



On Self-Understanding and the Importance of Basic Questioning: A Teaching For a Guru Rinpoche Empowerment

H.H. the 43rd Sakya Trizin Gyana Vajra Rinpoche



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By the merit of this work, may Their Holiness the Sakya Trichen, the 42nd, and the 43rd Sakya Trizins enjoy perfect health and very long lives, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.



EDITORIAL PREFACE

Do you truly know yourself? We like to think we understand the joys and sorrows of our hearts, yet what subtle current guides them?

When you pause and ask, “Why do I feel happiness? Why do I suffer?” — do you have the courage to meet the quiet truth hidden within both question and answer?

Perhaps awakening begins not in some distant place, but in the very instant you dare to wonder.

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The Beginning Is the Most Challenging Part of the Path

Before we begin the initiation, it's traditional to explain why we should want to receive it. I'm sure most of you have received many initiations and teachings from many gurus. If you've noticed, all Buddhists and especially the Tibetan Vajrayāna masters love to explain suffering. It is a preliminary teaching, or a teaching at the beginning of the main teaching. The preliminary teachings are the most difficult part of the journey that we take towards enlightenment.

The beginning is the most challenging and most difficult part of the path. It is where we have to practice the most. Just because we're doing a certain practice, that doesn't mean we're already on the path of that practice. We may be physically doing it, or we may think that we are on the way to it, within this tradition of practice; however, if we think carefully about how our minds work, then I think most of us will find that we are still at an early stage or at the very beginning of our practice.

Understanding Yourself Is the Key to Unlocking the Dharma

I like to say that enlightenment comes the moment you understand yourself. To put it in a simple way, or in worldly terms: the moment you understand yourself is the moment you are enlightened. Many people study different animals, people, and societies—Asian society, European, American, etc. But once you understand *yourself*, then you understand everybody else. And if you don't understand *yourself*, then it will be very difficult to understand others.

Understanding yourself is like the key to the universal law. Once you have the key, which is really control over your own mind, that is the method that will unlock your understanding of everything else. And if you understand everything, that is the moment you realize that there is no suffering, there is no happiness, there is no saṃsāra. That is very interesting to me.

As a practitioner myself, I think that to practice Buddhism, we should try to understand ourselves: how our minds work, why we are happy, why we are suffering, why we feel anger or desire.

Stop Assuming

We normally think that we already understand others—maybe not everything, but there are certain things we assume we

understand. For example, I could say that I know my family, or I know this person or that person. But how do we know? "Because this one likes apples. He likes to wear certain clothes. He likes to drink certain things. He likes to do certain things." But that's only five percent of what the person is thinking or doing. If you do this, you are looking at five percent and assuming you know this person.

If we come closer to our own traditions or our own family members, we might say, "Oh, I know everything about my father," or "I know everything about my mother," or "I know everything about my children." That is very interesting for me because, again, we only know certain things about them. For instance, you might know your child likes chocolate, or that your father likes bread, and so on. We are assuming that we know. If we look carefully, we are assuming everything we know in life. We are assuming everything. This is very important. It's a simple, small world. But it's a big challenge.

So far, we are talking about other people, such as family members; the final question is: Do we know who we are, ourselves? What do we know about ourselves? For me, in my personal experience, I literally had goosebumps the moment I thought this way about myself. I was shocked for a while,

thinking that I don't know anything about myself, as much as I don't know anything about others. I'd been assuming things about myself. Or thinking I knew myself if I knew that I liked football, or I liked swimming or sports, or I liked a certain kind of food, or certain places.

You Must Ask Yourself, "What Is Happiness?"

When you begin to think this way and try to understand yourself, then you can begin to ask, "Although we all want happiness and none of us want suffering, what is happiness?" I was quite shocked when I thought about this for the first time, and I'm forty-three years old. I started to think about how we all assume that we want happiness, or that this is what everybody wants. But if you think carefully, you must ask yourself, "What is happiness? What gives me happiness?"

For example, there was a World Cup match last month. People get excited. "This team is winning, this team is losing." People get angry or happy, and some people even cry. But if you think rationally, here are twenty-two adults, not children, running around with a ball, and everybody is screaming and yelling and becoming angry or happy or crying. Why are we getting so excited? How does it help you as a person if this team or that is winning or losing? They don't even know that you exist. If you

think about it, it becomes funny to see people getting so excited.

This is a simple thing, but these are the questions I like to ask. I'm just sharing my experiences. I'm not telling you that you shouldn't follow your team, or to stop being happy if they win. What I am saying is that, if you think carefully, then you will see that suffering and happiness are all conditional. When certain conditions come together, you are happy. When certain conditions do not come together, then you feel you are not happy.

If you like apples—if you think that the cause of your happiness is eating apples—then whenever you eat an apple, you should become happy. But it's not like that. It's only when certain conditions match that you feel happy. Or, you might have a vague feeling, a certain emotion, and you brand that emotion as happiness.

The most interesting thing in the universe is oneself. That is where you should practice. I feel that this is the easiest way to practice, and also the most interesting. With other people, you can think about what they do or don't do, and you can assume. But whatever little control you have in this world isn't control over them, it's control over yourself. The nearest thing you can test is yourself. But then again, no matter how much

someone can say that they know themselves, who can say “I will be thinking like this” in one hour’s time? Who can say that at exactly five o’clock or six o’clock or seven o’clock, my mind is going to be this or that?” Nobody can say this. And this means that we have no control whatsoever when it comes to our own minds, either.

Attachment

I began by telling you that Buddhists and Buddhist masters love to talk about suffering and saṃsāra. This is because we want to help people to get rid of attachment. The best antidotes to attachment are selflessness and compassion. Compassion makes it much easier to be less attached.

Attachment makes everything more complicated. We all know that everybody who has been born in this world is going to die. We all know this. I know I will die. But when I say that, I don't feel anything. I don't have fear in me. But if I had a disease, or if I were in a dangerous situation, then I would feel very scared of death. This is especially important for practitioners because knowing that there is an end, knowing the certainty of death, gives encouragement to practice.

But why are we afraid of death? It is because we don't know what's going to happen after dying. After we take the last

breath, what is going to happen to our minds or our spirits or our souls? In one way or another, our bodies will be disposed of. But as for the mind, we don't know. And that's why we are afraid of death. If we knew exactly how our minds will go after dying, or where our souls will end up, then we would not feel scared.

I always say that we Buddhists have the luxury of suffering. Suffering is important for Buddhist practitioners because it's the reason we want to practice—to eliminate suffering and its causes. If there were no suffering, if there were no death, then there would be no encouragement for us to practice.

The Most Important Question for a Practitioner

We are a little short of time. These are some things I wanted to share. I want you to think about them, because it's important to understand why we should want to practice. Maybe you are doing a Vajrapāṇi sādhana, or a Mañjuśrī sādhana, or Hevajra. You might think, “Oh, I'm doing this or that sādhana.” But you have to understand *why* you want to do it, right? That is the most important question for a practitioner.

If you do not ask yourself this question, then what is the point of your practice? You can't know what kind of practice you are really doing, if you don't know why you are doing it. Once you know exactly why you want to do this practice, then your practice will have more depth, strength, and power.

Projecting

Again, I'm not really connected to this, but I want to share something else. The other day, I was thinking that we have all

kinds of deities: peaceful deities and wrathful deities. I always find it interesting that we link movies and stories we have heard in the world to our Buddhist practice. For example, we have peaceful deities like Mañjuśrī or Avalokiteśvara, who are ‘normal’ and peaceful. But then, we also have Mahākāla and Vajrapāṇi. These are scary, and so people tend to be more careful about their practice. Because of their appearance, we project that they are more powerful and more scary.

This is wrong. Vajrapāṇi and Mahākāla are buddhas, and they are bodhisattvas. They cannot be scary, from any direction or from any point of view. When we practice a deity practice with a wrathful deity, we have to think of them as the Buddha himself and as bodhisattvas. There's no difference whatsoever between wrathful and peaceful. But in our normal life, we see some certain people as bad people, dangerous people, gangsters and so on. And we take these images and put them on our deities. We must understand that we do this. But in truth, what we say about people, we cannot say about deities—that they are bad or good people, dangerous because they have weapons, and so on. It's something important to realize.

Why We Have Different Traditions and Different Deities

We have completed the initiation. Now you can recite the seven-line Guru Padmasambhava prayer and the mantra.

As I said before, there is really no difference in the deities that we practice. It's only a matter of one's personal feelings and the karmic link that you have with a particular deity. Whether the deity is wrathful or peaceful is not important in itself. In the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, we have Sakya, Nyingma, Kagyu, etc., and even within the Sakya, or within the Nyingma, there are different traditions. But fundamentally, there is no difference whatsoever between them.

Try to Think About How Your Mind Works

The important thing is that you feel connected and that it gives you understanding. Even if the Buddha himself came to teach you, there would be no benefit if you didn't understand him. This is why trying to understand what we are doing is the most important thing. That's why I tell you, again, try to think about how your mind is behaving when your mind is happy, and think about why you are feeling that happiness, and then ask yourself what happiness is.

Generally speaking, when you try to understand happiness this way, you will not see a final happiness. And, just the same way, you will not find suffering, either. The simplest method is this: whenever you have questions, you can find the answers yourself if you think carefully about your question.

Look for Calm and Balance More than “Happiness”

Instead of looking for a happy life, I would rather say we should look for a calm life, at-ease, and a more relaxed life. I believe this is more important than searching for “happiness.” It’s more stable because happiness depends on so many causes and conditions. This is advice that I normally give for living a more meaningful life.

The first thing, then, is to find a balance in your life. If you are doing exercise, too much exercise is not good, just like too little exercise is not good. Too much medicine is not good, and too little medicine is not good. Too much love is not good, and too little love is not good. Too much meditation is also not good. You have to understand your own body—your knees, for example—and your own mind. I cannot tell you that one minute or five minutes or one hour of meditation is the perfect amount.

Everybody is different with regards to their minds. But of course, we are not so different otherwise. We might have the perception of being very different: we might think Europeans are very different from Asians, or that Americans are different from Australians, or that Africans are different because of their skin color. But these are not real differences. They are minor.

This is true even with food. Indian curries, American burgers, Italian pastas, or French croissants—you may think that we are all quite different. Our foods may taste different, but we often forget the purpose of eating—to provide energy and nutrients. And from that perspective, food is the same. What's more, the foods themselves are not that different if you look at the basic ingredients. Almost every dish in every country adds some salt for flavor. You may add sea salt, pink salt, iodized salt, or whatever, but we all use salt. Similarly, we all use grains—whether it's barley or rice, etc. The entire world enjoys the same four or five ingredients and variations on them, yet we still say that we are so different.

Thinking this way means thinking beyond your own community, and it will make life easier and more at ease for you. If you can see how everybody is the same, then it will be easier to connect with other people. This is especially important in the modern world. Thinking that you are different, or that you are better, causes problems.

We Have to Grow Beyond That

Every country has so-called good people and so-called bad people, rich people, poor people, handsome people, etc. This is true for any social unit, down to the street that you live on, or the building that you live in. If you live in an apartment building, there will be someone who is the richest person in the building, someone who is the poorest person in the building, someone who is the most handsome person in the building, the ugliest, etc. It all depends on who is asking the question and how we choose to look at these things.

I know that these are simple questions, but thinking about them can help make us calmer. We are often trying to be people that we are not. We all say that we are trying to become better persons, but what is a better person? According to which values do you want to become a better person? I have met a vast number of people who have thousands working for them. Generally, rich is considered good. They are said to be

happy people. But I have literally seen this with my own eyes: I always find them worried. They worry about their company, about their work, about other people, and about their future. I rarely see them so-called “happy,” even in worldly terms. And conversely, I have met people who are so poor that they didn’t have enough food for the next day. Yet, I saw that they were happy, laughing, and more relaxed.

The concepts we have of rich and poor are blocks that we have put on our own minds. We have to grow beyond that. We have to think beyond society and the rules that we have. I’m not saying break all the rules. Please don’t do that. Please follow the rules and don’t do anything illegal. What I’m trying to say is we have to *think*. To meet the standards of our society, we are working 24-7. We think we need to have a certain kind of house, a certain kind of car, and certain clothes. In order to reach these goals, we spend our whole lives trying to get to some standard. It’s such a pity. To be relaxed, to be more comfortable, you just have to realize what you are.

Accept Who You Are

The first thing is to find a good balance in your life, and the second one is acceptance. You have to accept who you are. I’m Asian, I’m 43 years old. I am Tibetan. Whatever skin color you

have, or hair color, whatever the condition of your physical body, if you accept who you are, you will be more satisfied. Your anxiety will be less. If I wanted to have a good body with a six pack on my stomach and big muscles, I'd be trying to get that for the rest of my life, and I would never reach my goal. Again, I'm not saying that you shouldn't watch your diet or exercise. I'm not saying, "Don't go to the gym." Go to work, go to school, go to the gym, but also keep in mind that you are what you are. If you are always trying to be two steps ahead of yourself, those two steps will always two steps ahead of *you*. You will never be relaxed. You will never be satisfied.

To be more relaxed and happy, balance and acceptance are very important. I am telling you this from my own experience and from whatever understanding I have of the Buddha's teaching and our masters and gurus. Whatever understanding I have, I'm trying to pass it on to you. I'm not saying that what I have understood is the only way or the best way. For all of you who must follow this path yourself, I'm not saying that. I'm merely sharing my experience. If you find that it is appropriate, and you think that you could try it, then please go ahead. Otherwise, you can at least think about it.

And of course, according to Buddhism, we are not thinking. We are not using our minds at all. Enlightenment means that we

have to use our minds. We are already enlightened inside us because we already have buddha nature in our every center. This is true not just for humans but for animals, the gods, and even for hell beings. Every sentient being has buddha nature, and this means that every sentient being is already enlightened inside.

I don't know how many of you play video games. When I was younger, I used to play them. The game is already installed in your video game, and as you play, as you achieve the goals of the game, you unlock the next level. Like this, we are already buddhas inside, but we have to understand or realize what we are. We have to realize the power we have. This is the easiest way of explaining buddhahood in worldly terms.

Without that understanding, it's not possible to attain buddhahood. With it, it's possible even in one lifetime. There are many stories of people who, while doing their practices or talking to their masters, attained enlightenment.

The Only Thing Stopping Us From Attaining Buddhahood Is Ourselves

We all know the steps. We all know where we are, according to the teachings. To attain enlightenment, we all know the path:

how to get rid of defilements, to gain merit, etc. If we all know this, then why are we not buddhas? What's wrong with us that we are not realizing we are buddhas?

The only thing stopping us from attaining enlightenment is ourselves. We know the path, but we have to believe. I don't know how to say this. Maybe, *conviction*? Or be *convinced*. We have to have conviction, without any room for doubt.

We say, "Oh, I want to reach the enlightenment of buddhahood," but in the back of our minds, we have many questions and many doubts. We need to get rid of all of these questions, all of these doubts, so that we will have conviction and one hundred percent zero doubt. All of these practices are so that we can achieve this.

In order to achieve it, in order to reach enlightenment, we need to check all the doors, all the doors that are questions in your minds, and to close them. Imagine you have many doors in front of you. You say, "Okay, I will follow door number three." But in the back of your mind, you are thinking, "What about door number one? What about door number four? What about door number five?" These questions will keep you attached. These doors will keep you in questions.

In order to stop that, before you go through any door, you have to check all of them. Recently, I heard an interview with an astronaut. He said that astronauts don't pray and say, "Oh, let's hope everything is fine with this rocket, and then we will arrive safely in space." He said, "We check every part of the rocket. We check every inch." When they are sure that everything is fine, that's when they travel. That way, there is no question in their minds and no doubts. They are certain that everything is one hundred percent perfect.

Astronauts don't say, "Oh, I hope we have enough fuel today." Like them, we can check everything in our lives in order to have one hundred percent certainty without any questions. Once you attain buddhahood, there's no coming back to be saṃsāra, right?

Conclusion: Why We Fall into the Same Ditch

Without taking more time, I'm very happy that I could pass these teachings on to you. I received this teaching from His Holiness the 41st Sakya Trichen. He received it from Apang Tertön in Tibet. I hope you will practice it. And I hope you will have the questions I described and others of your own. It is good to have questions so that they can be answered; then, at a certain level, you won't have questions anymore.

Most importantly, I hope you have questions about yourself and about the feelings that you have. We have been following the rules of society for so long that we are used to it. I will give you one small example. If I tell you that this is my eye [*while pointing to his nose*], and this is my nose [*while pointing to his eye*], it will be very difficult for you, right? For so long, ever since you were born, you've been told that this is your nose and this is your eye. If your master says, "*This* is your nose, and *this* is your eye," maybe you will respond, "Oh, yes, yes, we agree."

But in the back of your minds, it will be very difficult for you to accept this. It will take time. Every day, you will have to work to convince yourself. It's like that.

The reason we are in saṃsāra is because we are so used to these feelings and thoughts. That's why we fall into the same ditch, even when we know there's a ditch. Every generation and every sentient being falls into the same ditch at the same place. Why is that? Because we are all following the same rule. We are all going on the same path, thinking we are following the right path. That's why having these basic questions is so important. If you want to become enlightened, it's really important.

Enlightenment is basically in your mind. Critically, there's nothing to be enlightened. It's all mental—all in here. You can see that I just pointed to my head and said, "This is my mind." I'm following the 'rules' that I spoke about earlier.

These are simple things, but they are really important questions that one must ask.

Thank you so much.



- His Holiness the 43rd Sakya Trizin, Gyana Vajra Rinpoche, is the second son of His Holiness the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin). He belongs to the noble Khön family, whose successive generations have provided an unbroken lineage of outstanding Buddhist masters.

At an early age, Rinpoche undertook his training in the principal rituals and prayers of the Sakya lineage. Rinpoche has received from His Holiness the Sakya Trichen most of the major initiations, empowerments, oral transmissions, blessings, and pith instructions that are inherent to the Sakya lineage. Furthermore, Rinpoche has received numerous common and uncommon teachings from some of the pre-eminent teachers of Tibetan Buddhism of our age.



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