



(Opposite) *Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, location and date unknown*

The Wisdom Mind of Thinley Norbu

The great Nyingma master **Thinley Norbu Rinpoche** passed away last December at the age of eighty. We celebrate his life with remembrances and a selection of the profound Dzogchen teachings he imparted to the West.

WISDOM MIND AND THE BIRTH OF SAMBARA

*I bow to my own Wisdom Mind
which is my best wisdom teacher,
the source of all visible and invisible qualities.
Sentient beings are always in time and place.
If sentient beings are in time,
my wisdom teacher dances magically in time.
If sentient beings are in place,
my wisdom teacher dances magically in place.
If really examined, you never remain anywhere.
You are only display.
To whatever never remains, to you,
my best wisdom teacher, I bow.*

All generally visible measureless phenomena elements are the display of self-secret divisionless unobstructed Wisdom Mind. The nature of mirrorlike Wisdom Mind is that everything arises with infinite obstructed and unobstructed potential.

Whenever we do not recognize the pure nature of the manifestation of wisdom display, we cling to unobstructed mind's uncatchable self-arising reflection, obscuring its inseparable emptiness and luminosity, and separating the divisionless phenomena elements into subject and object. As soon as there is division, there is impurity and obstruction.

With this division, "I" becomes the subject and what this "I" perceives becomes the object, whether one or many, lifeless or lively, inanimate or animate. With this division, there is constant moving back and forth between subject and object, which is the beginning of direction and time, between root circumstances and contributing circumstances, between rejecting and accepting unpleasant and pleasant phenomena, between bad and good intentions, and between doubting and hoping. We call this divided mind dualistic mind, which is the cause of bad and good karma.

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Substanceless wisdom is unobstructed and pervades everywhere in samsara and nirvana without intention as self-accomplished compassion.



Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, 1976

Whenever we recognize the pure nature of the manifestation of self-secret invisible wisdom display, we are aware of the pure secret essence of the elements. With this recognition there is no subject and no object, no beginning and no end, no direction and no time, no root circumstances and no contributing circumstances, so there is no karma. With this recognition, absolute truth and relative truth become inseparable, nondualistic, clear awareness space. In this space, phenomena arise freely and this display of Wisdom Mind is not nothingness. The enlightened mind dances unobstructedly with phenomena yet has the potential to obstruct phenomena at will like choosing to eat or not to eat.

Enlightened mind reflects all the five wisdoms in equanimity. But through ignorance, over countless lifetimes we have created conceptions and karmic habits which obscure our Wisdom Mind's lively, unobstructed, mirrorlike quality. Because of our obscured ordinary mind, our ego makes categories out of equanimity. With ego and categories come substance, with the birth of substance comes its death, and with death comes suffering. Our inert and stale karmic body and all other substances are the gross element result of our inability in previous lives to recognize the

invisible secret essence of all substance. We are lost and suffering because of external staleness and internal ignorance. But even though we cannot recognize our invisible secret essence immediately, it is not necessary to think that it is far away. Our secret essence is always within the gross and subtle elements.

From *Magic Dance: The Display of the Self-Nature of the Five Wisdom Dakinis*

BUDDHISM AND NIHILISM

The Buddhist view is to recognize that we must not remain within ordinary phenomena by following a worldly philosophy limited to ordinary, substantial reasoning. We must decide to increase pure phenomena by following a spiritual philosophy which goes beyond ordinary reasoning and leads to enlightenment. Buddhist philosophy is entirely spiritual. Its purpose is to refute the views of the two extremes of nihilism and eternalism by the skillful means of wisdom, to release all beings to enlightenment.

Some nihilists in particular think that Buddhism is only a philosophy and not a religion. This misunderstanding is the result of holding the nihilist point of view, which does not accept the intangible, imperceptible qualities of nondualistic wisdom that can appear tangibly or intangibly. Because the nihilist point of view is confined to the reasoning of dualistic mind, it is actually impossible to use it to define or evaluate the qualities of Buddhism deeply and clearly, since they are beyond ordinary perception. Even the difference between ordinary and spiritual qualities cannot be analyzed.

The nihilist view of believing only in this momentary life is the result of considering substance to be the fundamental constituent of all

(Left to right) Thinley Norbu,
Dilgo Khyentse,
and Dzongsar Khyentse
ca 1984



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phenomena, including one's body, the objective gross elements, whatever arises from these gross elements, and whatever can be perceived. There are many different ways to understand substance within relative truth, since there are infinite relative truths. Nihilism means becoming caught within each temporary circumstance of relative truth and believing in its reality, so the perception of substance seems real.

From the Buddhist point of view, everything that exists in samsara is substance. The origin of substance is dualistic mind. There is no end to substance because there is no end to the conceptions of dualistic mind. Whenever the buddha-nature of sentient beings is dormant and dualistic mind appears, the ordinary passions and the incalculable phenomena of the karmic elements arise, which are all composed of substance.

Substance is not only one part of something. It is all the immeasurable forms of samsaric existence, unless it is transformed into immeasurable, substanceless, wisdom light appearances which are beyond all interdependent cause and result. This is the meaning of substancelessness. Substanceless wisdom is unobstructed and pervades everywhere in samsara and nirvana without intention as self-accomplished compassion, so it can manifest within substance, but it never remains there. Its essence is always nonsubstance, which is the quality of Buddha.

From *White Sail: Crossing the Waves of Ocean Mind to the Serene Continent of the Triple Gems*

BUDDHAS

The beginningless wisdom of Buddhas is not ordinary beings' wisdom. When the state of full enlightenment is reached, there is no name of worldliness. One cannot only conceptualize this. Fully enlightened Buddhahood is full wisdom and full wisdom activity. Buddhas' mind is wisdom, but Buddhas such as Guru Rinpoche and many others emanate in samsara to benefit beings. They teach faith, meditation, and realization, manifesting in the state of impure worldly wisdom to guide others, but their mind is fully enlightened Buddhahood. This wisdom excels beyond samsara in order to guide beings by showing a history and an order of stages of how to enlighten, but Buddha does not have any conception of order. If there is no conception, there



Thinley Norbu (right) with his father, Dudjom Rinpoche

NOT BOUND by TIME and SPACE

TRALEG KYABGON RINPOCHE says that like his famed father, Thinley Norbu was the kind of role model that's difficult to find in this world.

His Eminence Thinley Norbu Rinpoche was a shining star in the darkened world we live in, and I am honored to write this piece for the commemoration of his passing.

I grew up in the Tibetan monastic system and had contact with many elderly lamas from whom I received teachings. They all passed away, one after the other. In recent years I had no connection with lamas of that generation except for Thinley Norbu. He was generous in accepting me as one of his students, and I had the great fortune of being in his presence over a prolonged period of time.

I am saddened that he entered into parinirvana, as are his many devoted followers. His passing has left this world a darker place. He was an exceptional teacher. He embodied two qualities that are essential in Buddhism: one is learning and the other is practice. Due to his learning and impeccable conduct he attracted Tibetans, Nepalese, Bhutanese and even people from East Asia and the Far East.

As many of you know, Rinpoche was the eldest son of His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche, an accomplished and incomparable Nyingma master. I had the opportunity to meet with Dudjom Rinpoche and attended several pujas with him in Darjeeling.

The first time I met Thinley Norbu was in the 1960s, and reconnecting with him years later was a great blessing for me. Personally, I think Rinpoche possessed all the qualities that Dudjom Rinpoche possessed. He was a great scholar, a great meditator, and very compassionate—the kind of role model that is very difficult to find in this changing world.

Masters of such caliber are not bounded by time and space. Nevertheless, not having the opportunity to see him again weighs heavily on my heart, and I pray for his quick return to this world.

TRALEG KYABGON RINPOCHE is the spiritual director of E-vam Buddhist Institute in Melbourne, Australia, and E-vam Institute in Upstate New York. He is a lama in the Kagyu tradition of Vajrayana Buddhism and the author of several books, including *The Influence of Yogacara on Mahamudra*.

is no stage. When Buddhas emanate, they have to emanate according to beings' phenomena, showing histories to other beings, such as that of Buddha Shakyamuni learning, studying, and enduring hardship for six years so others can follow the example of these histories and open buddhanature through practice, as Buddha taught according to Mahayana, until finally reaching the fully enlightened state in which there is no fixation of time, place, or direction, where all Buddhas abide.

From *A Cascading Waterfall of Nectar*

THE THREE KAYAS

According to the Mahayana view, nothing tangible or intangible can affect great emptiness, which is always unobscured and pure. This is called the essential permanence of Dharmakaya. Dharmakaya is completely pure formless form.

The nature of Dharmakaya is unobstructed like stainless sky, so any wisdom qualities and aspects can manifest from its unobscured spontaneity. Since Dharmakaya is pure, whatever appearances radiate from it are self-adornments and always pure. This pure appearance is called the continuous permanence of Sambhogakaya. Sambhogakaya is immeasurable qualities of flawless, inconceivable, desireless exaltation form.

Infinite manifestations, whether they seem to be objective or subjective, can spontaneously and unendingly manifest from the pure appearance of Sambhogakaya to benefit beings. These reflections can manifest as many impure aspects to connect with the impure phenomena of sentient beings to guide them to pure phenomena, and as many pure aspects to connect with the pure tangible phenomena of sentient beings to guide them to pure intangible phenomena. Although the occurrence of these appearances is definite, their aspects are an indefinite emanation of effortless compassion to the indefinite faculties of countless sentient beings, arising in any form, at any time, and in any direction. This is called the indefinite permanence of Nirmanakaya. Nirmanakaya is unobstructed, miraculous emanation form.

The quality of Dharmakaya is stainless, great emptiness. Since it does not have the permanence of an object, it never remains in the somethingness extreme of eternalism. Yet because of its



A TEACHER of TEACHERS

Though he lived as a simple householder yogi, Thinley Norbu's impact was far-reaching, says his long-time student **SAMUEL BERCHOLZ**.

On a sunny day in the Paro Valley of Bhutan, the air was crisp and clean, flags of the five colors were snapping in the wind, and hundreds of yogis and yoginis were chanting and playing their chod drums, bells, and thigh-bone trumpets—the Dudjom Tersar Throma practice—as an offering to the *kudung* (the deceased physical form) of Thinley Norbu Rinpoche. His cremation was a fortnight away.

Who was this man who brought together kings and queens, ministers and officials, thousands upon thousands of Bhutanese, Tibetan, Nepali, Chinese, European, and American disciples to honor his life and to receive the blessings of his passing into dharmakaya? In the world of Tibetan Buddhism he was renowned as the living essence of Omniscient Longchenpa, the great Nyingma scholar-yogi of the fourteenth century who had been especially important in the transmission and development of the Dzogchen teachings. He was the first son of His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche, former head of the Nyingma lineage, and was believed to be an emanation of Tulku Drime Oser, a son of the great tertön Dudjom Lingpa.

PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN



Thinley Norbu Rinpoche's body arrives in Rangjung, Bhutan

He spent the last three decades of his life in the United States, living in New York City and then rural New York State and in the desert in California. He dressed simply, often just in a shirt with a bath towel wrapped as a sarong. He and his environment were impeccably clean. He had no dharma centers; the students who gathered around him practiced in his home and in the homes of fellow practitioners. He made little fuss about anything, and practiced every evening with his students, whether it was just a handful or a score. One of his main teachings was about the continuity of practice—meditation, offerings, and becoming familiar with Buddha and deity phenomena. His approach was simple, direct, and profound. He taught that development of the proper view and faith was paramount—faith meaning that once one had heard and considered the teachings, one actually put them into practice.

Every one of his students, including myself and my immediate family, were continuously blessed by his profound instructions, in the same way that practitioners in the past must have been blessed by the likes of Saraha, Padmasambhava, and Longchenpa. His American community was an interesting mixture of males and females of all ages and almost equally made up of Tibetan/Bhutanese, Chinese, and Westerners—all practicing as one harmonious group. He put particular emphasis on teaching and training his youngest disciples; some trained from birth and others trained continuously from a

very young age into their twenties. He held nothing back. They were trained in meditation, sadhana, dharma dance, scholarship, and discipline. This young group of disciples will be an important legacy to the world. His son, Garab Dorje Rinpoche, will continue their training. Though living the quiet life of a householder yogi, Buddhist teachers from all over the world came to meet him and receive teachings. He was a teacher of teachers.

Thinley Norbu was also a brilliant writer. He often apologized for his “bad English” despite using the most accurate vocabulary and nuances of the English language. His magnum opus, *The Cascading Waterfall of Nectar*, contains the pith teachings of the complete Buddhist path up to and including Dzogchen. It will be studied and appreciated by those fortunate enough to be challenged by it for centuries to come.

I count myself as one of his fortunate disciples, having had the great good fortune to spend more than twenty years with him, to be X-rayed by him, to be fried by him, to be simmered by him, to appreciate his great loving care and endless compassion. He is no different than the Buddha in person.

Samuel Bercholz is the founder and chairman of Shambhala Publications. He studied with Thinley Norbu Rinpoche for more than two decades, and has been teaching Buddhism and the Shambhala teachings for nearly four decades.

PULLING STRINGS

SANGYE KHANDRO recalls Thinley Norbu's unusual but highly effective method for training translators.

Kyabje Thinley Norbu Rinpoche was fond of quoting Omniscient Longchenpa's *Treasury of the Dharmadhatu* and in particular the following verse:

*Everything is Samantabhadra; the Ever-Excellent;
there is nothing that is not excellent.
Without good or bad there is only the oneness of
the Ever-Excellent; Samantabhadra.*



So it is.

Thinley Norbu Rinpoche was a quintessential Dzogchen master of modern times, forever loyal and faithful to the lineage of pure wisdom awareness. Whoever had the good fortune to encounter him was either directly or indirectly led toward their innate buddhanature.

Often Rinpoche would use himself as an example when teaching or giving pointing out instructions, as though he was the one learning what was being said. One time he told me that even though contemplating impermanence was a crucial step on the path to liberation, without the view of the deathless dharmakaya, it could lead to depression and lethargy. He said that to uplift himself, he would bring the thought of impermanence into the view of the deathless dharmakaya; in this way he could look forward to death, knowing that there was no death from the point of view of the three-kaya-wisdom buddhanature, and that this nature permeated every aspect of our reality. During the more than thirty-five years he taught in the West, Rinpoche's most consistent, crucial instruction was to always have faith and confidence in the three-kaya-wisdom buddhanature.

Rinpoche was adamant about maintaining the purity of the wisdom lineages traced back to Guru Padmasambhava and Lord Buddha Shakyamuni and spoke out with impeccable logic against anyone who tried to water down or change the truth to meet their own modern agenda. To be a disciple of Rinpoche was to undergo a core level transformation that would leave one's ego and self-grasping baseless from the root. How amazingly fortunate we were here in America that Rinpoche decided to live among us and work deeply with disciples, young and old, to sow potent seeds of authentic transmission that will endure for future generations.

Though there are many accounts of amazing teachings that occurred in my own personal relationship with Rinpoche that have shaped and directed my life, one story is my all-time

favorite. Many years ago I was suddenly asked to go to a venue where Rinpoche was teaching for several weeks and offer English translation so that he could speak Tibetan and conserve energy. Warned by colleagues that for various reasons no translator lasted more than a short while when working with Rinpoche, I was decidedly nervous. I took my seat and did my best that first night, and much to everyone's surprise Rinpoche did not stop or criticize me, and the teaching concluded without incident. The second night, I took my seat and one of the attendants came over and said she needed to tie a small cord around my big toe, and the other end would be in Rinpoche's hand. As she tied the cord around my toe I looked up and saw Rinpoche gazing down upon me with a mischievous smile. Then the fun began.

Rinpoche explained to me that even though he did not know English very well, if there was a word or phrase that might need adjusting while I was translating, he would simply tug on the cord to indicate I should stop speaking. He would then speak to me quietly in Tibetan and suggest another way to translate something. For those of you who never met Rinpoche, he was extremely polite and gracious. So the teachings began, and as I spoke he repeatedly tugged on the cord. He would then ever so kindly help me find a better way to express the teaching, based on a choice of terms that brought out the wisdom perspective. This process continued for several days, with most of the attendees oblivious to what was going on. Then one night, the cord was not tied to my toe and I knew that Rinpoche trusted me to represent what he was teaching in the way it should be expressed. He empowered me to know how to let the wisdom blessing pass through me without ego or pride so that the listeners could hear and feel exactly what he had said. This experience was a turning point in my life and has given me the opportunity to refine translation work and develop a sense of confidence that otherwise would not have happened.

Even though Thinley Norbu Rinpoche was among the greatest scholars and realized practitioners of our time, he never referred to any of his thousands of disciples as "his students." Rather, he referred to us as friends. He believed Western teachers and translators needed to be aware of the problem of pride, which he referred to as the ugliest and most detrimental of the five poisons. This was just one of the ways he demonstrated the teachings.

May the legacy of Rinpoche's wisdom transmissions and blessings remain in this world forever and may he swiftly return as a nirmanakaya to continue working for the benefit of all living beings.

SANGYE KHANDRO has served as a translator for many prominent masters, including Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, and is one of the founders of Light of Berotsana Translation Group. A longtime practitioner of Vajrayana, she studied with Thinley Norbu and his father, Dudjom Rinpoche, her root teacher.



Thinley Norbu Rinpoche (1931–2011)

unobstructed nature, pure wisdom appearances unendingly manifest so that it never remains in the nothingness extreme of nihilism.

Even ordinary karmic phenomena are obscured, impure manifestations of the three kayas. For example, the state of deep sleep is the impure manifestation of Dharmakaya, beyond tangible and intangible material appearances. Dreams are the impure manifestation of Sambhogakaya, arising as intangible, subtle appearances beyond daytime's tangible, gross appearances. Waking phenomena are the impure manifestation of Nirmanakaya, arising as tangible emanations of appearance. Through practice, these impure manifestations become the pure manifestations of the three kayas as they naturally are.

From *White Sail*

CLEAR LIGHT

At the time of the meditation of tranquil stillness and true seeing, although this meditation is not the basic nature of clarity and emptiness just as it is, it is the arising of an aspect of experience that is similar, like the way the form of the sky appears in water. This is called an example

demonstrating clear light. The essential nature of wisdom is free from the coverings of experience, like stainless sky. When this is realized, it is called absolute clear light.

By realizing the basic nature of the great bliss of the clear light of empty awareness and by continuously sustaining it, when one actually accomplishes the stages of the path, the consciousness of the five senses will dissolve into mind. Mind will dissolve into the consciousness of alaya. When alaya dissolves into the dharmata of empty clear light, even though there is no consciousness, because consciousness is purified from the root, self-awareness wisdom light will arise like stainless sky. Thus it is also said. For example, when gold mixed with earth, stone, sand, and so on is melted down and refined, the power of the ordinary stain or nature of the elements of earth and stone is reduced more and more, like the gross energy of obscurations, and the quality of the element gold is purified more and more. Eventually the time will come when even the object of purification, the gold itself, will be purified and there will be nothing left.

From *A Cascading Waterfall of Nectar* **BD**