

Choosing to Look Within (*Following the Buddha's Journey*)

We begin by drawing some parallels between the dissatisfaction of the early life of the Buddha and our own current way of being. To do so, we study a teaching from Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche and consider what is meant by suffering. Then, with the help of a teaching from Khandro Rinpoche we look at how to overcome our suffering through renunciation, and what renunciation actually means. Finally, as it is through revealing our own Buddha nature that we can transform ourselves and overcome suffering, Sogyal Rinpoche explains what Buddha nature is and how we can begin discovering it and opening to it.

Buddha's Early life: the spur of dissatisfaction

The life of Siddharta, the prince who later became the Buddha Shakyamuni, was full of challenges that still occur in our own lives today. As a prince, Siddharta seemed to have it all.

He was smart and educated, had huge wealth and a strong, athletic physique. He enjoyed the status and all the diversions and entertainments a privileged lifestyle can offer. His wife Gopa was beautiful and perceptive, shared his disenchantment with palace life and concern for the poor and vulnerable and encouraged him to follow his convictions. He was first in line to inherit the title and power of the king. Why then would he give it all away and become a possessionless monk living in a forest who begged every day for his food? He could have stayed in the comfort and security of the palace for the whole of his life, so why did he choose to leave it?

Even though Siddharta had everything society told him he should want and aspire to, he experienced something that we can all recognise: a nagging underlying sense that something is wrong, that something is missing.

Happiness for Siddharta and Gopa was not to be found in a pampered life of wealth and status. They weren't moved by exquisite and savoury foods or fancy silken clothes. While they could appreciate the artistry of the dancers and musicians, they were not carried away by the pleasures they offered.¹

When Shakyamuni and Gopa travelled around their kingdom:

At times they encountered terrible misery. They met families with nine or ten children, every child racked with disease. No matter how hard the peasants toiled day and night, they could not earn enough to support so many children.

Siddharta had long understood the inner workings of the royal court. Every official was intent on protecting and fortifying his own power, not on alleviating the suffering of those in need.²

Although Gopa and Siddharta worked to alleviate the suffering of the people they met, Siddharta felt that what they did "could not bring true peace. People were entrapped not only by illness and unjust social conditions but by the sorrows and passions they themselves created in their own hearts and minds."³

In the first teaching, Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche begins by describing Buddha's growing disenchantment with the pleasures of palace life. He links the story of Buddha's own life to how we too may experience a certain dissatisfaction or feeling that something is missing in our lives, even when things seem perfect and pleasurable.

¹ From Thich Nhat Hanh, *Old Path, White Clouds* (Parallax Press, Berkeley, 1991), pages 63-64. This book is Thich Nhat Hanh's retelling of the life of the Buddha, which is in turn closely based on the sutras (or scriptures) of the Buddhist canon.

² *Old Path, White Clouds*, pages 64-65.

³ *Old Path, White Clouds*, page 66.

As you listen to this teaching, see whether you can identify how this underlying feeling of dissatisfaction may present itself in your own life or at certain times. Does what is being said ring true for you?

What Buddha's life teaches us, part 1 (7 min)

Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, Lerab Ling, 9 September 2011

Dzogchen Ponlop talks about 'a sense of hollowness in samsara'.

—What do you understand by this? How did he go on to describe it?

—Can you identify this feeling generally in your own life or was there a particular incident or experience that particularly brought this home to you?

—Are there habits or tendencies that you indulge in to try to ignore or not to acknowledge this background feeling?

Note: The Buddhist term for 'suffering' is the Sanskrit word *duhkha*, refers to suffering, pain, sorrow or misery but can also refer to an underlying sense of dissatisfaction. Dukkha is comprised of two syllables: *du*, meaning 'bad', and *kha*, meaning 'fit'. So the literal meaning of *dukkha* is '**bad fit**'. Scholars trace the source of this word to the way the axle fits into the hub of the wheel of a chariot. When that axle doesn't fit properly, it's a bad fit, so **our human life is like a ride in a chariot with one of the axles fitting badly into the wheel of the chariot**. Dukkha conveys the sense that no matter how well our life works out, **there's still something not quite right. There's always going to be a subtle underlying sense of dissatisfaction**.

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche writes in *What Makes You Not a Buddhist*:

In many ways we are like Siddhartha. We may not be princes with peacocks, but we do have careers and house cats and countless responsibilities. We have our own palaces. And things go wrong all the time. Appliances break, the neighbours argue, the roof leaks.

Our loved ones die...Yet we are stuck there willingly, we don't try to escape. Or if we get fed up and think, 'Enough is enough,' we may leave a relationship only to start all over again with another person. We never grow weary of this cycle because we have hope and belief that the perfect soul mate or a flawless Shangri-la is out there waiting for us. When faced with daily irritations, our reflex is to think we can make it right; this is all fixable, we can make it whole.

Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche said "no one can get satisfaction in samsara no matter how much we have", but Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche is pointing out that although samsara is fundamentally 'unfixable' we don't even try to escape, but just carry on thinking that 'we can make it whole'.

—Can you think of habits or beliefs you have that make you reluctant to completely escape your palace?

Renouncing suffering

The way to finally leave behind the palace of our somewhat dissatisfying but oddly comforting existence is to renounce the suffering of samsara. Before we hear Khandro Rinpoche sharing her understanding of renunciation, consider or discuss what your understanding of renunciation is. Do we have to give everything away and live in the woods? What image comes to mind when you think about renunciation or someone who is a renunciate? Is it an appealing image? The Oxford English Dictionary defines renunciation as 'the formal rejection of something, typically a belief, claim, or course of action.' Does that help?

What is renunciation? (7 min)

Khandro Rinpoche, Mindrolling Monastery, 19 April 2020

— How does Khandro Rinpoche define renunciation? Does what she says change your idea about renunciation?

—The literal meaning of the Tibetan word for renunciation, *ngé jung*, is ‘the realization that originates from clearly seeing and discerning the definitive meaning’ of things, “to clearly see beyond deluded perceptions, beyond our assumptions of what something might be, to really analyse and reach a definitive understanding of the truth as it is.”

—How can analysing a situation and discovering its definitive meaning free us from suffering?

—How does this approach to renunciation break down the barriers that separate us from others?

Note: *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* defines *ngé jung* (page 33) like this:

Ngé means "actually" or "definitely," and *jung* means to "come out," "emerge," or "be born." The fruit of frequent and deep reflection ... will be that you will find yourself "emerging," often with a sense of disgust, from your habitual patterns. You will find yourself increasingly ready to let go of them, and in the end you will be able to free yourself from them as smoothly, the masters say, "as drawing a hair from a slab of butter."

This renunciation that you will come to has both sadness and joy in it: sadness because you realize the futility of your old ways, and joy because of the greater vision that begins to unfold when you are able to let go of them.

Buddha nature

By letting go of our assumptions and concepts and finding the definitive meaning, we can also uncover what has been obscured in us: our true nature, or Buddha nature, which the Buddha realized to be the true nature of all sentient beings.

Although we will be exploring what Buddha nature is in this next teaching, it is not necessary to become immediately certain and convinced that this is true right now. It's enough to hear what is being said, and to begin reflecting on this statement.

We all have buddha nature (13 min)

Sogyal Rinpoche, Amsterdam, 9 October 2013

- What is meant by 'one ground, two paths'?
 - What ways of connecting with our Buddha nature does this teaching present to us?
 - How do suffering and samsara get described at the end of this teaching?
- What does the famous verse from Shantideva show us about the origin of suffering and the way to overcome it?

The next teaching from Ringu Tulku Rinpoche continues the story of Buddha venturing out of the palace and encountering instances of old age, sickness and death, as well as a monk, or renunciate. As you watch the teaching, note down how Ringu Tulku Rinpoche describes the way in which Buddha responded to these sights, the questions and feelings that arose in his mind and what motivated his search for an end to suffering.

Why Siddhartha left the palace (16 min)

Ringu Tulku Rinpoche, Gangtok, 18 June 2020

- What was Siddhartha's main goal or aim and what was his motivation?
- Why would continuing as a worldly ruler not fulfil this aim?
- What did Siddhartha realise when he encountered the monk?

—At the end of the teaching, Ringu Tulku Rinpoche links the Buddha’s search to the real purpose of the Dharma and in doing so explains what Buddhadharma is *not* about. So what does Ringu Tulku say the Dharma is about?

Attitudes that help to overcome suffering

Faced with the inevitability of old age, sickness and death, how did Siddhartha respond? And what does his response show us about how we could react?

What Buddha's life teaches us, part 2 (12 min)

Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, Lerab Ling, 9 September 2011

—How can an attitude of open and innocent curiosity help us? What might make us hesitate to adopt this attitude?

—How comfortable are you asking questions about the more challenging aspects of life, particularly questions about old age, sickness and death? How normal is it in our society to be openly curious about such things?

—Neither great luxury nor great asceticism seemed to help Siddhartha transform suffering. What can we learn from this about the way to engage with a spiritual path?

We began to hear Khandro Rinpoche talk about the need to arrive at the point of renunciation if we are going to overcome our suffering. What do you remember about what she said? How did she define the Tibetan word *ngé jung*?

Now listen to how Khandro Rinpoche develops her explanation.

What is renunciation? Part 2 (6 min)

Khandro Rinpoche, Mindrolling Monastery, 19 April 2020

Sit in resting meditation for a short while and then reflect on these two quotations from Khandro Rinpoche’s teaching. Based on your own experience,

ask yourself whether you understand what is being said, what you accept as true and what you are not sure about or disagree with.

—“The origin of suffering is ignorance, the ignorance of building a situation of not wanting suffering but never really being able to understand that the happiness we pursue can be found within ourselves. There is a tremendous potential of goodness within ourselves that can be the basis of the happiness we are looking for. Peace is there, contentment is there, joy is there, as well as kindness, and all the love: everything is inherent inside us. All these qualities are mind’s own qualities.

On the other hand, just as we fail to see the value and the profound brilliance of a precious jewel that is covered by filth, our ignorance stops us from seeing our own qualities. We can, however, begin to see how ignorance envelops the wonderful potential within us. We don’t want suffering, but we seem to be so bogged down by ignorance and therefore unable to really build the ground of happiness. In its place, we tend to consistently build the ground of unhappiness and suffering for ourselves. So *ngé jung* is being able to really examine and then see the play of ignorance and what arises from it.”

—“Everybody seems to be creating the causes of unhappiness and suffering, and never really able to understand how to cultivate happiness for themselves. When, within your own clear wisdom mind you begin to see this very clearly, how could you not have the deepest empathy for all sentient beings? How sad it is that every sentient being, with this tremendous beautiful potential of happiness and goodness and the possibility to be free from creating suffering for themselves and others, dwells in ignorance and never really becomes themselves, or does what

they wish to do. Therefore, *ngé jung* is empathy, and also the revulsion that we feel towards the ignorance we sustain.”

Genuine curiosity, which leads us to look into our own ignorance and the suffering it brings with empathy for ourselves and others, can bring us to discover the sources of genuine happiness within. This kind of inner happiness, or contentment, which the buddha discovered, is the subject of the next teaching. Take notes.

The wise look for happiness within (13 min)

Sogyal Rinpoche, Hamburg, Geneva & Toulouse, 2004-2005

—Most people will have heard teachings on contentment before. If you have, which points of the teaching struck you this time? If you are new to this teaching, which points seem most important to you?

Buddha’s enlightenment

In the next teaching, Ringu Tulku Rinpoche continues with how the Buddha continued his path once he had regained his strength after his years of asceticism. While sitting in meditation having vowed not to move until he attained enlightenment, many kinds of obstacles or temptations were put in Buddha’s way to prevent him reaching his goal. Nevertheless, Buddha remained unaffected, and at dawn reached complete awakening.

As you watch this teaching note down:

—How is Buddha’s life and his enlightenment viewed by the different Buddhist traditions mentioned in the teaching?

—In what ways did the ‘maras’ try to obstruct Buddha from obtaining his goal?

—How does Ringu Tulku Rinpoche describe Buddha’s enlightenment? What was Buddha able to realize and see?

Buddha's enlightenment (16 min)

Ringu Tulku Rinpoche, Gangtok, 24 June 2020

Reflect on the following points:

1. The three main Buddhist traditions which developed gradually in India and are still practised today are Nikaya Buddhism or the Common or Foundational Vehicle,⁴ Mahayana or the Great Vehicle, and Vajrayana or the Diamond Vehicle. As Ringu Tulku explained, the Common Vehicle regards the Buddha as an ordinary human being who was not initially enlightened, but through his own efforts over countless lifetimes finally achieved enlightenment.

From a Mahayana and Vajrayana perspective, Buddha is not seen simply as a historical figure, but is understood to be a nirmanakaya manifestation, meaning primordial wisdom appearing in human form in order to benefit beings and as such was already enlightened. Buddha simply took the decision to take a physical form and seemingly follow a path leading to enlightenment in order to guide and inspire us.

Reflecting on these two perspectives of the Buddha's life:

—What do you think is the value of each perspective?

—Which perspective do you most closely relate to and why?

2. Ringu Tulku Rinpoche described the maras' attempts to prevent the Buddha from attaining his goal. Traditionally the maras are described as the four types of obstructive, 'demonic' forces which create obstacles to practitioners, but it is important to realise that the maras relate to the mind and symbolize the habits and negative emotions that get in the way of our practice and our spiritual path.

—How do maras like this manifest for you when you are trying to practice,

⁴ In his teaching, Ringu Tulku Rinpoche uses the term *Sravakayana* to refer to this tradition.

change a habit or do something positive? It could be attachment to comfort, doubt, or that voice that tells you, you can't do it. What do you do to counteract these obstacles and stay focused on your goal?

3. At dawn, Buddha finally reached full enlightenment. How did Ringu Tulku Rinpoche describe what Buddha was able to see and what he experienced at that moment?

Note: Ringu Tulku mentions how Buddha according to some traditions, reached the *11th bhumi* (stage or level) which is Buddhahood or complete enlightenment. The Bhumis refer to the stages a practitioner traverses on the path to enlightenment. If you would like to find out more about the bhumis visit: <https://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Bhumi>

Transforming the mind

One key point the previous teaching makes clear is that enlightenment, as well as experiences of happiness and suffering, all happen within the mind. Buddha sought enlightenment, and all subsequent Buddhist traditions seek enlightenment not through external factors, but through the transformation of the mind. The following teaching from Sogyal Rinpoche looks at why this is so, and starts to give us ways to progress from how we are right now to enlightenment.

Ignorance Imprisons Our True Nature (13 min)

Sogyal Rinpoche, Brussels, 7 May 2004

—What does *ignorance* mean in this teaching? How does relying on ignorance imprison our true nature?

—How can you use teachings on the mind being the universal ordering principle of our lives and on one ground, two paths?

What do they point out about how we could bring out our true nature and reduce the influence of ignorance?

—The story of Buddha's life and enlightenment places emphasis on rejecting a conventional understanding of suffering and happiness and attempting to overcome them by turning the mind within. How does this explanation resonate with you? From the teachings that you have heard so far, what feels right to you? What doesn't feel right to you?

Further study: Two sources of further study particularly relevant to this teaching are:

Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, chapter five. You could choose to read just the first section, or as much more as you wish.

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Old Path White Clouds*, chapters 17 and 18 ('Pippala Leaf' and 'The Morning Star Has Risen')