



G A T S A L

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Tenzin Palmo's Address at the Waldzell Conference in Austria, 2005



*The word 'Buddha' means to awaken.
We are all asleep, we are all dreaming,
and we believe our dreams.
This is the problem.*

One time when I was living in the cave I had a dream. I dreamt that I was in an enormous prison without end. In this prison, there were many levels. There were the penthouse suites where people were laughing and talking and dancing and making love and working. There were the levels all the way down, until you got to the dungeons where people were writhing in agony and despair of mind. But whether we were in the penthouse or in the dungeons, we were all in the prison. I suddenly realized it was so insecure; people in the penthouse today could be in the dungeons tomorrow. We were all trapped together. We had to get out. So I spoke to a number of my friends: "Look, this is a prison, we have got to leave." They all said, "Oh yes, it's a prison, but it's okay, it's not bad." Or they said, "True, it's a prison, but it's so difficult to get out. It's better to accept the fact that we are here." Eventually I found two friends who agreed to try to escape with me, and the dream went on.

The question is, why do we regard our ordinary life here as a prison, and how do we get out? This is basically the question in Buddhism. But why is it a prison? You might say, "My life is okay, it's not a prison. I can more or less do what I want to do." It is not dealing with the physicality; it is dealing with the mind. Our minds are imprisoned, not by external gates, but by ignorance. This is so universal, and it is why I am troubled for the future. Despite all our external learning, our research and science, we are still absolutely ignorant. Spiritually, we are as ignorant as we were when the Buddha walked this earth.

What are we ignorant of? Einstein said that in our age there has been a tremendous growth in knowledge, but absolutely no growth in wisdom. Ignorance has nothing to do with education, nothing to do with external brilliance and genius of mind. What are we ignorant of? We are ignorant of our true being and what is really the nature of this world. Because we are clinging to all the wrong things governed by ignorance, we are enslaved.

Buddhism is always concerned with how to become free. It is always concerned with liberation, liberation of mind. The problem is that normally we live within a world of time—past, present, future—and in a subject/object dichotomy. There is the subject "me" and the object "everyone else out there." We cling to this sense of "me" and "mine-ness." Some people think "I" when they think of their gender, their race, their country, or their religion. They think, "This is who I am. I am my personality. I am my memories. I am the sum of all these things."

Some people are more subtle, and they say, “No, behind all that there is something else. There is an “I” which is unchanging, which has always been there since I was born up to now.” But when you look to find this “I” which separates “me” from all the “you” out there, where is it?

Buddhism is not just to make us calm and quiet and feeling happy. It is to peel off the layers of our onion of individuality. If you peel off the various layers, the first layer race, then the layer gender, then nationality, then education, then one’s level in society, one’s profession, where is this “I?” Eventually you get to something else which is totally beyond “I.” This intrinsic awareness, this primordial awareness, which is at the very basis of our being, has nothing to do with “me” or “you”.

We experience a level of awareness behind the coming and going of thoughts and feelings and concepts. It is a wordless, timeless, non-dualistic perception. If we can remain always in that higher level of total awareness, we are Buddha. It is simple. This awareness is not something up there, and it is not actually something that is difficult to realize. Awareness is just awareness. The Tibetans compare it to the sky. The sky has no centre, and it has no circumference. It is endless. The sky is not just up there. It is within and all around us. It is space. In Tibetan, the word for space and the word for sky is the same word. So where is space not? Where is this awareness not?



Buddha said
“Desires are like salty water.
The more you drink, the thirstier you get.”

The word “Buddha” means to awaken. We are all asleep, we are all dreaming, and we believe our dreams. This is the problem. When we awaken even for a moment, then we see that what we cling to is really our own projection. Then our minds are so sharp, so clear, and so awake, and we realize that our true nature is something completely beyond the conceptual thinking mind. The important thing is that externally nothing changes, but inwardly everything changes. Everything becomes alive and clear and vivid, but there is no ego driving it. Then everything spontaneously happens, whatever one needs to do is spontaneously accomplished, without the ego getting in the way. It is accomplished skilfully.

What stands in the way of our liberated mind? This is what we have to deal with and what is happening in our society nowadays. What stands in the way of our realizing our minds? The true nature of our mind is obscured like a thick cloud that covers the blue sky. That cloud is made up of our negative emotions, like our clinging greedy minds, our anger and aversion, our pride and arrogance, our jealousy and envy, and especially our ignorance of not realizing our true nature. And this acts like a screen. Do we realize how much we live our lives through our minds? Everything we see, everything we say, everything we do, is directed by our minds, our thoughts, our feelings, our memories, our concepts, our judgments.

We hardly see anything as it is. We see our opinion. It is very hard to see things nakedly without the many sheaths of our conceptual opinions and ideas about that thing. We come here and we look at this ceiling.

Either we think this is magnificent art, or we think it is absolute kitsch. We think it is wonderful, or we think, “Oh my God, how could anybody have done this?” It makes no difference; the ceiling is just a ceiling and the painting is just paint. How we react to it depends on our mental framework, our background, our education, our aesthetic taste. Everything is like that. We never see things as they really are, we only see our version. Everything we experience, we experience through our mind. Everything we see, we hear, we taste, touch, or feel, is interpreted through our mind. Yet we do not know the mind itself.

We say, “I think that, I feel that, in my opinion it is that.” But what is a thought? What is a feeling? What is an opinion? We are always streaming outside through our senses, but we never turn that awareness, which sees and thinks and tastes and touches, inward onto the mind itself. What is a thought? Where does it come from? What does it look like? Where does it go? And who is thinking? If we say, “I am thinking!” Who am I? What is this whole thinking process and what is behind the thinking process?

We are so caught up in our heads. Some neurologists say that nowadays we know so much about the brain, but we still have not found the mind. In Asia the mind is not up in the brain. The brain is the computer, but the source of the mind is somewhere down here (in the centre of the chest). It is very interesting that when you first start meditating, you are meditating in the head. There is the mind thinking and the meditation practice you are trying to do. So it is like they are both facing each other. It is you and the practice. This dualistic approach which we start with is up here (in the head). The brain is trying to meditate. Once the meditation really kicks in and the mind really goes into a state of meditation, the meditation itself goes down to here (in the centre of the chest). Then there is no meditator and no meditation. You become one with the practice. At that time, things start moving. This is something you experience. It is not something you think about. As long as you are thinking about it, it stays up in the head. When you become the meditation, it moves down to the centre of the chest, as all religions have always known.

In particular, what troubles us in our modern culture? The Buddha said that the causes of our suffering are our negative emotions, especially our ignorant clinging to an ego. Our greed means “I want” for this ego, and our anger and hatred means “I don’t want” for this ego. This is the cause of our suffering.

Our modern society is selling us the idea that if we could only fulfil our desires, we would be happy. Two thousand years ago, Buddha said “Desires are like salty water. The more you drink, the thirstier you get.” You are never satisfied. Just look at you! You have enough clothes for another ten lifetimes! Why more? We all have more than enough things. If we packed them all together, we could not even carry them. We need a truck to carry all our possessions. Why more? Why do we think, if we only had the latest model of whatever, that would make us happy. When are we going to learn that happiness comes from giving, from generosity, from enjoying the happiness of others, and from contentment?

The terrifying propaganda that happiness depends on what we get is very dangerous. Not only is it destroying our planet, it is destroying our mind. Young people, little children, have all these advertisements on television. They all want designer clothes and designer toys. They are already plugged into this very insidious propaganda, which is increasingly violent and the opposite of any spiritual wisdom. When you watch the movies and games that children play, it is all violence! I read recently that from the ninth grade to twelfth grade, children watch on an average 25,000 hours of violence, through their cartoons, through their movies, through the games they are playing. Every movie has to be more violent, more terrible, more gory, to get that extra little take.

All this greed and anger feeds this ego, this “me”. I have to sell myself! I am the most important. If I am happy, then the rest of the world is okay. This ego, this adorning of the ego... these are the poisons, the poisons of the mind. No wonder, we are a sick society. Every day we are imbibing more and more of these poisons, then we are wondering why we don’t feel well.

We have gone wrong somewhere. We have gone horribly wrong, and we need to get back to thinking about the basic essentials, and to our spiritual roots. Happiness rests in the happiness of others, giving happiness to others, not thinking so much always of our own satisfactions and benefits.

Our satisfactions and benefits are in giving joy to others, in being kind, in being generous, in being thoughtful, and in learning to cultivate our inner tranquillity, our inner clarity of mind, and our empathy with all beings. Not just human beings, but all beings. We can all do it. If others have done it, we can do it. But if we do not learn to do it, and if we do not teach our children to do it, if we give them all the wrong values right from when they are small, what can we expect for our next generations?

*We can all do it.
If others have done it,
we can do it.*



We are in dire straits. We can pull ourselves out, but we can only do this through transforming our own attitudes. Our attitudes are genuinely transformed through understanding. Understanding and loving compassion go hand in hand.

The important thing is to transform our inner being, because our inner state of mind is reflected in our outer reality. What is happening with our planet at this moment is a reflection of the beings inhabiting our planet, mostly the human beings.

To transform the planet, we need to transform ourselves.

Tenzin Palmo

Venerable Tenzin Palmo's address was presented at the annual Waldzell Conference in 2005 at The Waldzell Institute in Austria. The mission of the Waldzell Institute is to make the quest for a meaningful life a chief concern of our society. The Waldzell Institute aspires to win extraordinary personages and their knowledge and wisdom for implementing concrete projects concerned with the spiritual and mental development of mankind.



“Gatsal Teachings” will be an on-going pull out section in the newsletter for you to treasure.