



PHOTO BY MARVIN MOORE

In his new book, *Joyful Wisdom*, **Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche** shows us how to discover the joy and awareness that are never affected by life's ups and downs.

We Always Have Joy

WHEN I'M TEACHING in front of large groups, I often confront a rather embarrassing problem. My throat gets dry as I talk, so I tend to drain my glass of water pretty early on in the teaching session. Invariably, people notice that my glass is empty and they very kindly refill it. As I continue to speak, my throat gets dry, I drink the entire glass of water, and sooner or later, someone refills my glass again. I go on talking or answering questions, and again someone refills my glass.

After some time—usually before the teaching period is scheduled to end—I become aware of a rather uncomfortable feeling, and a thought crosses my mind: *Oh dear, there's an hour left for this session and I have to pee.*

I talk a little bit more, answer some questions, and glance at my watch.

Now there's forty-five minutes left and I really have to pee.

Half an hour passes and the urge to pee really becomes intense. Someone raises his hand and asks, "What is the difference between pure awareness and conditioned awareness?"

The question goes to the heart of the Buddha's teaching about the third noble truth. Often translated as "the truth of cessation," this third insight into the nature of experience tells us that the various forms of suffering we experience can be brought to an end.

But by now I REALLY, REALLY have to pee.

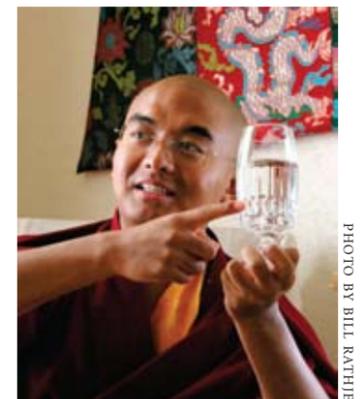


PHOTO BY BILL RATHJE

So I tell him, “This is a great secret, which I’ll tell you after a short break.”

With all the dignity I can summon, I get up off the chair where I’ve been sitting, slowly pass through rows of people bowing, and finally get to a bathroom.

Now, peeing may not be anyone’s idea of an enlightening experience, but I can tell you that once I empty my bladder, I recognize that the deep sense of relief I feel in that moment is a good analogy for the third noble truth: that relief was with me all the time as what you might call a basic condition. I just didn’t recognize it because it was temporarily obscured by all that water. But afterwards, I was able to recognize it and appreciate it.

The Buddha referred to this dilemma with a somewhat more dignified analogy in which he compared this basic nature to the sun. Though it’s always shining, the sun is often obscured by clouds. Yet we can only really see the clouds because the sun is illuminating them. In the same way, our basic nature is always present. It is, in fact, what allows us to discern even those things that obscure it: an insight that may be best understood by returning to the question raised just before I left for the bathroom.

TWO TYPES OF AWARENESS

The essence of every thought that arises is pristine awareness.

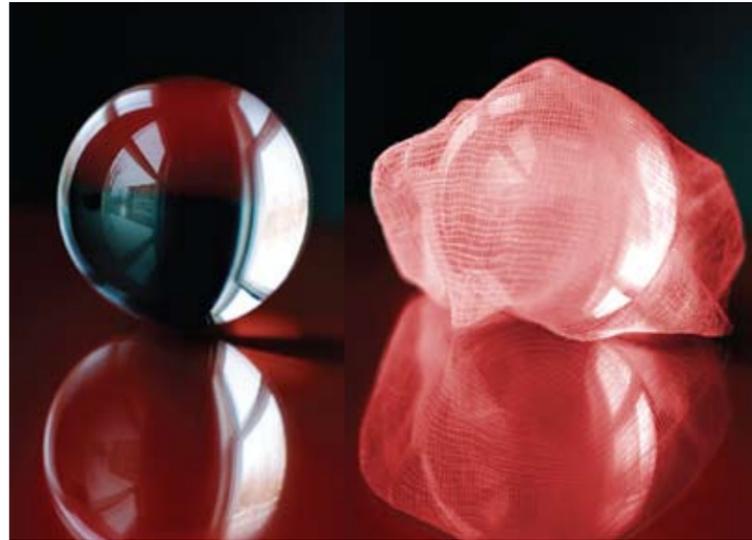
—PENGAR JAMPHEL SANGPO

Short Invocation of Vajradhara, translated by Maria Montenegro

Actually there’s no great secret to understanding the difference between pure awareness and conditioned awareness. They’re both awareness, which might be roughly defined as a capacity to recognize, register, and in a sense, “catalogue” every moment of experience.

Pure awareness is like a ball of clear crystal—colorless in itself but capable of reflecting anything: your face, other people, walls, furniture. If you moved it around a little, maybe you’d see different parts of the room and the size, shape, or position of the furniture might change. If you took it outside, you could see trees, birds, flowers—even the sky! Whatever appears, though, are only reflections. They don’t really exist *inside* the ball, nor do they alter its essence in any way.

Now, suppose the crystal ball were wrapped in a piece of colored silk. Everything you saw reflected in it—whether you moved it around, carried it to different rooms, or took it outside—would be shaded to some degree by the color of the silk. That’s a fairly accurate description of *conditioned awareness*: a perspective colored by ignorance, desire, aversion, and the host of other obscurations. Yet these colored reflections are simply re-



PHOTOS BY LIZA MATTHEWS

fections. They don’t alter the nature of that which reflects them. The crystal ball is essentially colorless.

Similarly, pure awareness in itself is always clear, capable of reflecting anything, even misconceptions about itself as limited or conditioned. Just as the sun illuminates the clouds that obscure it, pure awareness enables us to experience natural suffering and the relentless drama of self-created suffering: me versus you, mine versus yours, this feeling versus that feeling, good versus bad, pleasant versus unpleasant, or a desperate longing for change versus an equally frantic hope for permanence.

The truth of cessation is often described as a final release from fixation, craving, or “thirst.” However, while the term “cessation” seems to imply something different or better than our present experience, it is actually a matter of acknowledging the potential already inherent within us.

Cessation—or relief from suffering—is possible because awareness is fundamentally clear and unconditioned. Fear, shame, guilt, greed, competitiveness, and so on are simply veils, perspectives inherited and reinforced by our cultures, our families, and personal experience. Suffering recedes, according to the third noble truth, to the extent that we let go of the whole framework of grasping.

We accomplish this, not by suppressing our desire, our aversions, our fixations, or trying to “think differently,” but rather by turning our awareness inward, examining the thoughts, emotions, and sensations that trouble us, and beginning to notice them—and perhaps even appreciate them—as expressions of awareness itself.

Simply put, the cause of the various diseases we experience is the cure. The mind that grasps is the mind that sets us free.

BUDDHANATURE

When you are living in darkness, why don’t you look for the light?

—THE DHAMMAPADA, translated by Eknath Easwaran

In order to explain this more clearly I have to cheat a little bit, bringing up a subject that the Buddha never explicitly mentioned in his teachings of the first turning of the wheel. But as a number of my teachers have admitted, this subject is implied in the first and second turnings.¹ It isn’t as if he was holding back on some great revelation that would only be passed on to the best and brightest of his students. Rather, like a responsible teacher, he focused first of all on teaching basic principles before moving on to more advanced subjects. Ask any elementary school teacher about the practicality of teaching calculus to children who haven’t yet mastered the basics of addition, subtraction, division, or multiplication.

The subject is *buddhanature*—which doesn’t refer to the behavior or attitude of someone who walks around in colored robes, begging for food! *Buddha* is a Sanskrit term that might be roughly translated as “one who is awake.” As a formal title, it usually refers to Siddhartha Gautama, the young man who achieved enlightenment twenty-five hundred years ago in Bodhgaya.

Buddhanature, however, is not a formal title. It’s not a characteristic exclusive to the historical Buddha or to Buddhist practitioners. It’s not something created or imagined. It’s the heart or essence inherent in all living beings: an unlimited potential to do, see, hear, or experience anything. Because of buddhanature we can learn, we can grow, we can change. We can become buddhas in our own right.

Buddhanature can’t be described in terms of relative concepts. It has to be experienced directly, and direct experience is impossible to define in words. Imagine looking at a place so vast that it surpasses our ability to describe it—the Grand Canyon, for example. You could say that it’s big, that the stone walls on either side are sort of red, and that the air is dry and smells faintly like cedar. But no matter how well you describe it, your description can’t really encompass the experience of being in the presence of something so vast. Or you could try describing the view from the observatory of the Taipei 101, one of the world’s tallest buildings, hailed as one of the “seven wonders of the modern world.” You could talk about the panorama, the way the cars and people below

¹ *The Buddha’s first turning of the wheel of dharma was from the perspective of relative reality, and emphasized the importance of cause and effect. The second and third turnings were from the perspective of ultimate reality. The second turning emphasized emptiness and compassion, and the third turning presented the teachings on buddhanature.*

PHOTO BY CASEY BISSON

look like ants, or your own breathlessness at standing so high above the ground. But it still wouldn’t communicate the depth and breadth of your experience.

Though buddhanature defies description, the Buddha did provide some clues in the way of signposts or maps that can help direct us toward that supremely inexpressible experience. One of the ways in which he described it was in terms of three qualities: boundless wisdom, which is the capacity to *know* anything and everything—past, present, and future; infinite capability, which consists of an unlimited power to raise ourselves and other beings from any condition of suffering; and immeasurable loving-kindness and compassion, a limitless sense of relatedness to all creatures, an open-heartedness toward others that serves as a motivation to create the conditions that enable all beings to flourish.

Undoubtedly, there are many people who fervently believe in the Buddha’s description and the possibility that, through study and practice, they can realize a direct experience of unlimited wisdom, capability, and compassion. There are probably many others who think it’s just a bunch of nonsense.



The view from the top of Taipei 101

Oddly enough, in many of the sutras, the Buddha seems to have enjoyed engaging in conversation with the people who doubted what he had to say. He was, after all, only one of many teachers traveling across India in the fourth century B.C.E.—a situation similar to the one in which we find ourselves at present, in which radio, TV channels, and the Internet are flooded by teachers and teachings of various persuasions. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, the Buddha didn’t try to convince people that the method through which he found release from suffering was

the only true method. A common theme running through many of the sutras could be summarized in modern terms as, “This is just what I did and this is what I recognized. Don’t believe anything I say because I say so. Try it out for yourselves.”

He didn’t actively discourage people from considering what he’d learned and how he learned it. Rather, in his teachings on buddhanature, he presented his listeners with a kind of thought experiment, inviting them to discover within their own experience the ways in which aspects of buddhanature emerge from time to time in our daily lives. He presented this experiment in terms of an analogy of a house in which a lamp has been lit and the shades or shutters have been drawn. The house represents the seemingly solid perspective of physical, mental, and emotional conditioning. The lamp represents our buddhanature. No matter how tightly the shades and shutters are drawn, inevitably a bit of the light from inside the house shines through.

Inside, the light from the lamp provides the clarity to distinguish between, say, a chair, a bed, or a carpet. As it peeks through the shades or shutters we may experience the light of wisdom sometimes as intuition, what some people describe as a “gut level” feeling about a person, situation, or event.

Loving-kindness and compassion shine through the shutters in those moments when we spontaneously give aid or comfort to someone, not out of self-interest or thinking we might get something in return, but just because it seems the right thing to do. It may be something as simple as offering people a shoulder to cry on when they’re in pain or helping someone cross the street, or it may involve a longer-term commitment, like sitting by the bedside of someone ill or dying. We’ve all heard, too, of extreme instances in which someone, without even thinking about the risk to his or her own life, jumps into a river to save a stranger who is drowning.

Capability often manifests in the way in which we survive difficult events. For example, a long-time Buddhist practitioner I met recently had invested heavily in the stock market back in the 1990s, and when the market fell later in the decade, he lost everything. Many of his friends and partners had also lost a great deal of money, and some of them went a little crazy. Some lost confidence in themselves and their ability to make decisions; some fell into deep depression; others, like the people who lost money during the stock market crash of 1929, jumped out of windows. But he didn’t lose his mind, his confidence, or fall into depression. Slowly, slowly, he began investing again and built up a new, solid financial base.

Seeing his apparent calm in the face of such a terrific downturn of events, a number of his friends and associates asked him how he was able to retain his equanimity. “Well,” he replied, “I



PHOTO BY KARMA LECHO/TERGAR

got all this money from the stock market, then it went back to the stock market, and now it’s coming back. Conditions change, but I’m still here. I can make decisions. So maybe I was living in a big house one year and sleeping on a friend’s couch the next, but that doesn’t change the fact that I can choose how to think about myself and all the stuff happening around me. I consider myself very fortunate, in fact. Some people aren’t capable of choosing and some people don’t recognize that they can choose. I guess I’m lucky because I fall into the category of people who are able to recognize their capacity for choice.”

I’ve heard similar remarks from people who are coping with chronic illness, either in themselves, their parents, their children, other family members, or friends. One man I met recently in North America, for instance, spoke at length about maintaining his job and his relationship with his wife and children while continuing to visit his father who was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. “Of course it’s hard to balance all these things,” he said. “But it’s what I do. I don’t see any other way.”

Such a simple statement, but how refreshing! Though he’d never attended a Buddhist teaching before, had never studied the literature, and didn’t necessarily identify himself as Buddhist, his description of his life and the way he approached it represented a spontaneous expression of all three aspects of buddhanature: the wisdom to see the depth and breadth of his situation, the capability to choose how to interpret and act on what he saw, and the spontaneous attitude of loving-kindness and compassion.

As I listened to him, it occurred to me that these three characteristics of buddhanature can be summed up in a single word: courage—specifically the courage to *be*, just as we are, right here, right now, with all our doubts and uncertainties. Facing experience directly opens us to the possibility of recognizing that whatever we experience—love, loneliness, hate, jealousy, joy, greed, grief, and so on—is, in essence, an expression of the fundamentally unlimited potential of our buddhanature.

This principle is implied in the “positive prognosis” of the

At any given moment, you can choose to follow the chain of thoughts, emotions, and sensations that reinforce a perception of yourself as vulnerable and limited—or you can remember that your true nature is pure, unconditioned, and incapable of being harmed.

third noble truth. Whatever discomfort we feel—subtle, intense, or somewhere in-between—subsides to the degree that we cut through our fixation upon a very limited, conditioned, and conditional view of ourselves and begin to identify with the capability to experience anything at all. Eventually, it’s possible to come to rest in buddhanature itself—the way, for instance, a bird might rest in coming home to its nest. At that point, suffering ends. There is nothing to fear, nothing to resist. Not even death can trouble you.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL GODENAU

JOYFUL WISDOM

You will succeed if you persevere; and you will find a joy in overcoming obstacles.

—HELEN KELLER

Within our perceived weaknesses and imperfections lies the key to realizing our true strength. By facing our disturbing emotions and the problems that occur in our lives, we discover an experience of well-being that extends outward as well as inward. Had I not faced the panic and anxiety I felt through most of my youth, I would not be in the position I find myself today. I would never have found the courage or the strength to get on a plane, travel around the world, and sit before an audience of strangers passing on the wisdom I’d

learned not only through my own experience, but the experiences of the truly great masters who were my guides and teachers.

We’re all buddhas. We just don’t recognize it. We are confined in many ways to a limited view of ourselves and the world around us through cultural conditioning, family upbringing, personal experience, and the basic biological predisposition toward making distinctions and measuring present experience and future hopes and fears against a neuronal warehouse of memories.

Once you commit yourself to developing an awareness of your buddhanature, you’ll inevitably start to see changes in your day-to-day experience. Things that used to trouble you gradually lose their power to upset you. You’ll become intuitively wiser, more relaxed, and more openhearted. You’ll begin to recognize obstacles as opportunities for further growth. And as your illusory sense of limitation and vulnerability gradually fades away, you’ll discover deep within yourself the true grandeur of who and what you are.

Best of all, as you start to see your own potential, you’ll also begin to recognize it in everyone around you. Buddhanature is not a special quality available to a privileged few. The true mark of recognizing your buddhanature is to realize how ordinary it really is—the ability to see that every living creature shares it, though not everyone recognizes it in him- or herself. So instead of closing your heart to people who yell at you or act in some other harmful way, you find yourself becoming more open. You recognize that they aren’t “jerks,” but are people who, like you, want to be happy and peaceful. They’re only acting like jerks because they haven’t recognized their true nature and are overwhelmed by sensations of vulnerability and fear.

Your practice can begin with the simple aspiration to do better, to approach all of your activities with a greater sense of awareness and insight, and to open your heart more deeply toward others. Motivation is the single most important factor in determining whether your experience is conditioned by suffering or by peace. Wisdom and compassion actually develop at the same pace. The more attentive you become, the easier you’ll find it to be compassionate. And the more you open your heart to others, the wiser and more attentive you become in all your activities.

At any given moment, you can choose to follow the chain of thoughts, emotions, and sensations that reinforce a perception of yourself as vulnerable and limited—or you can remember that your true nature is pure, unconditioned, and incapable of

being harmed. You can remain in the sleep of ignorance or remember that you are and always have been awake. Either way, you're still expressing the unlimited nature of your true being. Ignorance, vulnerability, fear, anger, and desire are expressions of the infinite potential of your buddhanature. There's nothing inherently wrong or right with making such choices. The fruit of Buddhist practice is simply the recognition that these and other mental afflictions are nothing more or less than choices available to us because our real nature is infinite in scope.

We choose ignorance because we can. We choose awareness because we can. Samsara and nirvana are simply different points of view based on the choices we make in how to examine and understand our experience. There's nothing magical about nirvana and nothing bad or wrong about samsara. If you're determined to think of yourself as limited, fearful, vulnerable, or scarred by past experience, know only that you have chosen to do so. The opportunity to experience yourself differently is always available.

In essence, the Buddhist path offers a choice between familiarity and practicality. There is, without question, a certain comfort and stability in maintaining familiar patterns of thought and behavior. Stepping outside that zone of comfort and familiarity necessarily involves moving into a realm of unfamiliar experience that may seem really scary, an uncomfortable in-between

realm. You don't know whether to go back to what was familiar but frightening or to forge ahead toward what may be frightening simply because it's unfamiliar.

In a sense, the uncertainty surrounding the choice to recognize your full potential is similar to what several of my students have told me about ending an abusive relationship: there's a certain reluctance or sense of failure associated with letting go of the relationship.

The primary difference between severing an abusive relationship and entering the path of Buddhist practice is that when you enter the path of Buddhist practice you're ending an abusive relationship with yourself. When you choose to recognize your true potential, you gradually begin to find yourself belittling yourself less frequently, your opinion of yourself becomes more positive and wholesome, and your sense of confidence and sheer joy at being alive increases. At the same time, you begin to recognize that everyone around you has the same potential, whether they know it or not. Instead of dealing with them as threats or adversaries, you'll find yourself able to recognize and empathize with their fear and unhappiness. You'll spontaneously respond to them in ways that emphasize solutions rather than problems.

Ultimately, joyful wisdom comes down to choosing between the discomfort of becoming aware of your mental afflictions and

the discomfort of being ruled by them. I can't promise you that it will always be pleasant simply to rest in the awareness of your thoughts, feelings, and sensations—and to recognize them as interactive creations of your own mind and body. In fact, I can pretty much guarantee that looking at yourself this way will be, at times, extremely unpleasant.

But the same can be said about beginning anything new, whether it's going to the gym, starting a job, or beginning a diet. The first few months are always difficult. It's hard to learn all the skills you need to master a job; it's hard to motivate yourself to exercise; and it's hard to eat healthfully every day. But after a while the difficulties subside; you start to feel a sense of pleasure or accomplishment, and your entire sense of self begins to change.

Meditation works the same way. For the first few days you might feel very good, but after a week or so, practice becomes a trial. You can't find the time, sitting is uncomfortable, you can't focus, or you just get tired. You hit a wall, as runners do when they try to add an extra half mile to their exercise. The body says, "I can't," while the mind says, "I should." Neither voice is particularly pleasant; in fact, they're both a bit demanding.

Buddhism is often referred to as the "middle way" because it offers a third option. If you just can't focus on a sound or a candle flame for one second longer, then by all means stop. Oth-

erwise, meditation becomes a chore. You'll end up thinking, "Oh no, it's 7:15. I have to sit down and cultivate awareness." No one ever progresses that way. On the other hand, if you think you could go on for another minute or two, then go on. You may be surprised by what you learn. You might discover a particular thought or feeling behind your resistance that you didn't want to acknowledge. Or you may simply find that you can actually rest your mind longer than you thought you could. That discovery alone can give you greater confidence in yourself.

But the best part of all is that no matter how long you practice, or what method you use, every technique of Buddhist meditation ultimately generates compassion. Whenever you look at your mind, you can't help but recognize your similarity to those around you. When you see your own desire to be happy, you can't avoid seeing the same desire in others. And when you look clearly at your own fear, anger, or aversion, you can't help but see that everyone around you feels the same fear, anger, and aversion. This is wisdom—not in the sense of book learning, but in the awakening of the heart, the recognition of our connection to others, and the road to joy. ♦

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Joyful Son

Mingyur Rinpoche comes from an extraordinary family devoted to the teachings known as "the

THE YOUNG TIBETAN TEACHER Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche comes from an illustrious family of masters who have been influential in bringing the profound teachings known as Dzogchen to the world. His father, Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche (1920-1996), was renowned as one of the great Dzogchen masters of the twentieth century, and four of Tulku Ugyen's sons, including Mingyur Rinpoche, are themselves well-known teachers with significant followings in the West.

Often translated as "the Great Perfection," Dzogchen presents the view that we all abide in a natural state of pure awareness, free from extremes, and that suffering and liberation alike, both samsara and nirvana, are merely an "illusory display." This natural state is often likened to a pure, vast blue sky out of which appearances emerge only to dissolve. Dzogchen's rigorous practices are geared toward continually letting go of whatever occurs in body and mind that may temporarily obscure this natural state.

Mingyur Rinpoche's father, Tulku Ugyen, lived in Tibet for thirty-nine years before escaping to Nepal after the Chinese invasion of Tibet. In his home country, he had been privileged to

study with many of the masters who emerged from the great renaissance of Tibetan dharma that occurred in the late nineteenth century. He was steeped in two prominent meditation traditions of Vajrayana Buddhism—the Dzogchen teachings of the Nyingma school and the Mahamudra practices of the Kagyu tradition—and passed these teachings on to his children, as well as to many teachers and students who spent time with him in his hermitage above the Kathmandu Valley. Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche presented the highest teachings of Dzogchen with lyrical simplicity, and his books *Rainbow Painting* and *As It Is*, as well as the posthumous book of his memoirs, *Blazing Splendor*, are brilliant presentations of the flavor of Dzogchen mind.

Born in 1975, Mingyur Rinpoche is the youngest of Tulku Ugyen's spiritual heirs. Starting in 1984, he studied closely with his father at his hermitage, as well as with other masters of both the Kagyu and Nyingma schools. In his best-selling first book, *The Joy of Living: Unlocking the Secret and Science of Happiness*, he presented Buddhist teachings in the framework of Western medicine and neuroscience, and related how meditation had

Great Perfection." **BARRY BOYCE** has their story.

helped to resolve his problem as a young man with panic attacks. His teaching has been well-received by the increasing numbers of researchers who are seeking to verify the results of meditation in Western scientific terms.

Three of Mingyur Rinpoche's brothers are also well-known Dzogchen teachers. The eldest, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, has been a highly influential teacher for the past twenty-five years. His books include *Union of Mahamudra and Dzogchen* and *Present Fresh Wakefulness*. Drubwang Tsoknyi Rinpoche has a seat in Nepal that is home to a monastery, international meditation center, and translation committee. From his other seat, in Crestone, Colorado, Tsoknyi Rinpoche travels extensively in the West presenting teachings in a style similar to his father's, but in colloquial English. He is author of *Carefree Dignity* and *Fearless Simplicity*. Tsikey Chokling Rinpoche, author of *Lotus Ocean*, is considered the reincarnation of the Tibetan master who discovered the secret teachings that formed the basis for much of Tulku Ugyen's teaching. ♦

PHOTO BY MICHAEL GODENAU



Mingyur Rinpoche at age seven, with Tsoknyi Rinpoche and their father, Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche.