



## Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche - Teachings

### **Buddha Nature: We have forgotten that we are Buddhas**

Buddha Nature and the fact that we all perfectly possess it, including all its qualities, is a very deep topic. To make it more accessible I would like to use the phrase: our nature is Buddha. This points us directly to the inherent purity of our essence. Gold is naturally shiny and bright. It can be molten, purified etc. Even if it gets stained or polluted, the basic substance never changes. But if it is tarnished, it is temporarily not pure gold. In the same way we all have this Buddha Nature, which never changes. But at present we cannot claim to be Buddhas yet as we have not actualized our nature. It is still stained.

We practice the Dharma with the goal to reach enlightenment for two reasons: 1) to overcome our afflictive emotions; 2) to serve all sentient beings.

The first reason I will discuss in a little more detail now. Our afflictive emotions originate from ignorance. The moment we dissolve them completely, we reach enlightenment, which is synonymous to revealing our Buddha Nature in its entirety. At that moment we embody the Buddhas we have always been at our core. The Buddha himself spent years practicing the Dharma and eventually became enlightened in Bodhgaya. Only then did he acquire the name Buddha. Beforehand he was an outstanding practitioner, but still a normal person.

At this point I believe it is important to clarify a couple of points, so we interpret scriptures on Buddha Nature correctly and use the term properly. It is easy to say: "I am a Buddha, because I have Buddha Nature and all the corresponding qualities." But why then do we exert ourselves in Dharma practice? Why are we still in the grip of unwholesome emotions like anger and jealousy? Why do we still act selfishly? The reason is that our mind streams are tainted by negativity. When we extract gold from the earth, we can recognize it easily as it sparkles, but there is a lot of debris mixed in, which we need to get rid of to clean the gold and let it shine forth with its natural brilliance. But we do not need to change anything about the basic composition of the gold - it is naturally pure. In the same way, we need to rid ourselves from any kind of affliction rooted in our culture, habits, religion, environment etc., which muddies our radiant nature. Another example is the sky, that never gets affected by clouds. The sky is by nature space and will never adapt the nature of the clouds, even if covered by them.

Another word for Buddha is purity, so our primordial state is always flawless or to use a modern term, it is positive, no matter what disturbing emotions temporarily obscure it. We can easily find this out for ourselves, if we examine our inner qualities of love, compassion, kindness and so on. When we align with them, we feel more open,

welcoming, boundless, extensive. Our inner wisdom deepens by itself. What severs our connection to them? Due to our culture, social circumstances, education and so on we learn to differentiate between what is good and what is bad, in other words what to strive for and what to reject. This duality marring our experiences obscures our nature layer by layer. The Dharma provides us with skilful methods to purify these artificial coverings and lets our natural mind shine forth, which is boundless, open and free from any kind of conditionality. Conditions are by default based on conceptual thinking introduced to us by our parents, teachers and other social influences. When we eliminate these concepts, we immediately become more joyful and will laugh easily. If a crystal is in a dark room at night, it will have the qualities of producing colourful reflections of light, but these need to be brought forth through sunlight shining on it. But the basic constitution is always present. In the same way the Dharma is what lights up our Buddha Nature, so it can radiate out.

The second point I want to clarify is, that the fact that we have this enlightened nature is why our Dharma practice can be successful in the first place. Because there is gold, it is worth to engage in the process of cleaning it. From a Buddhist perspective, if our essence was not perfect to start with, then training in the Dharma could maybe better us in some ways, but the results would never be stable. Trying to become enlightened would be hopeless. It is like heating water. If we put a kettle on a stove and turn on the fire, the water will boil after a while. But the moment the fire is turned off, the water will start to cool down. The reason is that heat is not naturally part of the water. But our minds are imbued with enlightened qualities since beginningless time. The Dharma only acts as a kind of cleaning agent, no matter how long the process takes or how difficult it may be, the result is guaranteed. Once the qualities of love, compassion and wisdom are fully revealed, they will exude effortlessly and infinitely. The knowledge and conviction that we possess this wonderful nature, will provide us with the incentive to wholeheartedly engage in the Dharma. Actually it will become a very joyful activity. Otherwise it might seem foolish or like a waste of time to exert ourselves, if the outcome is unsure.

Now let's explore the signs of our Buddha Nature, so we can foster certainty in it. A common way is to investigate different sets of feelings like anger and love. Which one arises more effortlessly? Whatever arises more easily must be part of our nature. Whatever feeling we need to justify and which only appears out of a certain set of causes and conditions, is constructed or 'unnatural' on some level. Love definitely surfaces spontaneously, when we are in the flow of our lives. We do not need to make a lot of effort. Then also other conducive circumstances unfold easily like connecting the right people for our projects. We do not need much preparation or to overthink anything we do. We can deal with whatever happens without getting nervous or reacting emotionally like getting jealous or upset. Actually we are quite joyful, accepting and relaxed. Physically our breathing slows down and deepens, whilst our muscles soften.

Negative mental states are more challenging in comparison. They immediately disconnect us from our true nature and throw us off-balance, obliterating our inner calm. The consequence is agitation and distrust. Physically we breathe faster and more shallow, whilst our body tenses up, reinforcing the general feeling of unease.

Did you ever receive a good massage, which relaxed your body, quieted your mind and all tension just melted away? This is accompanied by a feeling of relief on a mental level. Wholesome emotions like love and compassion flood us easily. This proves that also our physical nature is more attuned to positivity, as mind and body are intrinsically

connected. The link between mental and physical health is easy to experience for ourselves. No need to dive into scientific studies.

How can we best describe our Buddha Nature? This is a crucial question. Unconditional love and boundless compassion are two terms that come to mind referring to our normal lives. These feelings arise spontaneously when we witness someone imprisoned or an animal in pain. This is an expression of our Buddha Nature based on our connectedness to all beings. Another expression is openness and joy, which enables us to deal with life in a relaxed way. When we are in such a state, in tune with our environment, our capacity to simply be is boundless. We might hum a tune without even being conscious of it as we are just simply happy. On the contrary, if we are subject to doubts, lack of trust and similar states of mind, we feel caged in, lacking inner freedom.

Adhering to the sutra texts Buddha Nature possesses three qualities: 1) its essence is empty; 2) its nature is clarity; 3) the union of clarity and emptiness. If we want to be a 'professional Buddhist', these points are basic knowledge.

I will not dive too deeply into the subject of emptiness as you can learn about it by reading the Heart Sutra, the Diamond Sutra or treatises by Nagarjuna or Longchenpa. Generally though emptiness does not mean that there is nothing at all when we perceive something. What is meant is that the way we perceive a phenomenon through our senses is not the way it really is. Even though we might believe phenomena arise and abide by their own right and through their own individual volition, everything comes about through interdependence. Designations like 'left' can only be established in connection to a 'right'. Or if we look more deeply, there is no way for us to posit something to be 'east' in and of itself. No direction exists in its own right. This sounds crazy, doesn't it? The same logic can be applied to common expressions like 'coming' and 'going'. One cannot be used without having a mental reference to the other. It is impossible to independently assert whether someone is coming or going. Reflect on this. This lack of independent, true existence is at the heart of emptiness. To understand this is especially important when reflecting on our sense of 'I'. Usually we believe to be an independent being, which breeds selfishness and an inflated sense of ego. But upon investigation, no independent 'I' can be found on a physical, emotional or mental level. Nothing is found to represent a soul or an 'I'. But if we still strongly believe in being an autonomous self, we easily become dejected as it is simply not the truth. The moment we can accept our empty nature, we are able to rescue ourselves from adverse emotions.

The next point is to understand that emptiness is not mere nothingness. It is endowed with clarity. Let's use the example of an atom. Even though, or in other ways just because, it is not anything solid it appears sometimes as a wave and at other times as matter. Our minds function pretty much the same way. In essence none of these mental constructs of right and wrong, possible or impossible, good or bad are intrinsically part of it. But still the mind is imbued with boundless compassion, openness and clarity, which makes it possible to perceive anything at all. Therefore emptiness and clarity are inseparably linked. Think of a mirror. When we look into it, we see our face, even though the mirror is 'empty' of our face, but possesses the ability to reflect the image. Our face appearing in the mirror is then the union of emptiness and clarity.

We practice clarity especially within the framework of deity practice when we imagine ourselves in a divine form, embodying our true nature truly. The moment we regard ourselves to be a deity our judgemental mind vanishes and we can abide in a mental

state of equanimity extending love and compassion to all beings. This is what we call the pure view.

The quality of emptiness is basically regarded the same way in all schools of Buddhist thought, but from a tantric perspective clarity also carries the connotation of purity, not only on a mental level but as something permeating all phenomena.

The third quality, the union of emptiness and clarity, is said to be all-pervasive compassion. From a Dzogchen point of view the term compassion is interchangeable with rigpa or primordial, fundamental awareness. We need to understand that these qualities and explanations all point to exactly the same Buddha Nature, just approached from different angles. If someone were to describe me for example, some people might see me when I eat and describe me doing that. Then someone watches me play, or someone is present when I teach - each person will have another description of me, but basically I am the same person.

Now let's get back to the difference between: I have Buddha Nature, my nature is Buddha, I am a Buddha. Were I to claim that I am a Buddha, that would imply that I have completely purified my temporary afflictive emotions and am therefore enlightened. This is clearly not the case yet, so to say that would be a lie. But I do have Buddha Nature or my nature is Buddha, I just have not eliminated my afflictive emotions yet. But if we train on the Dharma path, we can certainly attain Buddhahood. We achieve this by engendering wholesome emotions as antidotes to our unwholesome ones. Let's say our main problem is anger, then we train in patience during our meditation until we reach a certain level of stability, which enables us to access this patience anytime we are triggered. The more enduring our patience is, the more our anger is weakened until it eventually vanishes. If we are prone to envy and have gotten used to rejoicing every time we are faced with someone else's good fortune, envy will eventually be eradicated.

How can we gain certainty in this infallible nature? As I said before the answer lies in closely examining our feelings. The more positive and warmhearted we feel, the more we experience being in alignment with our essence. There is an ease and lightness. With certainty, confidence arises and we will feel even more inclined to develop our wholesome qualities. It is like watering the earth after having planted a seed in it. We trust that something will grow. We would not put a seed in sand and then water it as we have no expectation of a result.

An important point here is now the inclination to continue our efforts to proceed on the path. We should not get complacent, thinking 'I have Buddha Nature, so I'll definitely become a Buddha at some stage, so now I can relax, go on holiday - there is nothing to worry about!' Reflecting on our wonderful qualities provides us with the incentive to explore them further as they help us to live a better life and to develop our altruism, even if Buddhahood is not immediately available to us.

Let me recap these qualities once more. We can condense them into two: 1) possessing the primordially pure nature; 2) being free from adventitious defilements. All beings are equal to the Buddha concerning the first point, but as long as our minds remain disturbed by afflictions, we are not Buddhas. This is clearly stated in classical Buddhist texts by great scholars like Nagarjuna and Longchenpa.

It is very difficult to precisely convey what Buddha Nature is and what it is like to be a Buddha as no scripture or no teaching can deliver an accurate description. This state

needs to be experienced directly. Therefore some people might, based on their studies, know theoretically what it is, but have no way of expressing accurately lacking the experience. Others might have a more embodied feeling of it, due to their practice, but are not able to use the appropriate words, because they lack learning and the appropriate vocabulary is not readily available to them. I want to bridge these two scenarios. Longchenpa used a very interesting example in this regard of seven blind people touching each a different body part of an elephant and describing the shape of the animal according to the part they were in contact with. The person who touched the belly might say an elephant is like a big balloon. The one holding the tail might say, that is like rope etc. Each of them will have a very different description, that may even sound contradictory at first glance. This can be likened to people who have some experience of their Buddha Nature, but not a complete insight. At least what they touched is part of the real deal. The people who only intellectually approached the subject are like people who read about elephants and saw pictures, but have no idea what the animal feels like. So I believe it is important to approach the subject from both angles.

As I opened my computer to log on to our zoom meeting a video clip about an Afro-American man being stepped on his neck<sup>1</sup> by a police officer popped up on my screen. The incident sparked nation-wide protests in the USA. Just this short scene left me shaking and feeling deep compassion for the victim. This spontaneous empathetic reaction is a sign of our Buddha Nature. In these moments we have immediate access to it. Right afterwards a politician spoke about never having been mistreated in this way by the police, but that he is aware that many people suffer from similar acts of brutality. I do not know who he is, but I could sense his empathy and his honesty. He was not taking sides or saying anything inflammatory. Speaking and acting according to the truth without forcing anyone to adhere to one's own position is also an expression of Buddha Nature. If we try to win people over for our personal gain, if we want pull them to our side of the story, we feel slightly uncomfortable or kind of guilty. That is because our innermost being rebels, questioning us whether we are in line with our nature. If we act with integrity, we will never be uncomfortable or doubting ourselves, no matter how subtly.

As I mentioned before the third quality of Buddha Nature is sometimes said to be the union of emptiness and clarity, sometimes all pervasive compassion and within a tantric framework sometimes rigpa or fundamental awareness. For me the aspect of this boundless compassion is the most important. It is not limited by anything, no outer circumstances like cultural or religious affiliation and no internal judgements like someone being our parent or us regarding someone to be attractive. When do we tap into our basic goodness? I just gave you the example of watching the video clip of a man dying and my heart immediately going out to him. I do not know who he was. He lived very far away from me, but because compassion is part of my nature it spontaneously manifested when I saw someone in agony. There was no need to establish any further connection with him. It was irrelevant whether he was a relative or not, what country he was from, what religion he practiced, if he practiced any at all and so on. He was in pain and my inner being responded to that, because I could relate to the suffering of being stepped on the neck and the perpetrator not even blinking an eye. In other words as practitioners we might read and hear a lot about compassion, know all the right words, but we also need to experience it on a visceral level or else we are just dealing

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<sup>1</sup> Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche is referring to the video footage of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May, 25th 2020

with useless, empty words. Our mind remains unaffected. From my point of view that is completely wrong. We need to access this fundamental part of our minds, which is the source of non-violence and well-being not just for ourselves, but also the people around us and eventually for society at large, the environment and the entire universe. Our nature can also be called our humanity, which again is just another word for Buddha Nature. When someone violates basic human values like showing no empathy or concern whilst killing someone, we are shocked and question how this person is not able to feel anything. I also saw many of the protests that took place after this incident. It is important to voice our compassion and bond within this spirit of common humanity, but we should also make sure that no one gets hurt in the process. Using violence or destroying the property of others, who worked hard for it all their lives, is not compatible with our humanity either. Therefore we need to be vigilant to remain internally and externally aligned with these deep seated emotions of love and compassion and not betray them in the spur of the moment. The next step is to also extend our compassion to the individuals who abused their power. Again our fundamental compassion stemming from our Buddha Nature is all-pervasive, meaning no one and nothing is left out. If we are not able to maintain the view of equanimity towards all beings, we tend to get overly emotional and again might resort to violence of some sort, violating our own nature in the process. This is very dangerous. Therefore I actually want to warn you against being too emotional.

At this point I am coming back to the topic of emptiness and why understanding it is fundamental to our Buddhist path, but also as normal people. As long as we attribute a real existence to phenomena, we will also attribute a real existence to our emotions, which makes it impossible for us to control them. Emptiness is attuned with reality. If we want to be realistic, we need to have insight into it. Only then can we uproot our afflictions completely. The Buddhist texts dive into this topic using logical arguments and would never ever claim that it is true, just because the Buddha said so. They show clearly how all phenomena arise through interdependent origination and nothing simply exists in and of itself.

There is an object that is commonly called a car. It has this designation and there is a certain meaning attached to it. When we hear it, we think of an object with four wheels, an engine, seats and doors etc. If all of these things are arranged in a certain way, we say it is a car. But if we try to find anything that is by nature 'car', an intrinsic essence, we will fail. 'Car' is not in the seat, in the door handle, in the engine. We talk about a car seat, but it is not the car as such. Examining the different parts of the car in this way, then 'car' will disappear as an object in its own right. In this moment of insight our attachment will also dissolve. All the associated feelings are released like wanting this car as well as our judgements of this being a good car or bad car. We can also apply this to people. No person is just one solid individual, but also a conglomerate of body parts, moods, habits. So if we have a colleague for example that we have difficulties with, we can see him or her as having different aspects and we can focus on an aspect that we find more appealing. Or we can simply conclude that this person basically does not exist the way we perceive them. Therefore all our impressions of them cannot be 100% accurate and that invalidates all our emotions towards them. This can relax us and we do not need to hide every time they come our way. This is how the view of emptiness is an immense support to navigate our daily lives.

Many people think of emptiness to be like an onion. If we peel off one layer after the other, eventually there is nothing at all at its core. But this understanding is incorrect from a Buddhist standpoint. Phenomena do exist on a relative level, but are subject to

constant change and have no independent, singular, permanent self-nature. So, something is there, but we tend to misinterpret what we perceive. Remember what you believed to be true when you were ten? How many of these beliefs are you still holding and how many did you have to re-evaluate or discard? It happens to us all the time. We perceive something to be like this or like that, but later we find out we were mistaken and with that our whole viewpoint shifted. With age for example we also acquire other faculties, memories, habits and knowledge, which provide us with different insights than at a younger age. It is like having more pixels in our camera. We get sharper. But still it is impossible to take a completely accurate snapshot of reality. We need to bear this in mind to avoid getting entangled in our perceptions and the ensuing emotional responses. So what I am trying to say is that emptiness is not just like peeling an onion or staring into a black hole. Phenomena do appear due to interdependent arising and have no solid core to them. It is from our perspective that we name, describe and evaluate whatever we perceive. These names, descriptions and evaluations do not stem from the object itself. I used to get injections for a while as a teenager and in the beginning when I saw the doctor or the nurse prepare the syringe, I would feel very uncomfortable to say the least. It was a bit scary, even though the injection as such was not so painful. So I started to apply the view of emptiness and to challenge myself to find out where the pain was. Where am I relative to the pain? Where is the pain actually located? What is its shape and form? Not being able to pinpoint any one location, any shape or other qualities actually helped in overcoming the fear and it kept me from getting fixated. Nowadays I use the same approach whenever I get fearful. It is so helpful!

Now let's get back to the second quality of clarity. Clarity is synonymous with purity. The Buddha explained very clearly how actions create results and actions are based on motivation. Motivation is rooted in our emotions and our subconscious, which are both connected to mental processes. Following this logic happy, positive emotions lead to a congruent outcome. When our mind is clouded by negativity, then what we experience as a consequence will also be negative. Our emotions therefore are of supreme importance. There are many ways that we can influence them. We can listen to music, go jogging, eat a delicious meal to feel better, but the more adverse mind states still lurk in the background. It is like every emotion has an opposing political party to counter it. Patience and anger for example cancel each other out. Jealousy and rejoicing and so on. Unfortunately, how this dynamic works is not discussed much publicly. Everyone will agree that love and compassion are wholesome, but there is not much insight into what makes them so. We do not learn anything about it in school. In the medical field there is a better understanding, but that is mostly theoretical. What is missing is the practice, how to engender and apply beneficial emotions. The Buddhist scriptures are a lot more detailed in this regard. Happiness and well-being are based on wisdom, whilst suffering and dis-ease are based on ignorance and especially on self-grasping. The most powerful antidote to relinquish ignorance is the view of emptiness, which is directly linked to our Buddha Nature. The quality of clarity helps us understand how perceptions come into being and how we have the ability to shape them. According to Buddhism there are six realms of samsaric existence. Each being of these six realms has a very different way of viewing what we humans would identify as water. A hell being would experience lava. A hungry ghost sees pus and blood. For a fish it is their natural environment. Gods identify it as heavenly nectar. Highly developed human practitioners can observe the divine nature of the water as being the nature of deities. As we are not able to easily leave our body in order to inhabit another to find out how they experience water, we need to rely on texts.

I listened to a famous muslim scholar, who refers to heaven frequently in his talks. He describes how beautiful it is, how one is happily married there and enjoys the most exquisite food. But how are we able to take advantage of all these wonderful things without a body? That was the first question that crossed my mind. But then I remembered the crucial point is our mental way of being, not the physical state. Think about how everything appears to you when you are joyful and relaxed. Then everything is perfect, right? Everything is okay. Even a colleague, that you normally have a difficult relationship with might seem more tolerable. But when we are in a bad mood, then we automatically focus on whatever is likely to upset us or drag us down further, even if objectively nothing bad is occurring. Our mind shapes our world. These days a lot of scientific research is being conducted in the fields of neuroscience and psychology concerning this topic, which underlines the importance of mental hygiene and keeping ourselves in a constructive mind space.

Earlier I spoke about the protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd. It is understandable that there was a cry for justice, but in some places a lot of violence ensued. Eventually some protest leaders were able to calm the participants down and now the situation seems to be peaceful, even though the demands and the aims are the same. I believe this to be a wonderful example on how our emotions influence not just our own perceptions, but have an impact on society as a whole. We need to remember that our true nature is pure and impurities are adventitious. Even though unwholesome deeds and actions arise from our minds, they are not intrinsically part of it. In some religions it is said, that we are by default sinners, that our nature is sullied from the very beginning and punishment is therefore inevitable. There is a resemblance to the dynamic between adults and children, where children are threatened with punishment, if they do not behave according to the rules. The children may obey and behave well, but not out of conviction. They are simply afraid to get hurt. From my point of view, that is not healthy. Accepting that we have Buddha Nature will imbue us with healthy self-confidence though. We know then that we are pure from the get-go. We are capable to behave according to this primordial purity. Therefore please reflect again and again on the fact that you have Buddha Nature.

The all-pervasive compassion as mentioned before is the third quality. Actually we all know that compassion can be extended to any being, even a hardcore criminal can be swayed by compassion. But we are not perpetually in a state of boundless compassion. Why is that? What obstructs our good heart are afflictive emotions, our judgements, conceptual structures, which we erected from the time we were born basically. We get mentally stuck in all these mental fabrications and are often unable to go beyond what they dictate us. As a kid I often heard stories about demons and these days I sometimes watch horror movies, in which there are all these scary looking, blood-thirsty beings out to get us. But actually humans are way more dangerous than anything appearing in these stories or movies. We are the most dangerous species walking on this earth. We even develop weapons like atom bombs which can annihilate all of us many times over. What we do to nature and other creatures is unfathomable. At present we start to experience the results of the destruction we have caused all around us. We have been in lockdown for a couple of months and it is very difficult for many, but think of all the animals that we locked up for their entire lives and for many generations. What happens in the meat industry is completely unacceptable. Then we are also facing global warming with all its devastating effects. We like to believe that we are cultured and have freedom of choice, but really we behave like wild animals. No, we behave way worse than any wild animal. To overcome this detrimental behavior, we need to activate our fundamental goodness or intrinsic compassion. As explained before, this compassion is not limited by any



conceptual framework detailing who or what is worthy of it and who or what is not. It is all-embracing. It includes compassion towards ourselves, all living beings and it transcends all our fears and inhibitions. It connects our personal lives, the society we live in, the biosphere and eventually the entire universe. I believe it is the most potent antidote to the current Covid-19 pandemic, political disputes and whatever adversities we are facing. After the second world war all the countries united in inter-governmental bodies like the UN, but now they are falling apart. It is important that these structures are kept alive. We need to strengthen our commonalities and extend empathy to all.

Even though we all possess these three qualities of Buddha Nature, it is important not to get complacent and to think that everything is alright now. We need to continuously reflect on what that actually means and how we can express the qualities in our ordinary, every day life. There is a link between these three qualities and our happiness. Please explore this and do not waste what is basically our birth right - to be Buddhas.

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