

Interview by Andrew Cohen with Traleg Kyabgon, Rinpoche

*Andrew:* Rinpoche in your book about Mahamudra meditation called *The Mind at Ease*, you wrote that, quote “The essential quality of the mind is emptiness, but it is described as luminous emptiness, when spiritual fulfilment is attained this luminous emptiness is experienced as pervasively and profoundly blissful and enlightenment is characterized as luminous bliss”. Could you please explain to me what enlightenment is and what is the nature of emptiness when it is experienced as luminous bliss?

*Rinpoche:* Yes, basically enlightenment has two aspects, one is the aspect of being, or what actually is, what is real, so that is one aspect which is the sort of the primary aspect of enlightenment, and emptiness and luminosity, these two concepts are related to that idea. And then enlightenment also has another aspect, which is what manifests from that state of being, that state of ‘what is’, ‘what is real’, and that then manifests in varieties of forms in relation to various experiences that the individual may be having. In other words, how that state of being enlightened gets channelled into normal, everyday life experiences in relation to the world, in relation to other beings, and not just human beings. So I think that’s a general description of what enlightenment is. So there is harmony between what manifests and what actually ‘is’, ‘what is real’, because in a state of being, in relation to emptiness and luminosity, for example, that is not subject to change, but what arises from that, that fluctuates, that changes dependent on existing conditions.

*Andrew:* Rinpoche, it’s my experience that the deepest dimension of who we are has never been born and never entered the stream of time, and this is, I believe, the ground of being, or the being that you are speaking about?

*Rinpoche:* Yes, exactly. What one is, whether one recognizes it or not, as we say in Tibetan Buddhism, it is the same, whether we are in a state of ignorance or a state of enlightenment, but what arises from that, there is a huge difference between what an unenlightened person experiences and what an enlightened person experiences, and how the experiences are actually utilized, because as ordinary beings, we do not have the capacity or the skill to actually make use of them effectively, whereas an enlightened being, on the other hand, can do that with ease.

*Andrew:* Rinpoche, why is it that the awakening to the deepest dimension of who we are, which is the awakened to the ground of being, that you referred to as being, why is it that that awakening is the ground and source of spiritual liberation and enlightenment?

*Rinpoche:* Well, because, according to Buddhism, whatever ‘is’, is already liberated, so there is nothing that we need to do there, we just have to access that state of being, it is already free, it’s a state of being completely free, emancipated, there is not a trace of bondage, or confinement or restriction or something like that. When we recognize that state of freedom, that state of being, then our perception is described as ‘pure perception’ and when we do not recognize that state of freedom, that state of being, which is already liberated, then we describe our experiences as ‘impure perception’.

*Andrew:* So in the way that you are describing it, and please correct me if I am wrong, what you are calling pure perception only becomes possible when a human being has at least a degree of direct access to the deepest part of their own self and that dimension of being that has never been born and never entered the stream of time.

*Rinpoche:* Yes, that has never been born, precisely because, never been born is just a way of saying that state of being is ever present, and so because it has never been born it can never cease, so therefore the idea

of actually being liberated comes from, it is connected to the idea of emptiness. Because that which has never been born and that which is never going to cease, has the nature of emptiness, then there is no trace of bondage or something of that kind, it is free, that state of free, that state is free precisely because of emptiness.

*Andrew:* Rinpoche is the nature of being, empty?

*Rinpoche:* Yes.

*Andrew:* And when you say that the nature of being is empty, what exactly do you mean by that? Because there are different ways, I believe, of interpreting or describing the meaning of emptiness. I know that the Dalai Lama has described emptiness as the recognition that no thing that exists, exists separate from or apart from everything else. And from there he often goes on to speak about the law of dependent origination, that everything that exists is dependent upon everything else that exists and in that way of speaking about emptiness, he meant, empty of division, or empty of separation. And I know that is one way to understand or to interpret what the word 'emptiness' means. But there is also other definitions of emptiness which means empty of qualities, empty of substance, because most of the time when we think about the world of manifestation we see that every object that exists has certain qualities and characteristics, but when we awaken to what we have been speaking about, the deepest level of our own selves which is timeless and formless being, we discover as you have been describing, a quality that, we use the word 'empty' to describe. So in relationship to the definitions of emptiness that I have been speaking about are you referring to both of them or to one in particular?

*Rinpoche:* Yes, I think that there are two ways to think of emptiness, one is in relation to the way of being, as such, as we were talking about, what is real, and in that sense emptiness really represents something like being spacious, unrestricted, full of potentiality, things of that kind. Often emptiness is compared to the sky for instance, or not just the sky, the space generally, and the idea is that if there is no space then nothing could exist, so just as space makes it possible for things to come into being, for things to be created or constructed, or naturally produced, due to causes and conditions, so in a similar way emptiness does the same thing, that everything arises from emptiness, emptiness is the source. So that is really one way to think about it. And the other way to think about it is as you were saying, emptiness can be thought of in relation to everyday things, so thinking about emptiness in relation to causes and conditions. So by thinking about causes and conditions one comes to the realization that nothing can exist by itself, everything is dependent on something other than itself, so that means nothing is self-existing. And so from that then one comes to realize everything has the nature of emptiness. But it is just sort of looking at emptiness from two perspectives I suppose, one is from the absolute perspective, and the other one is from the relative perspective, as we might say in Mahayana Buddhism. So when we are thinking about what is real, when we are talking about emptiness, luminosity and things like that, then we are talking about emptiness from its own perspective, I suppose, from the absolute perspective. And when we talk about emptiness in relation to dependent arising then we are talking about emptiness from the relative perspective.

*Andrew:* Rinpoche, it seems that people who are truly enlightened have a unique quality which we could describe as joy, or lightness of being, ease, laughter, a spontaneous freedom, so is the luminosity that you were speaking about, could we call that luminosity a reflection in time of the infinite nature of the timeless ground of our own being?

*Rinpoche:* Yes, according to Mahayana Buddhism everything has the nature of emptiness, but luminosity is the essential quality of the mind. If we strip everything away, everything to do with the mind, and then layers of all kinds of structures of consciousness or something of that kind and then we reach to the very bottom of what is there, and what is left there is what we call luminosity of the mind, or clear light mind as it is called sometimes. And that is all there is, this sheer state of cognitivity. There is no thought elaborations, there are no discursive thoughts, wayward thoughts, no disturbances of any kind, just a pure state of pure cognition. But I don't think it means that it is the main thing, that state, it has to also be engaged with objects of cognition, but in itself, there is nothing but pure cognitivity and that is called the luminosity of the mind. And according to Buddhism that is what we should try to do, we should try, even if we haven't been able to work through all of our psychological and spiritual difficulties and problems and so on, even if we haven't managed to do that, but through practice of meditation or something of that kind, if we can go a little deeper and gain a little bit of access there, we could have a glimpse, and that in itself, would produce tremendous bliss, that's the idea any way. So what brings bliss, I think, is when you do that. Then what manifests from 'being itself' and the manifestation themselves have become reconciled. There is the reconciliation of what 'is', and what manifests from what 'is'. Because ordinarily, as they say, our mind is conditioned into thinking dualistically, so we embrace one form or the other, but we do not embrace both, so enlightenment is reached when we can reconcile these two facets of the same reality.

*Andrew:* And would you say that this happens when there is a profound shift of respect of orientation, so now the world of manifestation is now seen from the perspective of the primordial ground of being itself, or from the perspective of unconditioned emptiness, that the world is perceived, rather than seeing the world of time and space and seeing all that manifestation from within the context of manifestation and time and space, now we see all of that manifestation, time and space from this prior ground from this position of this primary or prior infinite existence, and that is what changes our perspective, that is what releases us from fundamental bondage?

*Rinpoche:* And then that then leads us closer to a state of enlightenment, I suppose. Yes.

*Andrew:* Could you say, Rinpoche, that this makes it possible for us to see not only our own mind, but the entire world, in fact the entire cosmos from the perspective of this deepest dimension of our self and therefore we are able to see the world of complexity with all its problems and challenges from that dimension of our self in which there are no problems, and there never have been and there never will be?

*Rinpoche:* Yes, there are problems but those problems are transient, so you bring a new kind of perspective on what is there in relation to the manifestations, various manifestations of the phenomenon. Because as I mentioned, being, itself, and what manifests have become reconciled and one realizes that whatever one experiences has its source in that state of being. But, of course, it does not mean that state of being, or that state of 'real', is the cause of all that manifests, but it is the source from which all these things arise.

*Andrew:* That's an interesting distinction that you just made, because you say it's not necessarily the cause, I suppose, to put it in my language, correct me if I'm wrong, it's not necessarily the cause of this or that particularly, but it is the ultimate source of all things.

*Rinpoche:* Yes.

*Andrew:* On one hand it's an obvious distinction, but on the other hand it is quite a subtle distinction.

*Rinpoche:* Yes.

*Andrew:* You also have written along these lines, I quote, “Our natural state of being has no origin, because we cannot posit a particular time when it came into being, nor can we say what caused it to come into existence or what it is dependent upon. Our natural state of being is self-sustaining, self-existing, and not dependent upon anything”. So is this also a description of the nature of the deepest dimension of ourselves - timeless, formless, being?

*Rinpoche:* Yes. Definitely, because if that were not the case then there would be nothing to distinguish ‘being itself’ and its manifestations. ‘Being itself’ would be the same as its manifestations, as you were saying, like with our normal empirical world we describe it in relation to causes and conditions, time and space, and so on. So then the ‘being itself’ would then also have some kind of, well you would have to think about causes and conditions which may have brought it about, and then if that were the case then you would have to think about it in relation to time frame, then there would be no distinction between the two, but the distinction must be drawn.

*Andrew:* And I suppose then we could say then, I think the Buddha himself said something similar, that if this were not the case, if what you are saying is not the case, then there would be no way out, there would be no liberation, there would be no source of enlightenment.

*Rinpoche:* Yes if that were not the case then our normal thoughts and emotions and feelings would have similar qualities to that of the luminous mind, the luminous, empty mind, for example. So the quality of Buddha’s own mind in himself or herself, it is stable, it doesn’t move, it doesn’t fluctuate, all this movement of the mind has its source in something that is very stable. So that is why in meditation, if we can realize that, then our mind should become a little bit more settled. Even if there is movement, just realizing that the movement actually has risen from something that is not constantly going up and down and sort of swaying this way and that way, then one begins to feel grounded in oneself.

*Andrew:* So then we could say that, would you agree that enlightenment would be this shift of identification to that which never moves from being, we could say hypnotized by a mind that is fluctuating constantly and deeply conditioned. So there would be, I suppose, the manifest expression of resting in luminous emptiness or timeless being, would be, or would look like, a kind of spiritual stability in evenness versus an endless fluctuation and lack of stability.

*Rinpoche:* Yes, I think that’s right, Andrew, I mean that’s just my humble opinion.

*Andrew:* And it does really seem, Rinpoche, that as we learn, you know, the art and science of introspection, of contemplation, meditation, really what we learn is to, at least in the language that I use, is to remove our attention from being attached to the objects that arise in awareness, and then awareness itself begins to contemplate its own nature. And then at the level of experience and we experience a shift from a sense of psychological suffocation and narrowness, because we begin to discover that the nature of our own awareness is the non-relative, infinite context in which the whole world and everything in it is arising, and the infinite nature of the ground of our own awareness is, in that sense, our own immediate liberation.

*Rinpoche:* Yes, exactly.

*Andrew:* And it seems that the quality of the ground of our own awareness in every moment, does have this luminous quality that you were speaking about, in other words we can put our attention on this in any moment, because this is always true, as you were saying, that the nature and the ground of our own awareness is joy, is lightness of being. And that lightness of being will come to the fore of our experience, will

come to the fore of our consciousness if we only learn the simple art of redirecting our attention from the content of consciousness of the objects that are arising in consciousness, to consciousness itself.

*Rinpoche:* Yes.

*Andrew:* It's fascinating isn't it Rinpoche, that even though the empty nature of our own awareness in every moment, is the sky that you were speaking about earlier, is the infinite sky in which the whole universe arises, even though it is the ground of our own experience in every moment, it is quite amazing that a human being can go through an entire lifetime and miss it, even though without it they wouldn't even exist.

*Rinpoche:* Yes that's exactly right. As many Buddhist masters have said, often we miss it because it is too close to us, so something that is too close to us sometimes we miss it, so in other words our own state of being is our own state of being, so it's not 'out there' and we do not have to strive too hard to get to it, we are already in it, but we do not realize it.

*Andrew:* Which means, I suppose, that we are always already there, we are always already enlightened, as you said before, even if we don't know it?

*Rinpoche:* Yes, exactly.

*Andrew:* And so this is kind of, we could say this is the big shock, the big surprise of the earnest practitioner, and the sincere seeker, when he or she begins to awaken to the ground of their own being, the shocking discovery that they have been there all along, they just haven't recognized it.

*Rinpoche:* Yes. As Mahayana's *Uttara Tantra*, Mahayana sutra says, gives an example, there is the story of this poor person who has constructed a hut on this empty piece of land and he is thinking I am so poor I have nothing, without realizing that just below his hut is a huge gold nugget.

*Andrew:* In other words he didn't realize that he had been a rich man all along.

*Rinpoche:* Yes exactly