



**What is Nirvana:
An Overview of the Various Views of nirvana
in the Buddhist Tradition
by
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Part 1

The topic for this discussion is "Buddhist Perspectives on Nirvana."

The concept of nirvana is used freely in the West these days. People use the word "nirvana" to mean a blissful, pleasurable state or something like that. Within Buddhism there are different ways of looking at nirvana, depending on the context within which we are trying to realize or attain it. For nirvana is not as many people assume, from whichever angle or perspective you look at it, it cannot be interpreted as an objective reality that is entered into or come into contact with. Instead, nirvana is a state we enter into as a result of self-cultivation through spiritual practices. The nirvanic state we will attain or realize is determined by what practices we are doing and with what purpose. This has to be understood, otherwise we are going to get confused. We may end up thinking there are contradictions between the different perspectives on nirvana. The traditional view within Buddhism is that there are many different states of nirvana, or there are many different kinds of nirvana, if you would want to put it that way. We do not attain one single nirvana, there are many different kinds.

Broadly speaking, we can say there are three different kinds of nirvanic states that we, as Buddhists, try to attain or realize. These are what I will try to talk about, without making it too technical and introducing too many Buddhist philosophical concepts. I am sure many of you, being Buddhist, are familiar with the subtleties and complexities of Buddhist thought. I am not going to get into that here, but at least for those of you who are familiar with the teachings, I think it is good to think about all of this. Often we may just read books on Buddhism and hear teachings, where the idea of nirvana comes up time and time again, presented in many different ways, but we may not have really thought about how all these different concepts of nirvana "hang together," for want of a better

expression. We have this concept of nirvana as "Extinction," then we have another concept known as "Non-abiding Nirvana," and then we have another concept within the esoteric tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, which could be described as "Innate Nirvana." I will try to give a general overview of these three different approaches as we go along.

I think it is important for us, as Buddhist practitioners, to think about these things because – after all, our spiritual aim is to attain nirvana. Not as a Buddhist, but as a Buddhist practitioner – in Buddhism there is a big difference. To seek nirvana is a difficult task only taken on by a few Buddhists. Most Buddhists are not trying to attain nirvana. Most Buddhists are simply trying to lead a good life so they can have a good rebirth. As Buddhists we believe in future rebirths so most Buddhists are quite content to think of the next life, hoping to be reborn as a human being, with all their faculties intact, in a well off family and then to have many children and many sons – which is also seen as a good thing if you are an Asian Buddhist! Oh, and a successful business of course, that is also very important, a flourishing business that does not go bankrupt! They don't want a business that is successful at first but then goes bankrupt later, they have to ensure that does not happen. So they go to temples and engage in what we call "merit making activities." This means going to the temple and feeding the bald headed monks, or cleaning the temples and all these sort of things. I am not actually trying to be disrespectful here, I am only trying to highlight the funny side of it, in a manner of speaking. These people think that just being a good person is the important thing to do as a Buddhist. That it is sufficient.

Nirvana as Extinction

To seek nirvana is a completely different thing. To seek nirvana we not only try to be a good person but we also try to seek wisdom. In Buddhism goodness is important, but what is even more important is wisdom, to have wisdom. In terms of Buddhist practice, we value doing good work – to achieve nirvana first we have to think in terms of cultivating all the virtuous qualities and trying to overcome all the vices. This is not done through action alone though – as is the case for normal Buddhists– but more specifically, if we embark on the spiritual path even the good works we do, all the virtuous deeds that we perform, have to come from wisdom. They have to come from a better understanding. Moral actions, good deeds of any kind, are subservient to the understanding born of wisdom through practice in meditation. This is very important to understand about the Buddhist

tradition. We value morality but as practitioners we need to go beyond morality. That is not to say that morality ceases to matter, so that a particular individual can then engage in immoral behaviour and it does not make any difference. It does not mean that. What it means is that one is not *constrained* by moral standards of behaviour. I hope that is clear to you.

In Buddhism we believe actions are not performed simply in relation to intentions and the attainment of particular goals. We also believe our actions relate to cause and effect. This is the most important thing we have to understand. A positive state of mind gives rise to wholesome behaviour. Unwholesome states of mind gives rise to unwholesome actions; unwholesome speech and unwholesome physical behaviour from the range of negative physical activities that we may engage in like assault, killing or any other activities. There is a direct relationship between the mental state and physical behaviour. Those physical behaviours in turn leave imprints on the mind. These imprints do not simply wear out, or gradually vanish, but operate on a sub-conscious level, even when we are not aware of them, giving rise to further causes for actions, reactions and responses. In Buddhism we consider this a bad state to be in and in order to get out of it we first have to become accustomed to more positive states of mind, which will enable us to behave in a positive way. At the end of the day though, we learn to rise even above these.

To be caught up in the causal chain of doing wholesome deeds and thus reaping wholesome benefits, then engaging in further wholesome actions and reaping benefits and so on, is going in circles. We have unwholesome, non-virtuous thoughts and attitudes leading to non-virtuous deeds on the physical and verbal plane and a similar circle of positive mental attitudes, with the cultivation of positive emotions of love, compassion, things of this kind, that lead to positive deeds on the physical and verbal planes. Trying to break out of these circles is where wisdom comes in. We have to break out of these karmic chains and that is what aiming for nirvana means. To attain nirvana we have to break out of this chain. In Buddhism this is what is meant by "going beyond morality." It does not mean somebody who has attained more wisdom is now permitted to go against ordinary or conventional standards of morality and common decency. On the contrary, if one has attained wisdom through self-cultivation, through the practice of meditation, that particular individual does not have to try to have wholesome thoughts. They do not have to try to develop positive attitudes or generate loving, compassionate emotions, these things will be their natural attributes. In

the beginning we must try to refrain from our impulses, our tendencies to do bad things because doing something bad comes natural, it is easy, we don't even have to think about it twice. But to do something good, we have to really try hard. It is hard to be compassionate, it is hard to be understanding, it is hard to be tolerant and it is hard to be patient. To be impatient is not difficult, and we may not even notice that we are being intolerant. We may just think we are responding to things the way we should and are morally justified in doing so.

This then puts us in an interminable chain of karmic cause and effect. Whether it is good or bad, it is repeated over and over. The Buddhist teachings say that doing wholesome deeds elevates us so we can have a happier, richer life. Doing non-meritorious deeds, not merit producing but demerit producing actions, causes us to think lower and lower. In either case we are not going to become free of cyclic existence. Sometimes we are in an elevated state then we plunge down into the depths of samsara, the lowest point of samsaric existence, then we come back up again. We ascend to the highest point only to be knocked off again. This means we need to break from this cycle and this is why, in Buddhism, we aim to attain nirvana. When we attain nirvana we have broken out of this samsaric cycle. This is what is meant by liberation in Buddhism.

In Buddhism *vimoksha*, or *tharpa* in Tibetan, means liberation. What are we liberated from? We are liberated from the eternal reoccurrence of similar life circumstances, repeated over and over, over and over. Freeing ourselves from that is called *tharpa*. This cycle is compared to a common sight in India where people fetch water from a well with buckets attached to a wheel. The wheel is fixed just above the buckets and when the wheel rotates the buckets also – of course – rotate. When the buckets reach the bottom they scoop up water. When they come back up to the top, they are emptied and go back down again. For some reason cyclic existence is compared to this. Maybe I should not use this example because you may not relate to it, but it is used over and over in the teachings. You should contemplate on that, it is like a Zen koan I think. Anyway, we have to free ourselves from this. I don't want to labour the point, but we have to free ourselves from this cycle and that is called liberation. This cycle is something that, even though we have been involved in for a long time, we can get out of. And we can get out of it by ourselves.

When we break out of this cycle we attain nirvana but what sort of nirvana? What is nirvana we may ask? For the moment I think we need to understand two things

regarding nirvana. Even in relation to the basic, fundamental concept of nirvana there are two different types. Even in the earliest Buddhist literature, two forms of nirvana are attained. When we attain "nirvana" we attain one of two different types. If one has attained one it does not mean the other will necessarily follow. These two different types of nirvana are called "Nirvana with Remainder" and "Nirvana without Remainder." Does that make sense? "Remainder" is a residue, Nirvana with and without residue.

It is said that when we are in samsara, when we are going around in this circle, everything we experience is like being in flames. There are fires of passion and fires of aggression for example, and these fires are put out by wisdom. The fire which perpetuates this samsaric turbulence, this state of agitation, is calmed by the realization of the true nature of the self. The oil which keeps the fire burning is extinguished. In any case the first type of nirvana is called "extinguishing the craving that keeps the fire going." The craving is extinguished, so the fire is put out. This happened when the Buddha Shakyamuni was meditating in Bodhgaya under the bodhi tree. When we say "Buddha attained enlightenment," "Buddha attained nirvana," we are referring to this particular time, the particular period when the Buddha meditated throughout the night and attained nirvana at dawn.

In Buddhist mythology, it is said that Mara sent his daughters to tempt the Buddha and they had no effect. Then Mara sent a whole army, a whole host of demons and so forth with all kinds of weaponry, to attack the Buddha but that had no effect. Now what does that mean? It means that the Buddha overcame all the residual causes of emotional conflicts – craving, desire, lust, aggression, violence, all kinds of manifestations of anger were all conquered. Buddha was able to conquer all of these and then he attained nirvana.ⁱ This is called "Nirvana with Remainder," with residue, because the Buddha still had his physical body. He had what we call "the five psychophysical constituents," the skandhasⁱⁱ. According to Buddhism, not just the mind but even our body is a product of our past experiences. It is not simply a biological, physical thing that we have inherited in this life. The sort of body we have, whether we are attractive or not attractive, all of the features associated with the body are remaining residues of the past. This is why it is called "Nirvana with Residue."

When Buddha went to Kushinaga, not very far from his birth place in Lumbini, he passed away. When he passed away, again the state he entered into is called "Nirvana," but this time it is called "Nirvana without Remainder" because even his

physical body had dissolved. The last remaining attachment was left behind completely. This notion that first we overcome our karmic tendencies, exhaust our karmic reservoir – all kinds of karmic traces – then gain complete liberation where there is nothing to attach to, or nothing to draw the liberated being back to the world, is put forward by many commentators. They say that is the end but there has also been those who have asked, “Once samsara has been conquered then what happens?” Obviously it does not mean that the “extinction” of nirvana is the extinction of the individual. The “extinction,” in this instance, has to mean the extinction of the mental causes and conditions that gave rise to the samsaric experience. So, subsequent to the attainment of nirvana, what happens to the individual?

In early Buddhist literature there is not really that much said about it. Later on Buddhism has a lot to say about what happens post enlightenment, but not in the early literature. In some of the Buddhist discourses even Buddha himself refused to answer these questions because, he says, doing so would lead to speculation. Asking, “What happens to the Buddha after nirvana?” is pure speculation, he says. So when he was asked by an interlocutor, “Does the Buddha survive nirvana? Does he continue after attaining nirvana in post enlightenment?” He said that was an inappropriate question to answer. Then when he was asked, “Does he not continue to live post-enlightenment?” He said that was also an inappropriate question to ask. That is, whether the Buddha continues or not is pure speculation. The Buddha seems to have been quite content to say this is something we have to find out ourselves. That it is a personal issue, not a metaphysical question to be settled once and for all through reasoning. Unless we experience it ourselves we can get into interminable discussions about what happens after enlightenment, but we will be none the wiser.

In any case, in early Buddhism, he laid down a clear path to nirvana, a state of complete freedom, through overcoming samsaric suffering by following the eight fold noble path.ⁱⁱⁱ We do not have to go into this in great detail, but it basically consists of moral conduct, concentration and the cultivation of wisdom. As I mention before, moral precepts have to be supported by meditative concentration and wisdom. Wisdom also has to be attained through meditation, through the gaining of insight. In Buddhism the insight we gain is that there is no “abiding self”; nirvana is attained when we realize there is no abiding self. If there is an abiding self – some kind of unchanging immutable self like the notion of *Atma* or a permanent self – then as far as Buddha was concerned enlightenment would

not be possible. It is only because there is no fixed self that we can aim for enlightenment. No matter how confused and deluded we are, we can transcend this state. We can go beyond this state because there is no self, and this will become evident when we are meditating.

When we are doing what is called “analytical meditation,” first we do meditation concentration – we settle the mind – then we do Vipashyana meditation, insight meditation, where we begin to see that there is no permanent abiding self. Self is changing all the time, there is nothing that remains the same, and because the self is changeable transformation is possible. This is why we can cultivate ourselves. This is why we can grow. This is why we can change from being a normal, confused, ordinary sentient being, to a fully enlightened being. In many respects what Buddhists call ordinary sentient beings and Buddhas are completely different, there are hardly any similarities between the two. Yet at the same time, when we achieve Buddhahood, the individual we used to be, the ordinary sentient being, has now become a fully realised Buddha. There is continuity between the two, even though there is no strict identity that survives – a sentient being is a sentient being and a Buddha is a Buddha. One is confused, full of delusions, defilements, obscurations, and subject to all kinds of samsaric suffering and turmoil. The other is a liberated, fully developed human without even a trace of any of that. They have nothing in common.

According to Buddhism this is a clear demonstration of the lack of self. A clear demonstration that there is no abiding self. If we realize this, then we will not be so imprisoned in our own made-up notions about whom and what we are. We are trapped within a self-fabricated conception about ourselves and everything else. Resisting this kind of knowledge, this insight, keeps us in the samsaric world – a continuously repetitious, cyclic condition. We think of ourselves as having some kind of fixed identity, so when we look at the world we also try to arrest its change. We do not see the dynamic nature of everything that surrounds us, from seasons changing to things coming into being and disappearing. We try to freeze everything, like freezing a moving picture, and this does not reflect reality. Looking at a frozen picture is not the same as viewing the world. The world is in motion as is the self itself, so there is no fixed central point from which we are viewing the world. We are moving along with the world within which we dwell. We are in this world, we impact on this world and the world – in turn – impacts on us. There is mutual influence and interaction going on continuously. This then goes towards defining who we are, what we are and so forth. In Buddhism seeing

that there is no fixed point from which we view the world is understanding *Anatma*, which means selflessness of the self or seeing oneself as non self – *dag me* in Tibetan. Realizing this is a great insight.

Of course it does not mean we do not exist, if we didn't exist then there would be no one trying to attain nirvana. It means that we are constantly changing, constantly moving forth, and what gets carried over is our dispositional properties. Realizing this will lead us to freedom. Not realizing this will keep us entrapped in the samsaric world. Without realizing this we will not be able to see how we can change. We will not see how we can escape from this samsaric prison. From a Buddhist point of view, wisdom has to come from understanding. In this way Buddhism does not just focus on that which does not change, or that which remains the same, nor does it view change as a bad thing. Instead, insight into impermanence is seen as a very liberating experience, a spiritually liberating experience – if we have this insight our defilements will be reduced and our wisdom will increase. Without this insight we remain deluded, when we don't see things with the perspective of impermanence we solidify them. When we solidify them we develop what is called *dzimpa* or fixation, we become fixated. And by becoming fixated we become entrapped in a frozen world. This means that whenever we are thrown into a particularly deep state of mental anguish, we can't see a way out. Everything seems frozen. This is the tendency we have, in many varying levels of density, and this is what prevents us from attaining nirvana, from one perspective.

Basically, this is really the basis of how we need to understand nirvana from a Buddhist point of view: nirvana is attained by wisdom, wisdom comes from understanding that things are always in transition – always changing. Not being able to see this comes from our fixation and our fixation is, in turn, supported by our concepts. Our concepts of things remain the same because our concepts are not things but the things that our concepts refer to are always in motion. The things are always in a state of dynamism, but our concepts of them, on the other hand, remain static and due to this fixation we do not develop. We remain stuck in our habits, in our mistaken notions of things.

The way we learn to reduce this fixation is through meditation. When we observe ourselves in meditation, we observe ourselves in transition, always changing. Even though we think we are thinking the same things, or experiencing the same emotions, there is always something different happening. There is always some

little change there, always some movement that would normally go unnoticed. Through greater observation, mindfulness or awareness we begin to become more intimate with how things actually function. Through practices such as the four foundations of mindfulness – mindfulness of body, mindfulness of feeling, mindfulness of mind, and mindfulness of the phenomenal world – for example. Through observing how everything functions, how everything works, we come to understand something about the things that surround us, about ourselves, about our body – all kinds of things – and with our feelings again the same. Feelings, emotions and the thoughts that we have, everything is always in a state of dynamism. When we see that then we see clearly. This is why this meditation is called “insight meditation” Vipashyana. We gain insight and insight leads to wisdom. Insight itself is not wisdom, but without insight we will not develop wisdom. And if we do not have wisdom we will not attain nirvana.

First we have to gain insight. The difference between insight – *prajna* in Sanskrit or *sherab* in Tibetan – and wisdom – *jnana* in Sanskrit or *yeshe* in Tibetan – is that *prajna*, the insight we gain through analytical, Vipashyana, insight meditation is discursive while the more direct, intuitive wisdom that it leads to is *jnana*. First we understand it conceptually and have some experience of it *prajna*, but later there is the wisdom *jnana* that understands in a more existential, intimate, direct way. They are distinguished in Buddhism.

Insight also has many different levels; from *prajna*, to the highest level of *jnana* that one can attain – nirvana. To attain nirvana is to attain enlightenment and enlightenment is so called because there is wisdom present, wisdom that has arisen through practice and meditation. We have seen into the nature of things, the nature of the self, and when we see this we can then effect change in ourselves. We can develop the necessary qualities and attributes to our progress. We can overcome the constraints and restraints we have imposed on ourselves. We can get rid of them. We can free ourselves from these things because they are not part of us. In Buddhist practice what we need to overcome is our ignorance, not our evilness. We are not evil in ourselves. We are not bad. We are not demonic, terrible, intrinsically depraved beings. Buddhism does not believe this. We are ignorant and whatever badness we possess, comes from our ignorance. Ignorance is the primary condition. Even when we do something really terrible, something shocking, that also has its root in ignorance, not in some kind of evil nature. If there was something called “evil nature,” then it would be very difficult to overcome. If something was completely intrinsic to our nature, how

could we get rid of it? How could we overcome it? In Buddhism, on the other hand we believe that we are ignorant and ignorance can be enlightened.

Not suddenly enlightened, but gradually. The more we give ourselves time to reflect, to look into ourselves, the more we will see. If we see more our understanding will grow, through our understanding we can give rise to wisdom and that will lead to the attainment of nirvana – the goal of Buddhism. But again who attains nirvana? Well, even at this early stage, only the Buddhas. There were also others who could attain nirvana. One who attains nirvana is called a *drachompa* in Tibetan or an *arhat* in Sanskrit – which means “foe destroyer.” This means the foes of the five poisons – ignorance, excessive desire, anger, jealousy and pride – and all the attendant defining tendencies of the mind are destroyed. Then one attains nirvana. Even if one is not a completely enlightened being, such as the Buddha, one can still attain a lesser state of nirvana – that attained by arhats. To reiterate what I said right at the beginning, nirvana is defined by one’s own effort, direction and spiritual purpose. And in relation to this, it is not only the Buddhas that attained nirvana but others also, like the arhats, also called foe destroyers or *drachompa*. I think I should stop at that point. I have said enough and we can have a discussion. Thank you very much.

Question: About the experiences of someone who has attained enlightenment, you say that Buddha himself wouldn’t comment on that, is that right?

Rinpoche: Yes, what happens after enlightenment, after nirvana. That is not the first nirvana, with residue, but the one without. In other words, what happens after the Buddha’s death. What happened to Shakyamuni Buddha after he passed away at Kushinagar. Buddha said we should not speculate too much about this because it would only be speculation. We will just have to wait and see what happens. It is more of a personal issue than a metaphysical question.

Same student: I thought it was predetermined by the bodhisattva vows that you keep on going in cyclic existence?

Rinpoche: Oh yes, but I was trying to save that for this afternoon. We first have to understand the fundamentals of the Buddhist concept of nirvana and how it is attained, that which is acceptable for all Buddhists. Then we will go further, elaborate on that and finish off by presenting some Tibetan Buddhist perspectives.

Same student: Okay, so at this stage can you talk about what happens, like how you would experience nirvana with residue?

Rinpoche: Yes. If you attain nirvana, you attain nirvana in the body of this present life. According to Buddhism our body is something we have inherited from our past deeds. When we pass away that body is gone and, it is said, the individual is completely free, even from the skandhas – the five psycho-physical constituents, remnants of one's past.

Same student: You mean that people who have attained enlightenment keep the body and go through the bardo?

Rinpoche: Well this is the thing, the concept of "the bardo" and so on, apply to us Mahayana Buddhists. What I am trying to say is that early Buddhism does not have much to say about what happens after nirvana is achieved. In the Mahayana of course we elaborate on it, and this is where the concept of non-abiding nirvana comes in, which we will discuss next. In the Mahayana, rather than moving from a samsaric state to nirvana you try to attain a kind of nirvana which does not favour either of these two extremes. Mahayana Buddhism offers this other perspective on how to attain nirvana. From this perspective you can attain the kind of nirvana that we have spoken of already, but you can also attain another kind of nirvana which is even better and that is the kind of nirvana that we should aim for as Mahayana Buddhists.

Question: This is not a very esoteric question I hope. With my offering bowls, traditionally most Lamas they empty the offering bowls at night before they go to sleep, when they clean and dry them out. I have this concept that if I leave them overnight it is a longer offering. If I wash them in the morning and put them up again it is a longer period of time for the offering. Do you have any advice as to which is the better approach, or the correct approach?

Rinpoche: No, I don't. I don't think there is any particular reason for doing it this way but I think doing this kind of thing is a form of mind training. If you do these kinds of things in the same way everyday, at the same time, in a mindful fashion than that is really the key, the main thing. As to whether you empty them at night or not, I have never heard any explanation why that is the case. I think it is because if you empty them at night, in the morning you will have these

completely clean and dry bowels, which you then fill with fresh water, I think it makes sense. Before you go to bed you attend to your shrine so it is like you are closing it, you close the shrine at night and you open the shrine in the morning. It is a practice in mindfulness. When you fill the bowls for instance, you fill each bowl to the same level, so that one bowl does not have more water in it than the next. And the bowls are arranged in such a way that there is an equal space between them – two are not closer to each other than others. These are all practice in mindfulness. I think sometimes people think that in Tibetan Buddhism mindfulness is not emphasized as much as in Theravada or Zen but in Tibetan Buddhism we also emphasize mindfulness and awareness. We value what is called *zhi-dul-bag-yu* in Tibetan. These kinds of practices are part of training in *zhi-dul-bag-yu*, maintaining mindfulness and controlled calm.

Question: When you spoke earlier about Buddhists trying to lead a good life rather than seek nirvana, what is the best view, is it best to just try to lead a good life, take rebirth as a human and take many life times to get to nirvana or is it best to aspire to nirvana?

Rinpoche: Well, in Buddhism we do not really see rebirth as a reassuring thing. I think many people think that Buddhists believe in rebirth because it gives them some kind of comfort. If you believe there will be future rebirths, then you will have good opportunities to put things right another time. But we see it as a terrible thing. If we don't do anything about it rebirth is endless. We will go through the same agonizing process time and time again.

In Buddhism even when we are trying to lead a moral life, we still think that that moral life should be within the bounds of "the good life." In the West I think sometimes they aren't seen as complimentary. There is this idea if you want to lead a moral life then it should not be a good life. You should not have an enjoyable life. If you are having fun living your life fully then you are not leading an exemplary moral life. According to Buddhism that is not so. We can lead a good life, a life that we enjoy, in which we find satisfaction and fulfillment and at the same time lead a moral life. This, I think, is really very important. In Buddhism we lead a moral life to be happy. This is not emphasized in many moral theories, happiness does not feature and your happiness does not count. What counts is doing the right thing, or doing your duty or something like that. But as the Dalai Lama keeps on saying over and over, and as he has proven by all his books with "happiness" in the title, happiness is emphasized in Buddhism.

People still think Buddhism emphasizes suffering but actually Buddhism emphasizes happiness. We want to be happy so we try to lead a moral life. In Buddhism, what we might call moral psychology has to go with our moral principles. There has to be harmony between the two. Buddhism says that if we get angry, frustrated or jealous – if we engage in thoughtless kind of actions – then it is self destructive and we are unhappy. It is not a happy state to be in when we are always angry. It is not a happy state to be in when we are always jealous and envious. And it is not a happy state to be in if we are covetous, lusting after this and that. When we have mental states that are the opposite of these, we feel richer in ourselves. We feel less out of control, less driven, and therefore more energised. The emotional conflicts we experience on a daily basis have a detrimental effect. As years go by the wear and tear, begins to show. It beats us down. We feel tired. We feel exhausted. We feel worn out. This shows us that to cultivate moral psychological states leads to happiness and to do the opposite leads to unhappiness.

For instance, when we are getting on with people, when we are working well with people, we feel happier. We don't feel happy when there is always conflict. When we feel at odds with people there is no happiness. In that sense Buddhism also emphasizes the pragmatic nature of these moral principles. Not only do we try to do the right thing because that is good in itself, but also because it is the wisest thing to do. It is the most practical thing to do, the most beneficial thing to do. It will bring the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has co-authored two books with scientists, as I am sure you are aware. I think both were written with Daniel Goleman, one is called *Healing Emotions* and the other is called *Destructive Emotions*. They go into this idea of how destructive emotions are bad even for your health. How they make you more prone to sickness, cancer, high blood pressure and all kinds of other physical problems. Buddhism would go along with this, because in Buddhism we believe body and mind are intimately related. If we are always getting caught up in negative mental states it is bad for the body as well, it seems to me. Even if we are going to the gym every day, if our mind is not in tune then the body cannot enjoy real health either.

Question: I was just wondering about the expression "realising the nature of mind" and whether that refers to any particular stage in itself or whether that is liberation or what you have been talking about?

Rinpoche: I want to talk about that later actually, but briefly I am sure that realising the nature of the mind is not a “once and for all” kind of thing. You have to think in terms of degree and you have to think in terms of episodic experiences. Sometimes you may have a glimpse of it and then nothing and then you have another flash of insight or something. But at the same time, if you have these insights frequently, or if they accumulate, the impact accumulates. To have complete insight into the nature of the mind means you have attained enlightenment, complete enlightenment. But just like nirvana there are also many different kinds of enlightenment you can experience without becoming a fully realised Buddha. You can be more enlightened and less enlightened, just like you can be more confused than not be confused.

Same student: Can a person recognise where they are at or could they be confused at what stage they are at and think they are more enlightened than they are?

Rinpoche: The interesting thing is, unlike following some other kind of spiritual practices, if we are doing meditation then we are always trying to be more observant. We are always trying to see what is going on in our own mind, so we have to avoid falling into the trap of self deception – deceiving ourselves. It is probably impossible not to do this at all, but the thing we need to be aware of is to see this possibility. If you experience something positive in your meditation, it is not very helpful to go off on a tangent – invent a whole story – about it. What it might mean, what it might signify, how far you are from attaining Buddhahood, or how far you have gone on the path. The mind has a tendency to play all kinds of tricks on us as we know.

In Buddhism this is called conceptualisation, the particular form of excessive thinking that we do. When we talk about conceptualisation – *numtok* in Tibetan or *vikalpa* in Sanskrit – we don't mean all thoughts are bad and we should not do any thinking. We should think, but we should think clearly, which is what we cannot often do. Meditation is supposed to help us with that. It is supposed to help us think a little bit more clearly. If we meditate then some of the cobwebs will go away. It is good to have people who can advise and guide us, give us suggestions and so on but at the end of the day if our cobwebs are proliferating then they are very difficult to untangle. Meditation can really help. We, as human beings, have to think, and think clearly, because we have to make many, many

decisions every day. Some of these decisions are very significant, others not as significant, so we have to prioritise, we have to make choices all the time. Some of our choices are very important, but our conceptualisations mean we go over board – our thinking goes in all different directions and only confuses us. We become less effective, we can't decide. We become paralysed. If you want to do something, then we start to think "What if this or that thing happens? Maybe I shouldn't because I could do this thing and blah blah blah." For very simple things we do this and the same mentality is carried over into different parts of our life. When you are going to a clothing shop and trying on a dress you think, "How do I look?" Then you try another one and another, and then you give up and go into another shop, wasting a whole day! You come home, haven't bought anything and then lie in bed thinking, "Maybe I should have bought that new dress."

We do that with everything in life I suppose. This is what is meant by conceptualisation. Even in things like this we are not moving with life – it is a form of being stuck I suppose. I am sure we all carry certain favourite scripts in our heads, and they get played over and over. I think we should stop here before the cobwebs get even worse! We will stop here and I will see you this afternoon.

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ⁱ. By defeating the *maras* and kleshas within our mind and stream of existence, we also gain victory over the outer manifestations of the maras which are the various negative forces and even the demons that seem to appear. The reason for this is because there is an intimate relationship between the inner aspect of the maras and the appearance of seemingly outer, negative influences and obstructing forces. Therefore, once we have crushed the power of the maras within, then automatically the negative influences that manifest outwardly are crushed and are no longer effective.

ⁱⁱ. The five aspects which comprise the physical and mental constituents of a sentient being: physical form, sensations, conceptions, formations and consciousness.

ⁱⁱⁱ. Right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration.