

Voice of Clear Light

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Openness, Options and Living a Worthwhile Life

An Excerpt from Rinpoche's Teachings in Amsterdam



Photo by Maria Aurelia Kulik

During a seminar on A-tri in Amsterdam in May 2015, Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche talked about openness and sangha and the options that are offered. Here is an excerpt, which also appears in the Summer issue of Ligmincha Europe magazine.

I want to talk about sangha and openness. I have been teaching in the West for the last 25 years. And one of the things that I have learned from my teaching is to be open to those who are learning from me. To be open means to be open to both the student's level of familiarity and lack of familiarity; to the student's ability to understand and not to understand; to the student's readiness to commit or not to commit. I developed a deep respect for those who are learning from me, for who they are.

For me, the role of the teacher is not to teach what I think is right, but to pay attention to what the students are experiencing and how they are relating to the teachings. This is more important than my opinion of the right way and the wrong way. Trying to push everybody into the right way is not my style. At the end of the day, my intention is to help, and you help more people by being open. There are people who don't want to agree with you. Be open to them. Whatever they understand, meet them at their level of understanding.

You might ask, but what is the right way? Different people need different things. But what is the right way, the best way? There is no right way; there is no best way. Right is what transforms

you. Best is what elevates you. There are a lot of people suffering with their Buddhist practices in the West. Buddhism is bringing more suffering into their lives, not because of the practice being done but because of their relationship to their practice.

The main point in teaching and in practice is to be open. What does that mean? I am bringing different opportunities to the West. At Lishu Institute in Dehradun, India, I offer people the possibility to study the texts as you would study in a university or as I did when I experienced my geshe training. In the beginning, I tried to make it a five-year program, but it did not work. So I made it a three-year program, and still that was difficult. Finally I said Okay, I will give you the flexibility of coming every six months. I have been trying to accommodate and accommodate even more, and still it is difficult. But at least I am not stepping back. If there are only five people or even only one, we will do it! [Currently 11 students are enrolled for the fall semester at Lishu.] In September 2015 we will start. And if there are dedicated people who don't have any money, I'll find the money for them to do it. Money should not be the obstacle, because it matters; it is important. And above all, it is special to those who feel they want to do it. For those who have that level of dedication, they now have a place where they can do it.

On the other side is The 3 Doors program. This is very much about personal work. Several years ago there was a big conference in North America called "Buddhism in the West." H.H. Dalai Lama and many lamas from other schools were there. I was also invited, and so I went. One of the big discussions was "Teaching in the West." I found it rather strange that there were extreme opinions being expressed. There were people saying: This is right! And: That is wrong! How can you have that? Buddha never said that one way is wrong. In the Bon tradition there are nine ways, and each of these ways exists because the capacities and needs of people differ. It is not that one approach is right and another approach is wrong. It took me a little time to articulate my position for myself before talking to anybody else about it. It seemed like the wrong thing to say of a particular approach that it is not right, because that particular approach is right for some people. And that particular approach is wrong for some people. But in and of itself, it is not appropriate to say that an approach is not right. A fundamental principle of Bon Buddhism is that there is nothing inherently wrong.

Many things come from openness in my life. If I thought that only one approach to the path of liberation was right, then my walls would be very small and narrow. My ability to help people would be very limited. And my ability to touch people's hearts would be very limited, because then every heart should be like my heart, and that is a problem because it is simply not like that. The whole motivation to create The 3 Doors came from openness. The purpose of The 3 Doors is not studying texts, but working with practices to change yourself. Is working with yourself easier or is working with a text easier? Is working with yourself more interesting or is working with a text more interesting? Are both equally interesting? Are both equally important? It depends on who you are. We already have over 100 people who have graduated from The 3

Doors Academy. I do not have to evaluate or promote the program as good or bad, because you can talk to the graduates themselves. Every time I meet them, they are a little crazy, exclaiming, “Oh, it is so good!” It’s amazing for me to witness the expressions of their gratitude and their transformations and how deeply their journey in The 3 Doors has touched them. Their experiences are much richer than my explanations could ever be. Sometimes people will ask me to say something about The 3 Doors. Why should I talk about it? Those in the program or who have graduated can tell me and others what they feel. This is far more alive than what I have to say. They are talking about real transformations. And one important thing is that they have touched the areas of their lives which are difficult. They are able to go in their practice to the exact places that need to be acknowledged and respected and transformed. They go to those areas and they have a lot of support to do so within their practice and from the collective presence of others in the program.

So we have Lishu and we have The 3 Doors, and in between we have all the activities in the Ligmincha sangha. Each person is trying to relate to the teachings and the practices from their own level and in their own way. This weekend is a wonderful example. We have the A-tri text. And within this text are many details. Some of these details are not all that necessary. So here we put more emphasis upon the core aspects and our experiences with those aspects. So 70 percent of our focus here is upon practices and experiences, and about 30 percent is on the teaching of the text. I think that balance is better. You might not understand every word, but I hope you have some concrete and valuable experiences during this weekend. Of course it is somewhat difficult to experience everything in two days! That’s why if you feel you want to study a lot more, go to Lishu Institute!

Ligmincha, as an organization, is inviting more resident teachers. In Europe we have a lama living in our center in Poland, and a lama in living in Paris — Geshe Khorden Lhundup Gyaltsen. In the past I have encouraged the sangha here that it may be a good idea to have a resident teacher. I don’t know if they did not hear it, or if they forgot about it, and so I’ll keep reminding them. To invite a teacher from Nepal or India is not that easy. The immigration takes months and involves dealing with lawyers and a lot of paperwork. And the responsibility when you invite somebody includes health insurance and a lot of other things. But now, you have to do very little. Paris is a three-hour train ride from here. That presents an opportunity. You have to be open to it, and you have to see it. If you see it, there is no way you cannot take action. So I am encouraging the sangha here to come together and to take advantage of this.

I have been reflecting on what to do. For three years I have been teaching the A-tri. It is a Tibetan text and there is an English translation, so it would be great if Geshe Khorden Lhundup Gyaltsen could come and go through the text with you. Those of you who are very new here might wonder why you have to study the A-tri text. But if you ask me — which perhaps you are not — then I say: Yes! Go for it! Take advantage of that great teacher and learn a little bit more.

You will be meditating anyway, so it is best to learn a little bit more. I encourage you to do that. And organizationally, I am encouraging this, too. So perhaps you can invite him every three months, and he can come to different parts of the Netherlands. I encourage everyone to be part of it. And for those who want to be part of The 3 Doors Academy, the opportunity exists. And for those who feel that The 3 Doors is too much and that studying Tibetan is too much, then you have a free webcast every month coming to your home. These are the options.

But please don't think that one option is better than the other. There is nothing like that in the dharma. So when anybody — including a lama — says that one approach is a little better than the other one, that attitude itself is fundamentally wrong. That is the lack of openness that we are talking about here. In saying that one approach is better than another, you are basically disrespecting someone, for there is someone who needs that approach, and you are not respecting that person. Imagine that I love carrying a mala and I try to convince everyone to carry a mala. Now someone says to me: This mala is too heavy to carry! And I say back to them, No, you must have a mala; it is important. So now we are getting into a discussion, and I am feeling a little bit rejected and a little angry, and I end up saying: You are not a serious practitioner. Come on, you must have a mala. And even further: I think you are a bad practitioner! Maybe even: You are not even a practitioner because you don't carry a mala! People say these things. It shows a lack of respect.

So be open to the teachings and learn whatever you can learn. And don't punish yourself or punish other people for having different paths. Know that the only spiritual practice worth doing is the practice that leads you to openness. Otherwise, even a spiritual practice is not worth doing.

Unfortunately, for some people, so-called spiritual practice is nothing more than honoring their own painful patterns. Nothing changes. It is exactly the same product with a nicer label. If nothing has changed, you are fooling yourself in your practice. And when your spiritual practice does lead you to openness, do not simply experience that openness in your practice, but bring it into your life. The real meaning of openness comes in living with openness and sharing your life openly. Do what you can do with openness, not with blocks. Express your life with joy, not with fear. Express your life with creativity, not with pressure. Live your life with openness, for openness is the only way to live a worthwhile life.