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NGALSO
Path to Enlightenment

The Nature of Reality Lama Michel Rinpoche

This text is a clean and unedited transcription of a public speech given by Lama Michel Rinpoche in De Roos, Amsterdam, Netherlands on May 13, 2015. Link to video:

<https://youtu.be/herBMUxEc20>

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Introduction and prayers

First of all, it's a great pleasure being here with you. But before I can say anything, I will start with a short prayer. This prayer actually I do anywhere I go. It doesn't matter if I'm talking in a conference, in a congress, in a temple, in a school. Basically this prayer that I do is to remember the kindness of my teachers and the teachers of my teachers.

Just because if I have anything that I can share with you today, it's because someone taught me. So generally in Buddhism... and I believe very much in the importance of recognizing the kindness of those that taught us, so to be grateful. So first of all I would like just to start with a short prayer. The first part of the prayer is in Tibetan, the second part of the prayer is in Sanskrit. If there is anybody here that knows the prayer who would like to join me they are also welcome.

*lo chok sangpoi pel gyur trashi pa
thub chen ten pe trinle yar ngo da
pel gye dro lor tsam pe dze pa chen
pal den lame shab la sol wa deb*

OM AH GURU VAJRADHARA SUMATI MUNI SHASANE KARMA UHTA
VARDANAYE SHRI BADHRA VAR SAMANYA SARWA SIDDHI HUNG
HUNG

*pa khyo kyi ku dang dag gyi lu
pa khyo kyi sung dang dag gyi ngag
pa khyo kyi tug dang dag gyi yi
don yer me chig tu jin gyi lob*



OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNI SHAKYAMUNIYE SOHA

I am very happy to be here. I think many of you we have met before in the congresses [*Integrated Psychiatry*] that very happily I could participate. And I'm happy also to be here today because it is an opportunity to share some things that for me are very useful basically.

I have many joys in my life, I have a very good life, I really cannot complain. Sure we all have something to complain about normally, but I have a really good life. But from all the things I have, one of the things that gives me the greatest joy is the possibility to share with others, aspects of life that are very beneficial for myself. Things that I could learn, I could experience, and to have this opportunity of sharing.

This is one of the reasons also why in one evening like today, for me, I don't know really much what I am going to talk about. From the point of view, I don't have a structure of subject, point a, b, c, d and so on. But it's mostly because I am not here to teach anything; I am here to share. If you want to make a lesson about Tibetan Buddhist philosophy and we go in a very academic way - I studied in that way - it's very easy to teach in that way really; no problem. But I really prefer in this moment to share something with you that for me is of benefit, that is possible for us to apply in our lives, that is, in the same time, also one of the reasons of my own life. It's what, how to say, sustains my life, what gives meaning to me.

Understanding reality

When I talk about the meaning of reality, the reality in which we live, it is something that very often we take it for granted, no? What is reality? But how many times in our lives have we ever really questioned ourselves: what is reality? It's not something that we are taught to do much, no? In school, are we taught to question what reality is? I am not talking about trying to understand what other people said reality is. I am talking about questioning what is reality. To look at things and say: how things actually are? Where am I. Who am I? And this is a question that for me is extremely important. And I see very often we don't do much to ask ourselves, who am I? What am I? What is the world in which I live?

And when we go to Buddhist philosophy, in anything, it is divided into three parts, which in Tibetan is called: *zhi lam dre sum*, which means: the basis, the path and the result. Anything we need to do, we need to have these three aspects. Let's say, I don't know, I am going to start a new business, what is the basis, what are the resources I have. Then, the path is what I am going to do with these resources. The result is where I am going to get with it. So I want to make a business that is going to be selling internationally, so I can sell it after ten years and become very rich and never work again, just inventing whatever, okay?

So what do I have now? I have my knowledge, I have a little money, I can invest that in order to get to my goal, what do I need to do? I need to do this, this, this and that; that's the path. But it's very important that the basis - which are the resources we have- the path and the result, they must be coherent. Normally we start, first understanding the basis, then understanding what result I can get, and then we go what path can I follow in order to get to this results.

So when we talk about the reality in which we live, understanding the reality in which we live, we are talking about the basis. It is understanding which are the resources that I have with me. We aren't talking about understanding a complex



philosophy of whatever. It's basically first of all understanding what is this body, what is the world around me, how do things exist, what is the coherent way of living.

One of the aspects that I really like very much of Buddhism is that... you know, because before that, personally I don't feel I am a religious person. Maybe that is a bit strange to say. What do I mean by that? I am and have always been quite a skeptical person, in that sense, I believe in what I understand and in what I experience directly. Otherwise we can say thousands of things. It doesn't matter who tells me. There are some things that, for example, my teacher Lama Gangchen Rinpoche, the person that I most respect, has said to me that I really don't understand yet. I have not experienced, so I put in a waiting list. There are things that we don't understand; we have not had an experience. That is not a reason why it's wrong, or it doesn't exist, but I put it in a waiting list. I have a long waiting list. When we experience the opposite, then we take it out of the waiting list. We say, no, that's wrong. Otherwise we need...

It is very important to have a waiting list I believe. Of things that we know that we don't know about. Because sometimes we simply take for granted the things that we know and what we don't know we say: that's wrong. We put it aside. Instead, sometimes it's even more important to know what we don't know than to know what actually we know.

I always remember one day, I was so happy, a few years ago. I was a little bit sad one day, during New Year time. I never like so much the New Year, whatever reason I don't know, since I was a kid. I never understand why we need to choose one day where it is the New Year. This is my personal problem. Anyhow, what happened was that, one time I wanted to talk to Lama Gangchen about my own faults. So I wrote them down. I remember there were thirty-two faults. Things I have that I don't like, that I need to change and so on. Then I went to talk to him and I couldn't talk to him right away about it. He asked, okay maybe another time. Two years passed almost until there was time to talk to him about it. And the day I read it to him I was so happy. Why? First of all, okay, two of them were not there anymore. I couldn't find anything new, so it means I am going in a good direction; there were thirty, not thirty-two. But what gave me the greatest joy was to see my own faults, to see what I don't know, to see where I can grow, to see where I can get better. Because in the moment that we can see that I can get better, it means there is a whole horizon that we can go. In the moment that I see what I don't know, I see my own limitations, it means I can go beyond it. If what I am is the maximum of what I can get, then I am really having trouble, you know.

Instead to have this ability to put things in a waiting list: "Okay, this I don't know, good, I must try to understand it." Having patience towards ourselves and the world to see that sometimes we maybe will understand things in the way that we least expect to understand it. Things come in the most strange way sometimes.

But when we talk about reality, it's one important thing to understand in which reality we actually live, because that's the basis.

Some things we will not understand right away. Not even a little bit after right away also, we will not understand, but we put them in a waiting list. That is a very important aspect.

For me, as I move along my life, questioning, wondering, reflecting through Buddhism, especially one thing I saw about Buddhist teachings, which is maybe one

of the aspects that I most like... As I was saying before, I am not very religious in the sense that I am not fanatic of Buddhism, you know. If some day someone comes and shows me a path that is more coherent, more clear, of greater benefit, I will be very grateful to Buddhist teachings, but I will follow the next one. No doubt. But the point is that the more I followed Buddhist teachings, one thing became very clear for me: what Buddha tries to show to us is a way how to live our life and how to experience reality that is coherent. Our suffering is coming mostly from the way of being uncoherent with reality. We relate with reality in an incoherent way with what reality actually is.

I will give a few examples tonight of things that we relate in a way, when we go to analyze, when we go to observe, we see that it's wrong. And the more we are attached to a reality that is incoherent with the way how things are, the more we suffer.

The root of suffering is ignorance

One of the aspects, which is core to Buddhist teachings, is that the root of all suffering, of all conflicts, is ignorance. If we look around in this world there are many conflicts, no? Starting from our family, our friends, our job, the place where we have fun, we can have conflicts in the country, conflicts in society, international conflicts, between religions, whatever.

If we look to this world from the material point of view, from nature, is there anything that nature cannot give us? Or isn't nature giving enough? I think nature is giving enough, no? Would there be enough food for everyone to eat in the world? Yes. So, why this planet earth is not a paradise? Who makes it not to be a paradise? Us. There is one thing that for me is very funny.... I don't know, for me it's funny. When I read descriptions of paradises... because whenever we have descriptions of paradises, in many different traditions, mostly the description of paradise is of everything we like to have on earth but we don't have right away. And I am quite sure if we make a modern description of paradise, we would put a fast internet connection in it. But when we talk about it, we never talk about the people living in paradise, how they should be. What happened for example... Let's say we are a group of hundred people, and we have our own conflicts, our own problems and so and so on, and suddenly we go to a paradise, whatever paradise we like to call. What happens after some time with that paradise? "This is my little space of the paradise; you cannot come in. That's your space of paradise, okay, but mine is better than yours." Then I start to get envy, then I try to destroy your space of paradise, I take it out of you. What happens? We make the same. What makes a place a paradise is not the actual space, but the ones that are there.

So what happens is that if we look at all the conflicts that we live, where are they coming from? Ignorance. Being incoherent with the way how we relate to reality. This manifests through: attachment, in-satisfaction, hatred, violence, physical, verbal, mental violence - jealousy, envy and many, many other ways. If we look at all these emotions, not one of them is coherent with reality. We will see a little bit of this. But the point is that if we really look, where are our conflicts coming from? Wars... how much money and energy is invested to solve conflicts in the world? So much! But we are never really going to the actual point. Never, I don't know, but mostly not. Where is the actual point? Selfishness, hatred, attachment coming from our own ignorance. So understanding the world we live in is extremely important. Let's go to the points, because there are many things that I'd like to share, and we

don't have that much time. Let's start to see some of the ways how we are incoherent, because there are many ways how we can talk about a subject. And I have found out that, for me, sometimes it's easier to understand something, instead of showing what is the right way first we see the wrong way. Then it's actually easier to understand, to see the right way. For example, okay, we go another way still...

Impermanence makes us suffer

Do we suffer when things change? Depends on what changes. Not all changes we suffer, right? When we have this strong winter, and then suddenly you have this beautiful sun coming out... It was a change. Are we suffering out of it? Mostly not, right? But when there is something that we like, and it's there and it suddenly changes, and we are not expecting that change, do we suffer? Yes. Normally do we suffer more because what is happening, or because according to us it should not have happened? We suffer more not because of what is really there, but because according to us it should not have happened.

Who am I to say what should happen? When we look at these beautiful flowers, these flowers are constantly in change. When we go in the Buddha's teachings, the teachings called 'The Twelve Links of Interdependence', one of them is talking about birth, and just after birth is aging and death. And the second instant after birth, when something starts, right away it starts to die. When we are born, nine months old, we are already more near to death, we are already ageing. As we start this gathering today, it is already starting to end. Every instant that passes, we are getting nearer to the end of whatever had started and to the beginning of something new that will come afterwards, because 'end' means transformation; it doesn't mean complete nothingness. One thing finishes, another thing starts; that is the transformation.

But when we look at these flowers, they are constantly in transformation. Can we perceive the constant transformation of the flowers? Can we perceive that the flowers are getting a little older and maybe dry and so on and maybe the colors slowly, slowly are changing? Can we perceive the death in the flowers, or not?

Without philosophizing with our mind, just looking at it: if we look at the flowers, we close our eyes, then we open the eyes again and look at them, are they the same flowers or they have changed? Without philosophizing with our mind: same flowers, right?

We meet each other now here. Let's say we go home and we meet again tomorrow. Who do we expect to meet? The same person or a different person? The same person. Now, do we change from one day to the other, or do we continue to be exactly the same? We change. The flowers, when we close our eyes and then after we open again, if we analyze them, are they actually different or are they exactly the same? Has there been any change on them? Yes. Nothing changes like this [*snaps his fingers*] in an instant. Everything is gradual and so much is happening inside this flower right now, but we are not able to perceive it.

One aspect for example of reality is that we live in a world that is impermanent. Things are constantly changing, everything around us is constantly transforming. But we are not aware of it. So, when something has such a strong change that we cannot perceive it as before, we suffer.

I try to explain a little bit how it functions, why it happens like this. Everything around is constantly transforming. This is clear, right? My beard is growing, my hair is growing as I am talking, you know. I am getting older, as all of us; not only me. And

what is happening at this point? We are not able to see it right away, but it's clear for us that everything is changing, right? There is movement in everything.

Now, okay, when we see something, let's take for instance these flowers. When we look at the flowers, what actually appears to our eyes: flowers or shapes and colors? Shapes and colors, right? For example when we see flowers, do we like them? What reaction do we have in our mind: joy or sadness normally? Joy? Not for everyone. For example, I remember one time in Brazil, we had a friend and she's a schoolteacher. They had a day in the school, in a public school in the outskirts of the city. And she prepared one room full of flowers, dedicated to the mothers. So the mothers would come and she made this beautiful room full of flowers. She put a lot of effort, she doesn't have much money but she put some money there, quite a lot, to make this beautiful room and so on. And no one was entering the room. No one. People were going; they looked at the flowers and they were going away. At a sudden point she came and she asked, "What's the problem, why no one is entering."

"Oh, too many flowers in there."

"So what!"

"Oh, we only see flowers in funerals."

Because at that part of the city, a very poor area of Sao Paulo, people never buy flowers just to have something beautiful. Flowers is equal to funerals. So for them to see flowers would mean to bring back bad memories. So if you give a flower to one of them, they will not be happy.

So when I see a flower, and a person in that condition sees a flower, does it have the same meaning? No. Are we talking about the same object? Not really. Somehow yes, but we give a different meaning to it. So when we see this object here in front of us, what appears to our eyes is colors and forms, shapes.

The same thing happens while we talk. While I am talking right now, what are you listening to, words or sounds? Sounds really, no? What arrives in our ear is sounds. What do we do to these sounds? We assign meaning, we attribute meaning to them. If I say a word in another language that you don't speak... I often use the same example, because I really like the sound of this word in Tibetan, is *shiluma*. A nice sound, no? Oh look, what a beautiful *shiluma*. It's a nice sound. But what comes to our mind when I say *shiluma*, if you don't know the meaning, just the sound?

Shiluma is cockroach in Tibetan. Now, if I say *shiluma* again? Is it the same or has it changed? If I say: what a beautiful *shiluma*? [laughter] Already a different meaning, a different emotion coming.

So what happens is that when we talk, really, really what we hear is not any word or meaning; what arrives in our ears are sounds to which we are going to assign value, meaning. This meaning that we give to things, when we listen, when we see, when we touch, when we smell, when we taste, is called in Tibetan: *donchi*. *Donchi* means: 'general meaning', which I prefer to translate as 'mental image'.

We have a mental image. The mental image is based on what? On all our past put together. Our mental images are based on all the times I saw flowers, all the times someone showed me what a flower is, of all the experiences I have, related to it. So when I see it, I have all my background and I see the object - I have a sort of inner database - and I am going to: "Okay, what does it look like? Okay, these are flowers, okay? Flowers." Is this clear for us?

Mental images are permanent

Now we have a problem, which is: the flowers in this instance, this object, are impermanent; they are constantly transforming. But the mental images are permanent. Mental images are not constantly transforming. Does somebody have a piece of paper? This is an example I did once, and I never change the example because I think this is the best one I ever found up to now. Take for instance this object. *[shows a tissue]* What is this? A paper tissue. Okay? Look well at it. You can see it well, right? Do we have a mental image of it? If we close our eyes, can we imagine it? Yes, no? The more I go into details explaining to you... it has sixteen little squares, it's soft and nice, it's white, I can go on describing it. The more I will describe it, the more strong our mental image becomes, right? Okay, *[holds tissue behind his back]* now we can remember it, we can imagine it. Now, without a mind of philosophy and trying to analyze things, just spontaneously: *[shows tissue]* Is it the same tissue? Yes. *[holds tissue behind his back and shows it again]* Now is the same tissue? Yes. Now we can go on the whole night. *[holds tissue behind his back and shows it again]* And we can go on and on, is it the same tissue? Yes, okay? *[holds tissue behind his back and shows it again]* Then now, we go like this... *[tears the tissue in pieces]* and then I ask you: is it the same tissue? Spontaneously, what would you say?

If I give you my car and you bring it back to me like this, is it the same car? Or the other way around: if you give me your car and I bring it back to you like this, *[shows the torn up tissue]* is it the same car? *[laughter]* No, right?

Why is it not the same tissue? Do you still have the mental image of the first tissue that I showed to you? Does that mental image fit in this object? That's why it is a different tissue.

When the change is so big that the mental image cannot fit anymore into it, we say it's changed. Actually every time I showed the tissue, was there any small change in it? Yes, for sure. But what happened? We couldn't perceive it. Why? Because the mental image we had was still fitting perfectly in the object. Now we have a new mental image of the new tissue. But the other mental image, is it still there or not? And has it changed? Not really, it's there. So the problem is: mental images are permanent, objects are impermanent. And we do not understand that what we see is an object but we relate to the object through a mental image. We don't understand that.

For example when I think I am going to see you tomorrow, really who do I have the expectation to meet in my mind? The mental image I have. When I say, "Oh I am going to go to the park, I am going to go to your house." When I say, "Oh, tonight I am going back home to my nice bed to sleep." What is our object of perception when we think about the bed where we are going to sleep tonight? The object of perception... Is the bed an object or is it the mental image we have of the bed? The mental image we have, right? When we get there tonight, if the bed is not as we expected, okay, who's to blame? "Oh, I had a wrong mental image," or the bed has something wrong? The bed has something wrong.

If I am going to meet you in ten days, or tomorrow, or after six months, and I say, "Oh, that friend of mine, I am going to meet him, how nice (and so on). I have such good memories." And suddenly I see you and you are not the same as I expected; who is to blame? My mental image was wrong or you have changed, you are not the same, you are to blame?

So we have the arrogance to expect that reality should be as we want it to be. We are talking from still quite a gross level; we are not going into a deep level of what reality

is or not. Very, very simple things. Things change and we do not see them changing. We relate to reality through mental images. We are totally unable to perceive anything independently of our mental image. Can we perceive anything independently of ourselves? No. That's why in order for me to understand something really well, I must also understand myself; not only the object. This is a mistake that is done very often. If we make research about the object of research, but we do not make research about the researcher, we are faulty. But we go there slowly, slowly, we finish one point at a time.

Things are impermanent

So first thing: Things are impermanent. Ah, how good, we can relax. We don't need to live in the expectation that things should be the same.

Why do things change? Because they interact. Wherever there is interaction, there is change. The stronger the interaction, the stronger will be the change. I remember one time, this came very clear to me.

I was seeing a documentary about the digital age, and then in this thing they showed actually something quite interesting that Bill Gates did. Bill Gates, he bought an old mine of copper or whatever, a salt mine - I don't remember what type of mine - in the United States; a big, big, big mine. And then inside he is putting everything printed, because he says, "Sooner or later digital things will all fail. And we cannot keep the memory of humanity in digital things, because one day it will not work anymore." So he is printing all the newspapers, all the books, I don't know how, what exactly, but a lot of stuff he is printing, printing, printing, and putting inside this big place. So that maybe after a few thousand years or whatever, there will be history. But what I want to say is that he chose this place because it has a special temperature. Because of having a lower temperature and having the qualities of the air being specific in a way, there are not so many bacteria interfering together with the paper. The paper then has less interaction, and because of having less interaction it will have less change and it will last longer. Why do we put food in the fridge? Because if the food is in the fridge it will have less interaction, so it will have less change. It will have other changes that are not so good, but that is another thing, because they have a different type of interaction.

What I want to say: why do things change? Because they interact. Okay? We as human beings, how much do we interact? A lot, no? We interact through the body, the mind, the memories, the people we meet. When I meet one person, it is not only the person I am meeting, it is also interacting with my past memories, and what happened before and my expectations of the future, and my body, and the food I eat, the air I breathe; I am interacting with so much. So how can I expect to meet a person and the person not to be different from the one I met before? We are always changing, every time.

So, to take away this heaviness that we take with us, that things should be as we expect, it makes life really much easier. How much suffering do we have because things are not the same as we expect them to be? From all the attachments we have - and we really have many attachments - I believe that one of the strongest is the attachment towards reality as we want it to be. But we are studying from a simple level. I am not talking about, "Oh the reality of... whatever." No, I talk about daily life. I go home, and dinner is not ready; grrr, how is it possible? I expected it to be ready, it should be ready. I don't know, anything; I just find whatever example, okay? But if

we look, most of the times when things are not as we expected, we are not suffering because what they are; we are suffering because what they are not. It is clear for us? True or not true? True, no?

So, first thing is if we simply accept: okay things change. How can I relate to reality? Accepting impermanence. Taking into consideration that things are changing. I need to understand that I relate through a mental image that is permanent. So what do I do? I need to constantly update my mental image. I see you today, nice... I am going to see you tomorrow; okay let's update... one minute... okay? And first of all, do not have the expectation that things should be as I want them to be, as I think that they should be. For one other reason also: the more we are attached to reality - the way we think it should be - the more we are closed to new things. The more we are unable to learn and to experience new things. Okay, is this clear for us?

So impermanence is something very, very precious. Actually, for me impermanence is beautiful, because it is because of impermanence that we can make things different. It's because that everything is changing... Why do things change? Because they interact. Which means: if I do a right interaction I can also be part of this impermanence and so of this interdependence and make the change in a way how I want. But the changes come in small, small, small, small parts.

So one first aspect of reality, everything that I see, I touch, I smell, I taste or I listen is impermanent. And they are constantly transforming. But I am unable to perceive any one of them independently of the mental images that I attribute to it. We got this?

Perception of reality

Now, in order for me to see anything, there must be one thing that we call contact. Contact means: the union of.... Before we attribute a name, there is the union of the object, of sense power and of sense consciousness. For example there is form, shape and color, there is the eyesight, and then there is the eye-consciousness. When these three get together I can perceive reality, I can perceive form. The same thing is for sound. There is the vibration in the air, there is my ear sense power, physical. Then there is my ear-consciousness.

Now, we look at the flowers, the object of perception. We all can see the flowers, right? The object that we perceive: is it the same or is it different for each one of us here? Why it's different? We are looking from different perspectives. So the shape and color that is appearing to our eyes, it is the same for every one of us? No. The distance is different, the side from which we are looking is different. So we already see that the object that we see is not exactly the same. It is similar but it is not exactly the same.

Now, eye sense power, is it the same or is it different? If I take off my glasses I cannot even recognize my best friend. At least from the eyes - maybe by listening, yes. So our eye sense power: is it the same for every one of us or have we a different one? It is similar, as we are all human beings, but different. Our eye consciousness, it is the same or different? It's different. So what we are looking at: are we looking at the same thing or is it different? It's different. This is clear?

We have conventions okay? So, is it the same flower? Conventionally speaking, without analyzing, is it the same flower that we are looking at? Sure. But if we start analyzing and going into details, is it the same flower that each one of us is perceiving? No. Each one of us perceives in a different way.

Then, to make it even worse, or better: the mental image that we attribute, the name that we give, the value that we attribute when we see this object here that we call

flowers, is it the same for all of us or is it different? It's completely different. We have different memories, different emotions that come, a different meaning that we attribute. So what happens? For example, I take this object here. We call it a mala. It is what we use in Buddhism to make our prayers and mantras. We can see it. Each one of us, we have a different way of perceiving it. One person can say it is a mala for prayers. Another person maybe... You know, sometimes in a monastery - monasteries have very rigid discipline. And when the kids are a little bit smaller, and they are not exactly following it and so on, sometimes they may get beaten. And sometimes they use the mala. So if you were used to be beaten with a mala, and then suddenly you see that mala, do you have the same mental image as the one that is praying with it? No. Different memories. A different way of seeing it. And even what I just said right now, to make an example. I make the example that some teachers sometimes they would hit the students. How do we see that? Good or bad? Bad, good; it depends. Each one of us will see it differently. According to what? Our culture, our own experiences, our expectations, our ideals and so much more. I am not going to enter into what I think about it. If it's good or if it's bad; that is an ethical discussion, this is something else. The point is that the way how I see it, it depends on what? On my own experience. It depends on context. It depends on so much. So what I want to say is that the reality that we perceive, each one of us, every moment, when we are awake or when we are sleeping; it's not solid, it's not external. This doesn't mean at all that reality is only inside our mind.

Does external reality exist or not? Yes it does. Sure. I can touch you, I can throw water on you; you are going to feel it. We can see each other, we can touch the same things. External reality does exist, there is no doubt about it. We don't need to go into the nihilistic view that nothing exists and everything is just in the mind. There is this old Chinese saying - the saying is quite nice, but I don't share so much the meaning - which is, "I don't know if I am a human being dreaming I am a butterfly, or if I am a butterfly dreaming I am a human being." There are many ways how we can think. And there are many philosophical schools that went into this direction of saying, "Okay, nothing is existing, all is an illusion." Reality, external reality, does exist. This is for me very, very clear. But, does it exist as it appears to us or not?

First of all, how does it appear to us? Of what we have just said right now, the reality in which we live, is this subjective or objective? It is subjective, right? We see things: the same thing, the same word, the same sound, the same object is not the same. Even the smell - good smell or bad smell - the same smell is good for everyone? In all moments we will feel the same reaction according to a smell? No. Even though from all our senses, the one that has the most direct connection with our brain is smell. It's very direct.

I remember, because one time I saw a documentary talking about smells. It was very nice: they were talking how they were trying to make a weapon, which was a smell bomb. The idea was to make one smell that was so bad that you put it in a place and people would faint or go away; they cannot stay there. Because when we have a very, very bad smell, we are not able to keep with it. The idea was: instead of putting a gas that gets people hurt you put a bad smell. But then they got a big problem, because they could not find out one smell that was bad for everyone. Because, actually how does a smell work for us? The first time we have a smell, it comes together with a sensation of pleasure, suffering or a neutral sensation. If I have

a smell and it comes with a sensation of pleasure, which category I put that smell? Good smell. When I have that smell and I have a sensation of suffering, where I put that smell? Bad smell. And in different cultures having different lifestyles, the same smell comes with different sensations. So for some people – some smells for one will be bad, for another will be good.

So they couldn't make it basically. Finally they put many bad smells... they collected which were the worst smells for every culture trying to make one smell mixing all together. But the point is that even smell... when I smell something, for us is it a bad smell by its own self or is it because I have a negative memory from when I felt the first smell? How do we see it normally? It's a bad smell by itself, no? If someone comes to me and says, "Come on, it's not a bad smell. It's just because you had a bad experience in the past." What are we going to say? "Do whatever you want to do with your philosophy, but it is a bad smell."

Beyond conceptual understanding

So what happens is that actually reality is subjective. But how does it appear to us: as being subjective or as being objective? Objective. Do we believe in it as being objective? Not philosophically; practically. Yes, it's solid as a rock. Not even a rock is solid, but still. It's like, we have this idea that things are just as they appear. But if we really analyze, if we start to observe, are things like that?

So in one way, making it very simple, simplifying it a lot, the correct view of reality is to perceive not conceptually, because the whole point is to understand... It is nothing so special to understand. What we are talking about right now here is not so difficult to understand, right? But because we have understood that phenomena are impermanent and we relate to it for a mental image that is permanent, is that enough for us not to see things as permanent anymore? No. Understanding is just the first step. Once we understand, we need to get familiarized with that up to a certain level so that it becomes deep inside ourselves, that concept, that we can experience even without words. It's like... there is a saying that I like which is: learn, learn and after forget. It's like when we need to learn to play a musical instrument - which I don't know how to play; I know how to play the bell that we do at Buddhist ceremonies. But what happens is that, let's say I want to play a violin, it takes time no? How can I learn to play a violin? Just by knowing the theory? You take it, learn the theory, sure. Take it and play, play, play. How long does it take... how many hours do I need to exercise myself until some nice sound will come out? Many. And how long does it take for me to play and play and play until a moment I feel the instrument is just as an extension of my body? In the beginning, okay, this finger here to make that note, that finger there, and this and here... I am thinking about many things. At a sudden point where I get so used to it that I forget the theory, I just am the theory, I am the instrument. I don't even need to think about it anymore.

It's like when we are driving. Are you thinking, left foot here, right foot there? No. It's just spontaneous. That's why we say: learn, learn, learn and after forget. Which means when we experience something we don't need the theory anymore, we don't need anymore to have the conceptual understanding of it. It becomes spontaneous. That's when we talk about: we realize something. So when we talk about reality, for example impermanence, it is not enough to understand that phenomena are impermanent; we need to realize it. To do that we need to repeat again and again, we need to experience it. And once we have it, then we start to relate to it in a different way.

But the truth is that somehow, for some reason - I don't know really what... Many of you have much more understanding and knowledge than me about our own history and culture, where it's coming from and how it is and so on. But one thing is very clear. We live in a moment of our own history where we give much more importance to understanding, conceptual understanding. And much less importance to experience and realization. And we have this crazy idea that to understand is enough. So we understand what is reality, we understand what is right, we understand what is wrong, but we do what is wrong and we don't do what is right. We understand that everything is relative and nothing is objective; all the phenomena are subjective. If we go to see quantum physics and here and there... The importance of the observer etcetera, etcetera, etcetera... And then finally, "How come this is not like that." We are not realizing it. And it is so important for us to bring it into practice.

When I arrived at the monastery, a few years later, my teacher Gen Lhagpa-la, he told me one day, "Oh you are studying well. That's good. But remember one thing: just to know things is not enough. Everything you learn here, you must put into practice. What does that mean by Buddhist philosophy? You must use the knowledge to shape your mind. If you do not shape your mind, if you do not change the way of your behavior, of your attitude, of yourself, of your character, better you go to study something else. At least it will help you to find a job." He said, "Go study mathematics, medicine, history, business; anything else." Because whatever you learn you must put into practice; that's the only reason why we learn these things in Buddhism.

When I was studying in the monastery, it was funny because I would meet people around and they would ask, "Oh what do you study, where do you live?"

"Oh I live in a monastic university, I study Buddhist philosophy."

"How much do you study?"

"Oh we study normally six days a week, around ten to twelve hours a day of study, around eleven months a year."

"For how long the study program takes?"

"About eighteen years."

"Oh, what do you study for, what do you become?"

"I don't study for anything, I don't study to become something, to get a job or to have a title; I study to be a better person. I learn things to change myself."

We even have titles in the monastery but I really never cared for that. Because why do I study? Because I want to be a better person, I want to understand things and apply them to my life. Otherwise: knowledge just for knowledge means nothing. I can have a whole theory, a whole understanding of knowledge how to build a house, and I can have the whole knowledge of how to make a chocolate cake; if I never build houses and I never make cakes, what difference does it make? None. What makes a doctor a doctor? Finishing the university and having the knowledge of medicine or applying the medicine to cure people? Applying the knowledge of medicine to help people to get out of their sickness and to bring them to health, to a healthy state. What makes an architect an architect? Not knowing how to build houses but making plans and building houses. So, just the knowledge is not enough. To know things is just the first step.

So when we talk about the nature of reality we also need a reality that is not only conceptual. It's very, very important, the whole other aspect, which is the most emotional aspect of our lives; the perception that we have of the world. Even now as we are talking: I myself, I find myself... I cannot say it's a conflict, but sometimes I

find a contradiction somehow. The more I go on with my life, the more my life is dedicated to talking... Actually I said also before in the lecture, I really don't like talking much. In the sense that in my personal life - the people that know me in my daily life - I really don't like talking. I only like to talk if there is some sense to talk about. Otherwise I think there is nothing more intimate than being silent, to be in silence with a person. But what is somehow contradictory - not really, but strange for me - is the more I go on, the more I see how words mean nothing. It's much more important: the intention that I put, that we put. The emotion that I bring. The example that I am. All of this together can say much more than words; much more. If we look in our daily life, the conflicts that come, do they come because we lack knowledge or because we lack emotional stability? Emotional stability, right? But in our whole process of education, since our childhood, what were we taught? Knowledge. Learn, learn, learn. Understand one thing, know how to make mathematics, we need to know the history of things; we need to know. Knowledge, information, information, information, information. If you are emotionally stable or not; who cares. The important thing is to have good grades because you have a lot of information in your head. I am a person that loves studying and I love information. But the more my life goes by, the more I see how useless it is very often. But how much energy do we invest in our life to learn how to be emotionally stable? It's a question each one needs to answer for yourself. But very often not much, right? Even from this point of view of reality, we live in a world that reality is not just knowledge. We are not all computers. We are made of feelings and emotions, desires, aversions. And I believe it's much more important in our education to learn - because it's possible to learn - how to deal with our emotions, how to develop the good ones and abandon the bad ones, than knowing how to do our job very well, or whatever. Now I will just do something that I didn't really want to say, but in between: Our education system that we have is basically an education system that is there for the whole economy to function. Why we need obligatory schools? Because we need everyone to learn the same things, in the same way, in order to function in the same way for the market and for the industry and so on. So when I need to hire someone, I know exactly what they would know and how they will function. This is just one example also of how we see reality differently. For example when you ask, "Is it good or bad that every child must go to school?" What would we say normally? "It's good. You go to a country where children don't need to go to school, what a terrible country. You see children staying the whole day with their family that are farmers, and working in the field with their parents: poor children, why they don't go to school?" Would we say that or not? But if we start to analyze, is it necessarily like that? Nowadays in Tibet, what is happening? The kids need to go to school, because they are obliged to by the government. So they don't stay with the parents anymore working the land. When they get eighteen, whatever, they don't want to work in the land anymore. They don't find work in the cities, because the education they have is not as good as the one the other ones get in the cities. And what happens finally? The parents are there very old trying to do the job. The kids go back home and they don't know how to do the farming job. One tradition is lost and the people, they don't have their livelihood anymore. So what would be better for the kid? To learn how to know the land, when is the right period to plant, how to use the instruments; to learn that way of life, or not? It is just an example. Many things can be seen from different perspectives, but the problem is where? That we grasp at reality in the way how we want it to be.

Constructed and spontaneous aspects of our mind

And here comes another thing, which is also important for us to understand. According to Buddhist philosophy we have two terms that I like very much, which is *kundak* and *lhenkye*. *Kundak* means constructed views and *lhenkye* means spontaneous views.

So in our mind we have some constructed aspects of our mind and some spontaneous aspects of our mind. Constructed aspects of our minds are ways how we see things, how we perceive things, but they do not depend on something that is natural in us. They depend on the culture where we grow up, the education that we receive and so and so on.

Let's make one very simple example. It's a very simple example, nothing too special. Take for instance color. Let's say we have a new kid, a boy, and we go to make the room for the boy. Which color we choose, blue or pink? Blue, right? If we make a pink room for a boy, some people may say, "Oh, what will happen to him? That's not very good." So basically what's the color for boys? Blue. What's the color for girls? Pink, right? Why? "Because that's how it is, come on! How can you see a boy with pink; that's terrible! It's natural that it's like this!" Have we ever questioned ourselves why the boy it's blue and why the girl it's pink? Okay, I tell you why.

Everything started in 1918. In 1918, we are in the beginning of the age of industrial revolution. At the beginning of the industrial revolution there was a point where they started to be able to produce cloth with color, cheap. Until that time, what was the color of the clothes of kids? White, grey, cream. That were the three possibilities basically. And some of them would get a little bit more black, after some time. But this was the possibility. There was no color for boys or color for girls. Why? Because it was too expensive to have colored clothes. Suddenly there has been an industrial revolution. They developed ways how to produce cloth that was accessible for people to buy with different colors. But they needed to start to teach people that they need colors. Because they were not used of needing colors. Nobody needs colors, but still. Not colors; cloth with colors. So the marketing people of that time, in 1918, they invented that pink was for boys and blue was for girls. Because they said, "Pink is a strong color and blue is a soft color. So pink for boys, blue for girls." And from 1918 to 1920: all the boys with pink, all the girls with blue. Then they got a problem. People were not buying anymore. They already had the pink clothes for the boys and the blue clothes for the girls. They were not used to buy things every six months after having invented this strange thing which we call fashion. Because people were not used to buy clothes so often, right? Why do we buy clothes so often now? Because we need to keep the market running. And someone taught us that we need to do that. Anyhow, that's another subject. The point is that in 1920 they needed to make the market to run. So they said, "What do we do? We invert things." So in 1920 they made a strong marketing campaign in which they said, "No! Boys must wear blue and girls must wear pink." And from 1920 up to today, we follow. Boy is blue, girl is pink. Is this a spontaneous view or it is a constructed view? A constructed view. But when we choose the blue for the boy, do we see it as a constructed view? We say, "Oh because of the marketing people of 1920, I think they were right. So because of that I see that it conventionally would be normal to do like this. So I am also going to follow the convention, so I choose the blue." Or we simply think blue is the good color for a boy? We take it for granted. In the same way there are millions of ideas, millions of things that we seem to take for granted. But they are all things that come from the

culture that we grow up, the information we receive.

Another example: the world view that most of us have here, related to reality... not only most of us here, but culturally, in the modern times. The way how we see reality, normally; is it coherent with the modern developments of science or not? The view of the world that is taught in the schools nowadays and that we grow up with, and we make our choices within, is a mechanical way... where reality is mechanical, where we don't take into consideration the observer. We have the Newton view up to now. How old is Newton? I have no idea, how long ago... Sixteen hundred, so it means we are four hundred years stuck. It's true. Our view of the world - if we look in the history of humanity; humanity has always changed paradigm, changed the way of seeing reality as we moved along in our history. Before we believed... we in the West, one part of the world believed that the world was flat. Some parts of the world did not even question how the world was. It didn't matter much for them how the world was. And like this we go on. Slowly, slowly we changed the view. If you ask someone now, "Is the world flat or round?" Anybody is going to say flat? How come, why the world is not flat? Because some people said so, we saw pictures, we have the idea that we can travel. I have never done the complete turn around, but still, we believe in this way. But for example the view of the world; science has developed in a way that has gone much beyond Newton. But the common view is still stuck there.

This is to say that the way that we see the world, that constructed view that we have about reality, is not just about my local understanding of the moment. It comes with the education that I receive, with the information I have around me, all of this. It's much deeper, it's like pink and blue. And we live in a mechanical way, coming from let's say Newton, to make things more simple. But actually it is before that. But if we really go to see science, and all the developments that came in physics, the world view, the view of reality, it's completely different. We come from a view nowadays... if we go to look scientifically, and I am the worst person to talk about it, but still, from the little I have seen, we are talking about a view where the observer is in the center, where nothing exists objectively, everything is subjectively, it depends on how we see it. It's very, very similar to a Buddhist perspective. But do we see it in that way? No. Because we have not yet that constructed view. So it's important for us to understand that the way how we relate to reality, how we see reality, it influences - not [just] influences, it determines our choices. It determines the way how we experience everyday life, the way how we see reality.

This is something quite shocking actually, for me at least. That in the moment that we understand - really; not just an idea - when we can feel, when we can touch, and we can deeply understand that the way how I see reality changes the way how I experience life and reality, is shocking. Because we have the idea that we can interpret, we can have a different interpretation of reality. Oh, you have your interpretation of reality, I have my interpretation of reality, but then there is reality! No... How can there be a reality that is independent of the observer? Who can perceive it? Who can see it? No one. So as we move along, we will see that the way how I see reality is the way how reality manifests to me. And every choice I make, every thought I have, every word I say, everything I experience is totally conditioned by it. So it's extremely important for us to question: how do I see reality? Is it coherent or not? And if we really stop a little bit to think about it, to analyze it, we will see that most of the times when we suffer, it's because we are experiencing reality in an incoherent way. This is clear or not? You can understand it?

Causes and conditions

Coming back to the point that we said before: We suffer much more because things are not in the way how we expect them to be than from the actual experience that we have. I just make a very simple question: in our lives, what do we have more - physical suffering or mental suffering? Mental suffering, right?

Mental suffering is mostly related to the past, present or future? Past? Future? How much mental suffering we have related to the present? Present means: the right now. Almost nothing! We almost never suffer for the present. "Oh, you said this to me!" That's already past, even if it's one second ago. "You cannot say this to me!" If I said it, it means I can, first of all. "This cannot be like this!" If it is it can be. Whenever someone comes to me and says, "Oh but this person cannot do this!" Then the question is: is he doing it? Yes, so it means he can do. If you tell me it would be better that he didn't do it, okay. That's a point of view. How can we interact with him so he will not repeat it again, that is another thing. "Oh, this cannot be like that!" If it is, it's because it can. When we ask, "But why are things like this?" The Christian answer... Again, I am the worst person to talk about Christianity because I really don't know much, but based on our culture it's because God wishes. Sometimes we hear this, no? We say, "Why is it like this?" "Oh, because God wants it to be like that." The Buddhist answer would be: "Why it is like this? Because causes and conditions were created for it to be like that. Who created such causes and conditions? The interaction of all of us put together. That's why things are like this." "Oh but it's not nice like this!" Oh, there are many things that are not nice. "They shouldn't be like this!" Why? Why shouldn't things be the way how they are? I don't know really. Who am I to say how things should be?

One time I imagined how it would be if everything that I want would just happen. It's frightening! Because, how can I know what is really the best choice? It's really very difficult to make choices at this point. I think I would get completely stuck. For example, we are here right now. How many causes and conditions were necessary for this moment to exist? How many things have happened for this moment to exist? Thousands? Millions? Billions? But how many things have happened, that if it was not for that specific thing, this moment would not exist as it is? So many. If I start to tell you the history of this moment, we could talk ages and lives and lives, and we cannot get to the day of today. Of things that happened, if it was not because of these then we would not be here. I make a very short example, one that I really like very much. Lama Gangchen came to the West. If Lama Gangchen had not come to the West I would not be here today, which means you would not be here today. Maybe someone else would be here but not me. Not in this situation, not in this condition. To tell the truth, I have no idea what would have happened, but most probably not what we are experiencing right now. There was a moment in Lama Gangchen's life when he was about to go into retreat, spiritual retreat, meditation, for one year, not seeing anyone, one year of meditation. So he went to talk to his friend that later became my teacher.

He said to his friend Gen Lhagpa-la, "Oh I want to go into retreat for one year."

Gen Lhagpa-la was a man of very few words, but when he would say something he would be very sharp. So he listened and then Gen Lhagpa-la simply said to him, "If I was in your position, I would not be able even to do a hundred mantras."

He said, "Why?"

"With all the debts that you have, how can you relax and do a retreat, do meditation?"

Because Lama Gangchen would go around and he would help people. He was a sort

of, how to say - here we have Robin Hood. Instead of stealing money he would borrow money from people and give to the poorer ones. So he would borrow money from someone that had a little bit more and give to the one that had less, that was in need. But after a few years like this he was full of debts. And people didn't have the courage to say it directly to him, so they would say it to his friend.

So Gen Lhagpa-la said, "So many people come to complain to me that they need the money. You need to give it back to them."

And then, he listened. Finally he didn't go to retreat; he went to the north of India where he was invited by the king of Sikkim's family and he was there to do healing with the mother of the king. She had eye problems, so he healed her eye sickness. His idea was, "I go there, I stay two, three months, I get some money from donations and so on. Then I go back, I pay all the debts and I go into retreat." That was his plan. But when he went there, so many people were coming to see him! From early morning he had a line of people waiting for him to ask for advice and healing and teachings, whatever. So instead of two, three months, he stayed there almost two, three years. And during that time he went to Nepal, where he met one guy called Giorgos who invited him to come to Greece, which was the first country that he went to in the West. And I don't want to go into too many details because it will be too long. But basically, if he had not said to Gen Lhagpa-la, "I am going to retreat," and Gen Lhagpa-la wouldn't have had the courage to say to him, "Oh look, I would not be able to do even a hundred mantras," most probably he would have gone into retreat. He would have taken another direction and most probably he would never have met Giorgos who was at that time in Nepal, who was from Greece. And most probably he would never have come here and I would not be here today.

What I want to say is this: every word we say, every word we hear, every thought we have, every decision we make; it's totally... how to say - it determines what will happen in our future. But at the same time we have no idea what would happen. So do we really know what's going to happen tomorrow? It is another aspect of reality.

Mental images

We have the expectation that tomorrow, what will I do? Oh tomorrow I have a course that I need to give, so I will be in this place, doing this and that. The timing will be like this, and then I will do this and then I will do that, and then I will go, I will meet that person and I have this and I have that. What do I have of the future right now? Just a mental image. What happens when the future is different of the expectation we had? Frustration. Why frustration? Because it doesn't fit in the expectation we created.

So once again: we are living reality in an incoherent way with what reality is. Things are not as I expected. My children didn't come out the way how I wanted them to be. My parents are not the way how I wanted them to be; after growing up I see that they are not exactly how I wanted them to be.

Here is another point also, which I forgot to say before, which makes things a little bit worse, but it is the following: when we have a mental image, we put mental images into categories. So we have general mental images and specific mental images. So for example, we all have a mental image of: father, mother, son, daughter, teacher, boyfriend, girlfriend and whatever. So what happens when my father doesn't fit in the mental image I have of 'father'? A problem. What happens when my son or daughter, or friend or whatever doesn't fit the category in which I have put him? Conflict. Suffering.



I found one solution, for myself. What I experience is like this: whenever I experience something, for example a relation with a person, any kind of relation... Whenever we give a name, we put that relation in a box. And then if it doesn't fit in the box, who is to blame? The person. The relation. Not the box that I have put. So what I do? I try not to give names to things sometimes.

Some time ago a person asked me, "Oh you have been lying to me."

I said, "Why?"

"You didn't tell me these things."

I said, "True, but I was not lying, I was omitting, not saying some things."

Why I didn't say?

"Very simple. In the moment that I would say these things to you, at that moment, would you have the same understanding you have right now?"

The person said, "No."

"What would have happened in the moment I would say these things to you?"

"Oh, I would have given a name, and then, the moment I give a name, I put it in a box."

"But the box that you put and the box that I put are different. So when my box doesn't fit with your box, we are talking about two different things. But we think it is the same. And then we have a conflict. So before telling you, I waited until you have the openness of mind and the experience that you can understand my box."

Is it clear? So, whenever we give a name to something, we put that in a box. We are not able to do differently. If we know that we are putting it in a box, sometimes we can change boxes. There are elastic boxes also; they are very useful really. If you put things into an elastic box, it's there but it can change shape a little bit. We put it into a box that will shape according to the content inside. The more rigid is our box, the more we will suffer. Because it is very difficult, almost impossible to find something that will fit perfectly into our box. So every time we have a mental image, we have it like a box. So when we have the general idea of 'friend'; what happens when a friend doesn't fit in the box of 'friend'? It's not a friend anymore. But maybe he is still my friend, but simply he doesn't fit in the box that I have for the idea of a friend. So the more we are rigid into the ideas - the more we experience reality through very rigid boxes, the more we are going to live in conflict and suffering. The more we understand reality is flexible, things are always moving, and I need to relate - try to understand them, I need to be flexible also myself, and I need to put them in boxes, so let's have flexible boxes; we get much more relaxed. Life gets much easier.

Problems and facts

There is one point, which makes a difference here: we understand things but we need to accept them. How easy or difficult is it to accept that reality is not as we expect it to be? I think it's wonderful! Really. Like the day I understood that problems exist and will always exist, it was such a satisfaction. Because, before the suffering was: always trying to solve problems, and trying to make life perfect. Then one day I understood this. I remember I was in one place in the car, when suddenly one situation came to my mind, and I got very clear in my mind: "Wow, problems exist and will always exist! What a wonderful thing! So I don't need to dedicate my whole life trying to solve problems. I need to put energy somewhere else. Problems are sacred, are very important. Because first of all, if something is a problem, it means it has a solution. For me, definitions are also very important. So, this is a problem. What does a problem mean? It has a solution. If it doesn't have a solution, it is not a problem; it is a fact. As simple as that. Let's take for instance - I like the night also

very much - but let's say that I do not like the evening, the night. And for me I really suffer when the sun goes down. So for me it becomes a problem that the sun is going down. Is it a problem that the sun is going down? No, it's a fact. There would be one solution; I thought about it. Six months North Pole, six months South Pole, then I have a solution. Otherwise, what's the point?

I cannot get pregnant. [Laughter] Is that a problem or is that a fact? It's a fact, okay? Like would it be crazy for me to suffer because I cannot get pregnant? As hard as I may try? What would people say if I am suffering because I cannot get pregnant? Or they will laugh at me, or someone is nice to me and they would say, "Come on, let me try to explain to you, things are not like that." So what happens is, there is one thing: things are facts, and another thing: things are problems. A problem means: it has a solution. So, if there is a problem, where do I need to put the energy? Into the solution; not in getting stuck into the problem. So stop complaining about the problem, and let's look for the solution. If something is a fact, swallow it if you don't like it. No other choice. That's how it is. I can learn how to live with it, I can find a different perspective, I can change it by changing myself. I can learn to like the sun going down to see the sunset. I can understand so many other things. But I cannot change this. I can learn to know my nature of my body as a man better, and stop suffering because I cannot get pregnant. But I cannot get pregnant. Can I do something about it? Yes, change my perspective, but that's a fact.

We suffer for many facts. So very often we have a big difficulty accepting reality, even the reality that we understand. And I see this as a sort of arrogance in which we want reality to be as I expect it to be. That's one of the most stupid things anyone can ever do. Sorry to put it in that way. But when we really analyze and we look at it, isn't it stupid to be attached to a reality that is just because I see it like that? For me that's crazy. This doesn't mean we cannot make plans. Sure we need to make plans. One of my mottos, something I really believe, is to have high objectives, low expectations and constant effort. But there is a very important thing about having courage, about having high objectives. The high objective must always be coherent with the present resources that I have. If I put the objective to get pregnant, I can try as much as I want; the only way is dying and being reborn as a woman. So it's not that I need courage, no, it's stupidity to try it, because I don't have the resources.

Interdependence

So we need to understand what the resources are that we have. And with the resources that I have, what can I do? Where can I go? What can I realize? It is what we said in the very beginning: understanding reality. And we will see that the greatest of all the resources that we have is called interdependence. It is that things change. And because of that, when I interact, things are always moving. I am changing every moment, you are changing every moment, society is changing every moment, but we are interacting. So if we are less attached to the way how we see reality, and we are more attached to the interaction that is constantly happening, then we can make a change.

For example: Can I change a person? Has anyone here ever tried to change a person? Has anyone ever succeeded in it? [Laughter: "No."] Okay, so, if there is a person that is suffering a lot, and I have already gone through that, I see there is no need for that suffering and so and so on, what can I actually do?

Another thing here before that: how often do we see people suffer because the other person is not as they expect that the person should be. "How come you don't

understand this? Why are you not like that? I expected you to be!” “Because I am myself, that’s all. I am the result of all the causes and conditions that I made in the past and how I interacted in the past and the present, that’s what I am. Sorry if I am not what you expected me to be. But that’s what I am.” But how can I help you to change? What is the only tool I have in my hands? It doesn’t matter if I am a normal human being or if I am a Buddha, from the Buddhist perspective; a fully realized human being. What is the only tool I have in my hand to change you or anyone else? Interacting with you. That’s the only thing I have. So if I want to make a change in a person, in society, in the environment, in anything; the only tool I have is to interact in a positive way. And by interaction I make a change, that’s how we can make change, that’s how we can change our life and things. But we need to accept the reality, that that’s what I can do. I cannot change anyone; I can simply interact with others.

Where lies our freedom?

And here comes another thing, just before I conclude. How much freedom do we really have? How much free will do we really have? One time I met one man, he was a very wise old man, an astrologer. And he said to me, “The freedom that we have is the freedom that a goat has when he is attached to a fence, a hundred-and-eighty degrees.” Depending on... each person has different lengths of ropes. I think our freedom is even smaller. Our free will, our true freedom is even smaller, is a very few degrees, not even hundred-and-eighty. Because, am I free from my past? No. Am I free from my body? Am I free to make choices and to have understandings? For example, if I have a very unbalanced body from the chemical aspect and so on; is my mind influenced by it? Sure, just eat a lot; you’ll see what happens. The body is directly connected to the mind; we know that. Where is the mind in the body? In the whole body. The mind is connected to the whole body. The conceptual understanding is in the brain, but that’s just a very small part of our mind. It is another subject okay? But this is a very important subject. For example, when we say the mind, where do we point the finger normally? To the head. But the mind is not just conceptual understanding. The fact that the mind is in the head, that’s a constructed view that we have; that we give so much importance to the brain. Whereas our mind, our emotions are directly connected to our kidneys, to our liver, to our digestive system, to our heart, to our lungs, to our skin, to everything in our body. I believe like this. Anyhow, the old Buddhist texts used to say: mind and body are always connected. To see that is simple: when you get sad, tears comes out of your eyes. If there was no connection between mind and body, why would you have tears coming out of your eyes when you get sad?

But the point is: am I in this very right moment, the way how I perceive the world, the experience that I have of reality, am I influenced by this body or not? Yes. Am I influenced by the environment I am in, or not? Yes. Am I influenced by all the choices I made in the past, and experiences that I had, and the education I received, and the actions I did; am I influenced by my past or not? Yes, very much! So where is my freedom? My freedom is in the present moment. I can choose between a range of words which one to say. Between a range of choices, which one to take. I cannot choose anything, because it’s like... there is an example, which is not the best one, but maybe it can help us to understand. Can I buy anything I want? Yes, as long as I have the money and someone is selling it. If there is someone selling it but I don’t have the money, can I buy it? No. And if I have a lot of money, but no one is selling what I want,

can I buy it? No. So I am conditioned to the causes of the past and to the conditions of the present. So where is my choice? Where is my free will? In the small choices I have. It's like half a degree. But if I make half a degree to the left and I go straight, after the long term I will go into a complete different direction. So today I am extremely influenced by small choices I made ten, fifteen, twenty years ago. Are we influenced today by experiences we had when we were a kid? By the words we heard from our parents or from our friend or something? Yes. So we can see it; small things like half a degree, one degree or even less, in the long term it makes a big difference. That's where our freedom lies. The only freedom we have is to interact differently with ourselves and others. That's where our freedom lies.

But the greatest thing about our freedom, where our true freedom is, is the freedom to choose how to relate to the world, how to see reality. How to experience reality; this depends on us, on no one else. And in the moment I choose gradually, because it is not from one instant to the other, and I learn and I choose to experience reality in a more coherent way, I will simply have a better life. And that's what we all want, no? So, we could go on and on about the subject. But I think I will like to open for questions, and after I will do a small conclusion. Okay?

Please...

[Someone in the audience asks a question]

That's a very important point. Paula's question was that, it's easier to understand the impermanence of things around us, but it's more difficult to understand our own impermanence. We can understand that the world around us is... we can perceive it in different ways, and it is subjective and so on, but I am solid. Me that perceives, I am here, I am solid. So, how to see that?

Here we come to a question that I put in the beginning, but I didn't talk about it. It is a very important question that we need to ask: What am I?

First thing: Am I an entity that exists only in this body or can I transcend this body? It is a question. Maybe we believe in one way, maybe we believe in another way, but it's extremely important to make the question to ourselves. So, in the moment that I can transcend or I can be just in this body, the two cases: What is in common of when I was a kid and now? Ten years ago and now? For example when we met, Rogier, *[points at someone in the audience]*. It was 2004? I remember a year, which is special. I have a very bad memory of numbers. 2004. Many years have past. Eleven years ago. So the person we met ten years ago, the person I was ten years ago is the same person of today or not? It was me that talked to him, in the congress in Verbania, or not? Yes, no? Yes. When I have memories that I was a small kid... Last day it was very nice, I was talking to my mother, and she was reminiscing about when I was a small kid... Was it me or not? Yes, it was me. But am I the same, or something has changed? Many things have changed, but it's still me. So what am I?

The philosophical definition that is given of the self is, we say *pung po ngapo gang rung la tagpe nga tsham* in Tibetan, which means the mere imputation of the I, based on the five aggregates. What are the five aggregates? Body and mind. We have the aggregate of form, which is body. Then we have four different aspects of our mind, which are called the other four aggregates, which means: the aggregate of compositional factors, which is basically somehow, let's make it simple, our personality. It's forty-nine mental factors; we can go in detail into it, but it is not the moment right now. Then we have the aggregate of sensation. The aggregate of discrimination: good, bad, the house, car, whatever; discrimination. Then discernment: the aggregate of discernment. Then we have the aggregate of

consciousness: the continuity of our mind. So we have these four aggregates, which is the mind, and then we have the body, gross, subtle, our body. These two are both together, which are impermanent. There is a mental image, there is an imputation of a name, in which we say: "I". There is an identity that is generated on the basis of body and mind. This identity is what unites the I of today and the I of yesterday. Because the body has changed, the mind has changed, but there is something that puts these things together into one. It's similar, when we look at the flowers again. Is it the same flowers of the beginning of the lecture tonight or is it different flowers? The same flowers. Have they changed? Yes. But is it the same flowers or not? Has anyone come in and changed the flowers? No. It is the same flowers. Why can I say the same flowers? Because I still have the same mental image. An identity that I am giving to it, that puts all the moments together, even though there are changes. Even though in our lives we have big changes, it is still ourselves. Why? Because we have a mental image in which all these moments are fixed, which is called the I, the identity. It is the same problem as the rest. The identity that we have, the mental image, and here we could go even a little bit more... but, okay. The mental image that we have of ourselves, it's permanent, but we are impermanent. But in the same way that when I look at the flowers, I have a confusion that I think that the mental image is the flowers. I cannot distinguish between the object and the mental image that I have, the same thing we do with ourselves. We have a mental image of us. Like what happens after many years, and suddenly I am not what I expected that I should have become. I do not fit anymore. This body and mind and society, what I am, doesn't fit anymore in the mental image that I have of myself. "Oh, crisis! What have I done, I have wasted my life! Oh, I am not as good as I was supposed to be." I can have an identity crisis. Why? Because I simply see that I do not fit anymore, the mental image I have doesn't fit anymore with the body and mind, with the reality that I experience. So, the reason why we see our self so solid is the same reason why we see the flower as permanent. It is because we do not understand that even I, even myself, I exist on the mere imputation of the name, on the mental image that I attribute. That's what puts all the moments together. I hope it's clear; it's a long subject, but I hope it's clear.

Emptiness

Question from audience: "Can you say something about this objective reality, this non-duality..."

Here, there is one thing, which is: sometimes it may look like a game of words. Playing with words. For example: relative reality and ultimate reality. In Tibetan we call it *kundzob dempa tondam dempa*. What is the ultimate reality? That relative reality is relative. What is the ultimate reality? What is the objective reality? That subjective reality is subjective. That's the objective reality. I don't know if it's clear. I repeat again: What is the only objective truth we have? That truth is subjective. That subjective reality is subjective.

In Buddhism we use one term, maybe some of you have already heard about it. Today I didn't use this term trying not to create confusion, but we call it SHUNYATA; emptiness. Maybe some of you have already heard about emptiness. And when we talk about emptiness, it looks like nothing exists and nothing is there and everything is an illusion. No! What is emptiness? I am simplifying it okay? Maybe philosophically it's not precise what I am about to say, but trying to make it simple. Emptiness is that all phenomena are empty of having an objective reality. All subjective phenomena are empty of having an objective reality, which means they are actually subjective. So

when I look at the flowers, the flowers are empty of being objectively a flower. They are flowers because I see them as flowers, for me they appear as flowers. For a little ant going there, they are not flowers but something else.

So when we actually talk about relative and absolute, they are the same. They are of the same nature. It is when we talk about non-duality. It's because there is no such a thing as: in the absolute reality everything is the same and beautiful. And then in the relative we have differences. When we talk about absolute, ultimate, objective, it's different words to say the same thing. We are talking about interdependence. Everything is interdependent. That's something objective. Everything lacks an objective reality, That's why, if we go into this debating and dialectics and so on, there are terms for example that we use when we say: nothing exists ultimately, but ultimate reality exists. Nothing exists in an objective way, but objective reality exists. What is the objective reality? That all subjective reality is subjective. So it's important for us... like here we open a door to a whole subject. It's quite long because we are going into very specific terms and so on. And it's the reason why I try to make it simple.

Why we talk about SHUNYATA? Why we talk about nothingness? Why we talk about emptiness? Because of a very simple aspect of our mind. We are totally unable... actually this is in the core essence of Buddha's teachings, and it's in the core essence of the path to enlightenment: We are totally unable to have two directly opposite thoughts at the same time. For example: I like water and I don't like water. Can I have these two thoughts at the same time? Try. Can we think at the same time: I like water and I don't like water? No. Can I think one after the other? Yes, we do that very often. But, can we think it at the same time? No. So we are totally unable to have two directly opposite modes of apprehension at the same time, okay? So, what does that mean in practice? If I want to change a state of mind, if I want to eliminate a state of mind, what do I need to do? I need to generate a directly opposite state of mind, so that one will not be there anymore. If I say that the mind that says, "I don't like water," is not good. How do I eliminate the mind that says I don't like water? By generating the mind, "I like water." That's the only way.

Which is the root of our suffering, the ignorance that I was talking about in the beginning? It's the mind that grasps at reality as being of inherent existence. Of being an objective existence. It's the mind that... I look at the flowers, they appear to me as existing objectively out of themselves, and I believe in it. That's the ignorance that we call: grasping at inherent existence. So what happens is that... what's the directly opposite mind to this one? The flower lacks inherent existence, lacks objective existence. That's why we talk about emptiness. Emptiness of what? Emptiness of objective existence. Emptiness of - we call it inherent existence. Why we need to generate that? Otherwise it will be enough to say the flower is interdependent. But it's not the direct opposite mode of apprehension, of the mind that grasps at inherent existence. So in order to eliminate that mind, I need to generate a directly opposite mind, which we call the mind that realizes the lack of inherent existence. It's something a little bit complicated, but the important thing for us to understand is that reality is non-dual. Relative and absolute is the same thing. It's not two separate worlds; it's not two separate realities. This is also one important aspect.

Understanding each other

[Someone in the audience asks a question]

Actually it's quite simple. The question was, "How can we ever understand each other?" Spontaneously I would say: never! In the sense that I would never be able to understand you in the same way how I understand myself. In the same way sometimes people say, "Nobody understands me." Don't worry; nobody will ever understand you! In the sense that nobody will ever see me in the same way as how I see myself. And I will never see you in the same way as how you see yourself. It's simply impossible. But, we can understand each other in the moment that I respect the interdependence in which we live. I respect the way how you are and I am. That we depend on the experiences we have and, how to say, I can understand you within the limits of what it means to understand you. I cannot understand you in the same way as how you understand yourself. I can understand you, trying each time more and more, having the humility of adapting the mental image. And as times passes by I will always try to shape the mental image I have of you, so each time more and more I understand your contradictions, I understand your joys, your sufferings, your mentality; I try to understand it slowly slowly. But most probably after twenty years I will be far far far away from understanding you in the same way as how you understand yourself.

Question from audience: "That is also changing all the time?"

That's also changing all the time! But the point is that the only way I can try to understand another person is from my point of view. What I try to do normally is, for example I have learned that people are incoherent - we are incoherent - for example, one thing I learned, I learned it the hard way actually, this part: don't listen to what people say! The way I grew up in the monastery; we studied dialectics, so a word is a word. We are very much into it. So when I say something I mostly mean what I am saying, really. And what I have learned is that many times and very often people say things, not because they want to say that thing, but because they need to say something. And because they need to communicate an emotion, they need attention, they need whatever and then basically they are just saying things. So I have learned - I am trying and still learning - each time more and more to listen to people; not to what they say but listen to what they don't say, to listen between the words, to listen to the expression.

Like one time I was with a friend and he was telling me some things, complaining, and I said, "Yesterday you told me these things, which are in contradiction with what you are saying to me today!"

As a matter of fact it was exactly one day after the other.

I said, "Which one shall I listen to? The friend of today or the friend of yesterday?"

Then he looked at me and he was a little bit upset at that moment - he looked at me and said, "Oh, better that one of yesterday."

I said, "Okay."

Another thing is that, when I see you or anyone, I always try to keep in mind that we are always changing. So I have no expectation that you should be in the way I want. But I will always try to interact as I learned from Lama Gangchen. To interact with the other person with their qualities, trying to help to develop their qualities.



One time a journalist asked Lama Gangchen, “How come you have so many friends? How come so many people like you and you have so many friends?” And he told him, “I believe it is because I relate to the qualities of everyone around me and not to the faults and defects.”

So normally, very often we are like with a gun, no? Looking for the defect of a person to shoot. Instead we look at the qualities and we try to relate to that part. So there are many ways how we can know another person. Maybe for example, we have the same person: when I relate to that person I relate to one aspect of that person so I know the person from one perspective. Another one relates to the same person, but relates from another perspective. So he will be two different persons for each one of us. So my way of really knowing someone is knowing that I cannot really know that person hundred percent. I can try to relate and be open to understand different aspects constantly, updating the mental image I have of the person. That is the best way, I think.

Meaning for health care

[Addressing someone in the audience:] You were saying something before...

Question from the audience: “I think many people here are in healthcare. Can you say something about how all this is related to health?”

How all of this relates to health.

First thing regarding health: I think that this is very important of what I have said: basis, path and result. We must have clear: what are the resources that we have, what is the potential that we have? Where can we get, and what’s the path to get there? Something that I feel sometimes is that we miss the point, which is that we are very busy dealing with the difficulties and with the sicknesses and the symptoms, and not pointing high. Sometimes I feel that we are lost. We, I mean, in the daily life, in our society, in medicine, in many ways. Sometimes I feel that we are lost, not having a real direction.

We are doing many things. So first thing is, what is the reality of medicine, of healthcare? Are we disease, sickness care or we are health care? What is my role as a doctor? Is it to cure disease or to bring people to a state of health? These are two completely different things. They are related, for sure. But from my point of view, they are two completely different things. So, according to the way how I see my reality, it will change the way how I work. If my objective is to bring the person to a state of health, first I need to understand is: what does that mean? For example, for me to be really healthy, I mean in the complete sense, you must experience reality in a coherent way. Otherwise, if we do not experience reality in a coherent way we will end up nervous, with anger, with jealousy, with anxiety. “Things are not happening the way how I expect them to be, how come that is possible?!” So all of this will bring all the other problems that we know so well. Anxiety, accumulated in time, does it bring health problems or not? Sure. We don’t need to be a doctor to know that. I know nothing about medicine but this I know. So, having a correct view of reality is very important because it will bring us to have more calm, to understand things better. I believe many many of the sicknesses that we have nowadays are mostly based on our mental suffering, not on physical suffering. I remember some data from Brazil. Now I don’t really remember the numbers, I have a very bad memory of numbers. But one medicine, which was for anti-anxiety - in a few years the amount of

this medicine that went up, is something shocking. If we look at our Western world in which we live. The right word is not the Western world; it is the materially developed world. Let's call it like this, because it's happening in the East also very often in many places. But it is something that we talk about from the West. Physically, the physical suffering is getting less and less, right? How many people here really suffer from cold or from heat? Not much. We have air-conditioning, central heating. How many people really suffer from hunger? Not much. How many people suffer from pain? A little bit more but not that much. We have painkillers and so on and so on. How many people suffer from anxiety? Not being able to sleep well? Of fear? Many...

So, there is one important thing, which is: I believe that in order to bring ourselves to a state of health, it depends on every action we do every day. So, for anyone as a doctor: what can you do to bring that person to a state of health? You can interact with the person in the best way. That's all we can do. That's why we need patience; we need to be very patient. Otherwise, if we don't have a lot of patience; how many times have you said something to your patient, and he comes back after ten days and he has been doing the same thing? And we have a problem nowadays, which is that people, all of us, based on the education and the whole system - we are not used to the simple concept of cause, conditions, result anymore. We expect things to be immediate. One example is that we are not used to planting anymore. Where do fruits come from? The supermarket. It looks like a joke. But that's how we relate to things.

So what happens is that we lose the concept of cause and effect. When we have a plate of food in front of us, are we aware of how long it took for that salad to grow? How much water was necessary? How much care was necessary? Not much, and I think not many of us. Me? Not that much. So what happens is that we lose the concept of cause and effect. For example, we want everything to be immediate, so we also lose the concept of needing to put effort into things.

I will just make some small example of something I learned one day. I was in Tibet, in the monastery, and it was almost winter, December. We were outside, and it was very cold.

I asked the boy living there, "How come it is so cold? Is it not a problem that you live here so cold, without any insulation?" I said, "It's winter, no?"

"Winter, it's cold, and so what? My mind is in another direction."

But the real point was another one actually. It was that, at the same time, I was talking to my teacher and I actually saw the same boy, coming up with twelve, fifteen, twenty liters of water on his back. And they have no water pipe system in the monastery. They have the technology, they have the money; why don't they do?

So I asked him, "Why not?"

He said, "If you do not learn in practice to put effort in the most basic things of life, how can you put effort in meditation after?"

If you get everything immediately, how can you put effort afterwards? So we live in a society where everything is immediate. But we know, to bring ourselves to a good state of health, is it immediate or is it gradual? It's gradual, it's daily work, it's hard work. It's the way how we eat, it is the way we sleep, it is our lifestyle. So from what I believe: the freedom that we have, that you as a doctor you have, is to interact with people. But I really believe that the greatest way of bringing ourselves to a state of health is only through the lifestyle that we have. That is connected to all the choices that we make. This is what I personally believe.

And another thing also, just connected to what we have said is... For example,



sometimes I hear people say, “Oh, we are researching on the cause of cancer.” Sincerely, I think it’s a bit... funny is not the right word. But I don’t think anyone can find THE cause of cancer. I think we can find the many causes of cancer. Because, it’s an epidemic that we are experiencing, which is coming from the lifestyle that we have. We all know it.

So, where is the solution? Lifestyle. It is in many things, so very often we shouldn’t look for the solution in one thing, because we will never find it. We can be our whole life looking for the solution for cancer but we’ll never find it if we look for one thing only. Because the causes are multiple, so the solution is also multiple. So when we look at a problem, try to look from different perspectives. Another thing also: before finding a solution we need to understand the problem well. This is another very clear thing in Buddhism. But believe in the potential of each one of us: we have a much bigger potential to be healthy and happy than we imagine normally. And my personal experience is that the way we see reality, how we experience the world, influences our emotions and by that it influences our body. This is quite simple.

So remember that in a way I believe that as doctors, you have a very noble profession. But there’s one thing, which in my role is the same way: I cannot say something to people that I do not believe. I can say, but it won’t work. If you give a health advice to your patient that you don’t follow, it won’t have much effect. If we practice what we say, then it has an effect. This is something that is my own personal view, but sometimes I feel sad when I look at the life of many doctors. It is the way - I see many hospitals and so on - that doctors are supposed to live. It is not a very healthy way. And who is the first one that needs to be healthy? The doctor. If I am not healthy, how can I help others to be healthy? It is what I think at least. So, by having a healthy lifestyle mentally, emotionally, physically, I can bring much more benefit for others in order to go into the same direction. Okay?

I think this is all. I’ll make a short conclusion. I think we are more or less in time no?