

Chögyal Namkhai Norbu: General Introduction to Dzogchen

Welcome. I am happy to be with you this evening to explain a little, particularly my knowledge and my experience. I want to say first of all: excuse me, everyone. My English is not good. Sometimes it is difficult to understand, because I never studied English when I was young. I started only later, after I arrived in Italy. I studied Italian. For many years I used Italian. When I would go to teach, I taught in Italian and someone translated into English. Then at the end, I thought it was better that I try to explain in English, because for teaching it is very important to have communication directly. But it is not so easy, because if I do not know the language in a perfect way, what I want to say and want to show, I could not do it the perfect way. So one becomes dependent on language and words. Sometimes I find that a little difficult.

I want to explain a little, more in a general way, about the teaching. You know already that in general we have many kinds of teachings, and particularly teachings related with the Buddhist tradition. We consider them taught by Buddha Shakyamuni — maybe directly, or through manifestations of Buddha, indirectly. So we have different kinds of teachings. But the final goal of the teachings of Buddhism, what is really most important, is understanding our real condition. That is really the essence of the teaching.

Sometimes we are learning and teaching in a more intellectual way, like philosophy or academic study. That is also relative. But really, the final goal of teaching is only to make us understand our real condition as individuals.

For example, when we are learning the Buddhist teaching, we go directly to how the physical Buddha taught in India. The number one teaching, considered most important, that Buddha started with, is the Four Noble Truths. Very famous: if you learned just a little Buddhism, the first thing you learn is that. In these Four Noble Truths, the first is the Noble Truth of Suffering. It is called a noble truth because it is universal. Everybody — we have suffering. There is no sentient being not having suffering. Very universal. And at the same time, all sentient beings, no one likes to have suffering. But then, they have not much knowledge of how they can overcome it. That is the root problem.

In general, if we have some problems, then we say: what is the solution? Struggling. For that reason, many countries, many people — when they have

problems, they do a revolution. They consider they are struggling with the problem and can win. But in a real sense, when we are making a revolution, we are killing half of the population. The conclusion is that only so many people can fight, and there is not much manifest benefit. Why? Because that is not the solution, even though they consider it a solution.

Buddha, 2,500 years ago, already explained that. But we are not noticing. We don't care very much about it. Buddha explained: there is suffering, universal for all sentient beings. But the solution to this problem is not struggling with suffering, because the problem is the effect of a cause. There has been a cause. We can learn about this cause, discover the root of the problem. That is really the function of effort, but not of struggling.

Buddha explained this for that reason. And there are also many other reasons. If Buddha had been explaining or teaching in a more intellectual way — if he had started teaching something like the nature of mind — then people would feel: "Oh, it is very deep, it is something essential." But it would not be so easy to communicate. Most people would not understand, because the nature of mind is not easy to understand. Also, many intellectual people would not agree with Buddha. There would be many arguments. The nature of a human being is very, very proud. We are always thinking: "I know everything. I know very well. I am an educated person. I have my idea, my philosophy." If we go to listen to some explanations, we already have the idea: "I know everything my way."

So Buddha went in a very concrete way. He went universal. If Buddha asks someone: "Do you understand what suffering is?" — nobody can say: "I don't understand." "Do you like suffering?" Nobody says: "I like it." "Do you like overcoming this problem?" — everybody says: "Yes, I agree with you." So then Buddha has no problem and starts presenting that.

At the same time, suffering is the effect. If we don't want to have that suffering, we must discover: what is the cause? Very similar to how we go to a doctor. When we have some physical problems and arrive at the doctor, the doctor asks: "What did you do yesterday? What did you eat?" The doctor asks so many questions because the doctor wants to understand which are the secondary causes for having that illness, that problem. Because the problem is the effect — so there has been a cause.

And here enters what is famous in the teaching of Buddhism and also Hinduism: what they call karma. People believe karma means something like rebirth, reincarnation. That is true, it is related with karma. But really, karma does not mean only someone having a rebirth. Karma means cause and effect. The real meaning of karma is action. Because we are doing something; with this action, we project

potentiality for an effect.

In a real sense, all Westerners already know karma, but they don't know that name in Sanskrit. If we are watching a film, we can understand: someone does very bad actions, and at the end that person gets many difficulties. That is showing the aspect of karma. It is very easy to understand.

If we go a little deeper, there are also rebirth, reincarnation, etc. We learn with our breathing: inhaling and exhaling continually means we are living, we have life. When we stop that, there is no life. After inhaling, what do we do? Exhaling. After exhaling, what should we do? Inhaling. Otherwise, there is no continuation of life.

Same way also: any kind of action has such a potentiality. Even very ordinary ones. If I am making someone happy, that person feels good and tries to do some good things for me. If I did the contrary, that person never tries to do good things for me. That is an example related with action and its potentiality.

When we do some action with intention, we enter into the action, and then we are satisfied — that means the potentiality of karma will be produced. These potentialities, when there are secondary causes, manifest. Even one person has so many potentialities of karma, positive or negative, but not always manifesting. The manifestation of the fruit of karma depends on the circumstances, the secondary causes.

There is a saying by Buddha: if you want to know how you lived your past life, observe your present situation. And if you want to know what your future condition will be, observe your karma — your action now. We have the possibility of purifying the potentiality of negative karma, or we can accumulate more negative karma. So this is how Buddha taught in sutra teaching, which is teaching more at the material, physical level.

So the famous karma comes with the first and second Noble Truths: the Noble Truth of Suffering, and through suffering, discovering there is a cause — the Noble Truth of the Cause.

Even if we know there are good or bad causes, it is not sufficient if we are not stopping or increasing. If positive, we must increase; if negative, we must stop. So then Buddha explained the third Noble Truth: the Noble Truth of Cessation. How to stop? Buddha taught first in the most public way, that most people can understand and that corresponds with their condition: if we don't want to create negative karma, then we take a kind of responsibility for controlling our existence — body, speech, and mind — because these three existences are our actual conditions.

Then he gives teachings like the ten virtues: not killing sentient beings, not committing bad actions with the physical body; not lying or insulting others with our voice; and not thinking bad things or increasing bad intentions with our mind. These are rules for how we control our existence. They are very popular, public teachings, because everybody can understand why we should do that.

But if someone has a little more capacity, it is not necessary to always limit our body, speech, and mind with rules. We can go to the root: the mind. First of all, mind is thinking and judging and acting. After that, we follow the mind, we are distracted with thoughts, we enter into action, and we produce negative karma. There is no way to produce potentiality of negative karma without thinking or judging. Always there is intention first.

If we have more capacity, instead of limiting our existence with rules, we observe what we are thinking, what kind of intention we have. When we have bad intention, immediately turning it into good intention. Then there is no reason for increasing that kind of bad action. This is the famous Mahayana.

When we are mainly controlling body, speech, and mind for not committing negativities, this kind of teaching, how Buddha taught in the more formal way, is called Hinayana — minor vehicle. "Minor" because the person remains in a limited way. When we have capacity, we go to the root, controlling our mind. We are no longer dependent on only limited rules. This is Mahayana — the greater vehicle — because it is more open.

In general, many people have the idea that Mahayana means having infinite compassion and Hinayana does not. That is not correct. Hinayana practitioners also have infinite compassion, but the way of applying it is different, because they always remain in the limited way. The principle of Mahayana is being ready to help others. The principle of Hinayana is not creating problems for others, by controlling their existence. They are different, but both are teachings of Buddha. Buddha taught different ways because he knew there are different capacities.

All teachings following the sutras — followers of Mahayana or Hinayana — are related with different capacities. Buddha never decided that one kind of teaching should be one way. Buddha went according to the situation of the people, what kind of capacity they had, what kind of desire they had.

But teaching is not only sutra. There are many other teachings like tantrism. The conditions of teachings are related with our existence: more at the physical level, more at the energy level, and more at the mental level. If one speaks at the mental level, it means very deep knowledge, not so easy to understand. The energy level is still much deeper and more complicated than the physical level. The physical

level is easier: if we see someone coming, we recognize that person immediately because we see the physical body. The physical is something concrete — we can see, we can touch.

Buddha, as a teacher, was teaching in a language, by his mouth and tongue, and other people were listening. For seeing Buddha, you did not necessarily need any kind of particular power. You could meet him just like a person. This is Buddha at the physical level, and his teaching was relatively more at the physical level — controlling body, speech, mind, etc.

The fourth Noble Truth is the Noble Truth of the Path. That path depends on the capacity and conditions of beings. In sutra teaching there are Mahayana and Hinayana. And particularly, tantrism teaching is related more with our energy level, not the physical level. Buddha did not teach tantrism directly, physically — he taught through manifestation, from his qualification of wisdom.

In the sutra teaching, both Mahayana and Hinayana, the characteristic is called the path of renunciation — renouncing the causes of negativities. Tantrism teaching is not called the path of renunciation. There is nothing to renounce. They are not renouncing — they are transforming. Because in the Tantra tradition, there is more knowledge and understanding of our energy level. Our energy is part of our real condition.

In sutra we say our real condition is emptiness. But in tantrism, not only emptiness — that emptiness has infinite potentiality. An emptiness without potentiality has no sense. That potentiality — of emotions, of wisdoms — is unique. There is no different potentiality, but the way of manifesting that energy is different. It can manifest in a dimension like a mandala, with deities, or manifest as ordinary life, samsaric condition. That is called impure vision and pure vision. But both in pure vision and impure vision, the root is the same. For that reason, in tantrism, the path is transformation.

An example is given in tantrism teaching: the nature of gold. If there is gold, gold is always valuable. But the way of manifesting its form is different, depending on the circumstance. If we make with that gold a very nice statue of Buddha, people put it on the altar, maybe offer flowers, pray to this statue. But one day that golden Buddha is transformed — like during the Cultural Revolution — into, for example, a very elegant ashtray, put on a table. The nature of gold never changed — same gold. But now the form has changed. Nobody prays, nobody offers flowers. They put dirties inside — like cigarettes. So now the function is different.

Same way, when we are in samsara, in our ordinary life, we have no recognition of how our real condition is. Then we are something like an ashtray. When we have

pure vision, it has such value. But the nature is not changed. For that reason we say the five aggregates transform or manifest as the five Dhyani Buddhas. The five emotions, generally considered something negative, are transformed into the five wisdoms. But the nature is always the same. This is the principle of transformation, the characteristic of the path of tantrism.

And then we also have teachings more related with our mind level. In the teachings of yoga — like yantra yoga — there are many movements and positions physically for controlling our energy. When we control our energy, there is also the possibility of controlling the mind. Examples are given: mind is something like a king who governs, or like a person on a horse. The person guides the horse where they want to go. The horse is like the energy level — blind, with no capacity to go or do something by itself, always dependent on the mind. If we control that horse — our energy — we control the person — our mind.

In a real sense, the mind is the most important. If we have capacity to go directly to the condition of mind, of course we have more capacity for realization. For that reason, teaching related more directly with mind is considered a higher level. But the person who follows needs more capacity.

Capacity doesn't always mean having a kind of realization. Capacity is very relative. For example, if you understand what the teacher is explaining, what the sense of the teaching is — that means you have such capacity. But sometimes people, even when listening, don't interest themselves very much, or don't understand — that means missing capacity. If there is no perfect communication between teacher and student, also missing capacity. Capacity depends very much on our circumstances.

People in my country, in Tibet, are very faithful to the teaching. They have really very strong devotion. But many people don't understand what teaching really is. They think following teaching means needing only devotion and going to the teacher for receiving blessings. When they receive a blessing, they think: "Okay, I received teaching." But with blessing, no one can realize. Teaching means you are following, listening, and then you are applying that path. Then you can have realization. Not passively.

Buddha himself said in the sutra teaching: Buddha has infinite power, wisdom, infinite compassion, is omniscient, knows very well the suffering of all sentient beings. But Buddha could not make all sentient beings enlightened. Buddha said: "I give you the path. But realization depends on you." Buddha never said: "Your realization depends on me." We could not find any teacher better than Buddha. Does not exist. That means we must follow teachings. The teacher shows you which is the best way of realization. And then you follow and apply and have

realization. That is the unique way. We must not be passive.

What I teach in general is called Dzogchen. What does Dzogchen mean? Dzogchen simply means a total, perfected state. That is the name of our real condition — of every individual. Dzogchen is not somewhere else. Dzogchen is not the name of a school, or the title of a book or a teaching, or a tradition. Dzogchen is our real condition. The teaching of Dzogchen is the method for discovering it.

The characteristic of the path in Dzogchen is not the path of renunciation. To follow Dzogchen teaching, you don't need to renounce anything. It is not transformation, like the tantrism system. Because there is nothing to transform. To transform means you have the idea there is impure vision and pure vision, and from impure you transform into pure. The Dzogchen teaching goes directly from mind to its real nature. There is nothing to transform.

Many tantrism and Mahamudra teachers advise their students: the problem is not visions — the problem is our attachment. Not outside, but inside. That is what is related with Dzogchen teaching.

The Dzogchen path is called the path of self-liberation. Self-liberation does not mean we need a special kind of antidote. Self-liberation means: when we discover our real condition and are simply being in that state — that is already liberation.

We give an example in Dzogchen teaching: the mirror. If there is a mirror, big or small, when we look in the mirror we can see our face. In the mirror we can also see all circumstances — objects, people, everything. Reflections in the mirror, we can see. That means the mirror has infinite potentiality of manifesting reflections. Why do we say infinite potentiality? Because the mirror does not need any program — not like a computer. In a computer, many things appear, but everything is a program. In the mirror, we don't need any program: whatever kind of object or thing exists, all these colors, forms, shapes — suddenly, instantly, that reflection is manifested. No need for something like a painting, developing one by one. That means infinite potentiality.

That infinite potentiality of the mirror is the qualification of the mirror. Same way, every individual has infinite potentiality. Our qualifications are of infinite potentiality. But the mirror is only an example — not the same thing.

When in the mirror an object manifests, that object and its reflection are interdependent. If there is no object, there is no reflection. Same way, we are living in a dualistic vision. We have six senses: with our eyes we can see everything, good or bad; with our ears we can hear all kinds of sound; with our nose we smell. And at the end, with our mind, we are thinking about all phenomena. We are

thinking and judging. We are not really enjoying seeing or hearing. We immediately fall into a dualistic vision. If we see something — it can be very nice, like a nice, colorful flower, or something ugly — immediately we enter into limitation. If something is nice: "Oh, how nice! I like it." If something ugly: "I don't like it." Don't like it means we are refusing. If we don't succeed in rejecting, then anger arises. If we think it's very nice, we create attachment: "I want it, I like it." And if we don't succeed in having it, we struggle, and all different kinds of emotions arise. These are our problems.

We are not really being in our real condition, in our potentiality. Immediately we fall into that kind of dualistic vision. With the knowledge of teaching, we learn how we can be in our real condition. First, how we discover it. After discovering, how we can be in that state. And if we are really being in that state, then we are free — becoming free. We are no more dependent on duality. All our functions of mind, thoughts, concepts — everything is something like a reflection. We don't need to reject or accept. But we are knowing. We are enjoying it. Knowing this is the qualification of our real condition. This is called self-liberation.

Only with the idea, it is not so difficult to understand — not only self-liberation, also transformation can be understood easily. But in a practical way, being in that kind of knowledge and understanding, you need to learn, you need to receive teaching methods, apply them, and become familiar. Then maybe it becomes easier. But it is not sufficient only to have the idea.

I give you an example. When I was at the university, one of my friends, a professor, said: "How do you transform in tantrism when you are angry?" So I explained: first we receive initiation, the method of how we transform into a wrathful manifestation. Then we apply that, entering into a pure dimension and manifesting in a wrathful form like Vajrapani. And we can transform our anger. I explained something like this. He understood. He said: "Oh, interesting." Then after a few days I met him again, and he said: "I understood what you said, how to transform. But I used it and it doesn't work." Then I said: "You understood only two days ago. Of course it doesn't work. I have used it all my life, and still it is difficult." That is the truth. If you train and apply, maybe then it works. But in a practical way, for it to work concretely, you need such practice, becoming familiar with these methods. It is not sufficient only to have the idea.

In Dzogchen teaching, we say our real condition is beyond explanation, beyond form, color, etc. The same is said in tantrism: our real nature of Vajra is beyond explanation. Same way also in sutra teaching: the real condition is beyond explanation.

If there is no possibility to explain, how can we understand? How can we get that knowledge? Dzogchen teaching is related with transmission. Oral transmission: the teacher explains what Dzogchen is, how we can get that knowledge. That is related with our voice and our physical level. And there is also transmission of symbol: for example, using the example of the mirror, which is at the material level, so people can have an idea.

But the main transmission in Dzogchen teaching is called direct transmission. Direct transmission does not mean we are doing a kind of magic. It is not that the teacher does something in a strange way. The teacher explains orally to the student. There is the possibility to have that knowledge through our experiences. Because experiences are the way for knowing everything.

If we observe in our lives: everything we learned, we learned through experiences. We know fire is hot. But why do we know? We had the experience. If we never had the experience and someone says: "Fire is hot" — we can have such an idea, but we don't fully believe.

When we say "sweet," if you never had the experience of sweetness in your life, how can you understand what it's like? There is no way. But now when we say "sweet," you know. You don't need to study philosophy or books. You know immediately — because you have the experience.

There are three main experiences related with our existence: body, energy level, and mind. The experience with the physical body is sensation. The experience related more with our energy level is called the experience of clarity. And we also have the experience of mind, which is mainly the experience of emptiness — how, when we do practices like meditation, we are being in the state of shinata.

But in Dzogchen teaching, something very important is distinguishing which is experience, and through experience, what we discover — our real nature. Experience is our method, and with this method we discover. There are many teachings, methods; sometimes teacher and students apply together, sometimes the teacher gives instructions and students apply and discover. These are the characteristics of the Dzogchen teaching.

It is not so very important if you are calling that state Dzogchen or not. That is not the main point. Names and titles are relative. Everything is relative. The really important thing is the essential knowledge. If you have such capacity, a teacher can introduce even without using a single word of "Dzogchen." Using only "Dharma," for example, you can have knowledge, you can get in that state. Even without using any name at all. If you get into that state — that is fine. It is not dependent on name and title.

Dzogchen is nothing else than our real condition. Our real condition has no name. It is beyond name. Relatively, we can call it different names. In a list of names of Dzogchen teaching, there are so many names. Also, related more with sutra teaching, the state of Dzogchen is called the essence of bodhicitta. That is something very essential of Mahayana Buddhism. We don't need to go very much after names, but after the sense.

This is what I teach in general. I teach this teaching because I myself, for many years, when I was young, studied Buddhist teachings, tried to discover, to get serious teachings. I learned sutra teaching, tantrism teaching, with many teachers, belonging to many traditions. But until I met one of my important teachers of Dzogchen, I didn't get really the true basis of the teaching. And at that moment, I discovered really the essence of the teaching — how we can understand and how we can get in that state.

Before, I always had the idea: "I know Buddhism very well. I know sutra and tantra very well" — because I had studied for many years. I never thought I didn't know, that I wasn't being in the knowledge. But with the Dzogchen teaching from my teacher, I discovered that all my knowledge I had constructed with my intellect, my ideas. And when I started to discover the essence of Dzogchen teaching, everything collapsed. That was a very important experience for me.

When I started to teach, I started to teach Dzogchen teaching, because I know most of the people who follow teaching are interested in understanding the real sense of teaching and in having such kind of realization. When I have the possibility to communicate this teaching to people, I am happy. Not because I want to convert people or change people. There is nothing to change in Dzogchen teaching. Only to help people who are interested to know how to get to the essence, to discover their real condition.

The principle of Dzogchen teaching is not that we believe, saying: "Buddha said this, we believe. Why? Because Buddha is an enlightened being." Or we say: "We have strong devotion to Buddha, faith in Buddha, we must believe." We can go that way, but it is always false, not real. If we construct something like this — faith, belief — today we can increase and develop everything, but tomorrow we can change. Because we are not really being in the knowledge.

What we need in Dzogchen teaching is to discover. To discover is very different from to believe. We discover through experiences. When we have discovered something, there is nothing to change. And the method for discovering — that is the teaching. The teaching is related with the teacher. Then everything has value. Maybe you can have faith, maybe you can believe — but that is another way.

More or less, this is the information of what Dzogchen teaching means and why I teach Dzogchen teaching.

We also know the situation of modern society — not only Westerners, but society in general. We don't have much possibility to do things like in ancient times — complicated practices, ceremonies, ritual things. We know how our life is. Life is busy: making money. If we don't make money, we can't live. Everybody has family. It's not like being the yogi Milarepa. It's not so easy. Some people have that possibility, but not ordinary people in general.

We must understand how our situation is, and we should work with our situation. In this case, Dzogchen teaching is very concrete. If we have such capacity, we can integrate in our daily life. Dzogchen teaching never asks you to change anything. Never asks you to do something this way or that way. There is no rule in Dzogchen teaching.

Some people say: "Oh, Dzogchen teaching is very nice! I like it. Why? Because there is no rule." That's true — there is no rule. But if there is no rule, you have responsibility! That's more difficult. Not so easy at all. But we can learn. What we should learn in Dzogchen teaching is to become responsible for ourselves.

Even with a small child growing up, how we educate them in the Dzogchen way: we try to make them understand. Slowly, slowly, they are becoming responsible for themselves. We are not always controlling the child. We are not educating the child to always be dependent on us, but making them understand, so they learn and become responsible. And we ourselves should also be that way. We should learn. We try to be aware at every moment, to do our best in any circumstance, not always distracted — to increase the possibility of being responsible for ourselves. This is the essence of Dzogchen teaching.

[Questions and Answers:]

The Four Noble Truths are: first, the Noble Truth of Suffering; second, the Cause of Suffering; third, the Noble Truth of the Cessation of the Negative Cause; and fourth, the Path — different kinds of paths.

You can understand if you have capacity or not when you are following Dzogchen teaching. It is not a question of going to the teacher and saying: "Teacher, please tell me if I have capacity or not." That is not the solution. If you really meet a good teacher, a serious teacher, that teacher teaches you. You listen, you follow the Dzogchen teaching, and if you understand, that means you have capacity. If problems manifest, we try to discover which is the problem, and maybe the teacher

gives you some methods for overcoming that problem. That is the solution.

In teaching, there always exist two different ways: the gradual way and the direct way. The gradual way is very much related with our way of seeing in society, our attitude. If I am a sutra teacher and someone comes saying: "I never followed the teaching of Buddhism," I consider that person completely new. So I say: "You should do basically this or that." That is the gradual way.

But in Vajrayana teaching, and particularly as a Dzogchen teacher, if someone comes saying: "I never received Dzogchen teaching before" — I can never have the idea that this person is completely new. Because this person is completely new in this life, but we don't know what happened in other lives. That this person comes here, meets me, and asks me for Dzogchen teaching — that means that person has a relationship with the teaching and transmission. Otherwise, there would not be this possibility.

So the way of seeing is different. In this case, I don't say: "You are completely new; you start at this point." But I try to communicate directly the main point of the teaching, in a non-gradual way — directly. Maybe that person wakes up. It is not impossible. Then you don't need to spend a long time. But if you consider that person stupid from the beginning, and that person has capacity, and they only do preliminary practices for years and years without ever receiving the main teaching — sometimes that person can even die. Then what do you do?

Buddha said in the sutra teaching: teaching must go according to the condition of beings — their condition, their capacity, their wish. We do not decide that teaching should go this way or that way, because it doesn't correspond. That is the reason for the non-gradual way.

It is finished. Thank you very much for all your attention.