

# I'm really not there

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Lama Zopa Rinpoche receives thousands of letters, and his patience and compassion in answering them is legendary. Rinpoche would like to share with all Mandala readers this one example of his correspondence:

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## A student writes:

My dear smiling, happy Monk,

I cannot tell you how much I appreciated your gifts of books, posters, cards and most of all, your letter to me.

I have already read with great delight your book *Transforming Problems into Happiness*. What was interesting about your book is that I am very aware of the simple lessons you state. The only problem, I had not been putting your advice into practice as much as I should. [Thought transformation] is such a simple and great teaching; I am amazed I have not used it more. I am now utilizing it almost every hour of every day. It is beautiful. I play with it as a mind game. What fun.

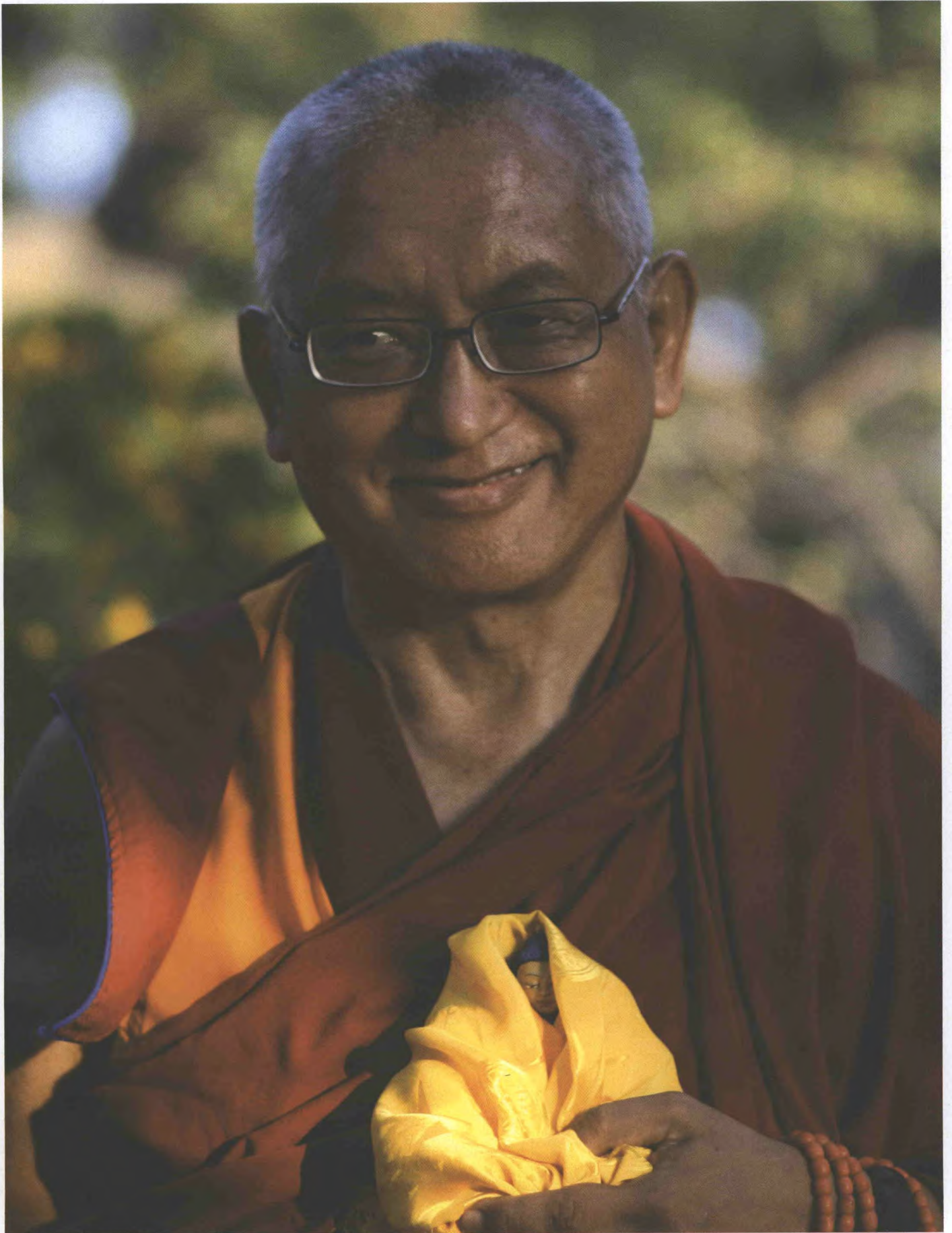
Now, if I may, I would like to tell you about something that happened yesterday: I went into a meeting with a very unpleasant fellow to negotiate a business deal. This fellow started right out being rude in an effort to throw me off.

Each time he made a point counter to mine I just let my mind go to "what are the benefits of what this fellow is trying to tell me?" Believe it or not, each time he was being unpleasant about a point I introduced, he inevitably let me know what I should really know about this business deal. There were a lot of very good things he said while he was being unpleasant. He had no idea how much information I was receiving by my just letting my mind move to the positive rebound of what he was actually saying, while filtering out the negatives. I was so happy I was able to interpret what he was saying in such a positive way that I started laughing, and happily turned down the business deal. This fellow asked me why I was laughing, and when I told him about your book and all the wonderful information I was able to get from him on why I really should not go into this deal, he too started laughing and wanted to borrow my book.

With great love and affection,

*(Name withheld)*





Rinpoche in Italy, 2008. PHOTO: Thubten Kunsang



## Rinpoche's response

My most dear friend \_\_\_\_\_,

I was extremely happy to get your fax, and I am so sorry about how long it took me to reply. What made me really rejoice and is really a positive thing is how you used the practice [in that business meeting].

This practice of thought transformation is using one's thoughts, one's actions and especially any problems in the path to happiness, which also means the path to enlightenment. It also means the path to happiness for other living beings, who are numberless. This is the most important thing in one's life – to cause happiness to others. Trying to cause happiness only to oneself, who is just one person, is where all the problems come from. From others we receive all our past happiness during beginningless rebirths, all our present happiness and all our future happiness, including the ultimate happiness of liberation from samsara, from all the oceans of samsaric suffering and its causes – delusion and karma – and the ultimate happiness of full enlightenment. We receive all this happiness from each and every sentient being: from every hell being, every hungry ghost, every animal, every human being, every asura being and every sura being.

You have realized how this is so worthwhile and should be put into practice – wow! What a great success! I would say this is the best success in life.

**P**racticing thought transformation (transforming suffering into happiness) is simple. It means using all problems in the path to achieve the highest happiness, not just peace in the present moment. Wanting peace and happiness today is very common in the world; everyone is mainly looking for peace and happiness right away. People don't think so much of the future; they don't know about the happiness of future lives, liberation from samsara and enlightenment. They don't know about liberation from samsara and the peerless happiness of full enlightenment, with total cessation of even the subtle defilements of the mind and completion of all the qualities. This is liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth, old age and sickness, as well as from all mental sufferings, such as meeting undesirable objects, being separated from desirable objects, being unable to find desirable objects and, even after finding a desirable object, never being able to achieve satisfaction. A great example of this is in the famous Rolling Stones' song: "I try and I try and I try and I try,

but I can't get no satisfaction." It's great – they are singing from their heart, from their own experience.

The story you told me means that you are using your problems, your sufferings, such as your ignorance, anger, attachment, pride and other negative thoughts, which make you unhappy and which makes others unhappy.

The "I", or the "self", action and object are dependent arisings. The "I" exists being imputed in dependence upon its base, the aggregates. Here *aggregates* refers to form, feeling, recognition, compounded aggregates and consciousness. The "I" exists in dependence upon the aggregates; the "I" is merely imputed to the base, the aggregates, which exist in mere name. So, the "I" is empty of existing from its own side, empty of existing by its nature; it does not exist inherently.

It is the same with any action. How an action actually exists is as a dependent arising: it is not independent. "Action" is labeled on what the body, speech or mind does. It exists, but dependently. Any action, no matter what name it is given, is merely imputed by the mind. Action does not exist from its own side; it does not exist by its nature; it does not exist inherently, or truly.

It is the same with any object. In dependence upon the base and the thought, something is labeled "object." The object came from the mind, not from the base. You could say that it exists from the side of the mind, or in dependence upon the mind, which imputes, or designates, it. But it also exists in relation to its base. So, it is the same with an object: it does not exist from its own side.

Therefore, "I", action and object are all totally empty. They are not nonexistent, which is nihilism, but they do not exist from their own side. They do exist from the side of the mind in relation to the base. This is the same with all the rest of phenomena. Nothing exists from its own side. While they exist, all phenomena are totally empty, existing in mere name and functioning in mere name, but that doesn't mean that they are nonexistent.

This is a very subtle explanation of how the "I", action, object and all other phenomena exist. It can be explained in a gross way, but here this is an extremely subtle explanation. Here, one needs to study and one needs to analyze, which means really check how things exist.

Here, I am explaining how we create ignorance, which is the root of samsara, the root of all suffering. Ignorance is the root from where death comes, from where rebirth comes, from where old age comes, from where sickness comes, from where all the disasters come, from where all the delusions, or



wrong concepts, come, from where all the negative karma comes. Ignorance is the root of all the oceans of suffering of all the hell beings, all the hungry ghosts, all the animals, all the human beings, all the asuras and all the suras.

**T**he Fifth Dalai Lama used the example of a rope curled up like a snake on a road at dusk. (This example is commonly used in the teachings.) Because it is dusk and there is no direct light, there is no understanding that it is just a rope. First there is the appearance of a snake. The mind merely imputes “snake,” and there is then a belief that it is a snake. The superstitious thought, the ignorance, believing it to be a snake, arises. The fear then arises, “Maybe

This is completely false, a hallucination, a deception.

We have to know how this hallucination, this false view, this deception happens, after the mere imputation. True existence, existence from its own side, is decorated on the mere imputation. For instance, the truly existent “I” comes from the negative imprint left on the mental continuum by the past concept holding the “I” as truly existent. You can say that the appearance of true existence is decorated, or projected, on the merely imputed “I”. The mere imputation is covered by this wrong view like clouds cover the sky, carpet covers a floor or a tablecloth covers a table.

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it will bite me. Maybe it will kill me.” So much fear arises that you want to kill the snake or throw it away.

It is similar with the “I”. The thought that sees the aggregates merely imputes “I” to the aggregates. Right after that, there is an appearance of “I”. Right after the moment the “I” is merely imputed, it appears back to you as a real “I”, an “I” existing from its own side.

This is the most important discovery! It should have appeared as merely imputed by the mind, because that is what it is, but that doesn’t happen unless we are a fully enlightened being, a being who has purified even the subtle defilements, the negative imprints, left by the superstitious thought, the ignorance that holds the concept of things as truly existent. This ignorance holds the concept of true existence in relation not only to the “I” but to every other phenomenon throughout the day, throughout this life, from birth until death, and throughout beginningless rebirths up to enlightenment. The only other time we don’t see everything as truly existent is when we become an arya, or exalted, being, with direct perception of emptiness, or ultimate truth, and are in equipoise meditation on emptiness.

Otherwise, everything, even though it is imputed by our own mind, appears back to us as a hallucination, as *not* merely labeled by our mind, as existing from its own side.

Right after it appears, the superstitious mind holds as a hundred percent true that inherently existent “I”, that real “I”, in the sense of existing from its own side. This is what is called “ignorance,” and this is what is present in every moment of our everyday life. Whenever we let our mind hold on to this real “I”, this “I” from its own side, as true, this is the ignorance that is the root of samsara, the root of all the oceans of suffering of the six realms.

There are four schools of Buddhist philosophy: the Vaibhashika, Sautrantika, Chittamatra and Madhyamaka. The fourth, the Madhyamaka, or Middle Way, school is divided into two: Svatantrika and Prasangika. What I have been explaining is according to the Prasangika view.

**Y**ou can now understand that while this “I” is existing, it is at the same time empty. This “I” unifies emptiness and existence, which means it is a dependent arising. If you don’t think about subtle dependent arising, if you don’t think about the meaning of existence in this way, you cannot unify the very natures of the “I”, emptiness and existence. Emptiness and existence then become contradictory to each other. When you see these two as contradictory, even if you believe you have the realization of emptiness according to the Madhyamaka view, you have a wrong realization. If you find these two contradictory, you are actually holding a wrong view.



In our life, when we think of ourselves and also of other sentient beings, we are constantly following ignorance. We think that there is an independent "I", a real "I" in the sense of existing from its own side, and we then do everything for this "I", which does not exist.

This is an excellent meditation on the right view. You first have to recognize the wrong view, and this is an introduction

We also believe that the "I" is permanent. This view is much more gross. We believe that the "I" is not compounded by causes and conditions. The "I" is changing, decaying, second by second, and even within a second; it does not last. There is a projection, a belief, that the "I" is permanent; that it exists alone, without depending on its parts, the aggregates; and that it exists with its own

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But if we look for that "I", we cannot find it; it is not there. We cannot find the "I", neither on this body nor on the other aggregates. We cherish and are attached to this "I", which is not there, which does not exist.

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to wrong view. We live our life doing everything, from morning to night, from birth to death, for this "I", which is not there. Not wanting the "I" to suffer and wanting the "I" to have happiness, we keep our life unbelievably busy.

But if we look for that "I", we cannot find it; it is not there. We cannot find the "I", neither on this body nor on the other aggregates. We cherish and are attached to this "I", which is not there, which does not exist. From that, discriminating thoughts of anger and attachment arise, discriminating some sentient beings as distant and others as close. If others do actions with their body, speech and mind that give us what we want, we like them and get attached to them. With this discriminating thought, we bring so much suffering to ourselves and cause so much harm to other sentient beings, to the world. When others do actions with their body, speech and mind that our attachment doesn't like, anger rises, and we then harm them, kill them and so forth.

To achieve happiness for this "I", we engage in killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, telling lies, disparaging others, slandering, gossiping, covetousness, ill will and heresy, or wrong views. In this way we cause so much harm to ourselves and to others. The whole point is to achieve happiness for this "I", but the "I" is not there.

When you watch other sentient beings, you will see that everybody believes there is an independent "I", a real "I" existing from its own side. We believe that it has nothing to do with our mind, that everything just exists from its own side. This view is gross.

freedom, without depending on the collection of the aggregates and the continuity of the aggregates. This mistaken view of the "I" is extremely gross.

When you go out and watch others, you see that many people are very unhappy. While some people smile, others have anger, sadness and grief, depression, feelings of hopelessness and many other forms of unhappiness. They worry about this "I", that they are unable to achieve happiness for. However, nothing of the "I" that they believe in exists there. It is similar when people have excitement in their life: there is no such "I" there. This is the fundamental suffering. Here we are not talking about the suffering of anger, desire and all the other delusions; here we are talking about just the suffering of ignorance.

Wherever you are, whether people are lying down on a beach, flying in a plane, in an army at war, experiencing the tsunami, homeless, living in danger from the elements (wind, earth, fire and water), working in the government or politicians, what everybody wants is to have happiness in this life for this "I", which is not there. Throughout their whole life, they put unbelievable effort into this.

You can also see now how you yourself have been suffering with this ignorance and harming others. This is terrifying; it is an almost unbearable thing. When you then see how others suffer, compassion arises. There is no choice but to give rise to unbearable compassion for others. You then think about how to help others, how to liberate others from suffering.

Look at the people who play on surfboards, successfully riding the high waves. All those people are trying to enjoy



themselves, trying to give happiness to this “I”, but the “I” is not there. It doesn’t exist in the way they believe it exists. There are also all those people who hang-glide (tying wings to their hands then coming down from cliffs) and the people who jump from cliffs with or without a parachute. They are all trying to achieve happiness.

People do unbelievable things for the “I”, but the “I” in which they believe is not there. You can meditate extensively on this. Meditate on your own life. From birth, from beginningless rebirths, it has been like this. If you do not realize emptiness, if you do not eliminate this ignorance, the root and continual cause of suffering in samsara, you will continue to suffer in future lives. During beginningless rebirths we have experienced all the oceans of suffering in the six realms, and this will be without end. Also, we won’t be able to liberate other sentient beings from the oceans of sam-saric suffering. So, they will suffer unimaginably.

All human beings...actually, I can’t say *all human beings*, because, of course, there are people who are embodiments of buddhas and bodhisattvas, who have realized emptiness and see everything as being like an illusion. There are also arhats, who have pure vision and are liberated from the oceans of sam-saric suffering and its causes. Even though things appear truly existent, with their wisdom they realize that things are empty. For example, when you are crossing a desert, when you look back, it looks as if there is water there. You have a vision of water but you realize that it is not true because you know there is no water there. You are seeing a mirage.

Anyway, most human beings have this wrong view of ignorance. From this ignorance all the other wrong views then arise. On the basis of ignorance, anger and attachment arise, and attachment has its own projection, its own wrong view, and anger has its own projection, its own wrong view.

You see a truly existent object, your enemy. By reflecting on how that person has harmed, criticized or abused you, you think that his actions are bad. Anger then arises, and you want to hurt him. Anger has its own projection of the object, that person, as bad, undesirable. You then think to hurt that person.

You see an inherently existent object, your friend. On the basis of that, you project that that is something nice or good. First, you think that. Next, the person appears as beautiful. You think that they have a beautiful form, that they are educated, that they can sing and dance and so forth. Attachment and grasping then arise, and it becomes suffering because it is difficult for you to be separated from that person

and so forth. Here, when attachment arises, it creates its own object, its own view, which is also a wrong view.

Jealousy can also arise on the basis of an object of ignorance. When the jealous mind arises, it wants to harm others. Like this, so many delusions arise on the basis of the object of ignorance, which is totally false.

This is a very powerful meditation. When you discover so much falsity and truth in life, it brings you so much peace in your heart. It is the initial step to knowing what truth is and what deception is. This is what gradually leads you to ultimate liberation, to full enlightenment. It also enables you to generate compassion towards all sentient beings and to actualize bodhichitta and wisdom.

The only way to be free from the root of suffering, this ignorance, is to totally cease it and all the other delusions, as well as karma. You never have to experience suffering again, because the cause does not exist. You have removed the cause of delusion – the seed, or imprint – by meditating on and actualizing the path.

Therefore, practicing Dharma is just one-time work. No matter how long it takes or how difficult it is, it is extremely worthwhile to practice Dharma. It is the most beneficial thing, not only for your happiness but also for the happiness of all the numberless living beings in each realm. It becomes most unbelievably, unbelievably, unbelievably beneficial to practice Dharma, to meditate on the path. This is the most urgent thing.

After this, there is enlightenment. You can reach enlightenment, which means you can enlighten all sentient beings and bring them to enlightenment. This is the ultimate goal of your life, the purpose of your life. Since simply knowing about it makes you the happiest person, there is no doubt about actually living it. So, this is the conclusion.

This evening I came from an initiation by the great lama Choden Rinpoche, which was at Tse Chen Ling, our center in San Francisco. A student called Holly helped me to write this letter by taking the dictation, and now it is 4:30 AM. I hope both of you will enjoy this letter. I am extremely happy that you were able to bring the light of Dharma into that person’s heart. You are beginning to enlighten others. You might not be removing defilements, but it’s a start. So, now you have started, there should be more like this.

With much love and prayers,

Lama Zopa

*Dictated to Ven. Holly Ansett in June 2008 and lightly edited by Ven. Ailsa Cameron. This is an edited excerpt and the full letter is available for viewing at [www.lamayashe.com/talktous/newsletter/e-letter7-08.shtml](http://www.lamayashe.com/talktous/newsletter/e-letter7-08.shtml)*