

# Misunderstandings

By Sogyal Rinpoche

**I** remember a story I first heard when I was a child growing up in Tibet. It comes from the Jataka Tales, the accounts of Buddha's previous lives, and tells of the time he was born as a lion who lived on the edge of a deep forest.

One autumn day a tremendous commotion broke out and all the animals began to stampede. The lion saw them, in their hundreds and thousands, running for their lives without daring to look behind them. He knew that if they were not stopped they would run as far as the sea and drown. Quickly, he leapt up on to a hill, which overlooked their path, and roared three times. The animals all stopped at once, one pressed against the next in a huge, trembling mass. The lion walked down from the hill and asked them why they were running so fast.

"The end of the world is coming!" they cried.

"Who said so?" asked the lion.

"The elephants," they said.

"No it wasn't," said the elephants indignantly, "it was the lions."

"No, it was the tigers who told us," said the lions.

The tigers said it was the rhinos; the rhinos said it was the buffaloes; the buffaloes said it was the antelopes; the antelopes said it was the gazelles; and the gazelles said it was the rabbits.

The rabbits said: "It was this little rabbit here who told us!"

The lion strode over to the little rabbit and asked, "How do you know it's the end of the world?"

"I heard it, sir, a terrible cracking noise, and I saw something out of the corner of my eye."

"Where?" said the lion. "Tell me exactly what happened."

"I was sitting under a fruit tree, thinking about what would become of me when the end of the world came, and all of a sudden I heard this cracking noise ... as if the earth itself was splitting apart."

"Let's go and have a look," said the lion, and the rabbit climbed on his back and showed him the way. When they got near his tree, the rabbit jumped off, because he was too scared to go near the crack in the earth. The lion

went up to the tree and saw where the rabbit had been sitting, and he saw the fruit, which had fallen and crackled as it crushed the autumn leaves. He called the rabbit and showed him, and then they told the animals that their terror had all been for no reason whatsoever. And that it was not the end of the world.

So often we make something huge out of a simple problem, and blow it out of all proportion. How many of our difficulties start with one tiny misunderstanding: someone didn't give us their usual smile today; our teacher gave us a stern look or our best friend criticized us; this morning's cup of coffee tasted bitter; we woke up feeling a bit cranky ... that's all it takes to ruin our whole day! We can find ourselves so fragile, so insecure, frail and vulnerable that any off-hand remark, any reaction or ill-timed joke can puncture our confidence completely. If we don't catch the misunderstanding there and then, it can act like a seed germinates and grows bigger and bigger. Small problems fester and expand into enormous fears and emotional earthquakes, and no matter how minute our suffering might be in truth, we imagine, like the rabbit, it's the end of the world.

Of course, we may not be able to pinpoint exactly what's wrong – it might only be a slightly bad mood – but somewhere we want to make the most out of it. We revel in self-pity or depression. But above all, we cannot let go of it. As if hell-bent on bringing everything to a painful point, almost as if we wanted to take revenge on someone or something – which always turns out to be ourselves – we lurch unfailingly towards a crisis. Meanwhile our delusion, or our depression, looms like some macabre sculpture we are fashioning, or a building we are feverishly constructing, enlarging and extending and finally topping with the discovery of some deep-seated, ancient problem, so that everything is assembled into an ideal home, complete with all the best reasons why we should be depressed. Yet what escapes us all along, apart from the fact that our problem is not even that serious, let alone disastrous, is this: it is all built from nothing! It does not really exist.







Photo Jim Funk

In the summer of 1900 the Tibetan mystic Tertön Sogyal began to reveal a cycle of teachings and meditation practices, which had been hidden more than a thousand years earlier by the extraordinary master Padmasambhava. At the heart of his revelation is a remarkable instruction on transforming faults in the system of interdependence that governs all our lives. I was amazed when I first read its opening lines:

“The root of all faults, all failings, is nothing other than ignorance. This ignorance is like mistaking a heap of stones on the horizon for a human figure; it has no basis whatsoever, which means that even the source of these faults and failings does not exist.”

Our problems, in other words, all come from nothing; they are all based on a misunderstanding that does not even exist. The more I think about what Padmasambhava said, the more I realize how true it is. With all our ideas, with all our misunderstandings, how often do we ever grasp more than a partial and distorted version of how things really are? Our whole vision of reality in fact amounts to a fabrication, an exaggeration, a fantastic edifice of delusion. Once we miss understanding, we create something based on that missing of the point, which cannot but be a lie and an illusion. And in turn, we swallow the lie and fall for the illusion and take it to be true, like the fool who spends his life chasing after the fabled crock of gold buried at the end of a rainbow.

How tragic this all is! For misunderstanding brings with it endless complications: hope and fear, despair even suicide. We make ourselves suffer, and we create problems for ourselves, which are absolutely unnecessary. It’s that simple – all we have to do is realize it. And when you do eventually see the truth of just how unnecessary it is, your heart wants to burst with compassion for anyone who is suffering in this way. And yet at the same time you begin to appreciate the absurdity of it all – it’s as ridiculous, the Tibetan saying goes, as trying to fix a string on to an egg.

Why on earth do we go through all this – for nothing? It’s so difficult for us to see the truth for what it really is because the whole thing is so personalized – we fail to see any other perspective, or notice how much our mind exaggerates. This is one of the symptoms of samsara, the uncontrolled cycle of life and death that we subscribe to. If we only examine them, all these appearances, all these perceptions of ours we take to be so real are revealed to be completely non-existent. We only need a glimpse of the innermost nature of the mind to see this fake reality for what it is, a way of sabotaging and undermining our true nature, and to see that all our hopes and expectations and fears are the agents of samsara, employed to drain and weaken us.

Even though we may listen to spiritual teachings, and hear the truth again and again that everything is like an illusion, and the delusory appearances of the mind, yet when ignorance is at play it employs such sophisticated or enthralling disguises that



we fail to recognize or see it for what it really is. That's what makes us truly "ignorant." What I have increasingly come to realize is that when we follow a spiritual path it becomes more important than ever to see through the mind and its delusions, and to know the extent to which misunderstandings dominate our lives. For a spiritual practitioner, it is crucial to be on top of things.

To be on top of things can be taken in many contexts, one of which is that we need to recognize the root of our problems. We know that it's often when someone begins to recognize their fundamental blockage that their healing will begin. But to identify the source of our difficulties and confusion can seem to be so hard and take so long. They are well supported on all sides, and even though we may occasionally have a brief glimpse of the reality of our situation, it's as if everything around us is conspiring to prevent us from being able to see. For it to become clear in our minds may require a particular set of circumstances, or a special environment, or simply a lapse of time. It can also be that the root of our problems lies obscured by our karma, which makes it impossible for us to see what is blocking us, or even for the teacher or a friend to point it out to us clearly. Until that karma is purified, we are not ready to realize what it is. Or perhaps our stubborn pride simply refuses to realize, preferring to take our misunderstanding as the truth, and clinging on to it in devoted attachment because we cannot face our secret suspicions that we are wrong. So many factors come into play, and whether we are able to see clearly into ourselves or not is all to do with the complex workings of inter-dependence.

Everything comes into being because of inter-dependence. When circumstances all fall into place, we call it "auspicious," and everything fits and unfolds harmoniously. But when something does not quite "click" then a gap, a vacuum, opens up, and in that absence of clarity misunderstanding creeps in. Once enough inauspicious and rogue ingredients have amassed, they somehow constitute the perfect circumstance needed to prove to us that our misunderstanding is the truth. This allows it to be exploited by others, whatever their motivation, and excites us into making the whole situation more volatile – something inside us almost relishes the drama of it all.

Issues begin to build up, because when we are unclear we heap everything we are not clear about – all our pain and suffering, all our insecurity, fears, emotions and

obsessions – on to our one area of obscurity. So, when we cannot see or we refuse to face our main problem honestly, it will get transferred and bounce around, fastening on to one aspect of our mind and life or another. As soon as one issue is resolved, it will shift to another, and then the next, and so become a recurrent calamity.

Yet if we have an openness and willingness to identify the root of our greatest personal difficulty, and see it clearly for what it is, we may be surprised to find it is not such a gigantic problem. All it may need is a subtle shift. To glimpse the nature of mind, for example, requires only the slightest shift, a different way of looking: of looking into the mind.

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The Buddhist scriptures have their own favorite example. Imagine, they say, you were out walking one evening at dusk. Suddenly on the path in front of you, you see what seems to be a snake. You are transfixed with fear ... and your mind races for some way of escaping the snake, and death. An impulse tells you to switch on your torch, and to your amazement and relief you see that your snake is only a piece of mottled rope. ... But where was the snake? It was a complete illusion, existing only in your mind, in its concepts and in your habitual tendency to fear, at that instant triggered by misunderstanding and projected immediately on to the harmless length of rope.

Haven't we all, at one time or another, known moments of sudden realization like this, when all our preconceived ideas about something shifted and betrayed a completely different, sometimes surprising, but always more authentic perspective on reality? Moments like these we should never overlook, because it is in them that we can, in a flash, see samsara, the vicious cycle in which we waste our lives away, revealed as a colossal fabrication, nothing but ignorance, itself non-existent, constructed into a tortuous labyrinth of delusion. Suddenly we realize something, something deep and liberating, about how mind works and how misunderstandings materialize. The trick then is to keep that realization so that the next time a similar situation arises it will at least be less intense. One thing we can be sure of: if we do not make a point of keeping alive the memory of what we have realized, in no time at all the mind will have found a way to work it off.







Being on top of things also means being able to recognize, and to remember, those special moments when some powerful insight arises and briefly blossoms: a moment of clarity and awakening, when suddenly something becomes strikingly clear; a moment of liberation when the words of a spiritual teaching make things click, carry an understanding we had far deeper and unlock the mystery of integrating spiritual vision with life.

In the Dzogchen teachings, we speak of dissolving everything, in the state of meditation, into the primordial purity of natural simplicity. You will notice moments when everything becomes transparent and you can actually see that natural simplicity is truly how things are. How ridiculous it seems then to stake our happiness and let our confidence hang on some casual, trivial event. Even though the insecurity we experience from a cross word or a severe look in no way affects the real "us," because we take it too personally it obscures our judgment and weakens our confidence in ourselves. During moments of clarity, however, we can see that the most important thing for us is to come back to ourselves, to recognize what our true nature is, to have confidence in it and to stabilize that confidence till it becomes unshakeable.

Cast your mind back now and re-visualize one such moment: you may have written it down, or it is there in the recesses of your memory. Capture the highlights, the peak experiences, and gather those moments together for yourself, for it is vital that you never lose them or let them go to waste. Why? Because however clear those experiences are in the setting in which they happened, when you change that environment they will fade away. The everyday reality of our ordinary existence is simply too strong; samsara has its own environment, its own support, its community and protectors and influence. They are so powerful and well established, and the resulting negativity offers such seductive and persuasive arguments, that unless you make a determined effort it will be difficult to maintain your inspiration on the spiritual path.

One of my students told me recently that for him to be on top of things meant "not getting stuck in our old habits." But how do we avoid getting stuck? By taking the way out, the path which is there, mapped out


for us to travel. Don't forget, I said to him, the Buddha's first teaching on the four noble truths, which tells us that there is an end to suffering and a path that leads to the end of suffering. Buddha actually shows us the way out, and if there is anything at all we need to recognize, it is this. Refuse by all means to get stuck in your habits, but go one step further, and follow the path to break out of them.

Friends and students of mine often tell me how they are plagued by some repetitive pattern: their partners keep leaving them; or there is always a problem at work; or again and again they fall out with people. If that keeps happening to you, maybe you need to look at the reason why. But don't make a big deal out of it, or succumb to the mistake we often make of dwelling on our habitual patterns. By thinking "I'm always doing this ... repeating the same old pattern ... This is what I'm like ... That's just the kind of person I'm always going to be ... I'm doomed....," all we are doing is empowering and steadily giving a false reality to that which we want be free from. We will never be able to change if we endlessly play the same old scratched record. Instead, just ask a simple "Why?"

Whatever the reason may be, and it could turn out to something unexpectedly simple, you need to identify it, and then you can do something

about it. If you continue to feed your problem there is no limit to how inflated it can become, and the whole issue will turn into a fog of complication. You will then be left at the mercy of the only explanations you can still catch sight of, theories of all kinds about who's to blame: your childhood, your father, your mother, your brother, your sister, Buddha, Jesus or God. It's too complicated by far.

So don't keep looking for patterns and tormenting yourself with what's wrong with you: that could be just another pattern. And whatever you do, don't identify yourself with your pain, your suffering and sore spots, otherwise you'll never be free of them. Don't identify with the mistakes you have made, or let yourself believe that simply because you went wrong, you are fundamentally bad or that's all that you are or could ever be. Much more important is to strengthen the good aspects of yourself, to realize and remember what happens in those wonderful moments when you are confident in your nature, when you feel so good that it's almost as if there is no ego, as if all sense of "self" had completely dissolved,

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revealing the real you, and there is only compassion, generosity and fearlessness.

In our heart of hearts we all want to make progress, to change, to become enlightened. But we don't need to wait for the perfect situation, for everything to be right, before we can let go and change. We can begin right now. Let's face it, we have no choice but to change – and that lack of choice is a blessing in disguise, for it hands us continuously the opportunity to blossom, to be free of our “selves” and so to become truly ourselves.

Sometimes, though, we can feel so frustrated at how stuck and resigned we are, and how resistant to change, that we want to alter absolutely everything about ourselves, even our whole appearance. Don't judge yourself or be too ambitious, and don't try to change everything all at once; instead, be sure to change something fundamental. Change has to grow on you, then it's much more stable. Sudden change is like a promise you cannot keep. Keep working slowly and trust that it will work out, because what we discover so often in life is this: when you really let go, whatever you are asking for happens; and when you try for too much, it does not. But letting go does not mean giving up; they are two quite different things. Never give up. But by all means do let go.

This is where the practice of meditation can be so powerful – because it can inspire in us the realization that we can actually let go, and if we let go, we're free. When we are truly able to let go of some blockage or pattern or obsession, that is the real result of practice; that is the sign that our practice is accomplishing something.

Then everything will prove much easier for us, because we will be so much easier with ourselves. We will discover confidence within: an authentic, natural, indestructible confidence, which will render us fearless. Whatever we have to face, we know we will be able to manage. Our fear, uncertainty and hesitation about whether we can change, or even truly wish to change, are what impel us, for want of any alternative, to put our trust in false refuges, and to sink back into our old, well-worn and familiar patterns of suffering.

Of course, it would be only too easy to sit back and congratulate ourselves on how we had changed, simply to find our subtle patterns easing their way back in, taking a new shape. Because there is no end to the deviousness of our minds, and the wrong views that are ego. We may cut the patterns, but then how do we prevent them from returning? We practice, abiding continuously by the View. The point of practice is to give us a framework, one that works for us, and which recreates a living atmosphere of inspiration, and of the View of the nature of mind.

We often hear about the View, and about having confidence in ourselves, but what do they really mean? What is the mark of whether we have translated the

View of the spiritual teachings into our day-to-day existence? It is when we can take the events and upheavals of our lives and let them teach us not only wisdom and discernment, but also means for being skilful, with both others and ourselves.

This is also the mark of whether we are truly on top of things. My students have told me of how they have gone through the hardest moments of their lives, like losing a loved one, when there was no choice but to let go. They said they found that when they let go in the light of their practice and the inspiration of the teachings, gradually over the years, through all the tragedy, through all the letting go, a deep confidence was born. In the unique method of Dzogpachenpo, the masters say that the worse the circumstances, the better it is for you. They do not mean that all the most dreadful catastrophes are queuing up for you as a blessing, but that with your View, you can let go of aversion to harm and difficulties, transforming anything that befalls you into a blessing.

There is a wonderful picture of Buddha, which I always remember. He is sitting, unwavering, in meditation in the first watch of the night when he became enlightened. Mara, the embodiment of delusion, ordered his army to attack the Buddha, yet as their weapons came within his radiance, they all transformed from instruments of harm into gifts of adoration, from spears and swords and boiling oil into a rain of soft and fragrant flowers. ❁

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Sogyal Rinpoche was born in Tibet and brought up by one of the most outstanding spiritual masters of the twentieth century, Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö. He studied at universities in New Delhi and Cambridge and acted as translator and aid to many eminent Tibetan Buddhist masters. Through his tireless teaching and travelling around the world during the last twenty-five years he has become one of the best loved and most important interpreters of Tibetan Buddhism today. Rinpoche continues to teach to large audiences and his influential and ground breaking book *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* has become a spiritual classic, selling over 1.6 million copies in twenty-six languages and fifty-four countries.

