and you'd better be careful about what you hear from me! From the Dalai Lama! You should check. You know, we all love the Dalai Lama; we think, "Oh, isn't he wonderful, he makes me feel good." Well, I'm sorry – Hitler made people feel very good! No logic. So check up on your

facts, you know. Have some confidence, have some certainty.

### **ESTABLISH THINGS AS EXISTING CONVENTIONALLY**

So, if things exist in dependence upon various factors, and if they're empty of inherent existence, then we need to think about it, we need to prove that it's true. And to do that, as I said before, we have to start by establishing something in order to discuss how it exists. So how do we do that? Well, we start with the name, and then we have to define it. A definition has two parts.

"Mummy, what's a cup?"

"Well, darling, it's that flat-bottomed clay container with a handle on it." "I can see it, can't I? "But Mummy, what does it do?" "Oh, it holds my tea, sweetheart."

The first part of the definition tells you its conventional characteristics, its substance, and the second part that tells you its job, what it does, its function. "It holds my tea."

But we're not confident yet. We now have to check that it does, in fact, fulfil its function. So I pour tea into it and if it holds the tea, then it does the job we said it does. But there's more: we now need to check that there are no other valid cognitions in the minds of anyone else that contradict that. And if there aren't, then we've established a cup, haven't we? And then we all shake hands on it and agree.

That's conventional reality in general. It's a cup literally "by convention," by agreement. And, actually, that's also subtle dependent arising: it's merely labeled, made by our own minds. And that's how everything exists, doesn't it? But we'll get to that later.

### **FIRST, THINGS EXIST IN DEPENDENT UPON CAUSES AND CONDITIONS**

Let's look at the different levels of dependent arising, taking it one step at a time, leading us to the subtlest level. The first way in which things exist is in dependence upon causes and conditions; they come into existence in dependence upon countless causes and conditions. And when it comes to

the thing called a person, that's called karma, isn't it?

When I first learned this from Khensur Rinpoche Jampa Tegchok, who was the abbot of Sera Je monastery for seven years, he was the abbot of our monastery in France for ten years and my philosophy teacher in England in the early 80s. He used the example of the object called "Robina." He said that it can be said that everything in the universe up to the first moment of Robina is validly a cause and condition for the existence of Robina.

I'll never forget it, and at the time, that sounded pretty cosmic. But let's look at the logic of it. It's perfectly true. You can start anywhere you like. Let's discuss this cup here. So let's say Mrs. Smith was the designer of this nice cup. So we can say, obviously, one of the first causes of this cup is Mrs. Smith, isn't it? Her mind imagining, conjuring up this design. We can say that, can't we? Very clear. We know that perfectly well. We know it didn't fall out of a tree like this. A human mind created it. So, Mrs. Smith had a mother, didn't she? And if Mrs. Smith didn't have a mother, there could not be Mrs. Smith. So, Mrs. Smith's mother had a mother, and then you can't help but say Mrs. Smith's mother had a mother, and where can you find the first mother? Because as soon as you posit one, you've got to posit the previous one, which is the simple logic of cause and effect. It's like a domino effect, going the opposite direction. That's the simplest level of dependent arising. As soon as you posit a thing, it has to have a cause.

Then you've got another angle – you think of the clay. Well, clay came from a mountain and that came from previous something and that turned into something else. Then you think of the paint. Everything you look at about this cup – once you start, you *cannot* do anything but keep going back and back. Of course, we are desperate to find the first cause – but logically, given cause and effect, such a thing cannot exist.

It's fascinating: we always want a first cause. This is the view of self-existence. This is the view that is actually manifesting in the teachings of "creator" and "soul" – that there is a "first cause" and it's called "God."

Buddha says it's irrational and illogical. You cannot – if you posit a law of cause and effect – you cannot have an effect without a cause. You can have a cause without an effect: if there's a chicken, it has to have come from an egg. And you know that egg has to have come from a chicken. But you know that if you have an egg, you don't have to get a chicken, you can break the egg.

So, if there is an effect – and everything that exists at this moment is itself an effect, isn't it – it assumes a previous cause, so you will never find a first one. But we frantically want there to be a first cause. "But but but there *must* be," we'll say. We ask the question: "When did it begin? When did delusions begin? When did suffering begin? When did karma begin? When did everything begin?"

We've got this view *because* we cling to self-existence, because we have this misconception deep in the bones of our being. We assume there has to be a first cause, because grasping at self-existent me, grasping at "self-existent anything" is the opposite to cause and effect.

So the first way in which things come into existence, the first level at which things exist interdependently is in terms of their existing in dependence upon causes and conditions. And you just keep going. You can't find a first cause. And there are countless causes for everything.

### **KARMA IS THE FIRST LEVEL OF DEPENDENT ARISING FOR THE OBJECT CALLED ME**

That's why karma is a marvelous example of this. The object is called me. So right now, we can see we cling to a sense of self that's very vivid, that's very solid, separate, lonely, bereft, self-pity, self-conscious, angry, depressed, fearful – all the drama. We live in the bubble of this sense of a separate, lonely me, don't we? There's me, and there's everyone else. This is the biggest lie. This is the experiential, emotional consequence of believing in "inherent I."

Like I said, we don't *think* we believe "inherent I," we don't even know what it means. But this is the experiential

consequence of it. Fear, drama, anxiety, anger, depression, low self-esteem, loneliness, poor me – these are the experiential consequences of this primordial mistake.

In other words, the way we assume about me, is that there's no causes, it's just me, I didn't ask to get born, it's not my fault, everything is done to me. So, you know, we don't want the ugly things done to me so we have huge aversion and anger and push it away, and we do crave the lovely things so we have attachment. Attachment and aversion are the consequences of this ignorance. The natural outcropping of ignorance, because we assume an I to have things *for*. We assume an I that doesn't want suffering. It's an assumption deep in the bones of our being. This is the experiential consequence of this mistake that our mind makes.

But thinking about how I am the result of past karma, I'm the result of past actions – you hit me because I hit you before, you're generous to me because I must have been generous to you before – it loosens the grip of this lonely, bereft me. It sees that I'm this interdependent scenario. That's why to talk about karma, to think about karma is the most marvelous way to loosen the grip of the "self-pity me," to loosen the grip of the ego, of the ignorance. Takes time, of course. This is why you're not really a Buddhist until you think about karma: karma means interdependence and interdependence is Buddha's thing.

So the first level of dependent arising is that things exist in dependence upon causes and conditions. There is a cup that does exist – in dependence upon countless causes and conditions. But you will not find a cup among any one of those causes and conditions. This is the first level to think about. And what this means is, you think about this and what it brings – this is the point – is the conclusion: "Oh, I see! Therefore there's no cup from its own side." You see the absence of the inherent cup.

We go, "Well, how do I think about emptiness? Just sit there and think, "The cup is empty, the cup is empty, the cup is empty,"

waiting for some vision to come. Ridiculous! You don't sit there thinking about emptiness. You sit there thinking about dependent arising. And that thinking, that logical analysis, triggers the conclusion, "Oh, I see – therefore, there's no cup from its own side, therefore the cup is empty of existing from its own side."

Emptiness is the conclusion you come to, having thought about dependent arising. It's a very practical thing. It's not cosmic, because very simply, if you think about how the cup exists *interdependently*, this proves that it is absent of existing *independently*. Obvious – they're the opposite.

If it is empty, if it is interdependent, it is empty of being independent, isn't it? *If it is interdependent, it is empty of being independent.* Independent and interdependent are opposite. So if it is interdependent, it lacks being independent. Simple. That's the simple way of talking.

And here we're talking about the simplest level of dependent arising: that things are empty of existing independently of causes and conditions.

There are subtler levels to it.

## **SECOND, THINGS EXIST IN DEPENDENCE UPON PARTS**

Now, the second way the cup exists in dependence upon various factors is the cup exists in dependence upon its parts. There is a cup, but you won't find cup apart from its parts. But we think there is, and our language cheats us. Our language is really tricky. It reinforces self-existence. You listen to the way we talk, you know?

Back in the seventh century, Chandrakirti, this Indian great commentator on Nagarjuna's teachings on the Middle Way, which are at the heart of all the teachings on emptiness in Tibet, he talked about using the example of a chariot. "Well," he said, "in order to look for this inherent chariot that we think is there, let's break it down into its component parts, to search for this inherent chariot." You won't find anything left over after you have dismantled all the parts, and instinctively we think we will. We think there's an owner there.

So, we can do this little meditation. You'd do an analysis in your mind, you'd do it very rigorously. You would start to break down the component parts of your own self – just like with the chariot – and you'd put them all out there, in little piles. All the hard bits and the soft bits and the mucky bits and all the bits of your mind – the negative states, the positive ones – as many piles as you want. Keep stripping it away, deconstructing this I into its component parts.

Now, when we finish that deconstruction, we believe we're going to end up with this naked self-conscious little I that's been found out, that's the owner of all the parts, because that's what we believe is there. We talk like this: "I did not do this." "I am a special person." "I am so fat and ugly." "I am not this." "How dare you say that about me!" We really believe there's a component in there called I or self that is walking hand in hand with the other components, the parts, the mind, the body, etc., etc.

Let's do an exercise to prove it. Okay. My table has a cup, a clock and a vase. Can you see this? So, how many phenomena did I mention? Four. My table, the cup, the clock, the vase, right? Four phenomena. We're talking conventionally here, nothing tricky. If it's a true statement that I just made, you must point out four separate, distinct phenomena: you have to point out a table that is not a cup, not a vase, and not a clock, right? A clock that is not the table, the cup, the vase. Etc. You have to point out four separate phenomena. There's a table, there's a cup, there's a clock, there's a vase. You agree, don't you? And we can do that, can't we? Easy enough.

Okay then. Another statement: I have a nose. You agree? And I have a foot. And I have a hand. How many phenomena? Three? No. There are four phenomena, aren't there: I, nose, foot, hand. Do you agree? So, same discussion. If those four phenomena do exist conventionally, you have to find four separate, distinct phenomena, each of which is distinct, is not the other, don't you agree? Same as before.

Well, there's my foot – cut it off! There's my nose – you can have it! There's my hand.

Now, where's the I? Where is the I that is not the nose, not the hand, and not the foot. Oh dear. . . Most annoying, isn't it? You can't find a separate I.

It's just the same with the cup. Cup has a handle and a base – there's the base, there's the handle. Where's the cup that *isn't* the base, that *isn't* the handle? Where's the I that *isn't* the nose, the foot?

That absence of an I or a cup that is not dependent on the parts is what we have to realize.

Now we have the subtlest level of dependent arising.

### **THIRD, THINGS EXIST IN DEPENDENCE UPON THE MIND THAT LABELS THEM**

So this gets us to the third level of dependent arising, which is that things exist in dependence upon the name, upon the mind labelling them, upon concepts. There is nothing that is independent of mind. Cup is merely a name we use, we impute, upon the parts, which is the valid base for that label: the handle, the base, the clay, the this, the that. "Robina" is a name we impute upon all the bits of Robina: the hand, the foot, the nose, the anger, and all the rest.

Same discussion – you can't find a handle among the parts of the handle, because "handle" is merely a name imputed on its parts. You can't find a hand among the parts; it is a hand, it does hold a cup, but it's merely a name imputed by mind upon the valid base, which is the fingers and the thumb and the palm and the wrist.

So, we're not satisfied, we think, "Oh, I'm just a name? What a bore. I thought I was more than that."

Everything exists like this. Prison is made up by our mind; love, anger, jealousy, hell, enlightenment: they all exist in dependence upon the mind calling them that, buying into their being that.

But they do function as that, remember? They must in order to establish as conventions. You can't call a cup a knife just before you feel like it. You have to establish it conventionally, and it has to function, and we have to agree to it.

As Lama Zopa Rinpoche says, "When we have realized emptiness, realized how things actually exist, it's as if there is nothing there, but there is. But what exists is so subtle it's *as if* it's an illusion, it's as if it doesn't exist." As we'd say in the West, "It's all smoke and mirrors."

### **FEAR IS THE VOICE OF IGNORANCE**

As Pabongka Rinpoche says, "When you nearly fall off the mountain, you don't say, "My body nearly fell off the mountain. You say *I* nearly fell off the mountain." If someone insults your nose, you don't say, "How dare you insult my nose! You insulted *me!*" we'd say. We believe there is this me in there, that's more than the parts, that doesn't depend upon the mind, the name.

Even conventionally, Buddha says, you won't find that one. He's just being practical, not being cosmic. But this belief in this self-existent, over-exaggerated boss that runs the show *is the source of all suffering*. When we have realized the absence – when we have *seen* the absence of *that*, when we have realized emptiness.

### **WHEN WE KNOW EMPTINESS THERE IS NO FEAR**

When we have realized the emptiness of that fantasy I, as Lama Zopa says, "Then there is no fear." Fear is finished, because fear is the main emotion of all the delusions, in particular ego-grasping. This ignorance is known colloquially as ego-grasping, and its main job is fear. Fear and panic. And I is the main voice of it. So when we realize emptiness, there is no fear, as Rinpoche said.

When he was a little boy, when he was eight – he was recognized when he was very small as the reincarnation of a previous yogi called Kunsang Yeshe up in the mountains in Sherpa country, you know. He was this meditator called Kunsang Yeshe and he lived as an ordinary layman, hanging out, you know, going off to Tibet and buying salt and selling it to the Sherpas and everything, and eventually left home and went to this little hole-in-the-wall in the mountains, which is now known as Lawudo. I think it was where they stored the radishes or the onions;

“Lawudo “ means “radish” or “onion,” I can’t remember which. Anyway, he pulled out the radishes and moved in, and that became his little home for the last twenty-five or whatever years of his life. He got to be known as the “Lawudo Lama.” And so when he died, being a great yogis, he had complete control over the death process, and could choose his rebirth.

Anyway, this little boy got born down the hill, in the little village below Lawudo, and he was – I forget his name then, he wasn’t Zopa, actually, but pretend he was called Zopa then. From the time he was a tiny boy, apparently, his mother, she’d go outside to chop the wood and Zopa’s gone, you know. He’s crawling up the hill, back to – well, not back to, we discovered this later – he’s crawling up towards the cave. And from the time he could talk, he’s always going up the hill, always. He’s relentless, very determined. And his mother would say, “Come home!” He’d say, “No! *That* is my home,” pointing up to the cave.

So then from the time he could play games, his sister said, he’d always play the role of being a lama, sitting on a throne and having a bell and having all these pujas and doing *torma* offerings and then he’d say that “all my benefactors are coming” and he’d give the list of all the names of his previous benefactors from his past life, saying they were turning up for puja.

So, she’d thought she’d better check with the local lamas and found out they considered, yes, he seems to be the reincarnation of Kunsang Yeshe. Then he became known as a Rinpoche, “Precious One.”

He’s eventually handed over to some manager, and he told this story one time about how up in the mountains at some particular monastery – he’s eight years old – and there’s this big river. And on the other side of the river, there’s these kind of strange, pale-faced people with straw-colored hair. He really wanted to meet these people. There’s this little rickety bridge, his manager kept saying, “No,” but he insisted. So he brought a little bowl of potatoes, being a Sherpa, you know, you bring your gift of

potatoes, and when he was halfway across the bridge he fell in the water.

When Rinpoche told this story, he said, “The head was bobbing up and down.” Of course, they don’t teach them to swim up in the Sherpa country, so his head is going up and down in the water and he’s seeing his manager running up and down on the shore. Then he said to himself, “Hmm... the thought occurred to me, the person known as the Lawudo Lama is about to die” – very rationally to himself, as he’s going up and down for air. And then he said to himself, “I didn’t know anything about emptiness, *but there was no fear.*”

Obviously, so far, being eight years old, in that life he’d never heard about emptiness, but we can deduce from his experience, in my own opinion, we can deduce from this that he obviously had the realization of emptiness, if he is said to be who he was, and it was in his mind already. Because he had in his mindstream an intuitive understanding of emptiness, there was no ego-grasping, and therefore there was no fear.

Of course, in our culture, we would find this utterly inconceivable. You’d be called mentally ill if you proposed this possibility to Western psychologists. Because Western psychology is based – like I said, not just the religious teachings but the materialist teachings as well – based on the assumption of a self-existent I. We say it is natural to have fear. We call it “instinct for survival.” We assume fear, jealousy, anger, paranoia, upset, depression, all the rest are normal behavior. Animals have it. Humans have it. So everything is based upon the assumption of this as reasonable mental health.

To hear that Buddha says you can remove all these neuroses from your mind, you can eradicate them from your mind, and go beyond all fear, and develop infinite wisdom and infinite compassion for all sentient beings, they’ll think you’re crazy; they’ll give you a pill and lock you up.

But this is exactly what Buddha’s saying. It’s easy for us to say it in nice religious terms – nirvana, Buddhahood – but we need to hear it as real, doable, actual psychological possibility, which is how Buddha means it.

So this ignorance, this ego-grasping – this deep, deep primordial delusion – this absolute default mode, this ancient, eons-old habit that we come programmed with from countless lives, along with its branches called attachment, and anger and all the rest – this is what we call normal. But Buddha says we’re all mentally ill. We’re all living in a mental asylum in our own head.

Once we understand the branch delusions – how they misconceive, how they exaggerate – then we can begin to understand the root delusion, the ignorance that clings to the self-existent I, the ego-grasping. Once you’ve seen the emptiness of the fantasy I, you’ve pulled out the root and then, of course, the others collapse, the branches die. There’s no longer anything to be attached to, or to be angry about, or to be depressed about.

#### **ANY INHERENTLY EXISTING PHENOMENA**

Q: Is there any phenomenon that has inherent existence?

Ven: No. Buddha says it’s a contradiction in terms. You cannot have such a thing. If something were inherent, it would mean it existed without depending on anything. And that is simply an impossibility. Everything that exists, necessarily exists interdependently. By definition, all existents are dependent arisings.

This is where they say the eternalistic view of “creator” and “soul” are a mistake. There’s this need for us to hold onto *something*, as if somehow “inherent” is above everything else. And that’s very much the feeling. I remember talking to a friend of mine – she’s a Buddhist now, but she was a Christian, and very sincere Christian – and she said she had a real struggle when she heard that a Buddha was ordinary first, and then *became* Buddha. That seemed to diminish Buddhahood. Whereas she was more comfortable with the idea, which is the Christian one, which is that God is always above everything. And has always *been*. And doesn’t exist in dependence upon anything. It sounds like it’s diminishing God

But Buddha would say if you analyze very carefully, you’ll see something that is inherent can’t exist. It’s the opposite to existence.

In fact, things exist *because* they are empty of existing from their own side. Because they’re empty, they can exist.

Q: You just blew my mind...

A: Okay, good! You see, our instinct is to think “empty “ means “nihilistic,” so we hear the opposite. It kind of splits us in half, so we’ve got to keep remembering, emptiness *means* dependent arising, dependent arising *means* emptiness.

#### **HOW TO MOVE FROM INTELLECTUAL UNDERSTANDING TO EXPERIENTIAL**

Q: I was wondering, do you have any advice for taking our understanding of emptiness from the intellectual to the experiential.

A: Yes, let me tell you how. It’s not difficult. Have you ever learned anything you didn’t know before? A certain science or a skill? Give an example. What is it? What have you learned? Okay, you’ve learned piano. Okay. When you first began, it was merely intellectual knowledge, don’t you agree? Wasn’t it? And even then, when you looked at those weird looking notes on the sheets of music, you thought, “What is this stuff?” You couldn’t get head around it, even intellectually, could you?. Then you started learning the theory, didn’t you? And then slowly you started putting your hands on the piano and you could gradually translate that boring intellectual stuff into something experiential. So what was the main that thing you did every day?

Q: Practice.

A: And then guess what happened? It became experiential, didn’t it? That’s how we learn everything. Nothing special. Well, this is how you get enlightened. There’s *nothing special*. You just have to do it: start with the words, the theories, then through thinking and meditating, they eventually become your experience.

If you had the wrong ideas about Bach’s music, this theories, you’d never play it right. So you got to have the right words, and then you just think about them every day, you analyze, you meditate on it, you think about

it, and gradually, slowly, over years, months, years, the penny begins to drop, until eventually it becomes your direct experience. *It's exactly the same process.* You just have to be patient and persistent. Do you see what I'm saying? That's the answer.

Then, of course, in Buddhism, especially in Tibetan Buddhism, you've got all these kit of tools that hugely help this process happen. Which seem to be the more religious side of things. The delusions, in our mind, the misconceptions, the obstacles are so strong, so huge, that without these extra tools we can't get far.

My analogy is this: Let's say you see see Michael Jordan getting all these balls in the hoop. (I'm probably twenty years out of date, but I always think of Michael Jordan.) And you go, wow, I'd like to do that. You go to him and you say, "Hey, man, please show me how to get the ball in the hoop." Right? Looks easy, doesn't it? You go boom, boom, boom, you get the ball in the hoop. Because you can see, with basketball, the essence of it is getting the ball in the hoop.

Now, he will tell you, "Okay, good. First I want you to go off for ten years, study basketball theory, go on a special diet, do lots of jogging, build up muscles, train in this and train in that. . ."

And you say, "No, no no – you didn't hear me. How do I get the ball in the hoop?" And he'll repeat his answer. Why? Because obviously, even though getting the ball in the hoop looks so easy, you have to have amazing skills and training and years of practicing other things that don't seem directly related to getting balls in hoops before you can do it effortlessly.

Same with your mind. The idea of familiarizing our minds with these new ideas until they're our own direct experience is the job, but we need to do many other practices to prime our minds to be able to do it.

The Tibetan Buddhist call them "preliminary practices." You've got to purify your mind. You've got to create masses and masses of virtuous karma that prepares your mind to do the actual job of being your own therapist every day and getting the realization of emptiness. All the prostrations,

all the water bowls, all those different things that seem so abstract and so disconnected from practice, that seem so un-psychological, so "religious."

But when we understand their function – and we have to think about this carefully – they're the ones that prime our minds, that enable us easily to get the realizations. Then we can realize emptiness.

## THE BEHAVIORAL IMPLICATIONS OF WORKING WITH THE CONCEPT OF EMPTINESS

Q: Say I've learned to understand the concept of emptiness. How does that next make the leap to feeling less fear, guilt...

A: I understand. Initially, it doesn't seem evident to us, doesn't it? This is why you're asking the question. That's why another way to put emptiness is to see things as interdependent.

Okay, let me use the example of those nuns in Tibet. There they were being tortured and sexually abused in a prison, right? Now, normally speaking, with the usual view that we have of "I didn't ask to get born, it's not my fault, I don't deserve this..." we would literally have a mental breakdown, wouldn't we? Just about, we would. And we'd be angry, we'd be freaking out, we'd be raging, we'd want to blame, we'd want to sue...look at the mental torture we'd have in relation to those kinds of things.

Now, their response – they weren't angry, and they even had compassion. That is literally coming from understanding karma which is meaning they created the cause, this is not who I really am; and karma is dependent arising, and dependent arising is the flipside of emptiness.

Because, if you look at the normal ego response, the way we have ego now, – Lama Yeshe calls it "the self-pity me" – and I'm not trying to be cruel, now. But it is the way we suffer. And if we analyze, if we unpack self-pity, unpack anger, you see it is "poor me, I didn't do this, I don't deserve this, why is this happening, there is no cause, I don't understand it, why me, what did I do to deserve it." Would you agree this is the way we think about suffering now? That is

coming from the philosophy of “I didn’t ask to get born.” That’s coming from the philosophy of “no cause and effect,” of “no karma,” of being an “innocent victim.” That’s the philosophy of the world. That’s why we have our freaking out now.

If you have the view of karma, it causes you to own responsibility for this thing that’s happening: you’ve made your bed and now you’re lying on it; which means there’s no fear, which means you’re confronting it, which means you’re accepting it, and then it even means you can have compassion. So that’s a very different way of interpreting a situation, isn’t it? And all of this is implying: therefore this is not existing from its own side, therefore it isn’t *causeless*. Because the way we have ego now, it’s all causeless. “Why is this happening?” and panic and fear. And that’s because we are grasping primordially at “innocent victim me” who didn’t ask to get born.

That’s a way of expressing emotionally how it feels to have ego; whereas if you have this other one, it’s more spacious. You recognize why. You know you did it. It’s more spacious and it’s linked to interdependence, which is the flipside of emptiness. One has to think about it again and again and again. It’s a practical thing, you know. It sounds so abstract, to hear about “understand emptiness.” It really means to see interdependence and karma is a perfect example of how things exist in dependence upon various causes and factors and things, you know. Does it make sense a little bit? So, thinking about interdependence is the way to put it.

Saying “emptiness” seems a bit abstract, because interdependence is the flip side of emptiness, because the way ego is, “grasping at the self-existent me” – this is the label for it – is the one of thinking there’s no cause, thinking it’s not my fault, thinking “poor me” and therefore the panic and the fear and the rage and the guilt and the shame and all the junk that arises when bad things happen. Does it make sense a bit?

And so finally, after years and years of much analysis and logic and thinking and meditating, one finally gets the direct insight

into emptiness. That’s when we finally have seen directly the absence of this fantasy “I” that we’ve been clinging to for so long. That’s when you cut the root of delusions. Because there’s no longer the misconception of the I. Therefore there’s no longer fear, no longer anger, no longer attachment. We have a way to go before you completely finish it all and become a buddha, but you’ve made this major shift when you’ve realized emptiness. That’s the real purification. That’s when you cut the root of suffering and its causes.

# *How Ignorance Grasps at the I*

*By Lama Thubten Yeshe*

## **THE MOUNTAIN OF SELF**

Our conception of ego instinctively feels that I'm somewhere around here; Thubten Yeshe is somewhere here. Where is Thubten Yeshe? My ego's instinctive interpretation is that I'm here, somewhere in my body. Check for yourself. See what comes up in your mind when you think of your name. The huge mountain of your self will arise. Then check exactly where that mountain of "me" can be found. Where are you? Somewhere around your body. Are you in your chest, in your head?

You feel this instinctively. You don't have to study philosophy to learn it; you don't have to go to school; you parents didn't teach you. You've known this since before you were born.

Buddhism describes two kinds of ego identity: *kun-tag* and *lhen-kye*. it comes at conception.

## **LEARNED GRASPING AT SELF**

*Kun-tag* means the sense of self that's philosophically acquired. It's something that you learn through outside influence from teachers, friends, books and so forth. This is the intellectually derived ego. Can you imagine? You can even acquire an ego through reading. This one is easier to remove, of course, because it's more superficial. It's a gross conception. The simultaneously born sense of self is much, much harder to get rid of.

## **INNATE GRASPING AT SELF**

The one I'm talking about is *lhen-kye*, the simultaneously-born one; the one that exists simply because you exist. It was born with you; it needs no outside influence for its existence. Like the smell that comes with a pine tree, they're one. The pine tree doesn't grow first and then the smell comes later.

They come together. It's the same with the innate sense of ego;

This instinctive conception of ego is really convinced that around my body is where you'll find Thubten Yeshe. Someone looks at me and asks, "Are you Thubten Yeshe?" "Yes," I reply, "I'm Thubten Yeshe." Where is Thubten Yeshe? Around here. Instinctively, I feel I'm right here. But I'm not the only one who feels like this. Check up for yourself. It's very interesting.

## **MY NAME IS NOT ME**

Until I was six years old, I was not Thubten Yeshe. That name was given to me when I became a monk at Sera Monastery. Before that time, nobody knew me as Thubten Yeshe. They thought I was Döndrub Dorje. The names Thubten Yeshe and Döndrub Dorje are different; different superstitions give different kinds of name. I feel my name is me, but actually, it isn't. Neither the names Thubten Yeshe nor Döndrub Dorje are me. But the moment I was given the name Thubten Yeshe, Thubten Yeshe came into existence. Before I was given the name, he didn't exist; nobody looked at me and thought, "There's Thubten Yeshe." I didn't even think it myself. Thubten Yeshe did not exist.

But when one superstitious conception named this bubble, my body – "Your name is Thubten Yeshe" – my superstition took it: "Yes, Thubten Yeshe is me." It's an interdependent relationship. One superstition gives the name Thubten Yeshe to this bubble of relativity and my ego starts to feel that Thubten Yeshe really does exist somewhere in the area of my body.

## **THUBTEN YESHE IS MERELY A NAME**

The reality, however, is that Thubten Yeshe is merely the dry words applied to the bubble-like phenomenon of these five aggregates. These things come together and that's it: Thubten Yeshe, the name on the bubble. It's a very superficial view. The ego's instinctive feeling that Thubten Yeshe exists somewhere around here is very superficial.

You can see that the relative reality of Thubten Yeshe is simply the name that's been

given to this bubble of energy. That's all Thubten Yeshe is. That's why the great philosopher and yogi Nagarjuna and the great yogi Lama Tsongkhapa both said that all phenomena exist merely in name. As a result, some early Western Buddhist scholars decided that Nagarjuna was a nihilist. That's a conclusion that could be reached only by someone who doesn't practice and spends all his time dealing in concepts and words.

If I were to show up somewhere and suddenly announce, "You're all merely names," people would think I was crazy. But if you investigate in detail the manner in which we're all merely names, it becomes extremely clear. Nihilists reject the very existence of interdependent phenomena but that's not what Nagarjuna did. He simply explained that relative phenomena exist but that we should view them in a reasonable way. They come, they go; they grow; they die. They receive various names and in that way gain a degree of reality for the relative mind. But that mind does not see the deeper nature of phenomena; it does not perceive the totality of universal existence.

### **RELATIVE AND ABSOLUTE EXIST SIMULTANEOUSLY**

Phenomena have two natures: the conventional, or relative, and the absolute, or ultimate. Both qualities exist simultaneously in each and every phenomenon. What I've been talking about is the way that bubbles of relativity exist conventionally. A relative phenomenon comes into existence when, at any given time, the association of superstition and the conception of ego flavors an object in a particular way by giving it a name. That combination – the object, the superstition giving it a name and the name itself – is all that's needed for a relative phenomenon to exist. When those things come together, there's your Thubten Yeshe. He's coming; he's going; he's talking. It's all a bubble of relativity.

### **THUBTEN YESHE IS A BUBBLE**

If right now you can see that Thubten Yeshe's a bubble, that's excellent. It helps a lot. And if you can relate your experience of seeing me

as a bubble to other concrete objects you perceive, it will help even more. If you can see the heavy objects that shake your heart and make you crazy as relative bubbles, their vibration will not overwhelm you. Your heart will stop shaking and you'll cool down and relax.

If I were to show you a scarecrow and ask if it was Thubten Yeshe, you'd probably say it wasn't. Why not? "Because it's made of wood." You'd have a ready answer. You can apply exactly the same logic to the argument that this bubble of a body is not Thubten Yeshe either.

I believe very strongly that this is me because of the countless times from the time I was born up to now that my ego has imprinted the idea "this is me" on my consciousness. "Me. This is me. This bubble is me, me, me." But this bubble itself is not Thubten Yeshe.

### **THUBTEN YESHE IS NOWHERE TO BE FOUND**

We know it's composed of the four elements. However, the earth element is not Thubten Yeshe; the water is not Thubten Yeshe; the fire is not Thubten Yeshe; the air is not Thubten Yeshe. The parts of the body are not Thubten Yeshe either. The skin is not Thubten Yeshe; the blood is not Thubten Yeshe; they bone is not Thubten Yeshe; the brain is not Thubten Yeshe.

The ego is not Thubten Yeshe. Superstition is not Thubten Yeshe. The combination of all this is not Thubten Yeshe either – if it were, Thubten Yeshe would have existed before the name had been given. But before this combination was named Thubten Yeshe, nobody recognized it as Thubten Yeshe and I didn't recognize it as Thubten Yeshe myself. Therefore, the combination of all these parts is not Thubten Yeshe.

If we call the scarecrow Thubten Yeshe and then analyze it to see exactly where Thubten Yeshe can be found, we can't find Thubten Yeshe in any of the parts or on all the parts together. This is easy to understand. It's exactly the same thing with the bubble of my aggregates. Neither any single constituent part nor the whole combination is

Thubten Yeshe. We also know that the name alone is not Thubten Yeshe. So what and where is Thubten Yeshe? Thubten Yeshe is simply the combination of superstition flavoring an object with the words, “Thubten Yeshe.” That’s all that Thubten Yeshe is.

### **BEYOND THE NAME, THERE IS NO THUBTEN YESHE**

Beyond the name, there is no real Thubten Yeshe existing somewhere. But the simultaneously-born ego doesn’t understand that Thubten Yeshe exists merely as an interdependent combination of parts. It believes that without question, around here, somewhere, there exists a real, independent, concrete Thubten Yeshe. This is the nature of the simultaneously-born ego. Therefore, if we do not remove conceptions like, “Somewhere in this bubble, I’m Thubten Yeshe,” we cannot release the ego.

The conception of ego is an extreme mind. It holds very concretely the idea that somewhere within this bubble of the four-element combination body there exists a self-existent I. That is the misconception that we must release. If the ego mind assessed the situation reasonably and was comfortable and satisfied perceiving that superstition giving the name Thubten Yeshe to this interdependent, four-element bubble was enough for Thubten Yeshe to exist, that would be a different story. But it’s not satisfied with that. It cannot leave that alone. It wants to be special. It wants Thubten Yeshe to be concrete. It’s not satisfied with Thubten Yeshe being a mere name on a collection of parts. Therefore, it conceives an imaginary, unrealistic, exaggerated, concrete self-entity.

*Excerpted from Lama’s commentary on the yoga method of Divine Wisdom Manjushri, Manjushri Institute, Ulverston, Cumbria, England, August 1977. Edited from the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive by Nicholas Ribush. Published in the June 2001 issue of Mandala.*

# *You Cannot Find the I Anywhere*

*Lama Zopa Rinpoche*

Let's concentrate for a few moments on what I'm saying. [Silence.] We believe, "I am here, in this building." We believe, "I am in America, Soquel, Land of Medicine Buddha, Land of Medicine Buddha, Land of Medicine Buddha! I'm in this gumpa, I'm in Vajrasattva retreat, I'm on this cushion, I'm in pain! I'm tired! I'm sleepy! I'm exhausted from a long day! What is he talking about? What is he mumbling about?" Anyway, thinking like that.

We think there's a real one, a real I, a real me, here doing Vajrasattva retreat, or listening to teachings. Here, sitting on this chair, or on this cushion – a real me listening to teachings. Now, I is your label; me, I.

You point to your body and label it I: "I am going out." You don't pick up a book and point to it and say, "I am going out!" No. You point to your body and apply the label, "I am going out."

And as your mind does the activity of thinking, you label, "I am thinking."

As your mind meditates, "I am meditating." By first thinking what kind of activity your mind is doing – for example, it's wandering – you say, "I am wandering. I am not meditating." "Are you meditating now?"

"No." You check the mind, then you say, "I am wandering," or, if it is meditating, being transformed into virtue by analytical or fixed meditation, you say, "I am meditating"; you call, or label, it, "I am meditating."

In exactly the same way as in this example, when you say "I," instead of pointing here [at your chest], point at this table; label I on this table.

So now, you have labelled I on the table, but where is that I on the table?

You cannot find I on the table. Even though you label I on the table, you cannot find it anywhere, on any corner of the table, inside the table, above the table – you cannot find I anywhere. Not only that, but this

corner of the table is not I, this other corner is not I – no part of the table is I. Even all the parts of the table together are not I.

So now, like this, it's exactly the same, exactly the same, even though our mind constantly labels I on this association of body and mind [Rinpoche pointing to his chest], constantly, twenty-four hours a day, labels I on this association of body and mind, exactly as in the example where your mind labels I on the table – even if you label I on the table, you cannot find I on the table – the table is not I, nor is I on the table, inside the table, or anywhere else; you cannot find I on any part of the table, and even the whole thing is not I – in the same way, I cannot be found anywhere on the association of body and mind. If you look for your I, you cannot find it, from the ends of your hair to the tip your toes – your little toes, your big toes – nowhere can it be found. You cannot find your I anywhere. It is neither inside your nose nor on the tip of your nose! I'm joking!

Anyway, I is nowhere to be found, not even inside your body.

Normally you believe I to be inside, but even if that's what you normally believe, apprehend – that there's a real I inside the body, there's a real me inside the body – if you look for it, you cannot find it. When you start to analyze, it cannot be found. Where is it exactly? Look for it. Where is it exactly, inside the body? Where is it exactly, inside the chest – the part of the body where we normally believe the I to reside? It's somewhere there, within the body. We don't think that the I is outside – we think that it's inside, inside the chest. But if you try to identify exactly where the I is located, it cannot be found. There is no particular location. You can't find it. If you look for the I, you cannot find it or its particular location.

Even though you normally believe that the I is there, somewhere inside your body, inside your chest, if you really check inside where it is, its exact location, you cannot find it.

## **SUBTLE DEPENDENT ARISING**

When you think that the nature of the I is dependent arising, subtle dependent arising,

the real I that appeared to you at the beginning and that you apprehend, disappears. It immediately becomes empty. It becomes empty, as it is empty in reality. If that real I that appeared to you were true – that you believed at the beginning to really be there – if that were true – according to the way in which it appears, the way in which you believe – if that were true, then even after analysis it should still be there. Even after your analysis of its dependent arising, it should remain. You should be able to find it. But it is not there.

Even when you meditate on the chakras, a real I seems to exist, but there is no real I existing in this body the way it appears to exist, the way you apprehend, or believe, it to exist. That I is not there, neither on the body nor inside the body. The body is not I; nor is the mind. Even the association of body and mind is not I; these aggregates are not I.

Without going through the Madhyamaka or lam-rim analyses of emptiness – for example, if the aggregates are I, then what happens, what illogical consequences arise? If the body is I, what illogical consequences arise? If the mind is I, what illogical consequences rise? – without going through all those detailed analyses, what I have just mentioned gives you an idea of how the aggregates are not I. From that, you can understand, or get the idea of, the rest.

### **SUBJECT & OBJECT CANNOT BE ONE**

Even this association of body and mind is not I. As the texts state, the aggregates – this association of body and mind – are what is received.

They are what is received, and I is the receiver. I received these aggregates this time; I is the receiver. I is the subject who receives these aggregates, who has received, or taken, them. The I is the receiver. Can you say “taker,” that I is the taker? Like take-away food! I is to be taken away, like take-away food! I is to be taken away. Anyway, I’m joking...well, there is a way in which this can be true.

In Tibetan, we say *nye-wa lang-cha lem-pa-ko*. *Nye-wa lang-cha*: what is to be taken, the aggregates. The aggregates are what is to be

taken, and I is the taker, who takes them. I is the subject and the aggregates are the object, what is to be taken. I is the taker of the aggregates. *Nye-wa lang-cha*, and *lem-pa-ko*; *lang-cha* is what is taken and *lem-pa-ko* is the taker.

So, there are two. The I created the cause of these aggregates; the continuity of this I created the cause of these aggregates, this samsara. Then this I has received, or taken, these aggregates. So the aggregates are what is to be taken and I is the taker. Subject and object. Therefore, they are not one. Therefore, the aggregates are not I, cannot be I, the subject.

Because aggregates are what is to be taken – the object. I is the taker of that object. So they cannot be one.

Similarly, an ax and the tree it cuts cannot be one. One is the object, the other is the subject, so they cannot be one. The cutter – the ax – and what is to be cut – the wood – cannot be one. The wood that is to be cut is not the cutter, the ax.

### **POSSESSOR & POSSESSION CANNOT BE ONE**

In that way, there’s one reason. The other reason is similar. [We say] “My aggregates, my aggregates, my aggregates.” Even from the common, language point of view, “my aggregates” shows that the aggregates are the possession, and my, or I, is the possessor. “My aggregates, my mind, my body.” Even normal language shows that these two are completely different; two completely different phenomena. They are not one. They are totally different phenomena. “My aggregates, my body, my mind” shows that they are possessions, and from that it follows that my, I, is the possessor.

Again, through that reason, you can see that there’s no way in which the possession, that which is possessed, can be the possessor, I.

There is no way. The two are totally different phenomena. They don’t exist separately, but they exist differently.

## THE LABEL & THE BASE CANNOT BE ONE

Perhaps another thing to mention is this. The aggregates, the association of the body and mind, is the base to be labelled, and I is the label to be applied – what the base is to be labelled with. Again in Tibetan, I is dagchö, the label to be applied, and the aggregates are dag-shir, what is labelled, the base to be labelled. The aggregates are the base to be labelled, and I is the label, what is labelled on the base. Thus again here, one is the base, the other is the label. Two totally different phenomena; two totally different phenomena. They don't exist separately, but they exist differently.

If they did exist separately, it would help a lot if you were a criminal!

It would help a lot. Because then you could say, "It wasn't me that did it; it was the body. I didn't do it"! Or you could say, "This mind did it, not me"! You could have many arguments! In court! You could argue in court, "I didn't do it – the body did it; the mind did it." If what you did was criminal or something for which you'd get punished, you could say, "The body did it; the mind did it. I didn't do it." But if it was a situation where you had something to gain, then you could say, "I did it"!

Say your body did something that normally brings millions of dollars, but nobody saw it. If your I had no relation to your aggregates, you could say, "I did it"! Since doing the action that brings millions of dollars didn't depend on the body or the mind doing it, you could take the credit, "I did it. I should get the money"! You could argue like that. If there were something good to gain, something that you like or want to acquire, you could say, "I did it." But if what you'd done were criminal or subject to punishment, you could say, "It wasn't me"!

Anyway, I'm saying that if the I existed separately from the aggregates, it could be very helpful. You could do that. Maybe you could still argue, "I didn't do it because I cannot find the I anywhere. I cannot see the I, so how could I have done it?" I'm joking!

What I'm trying to say is that since the aggregates are the base to be labelled and I is

what is labelled on them – the aggregates are the base and I is the label – they are two totally different phenomena. Therefore, they are not one; the aggregates are not I.

## THE MIND IS NOT THE I

Similarly, the mind is not I. It's the same – you can use all those reasons that I mentioned regarding the aggregates, with the mind, to understand that the mind is not I. Your mind is not you. My mind, your mind – that shows it is not you. Your mind is not you; my mind is not me.

If something that the I possessed had to be I, were the I, then everything you possessed would be you. Your car would be you. Your kaka would be you!

It's exactly the same with the table, as I mentioned before. You can find the I nowhere on these aggregates. Neither are the aggregates the I.

Exactly the same. Even though you label I on the table, you cannot find I on the table. The table is not I. Exactly as you cannot find your I on the table even though your mind labels the table I, exactly like that, even though your mind labels I on the aggregates, you cannot find I anywhere on the aggregates. Neither that, nor are the aggregates I.

When you get a feeling that the aggregates are not I, when you cannot find I on the aggregates, this understanding makes very clear what is the base and what is the label; you are able to differentiate. Now you are able to differentiate between the base and the label.

After this analysis, you are able to differentiate what is the base and what is the label I.

Before, it was unclear to your mind; these two things were unclear. His Holiness the Dalai Lama would say those two are mixed up, as if the table were mixed into the base, as if the table were inside the base.

His Holiness Ling Rinpoche used to say that the definition of the object to be refuted is the appearance of the base and the label as undifferentiable.

For your mind, in your view, the base and

the label – for example, the base to be labelled “table” and the label “table” itself – are undifferentiable. His Holiness Ling Rinpoche explained during a commentary on the Seven Point Thought Transformation at Drepung Monastery many years ago that this is the object to be refuted.

You are unable to differentiate between the label and the base. Your mind is very confused. Your mind is in a state of confusion. What appears to your view is that these two – the base, the aggregates, and the label, I, are undifferentiable. Now, through this analysis, you can see clearly that they – the label, I, and the base, the aggregates – are two totally different phenomena.

### **WHEN THE REALIZATION OF EMPTINESS OF THE I IS REAL, IT IS SO POWERFUL**

Now, even if you have one hundred percent understanding, or recognition, that the base, the aggregates, is not I, that the I exists nowhere, I would not call that having realized emptiness. In other words, you understand through the four-point analysis, the analysis of the four vital points, that if the I is inherently existent, it should exist either as oneness with the aggregates or as completely separate from them; it has to be pervaded by being either oneness with the aggregates or existing separately from the aggregates. But simply understanding that the inherently existent I is neither oneness with the aggregates nor does it exist separately from them – having a clear idea that the aggregates are not one with the I but also don't exist separately from the I – this awareness alone, the ability to distinguish between label and base, is not the realization of emptiness. Even if you had this awareness – the ability to distinguish label from base – even if the difference between the base and the label had become clear for your mind, still I would not say that you had realized emptiness.

When you realize emptiness – not just that there is no I, not just the feeling that there is no I – you should feel something very intensive. It should be very much more than that. Your understanding should be

something very intensive. Not just the feeling that there is no I. The feeling should be something very deep; the feeling “there is no I” should be very intensive, very deep. You should feel as you would if you'd had a vision that you had received a million dollars, that somebody had put a million dollars into your hands, and you had totally, one hundred percent believed that you actually had all that money – and then suddenly realized it was just a hallucination! It's gone! Like that, suddenly you realize that it's not there, it has totally gone.

What you have believed, were one hundred percent convinced of, and so strongly clung to, grasped at, is suddenly, totally non-existent.

There's nothing to grab onto, nothing to hold onto. Suddenly, it's totally non-existent. Nothing of what you have been holding onto, cherishing as if it really exists, is truly there. Nothing of what, so far, you have never had any doubt about, have been grasping at continuously, holding onto like a cat grabbing a mouse – all its claws clutching tightly together – nothing of that I exists. Suddenly, that about which you have never had any doubt since beginningless rebirths – even since this morning or since you were born into this life – suddenly, it doesn't go anywhere. Suddenly, there's nothing there. Maybe it's gone to the beach! Or to the mountains! To a retreat center! Anyway, it doesn't go anywhere.

Just there! Suddenly! You realize there is nothing there. Suddenly, it is not there. You realize that it's totally non-existent. Totally non-existent.

There's nothing to hold onto. It's lost. Totally lost. Just right there – where it was – totally lost. Not that it's gone somewhere, but right there, it has become totally lost. There's nothing to hold onto. You feel something very intensive – not space, but empty, like space. During that time, there's no dual view, there's no “this is I and that is emptiness”; no “here is the subject, perceiver, realizer and there is the object, emptiness.” It's not dual; non-dual. At that time, the view that should appear should be non-dual, not “this I is meditating on emptiness, seeing emptiness.

Oh, that is emptiness.”

Instead, there should be a very intensive understanding, seeing very intensively that . . . the I is empty. It's not just thinking that there's no I; it's not just that. It's not like, after searching for the table, the labelled table, the general table – not the inherently existent table but the general table, the labelled table – looking to see if any part of the table is the table – it's not that – or if perhaps the whole collection of parts together is the table – it's not that either – and only after all that, then thinking that the table does not exist. It's not that kind of experience. Nor is it like analyzing the body to find if the I is inside the body or on the aggregates, or understanding that the aggregates together are also not the I, then, after all that analysis, at the end, coming to the conclusion that there's no I.

Because you cannot find it, thinking that there is no I. It's not just that.

#### **WHEN YOU SEE EMPTINESS, THERE IS EITHER UNBELIEVABLE JOY . . .**

The right way of perceiving that the I is empty is an extremely deep, intensive experience, but there are basically two kinds of experience you can have. You can feel incredible, that you have discovered the most precious thing, such as a wish-granting jewel. Or like a person who has been looking for or waiting to meet a dear friend for many, many years – praying, wishing, to meet that person for many years – and then, after all these many years, suddenly meeting that friend. Or like you've been waiting to get a billion dollars for a long time and then suddenly you get the money. In other words, when you see emptiness, you feel unbelievable joy; incredible joy that makes you cry.

#### **. . . OR UNBELIEVABLE FEAR**

The second kind of experience is one of unbelievable fear, incredible fear. Not just any kind of fear. Not just the fear of being attacked by somebody; not that kind of fear. It's a very deep fear; something deep inside your heart, in the very depths of your heart. A very deep fear. The other fear is not fear of losing the I – something is going to happen to

this I, but it's not losing the I. The ordinary is fear that this real I is going to receive some harm, but here, something that you've believed in – not only from birth but from beginningless rebirths up until now – something that you've believed in one hundred percent, only now, only now you realize that it's not there. Only now you realize that it's totally nonexistent.

This can cause an incredibly deep fear to arise.

As I often say, even when you recite *The Heart Sutra*, when you say the words, “No ear, no nose, no tongue...no ice cream! No coffee, no chocolate, no cigarettes, no drinks...!” – if fear comes into your heart when you say “no this, no that,” if fear arises, that's a good sign. Fear arising means your recitation of *The Heart Sutra*, The Essence of Wisdom, is hitting, or touching, the root of samsara, hurting it. Your recitation of *The Heart Sutra* has touched the root of samsara, ignorance; has hit it.

Your recitation of *The Heart Sutra*, your way of thinking when you recite *The Essence of Wisdom*, is fitting – like an arrow or a bomb. As an arrow hits its target, as a bomb or a torpedo hits its target, the enemy at which you aimed, like that, your recitation of *The Heart Sutra*, those teachings on emptiness, your way of thinking, your meditation, has hit its target, the object of ignorance, the inherently existent I – the I that is apprehended by simultaneously-born ignorance. You have hit the target you're supposed to hit. The target that you are supposed to hit with the arrow or bomb of your recitation of the words of *The Heart Sutra* and thinking on their meaning is the object to be refuted, the inherently existent I.

Fear in your heart means that you have hit the target.

The texts explain that it is highly intelligent practitioners who have the experience of incredible, blissful joy, tears running down their cheeks, and feel as if they'd found an unbelievably precious jewel, and less intelligent practitioners who feel fear when they realize emptiness. At that time, you should not try to escape from this fear – trying to do so is your greatest obstacle to

realizing emptiness. Instead, you must realize that this is the one time, the one opportunity, to realize emptiness – the only wisdom that can directly cut the delusions, the root of samsara, the gross and subtle defilements, bringing liberation from samsara and full enlightenment. Knowing this, you must go through the fear; you must complete your experience. Go through the fear like crossing a river.

Otherwise, if you block your own progress the one time that you have the opportunity of realizing emptiness, if you run away from that, like running away from teachings, from meditation courses, especially my meditation courses – of course, those are good to run away from! – if you run from the fear that arises when you realize emptiness, that is no good at all.

**BUT DON'T BE AFRAID THE I WILL DISAPPEAR; THERE IS ALWAYS CONTINUITY OF THE LABEL I**

However, you never have to worry about the I ceasing, because the I never ceases. The I that is the label never ceases. The I never stops, never ceases. Why is there always continuity of the I, the label? Why is there always continuity of the self? Because there is always continuity of consciousness. Even after enlightenment, the consciousness continues forever.

Even though the body might change – one body stops, another body is taken – the continuity of consciousness is always there, even after enlightenment. Therefore, the continuity of the I never ceases. It always exists because the base, the continuity of consciousness, always exists.

Therefore, thinking, “I’m going to cease, I’m going to become non-existent” is totally wrong.

When that feeling arises, the appearance of losing or having totally lost your I, you shouldn’t be worried that that appearance means you’re falling into nihilism. Because of that appearance, you should not be worried that you are falling into nihilism – just as you should not be worried that the I is becoming non-existent. There are two things – one is the fear of falling into nihilism; the other is

the worry, “I am becoming nonexistent.”

You should not be scared of those things. If you do get scared, you’ll block yourself from realizing emptiness; this one opportunity to realize emptiness will have arisen and you’ll have blocked it yourself.

A very clear commentary on the Mahamudra by Ketsang Jamyang (I’m not hundred percent sure that’s his name), which is regarded as a very effective teaching, explains why this appearance of the self becoming non-existent happens. It happens because it has to happen. Furthermore, it is a sign that there is no inherent existence on the I, the merely labelled I. There is no inherent existence on that I, and the experience of its becoming non-existent shows, proves, that. When you have this experience, you see the Middle Way, the Madhyamika, view. You see the Middle Way, devoid of the two extremes of nihilism and eternalism.

**REALIZING EMPTINESS IS THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS LIBERATION**

I would say that realizing that the object of ignorance – the concept of the inherently existent I – is empty, realizing the emptiness that is the negation of the object to be refuted, is the first step towards liberation.

I’m not saying that by that alone you have entered – of the five paths to liberation – the path of merit. I’m not saying that. But it’s like you’ve taken a step towards liberation, because that wisdom is the main thing that directly ceases the defilements.

**CONCLUSION: THE I EXISTS BUT NOT HOW WE THINK IT DOES**

Just to conclude now – before we all go to sleep! – as I mentioned before, how when you label I on the table, it’s not there – in exactly the same way, when the mind labels I on these aggregates, it’s not there either. The aggregates are not the I; the I is not there. I exists, but it’s not there. The I that is labelled by your mind exists, but it’s not there. Even that is not there. Even that. Besides the real I that you believe to reside in the heart, inside your body, not being there, even the I merely labelled by your mind, which does exist, is not there either. I’m not saying it’s not here

[in this room], I'm saying it's not there [on your aggregates].

So now, the I that is merely labelled by the mind exists. That is here, that exists, but even that cannot be found on these aggregates, on the base of the aggregates. It doesn't exist on these aggregates. The merely labelled I exists because the base, the aggregates, exists. In the same way, the base, the aggregates, which are merely imputed, exists, but it doesn't exist on the gathering of the five aggregates; it doesn't exist there. The merely labelled aggregates exist, but they don't exist on the collection of the five aggregates. They don't exist there; they cannot be found there. So that's clear. The merely labelled aggregates cannot be found on the collection of the five. They don't exist there.

In exactly the same way, for each aggregate – for example, the aggregate of form, the general aggregate of form – it's exactly same. The same logic applies. The merely labelled aggregate exists but it doesn't exist on that base. Empty. It doesn't exist there; it's not there, not existent on this base. The aggregate of form does not exist on the collection of the limbs, either in all their parts or on the whole collection together. So there's no question about the inherently existent, real aggregate: it doesn't exist anywhere.

The real one appearing from there – the aggregate, the general aggregate of form – exists nowhere. Similarly, if you go to the parts of the limbs, to the arms, head, legs, stomach, and so forth, all those merely labelled ones exist, but they don't exist on their own bases. Even the merely labelled head cannot be found on the collection of its parts, the brain and everything else. If you look for head, it cannot be found there.

Like that, it's the same for the arms, the legs, the main body – everything down to the atoms – that which is merely labelled exists, but it doesn't exist on its own base. Even the merely labelled atom exists, but it doesn't exist, cannot be found, on the collection of the particles of the atom. And it's the same for even the particles of the atom – they can't be found on their own base either.

Thus, everything from the I down to the particles of the atoms, or, from the general

aggregate of form down to the particles of atoms, which appears as something real, is not there. It's totally empty; every single thing is totally empty. What appears to your view, your hallucinating mind, seems to be something real, from there – but it's not there.

Starting from the real I down to the real particles of the atoms, what appears is not there; it's totally empty – not space, but like space; totally empty, non-existent.

That was form. How about the aggregate of feeling, that which is labelled on the thought, the mental factor that experiences pleasure, indifference and suffering? It's the same with the aggregate of feeling – the merely labelled aggregate of feeling exists, but cannot be found on its base. It's also the same with the aggregate of cognition, which discriminates phenomena as bad or good, as this and that, as friend and enemy, fat and skinny, long and short, and so forth. The merely labelled aggregate of cognition exists – because its base exists – but it doesn't exist on that base. So that's the same. Then, if you analyze the pleasant feeling, the suffering feeling, the indifference, you cannot find those feelings on their base. Similarly with the aggregate of cognition – you can do the same analysis, but neither can cognition be found on its base, even though merely labelled cognition exists.

It's also the same thing with the aggregate of compounded phenomena.

It's also labelled, merely imputed, because its base exists. Subtracting feeling and cognition from the fifty-one mental factors, the rest are called the aggregate of compounded phenomena, labelled that, but that aggregate cannot be found on that base.

Finally, it's the same with the aggregate of consciousness. Merely labelled consciousness exists, but it cannot be found on its base, like a carpet on the floor. The merely labelled consciousness doesn't exist like that. The mind, which knows phenomena, which does the function of continuing from one life to the next, perceiving merely the essence of the object, that knowing phenomenon, she-pa, because that mind exists, your mind labels it nam-she, consciousness. But using the same

analysis I mentioned before, neither that consciousness nor the split seconds of consciousness can be found on their respective bases.

Therefore, starting from the I down to the split seconds of consciousness, each aggregate – form, feeling, cognition, compounded phenomena and consciousness, down to the split seconds of consciousness – everything that appears to our mind, to our view, as real, as something real existing from there, is totally non-existent. Normally, after making all this analysis, you should meditate on this emptiness; let your mind dwell in it for a while. Looking at everything as empty, let your mind stay in that state of emptiness for as long as possible. That's extremely good, very effective.

#### **DWELL IN THIS EMPTINESS OF NON-EXISTENCE FROM ITS OWN SIDE**

So that's reality; that's how things are. This is reality, so let's place our minds in this state for a while. Concentrate for a little bit on this conclusion that the whole thing is totally empty. Everything – from the I down to, and including, the particles of the atoms and the split seconds of consciousness – is totally empty from its own side.

[Long meditation.]

The final thing is that it's totally non-existent – from its own side. It's totally non-existent, but non-existent from its own side. So the second part of that expression makes the way of thinking or the experience correct – seeing it as not just empty, non-existent, but empty, non-existent, from its own side.

Like this, the nature of everything else in existence – forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tangible objects, hell, enlightenment, samsara, nirvana, happiness, suffering, life's gains and losses, virtue, non-virtue, everything – is totally empty, non-existent. But, non-existent from its own side.

#### **WHILE EVERYTHING IS EMPTY, THEY DO EXIST – MERELY LABELLED BY MIND**

So, while things are empty – everything is totally empty from its own side – they exist. They exist in mere name, by being merely

labelled by the mind – which also exists in mere name. Things exist as merely labelled by the mind, which itself also exists in mere name. Everything is unified with emptiness and dependent arising, as Guru Shakyamuni Buddha realized and Lama Tsongkhapa praised highly. Lama Tsongkhapa himself also actualized this emptiness – which is unified with dependent arising, subtle dependent arising – this right view, this wisdom, which is the only one that can cut the one particular root of samsara: the ignorance, the hallucinating mind that – while there's no I on these aggregates, including the inherently existent I – through negative imprints left on the mental continuum, projects on to these aggregates the appearance of an inherently existent I and then believes it to be true; the ignorance that believes this inherently existent I is true, that it really exists.

This particular root of samsara – the ignorance that apprehends the I, which is merely labelled by the mind, as existing from its own side, as not merely labelled by the mind – can be cut only by this specific wisdom, only by this right view, this wisdom, this right view. Only by generating that can you be totally liberated from samsara, from the entire ocean of sufferings of samsara, which are divided into three – suffering of pain, suffering of change and pervasive, compounded suffering. Within samsara, there are the specific sufferings of each realm and the general sufferings of samsara, such as the six, the four and the three.

It is only with this wisdom, this particular right view, the Prasangika view, that you can be totally liberated from the oceans of samsaric suffering – all the specific sufferings of each samsaric realm, and the three, four and six general sufferings of samsara. By ceasing the cause – delusion and karma – you can achieve the sorrowless state of total liberation from samsara, and only with this wisdom, the Prasangika view, can you also eradicate the subtle defilements, achieve full enlightenment and be able to do perfect work for all sentient beings, leading them to enlightenment as well.

I'd better stop here, otherwise we won't finish until tomorrow morning!

To escape from this hallucination, to be liberated from this hallucinating mind, we take refuge and keep precepts. Refuge is the very foundation of the Buddhadharma, the gate through which we enter the Dharma path.

We take refuge and vows to make certain that we practice, to make sure that we devote ourselves to actually practicing Dharma. That is the fundamental reason for taking refuge and vows. In order to liberate others from the hallucinating mind, ignorance, first we ourselves have to be liberated from the hallucination, from the hallucinating mind, from all these sufferings that we have been caught in since time without beginning, for beginningless lifetimes. Thus, refuge and precepts are the basic means, the very foundation of the path, for liberating both ourselves and others from the hallucination, from the hallucinating mind, from all suffering, and gaining the ultimate happiness of the highest, full enlightenment.

*Teachings of Lama Zopa Rinpoche given during a Vajrasattva retreat at Land of Medicine Buddha, California, in 1999.*