

Patrul Rinpoche Talk

by Vessantara

‘HERE YOU ARE AGAIN, DRIVING YOURSELF CRAZY!’

According to some scientists all human beings, all the billions of us on this planet, are traceable back to a common ancestor in Africa. Just as genetically it seems we can trace our lineage back to that one individual, similarly spiritually we can trace our lineage as Buddhists back to the Buddha Shakyamuni. Whether we are Theravadins, Zen practitioners, Tibetan Buddhists and so forth, we all ultimately draw our spiritual inspiration from his enlightenment experience under the Bodhi-tree.

Sometimes in the history of Buddhism this fact has been lost sight of, and factionalism has developed. Instead of appreciating the different ways in which Shakyamuni’s vision has been expressed, people have developed a narrow-minded and closed-hearted view of Buddhist schools and traditions other than their own.

In this talk we are going to meet someone who was at the heart of a very important development in Tibetan Buddhism in the 19th century, known as the Rimay movement. Rimay means ‘without limits or boundaries’. Factionalism between different schools had been a serious problem in Tibetan Buddhism at times, with all kinds of power struggles. Early in the 19th century a number of great lamas – including Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, Jamgon Kongtrul and Mipham Rinpoche – worked together to break down factionalism and to re-inspire the tradition by cross-fertilisation between the schools. They did this by swapping teachings and initiations. They didn’t mix up the various teachings, but they taught the doctrines and practices of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism impartially. In this way they transcended the narrow-minded sectarianism of thinking ‘My school’s the best’, recognising that all four were quite capable of producing enlightened practitioners.

These great lamas thought of themselves principally as Buddhists, rather than as adherents of a particular school. They studied and practised all the Buddhism available to them in 19th century Tibet. Nowadays we have far more Buddhism available to us. Buddhists in the West are like merchants watching their ships come in from all parts of the Buddhist world, bringing with them all the treasures of South East Asian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Central Asian Buddhism, as well of course as Tibetan Buddhism. So, like those Rimay lamas, we need to think of ourselves first and foremost as just Buddhists. And even though we may be practising within a particular school or lineage, we can have an open attitude to the whole Buddhist tradition, that whole great treasure trove.

In my own small way I have been reflecting this in my teaching. I’ve published a book called *Tales of Freedom* that includes stories from the Pali Canon, Tibetan Buddhism and Zen. To explore such a range of teaching would virtually never have been possible before in Buddhist history. We are very fortunate in the richness of what is available to us.

Through seeing the many forms Buddhism has taken, we can more easily discern the quintessence of all of them.

In this short series we shall be meeting one of the greatest of these nineteenth-century Rimay masters. His name is Patrul Rinpoche. I am very happy to be talking about this particular teacher, because I have been very struck by his character and qualities. In each talk we shall examine an incident or two from his life, to get a feel for the man, as well as exploring some of his teaching, trying to see its implications for us. As this is the first talk in the series, I am going to start by giving you a short biography of Patrul Rinpoche - to give you a sense of his life overall, so that you have a context for the stories and teaching.

Patrul Rinpoche was born in 1808 into a nomadic tribe in Eastern Tibet, in an area of vast grassland known as Dzachu Kha. As a small child he displayed a sharp intelligence, natural kindness, and an aptitude for the Dharma. He was soon recognised as a tulku, as a spiritual practitioner of an earlier time, who had taken rebirth in order to continue his service to humanity. The practitioner of whom the child was recognised as the rebirth was called Palge of Dzogchen Monastery. So 'Palge Tulku' became shortened to 'Patrul'. 'Rinpoche' is an honorific term, meaning 'Precious One'.

Later in his life, Patrul Rinpoche was described by his biographer (the third Dodrupchen Rinpoche), as follows:

"His head is broad like a parasol. His face is like a blossoming lotus, and his sense-faculties are very clear. Usually he has very little sickness. From childhood he has been endowed with great wisdom, compassion and courage. He has great confidence and is a brilliant orator. "

Patrul Rinpoche studied all the Tibetan Buddhist traditions with great masters in Eastern Tibet. His two principal teachers were Dö Khyentse Rinpoche and Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu. Dö Khyentse was a very unusual teacher indeed - a wild and iconoclastic character whom we shall meet in the third talk in this series. Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu was also an extraordinary practitioner. He spent years living alone in a remote valley near the snowline. He did not live in a hermitage, or even in a cave like Milarepa, but simply practised meditation in a small depression on a windswept hillside, subsisting on wild plants and roots, devoting himself uncompromisingly to transforming his mind through meditation.

Patrul Rinpoche was deeply influenced by this teacher's example. The best known of Patrul Rinpoche's writings is called The Words of My Perfect Teacher (kunzang lama'i shalung) which he claimed was simply what he had heard from Jigme Gyalwai Nyugu about the fundamental teachings of the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Like all Patrul Rinpoche's writings, it is a wonderful mixture of the profound and the down-to-earth: deeply encouraging and kind, but also hard-hitting and critical where he sees people causing themselves suffering by failing to practise the Dharma correctly.

Although he was an important tulku and entitled to a high place in a monastery, Patrul Rinpoche renounced his obligations and became a hermit and a wanderer. As we shall see in the second talk, his main practice was compassion. Although some people were wary of him because he communicated very directly and could be very unflattering, he was unfailingly kind. He spent much of his time teaching the violent tribesmen of Golok in Eastern Tibet, encouraging them to give up fighting and quarrels. He was great-hearted, and able to communicate with all kinds of people. He taught ordinary people the basics of the Dharma, especially the recitation of OM MANI PADME HUM, the mantra of the Lord of Compassion. He had memorised many Dharma texts in his youth which he could teach from memory.

He was particularly devoted to the Bodhicharyavatara of Santideva, which he taught from memory, often to very large gatherings, over 100 times. He was also a great exponent of Dzogchen, the highest form of practice in the Nyingma School, and he helped many of his disciples to arrive at profound realisations of the nature of the mind.

Despite all this, Patrul Rinpoche was completely humble and unassuming. He would often wander unrecognised, clad in a ragged robe which made him look more like a beggar than a great lama. He made no show of any spiritual attainment. But to a few close disciples he admitted that he could remember over a hundred previous lives, and that he had no emotional defilements left.

After being a beacon of kindness and wisdom for Eastern Tibet, he died in the Fire Pig Year (1881) at the age of 78 or 79.

This is a very brief account of the life of the extraordinary man whom we shall be meeting in these talks. However, although just getting a sense of Patrul Rinpoche as a human being will have a good effect on our minds, we shall also be trying to draw out from incidents in his life something of the spiritual qualities which he embodied, and to see how they can be developed, on a lower level, in our own lives. To do this we are going to follow a scheme which is very common in Tibetan Buddhism: known as the 3 Principal Paths.

According to this scheme, the path to enlightenment can be divided into 3 great stages of:

1) renunciation - seeing the faults of mundane existence and emotionally disentangling oneself from it;

2) bodhichitta - developing the compassionate desire to help all living beings to escape from suffering; and

3) wisdom - the understanding of the nature of reality which cuts through the root of all our suffering. We shall concentrate on one of these in each of our three talks.

These three qualities can be seen in different relations to one another. They can be seen, as it were on the same level, as the antidotes to the three poisons of craving, aversion and

ignorance. With renunciation we decisively abandon craving; the compassion of bodhichitta overcomes aversion; wisdom dispels the thick fogs of ignorance. They can also be viewed as progressive, with renunciation being one's concern to drag oneself away from suffering. This leads on to the empathetic realisation that all other living beings suffer just as we do, so we cannot simply work to save ourselves. Finally with wisdom we see through the false concepts of 'self and other' which we impose on our experience, have a direct intuitive experience of the true nature of things and work to help all others to come to that liberating realisation. Finally, these three can be seen as a spiral dance, in which renunciation leads to compassion, which leads to wisdom, which then deepens our renunciation, and so on.

Now that we have some sense of Patrul Rinpoche's life, and have a sense of the three paths, it is time to look at an incident which is very typical of the man, and which demonstrates his renunciation.

Once Patrul Rinpoche spent a week giving teachings on the Bodhicharyavatara at a place called Zamthang. During the teaching an old man offered him a large silver ingot in the shape of a horse's hoof. Among the crowd who saw this offering made was a thief. While Patrul Rinpoche expounded Santideva's inspiring text, the thief's mind was full of plans for getting his hands on the silver.

Finally Patrul Rinpoche had finished expounding his heart text, and he left Zamthang and resumed his wanderings. The thief tracked him silently for hours, waiting for his chance. His job was made easier because Patrul Rinpoche as usual was alone and unattended. That night Patrul Rinpoche lay down to sleep in an isolated spot. The thief crept up and peered around in the darkness. Where was the silver? All that lay near Patrul Rinpoche was a small shoulder bag. Feeling silently within it, the thief found nothing but a clay teapot.

There was nothing for the thief to do but begin rummaging surreptitiously in Patrul Rinpoche's bedding.

The hands exploring his clothes startled Patrul Rinpoche awake, and he demanded to know what was going on. The thief threateningly replied that he knew Patrul Rinpoche had been given a large piece of silver, and demanded that he hand it over.

Patrul Rinpoche wasn't in the least intimidated by being threatened by a robber in such a lonely place. He shook his head, and replied:

"Look what a mess you make of life, running around like a madman!" You poor idiot, you came all this way, just for that silver." Then he explained that he had left the silver on the ground at the place where he had been offered it. He had used it as a stand for his teapot and then gone off leaving it in the ashes of the fire.

The thief found this story almost impossible to believe. But Patrul Rinpoche spoke with total certainty, and the silver didn't seem to be anywhere about. Eventually the thief had

no choice but to go back and look for it where Patrul Rinpoche claimed he had left it. You can imagine his state of mind as he stumbled back towards Zamthang in the darkness. Part of him was cursing himself for a fool for allowing himself to be tricked by that lying old lama, who could not possibly have left something so valuable behind. Part of him was hurrying forward to find the campfire in case the silver was there and someone else found it first. Eventually after a long sleepless night, around dawn he came upon Zamthang and found the campfire. There in the ashes, catching the sun's first rays, was the gleaming silver ingot.

The thief's emotional responses to his discovery were a mixture of surprise, relief, exultation, and then a deep unease, followed by an outburst of much deeper feelings. We can imagine that a western thief in such a situation would feel challenged by the situation. People who cheat and steal often justify their actions to themselves, semiconsciously, with the idea that this is a bad old world, everyone is out for what they can get, and so forth. It would be challenging for their deeply-held emotional attitudes to come across someone as unattached to wealth and possessions as Patrul Rinpoche. However, this thief was a Tibetan, and though (as we can gather from his actions) he was not a Dharma practitioner, nonetheless he had been brought up with Tibetan Buddhist beliefs. One of these is that the karmic effects of an action differ depending on the spiritual status of the person to whom the action is directed. For example to attack a bodhisattva is considered to be a much more weighty negative karma than to attack an ordinary person. Now it dawned on the thief that Patrul Rinpoche must be a highly realised practitioner, and that by threatening and trying to steal from such a person, he had created a karmic effect which would result in some very serious future suffering for himself.

The thief's heart was gripped by a pincer movement of powerful feelings: on one side the impact of the revelation that there really were lamas who did not just mouth the Dharma but who totally embodied their teachings; on the other the awful fear and dread of what the repercussions of harmful actions against such a lama must be. This combination cracked open the protective emotional carapace which had allowed him to be a thief. Sobbing deeply, he set off once more in Patrul Rinpoche's footsteps, but this time with a very different motivation.

When he finally caught up with Patrul Rinpoche, he got a seemingly-frosty reception: 'Here you are again, driving yourself crazy! I told you where to find what you wanted. What is it now?' The tearful thief poured out a remorseful confession that he had been ready to beat and rob such a highly-realised master. He begged his intended victim's forgiveness. Patrul Rinpoche told him not to worry about confession or asking forgiveness. He said that all the thief really needed to do was to develop a good heart and go for refuge to the Three Jewels.

Later, other people who were devoted to Patrul Rinpoche heard what had happened. They caught the thief and started beating him.

Patrul Rinpoche was nearby, and heard the commotion. Following the noise and seeing what was happening, in his usual forthright way he shouted at them: 'If you harm my

disciple, it is as if you are harming me. Leave him alone!’

In this story we see Patrul Rinpoche’s fearlessness in confronting the robber very directly. He doesn’t cower to avoid possibly being beaten up. We also have a demonstration of his great kindness and compassion toward a man who had threatened and tried to rob him. However, what is perhaps most striking is his extraordinary, carefree unconcern for wealth and possessions. His actions in this story are typical of him. He used to wander from place to place with nothing but a small cloth shoulder bag, his clay teapot and a copy of the Bodhicharyavatara, his favourite text. When people made offerings to him he would refuse them. If they insisted, when he left the place where he had been given them, he would simply leave them on the ground where they had been given to him. In our ‘shop till you drop’ society, such behaviour would be eccentric to put it mildly. What was it that made Patrul Rinpoche act in this way?

Patrul Rinpoche acted like this because he had seen, and responded to, the existential situation in which all human beings find themselves. In Tibetan Buddhism one is encouraged to acknowledge this situation by reflection on what are known as the ‘four thoughts that turn the mind to the Dharma’. Patrul Rinpoche himself wrote a very direct and useful commentary on these reflections in the early chapters of *The Words of my Perfect Teacher*.

What are these four reflections which help us to see our situation in life? In brief, they are:

- 1) Considering the good fortune of having been born a human being, and having come in contact with the Dharma;
- 2) Reflecting on the impermanence of all things, especially our own life and the fleeting opportunity which it presents;
- 3) Understanding that our fortunes in this life (and future lives) are shaped by our choices - our volitional actions. That skilful actions, based on contentment, love and understanding lead to happiness, and unskilful actions, based on craving, aversion and ignorance, lead to suffering. As Jamgon Kongtrul, one of Patrul Rinpoche’s contemporaries bluntly put it: *“If you plant buckwheat you get buckwheat; if you plant barley you get barley.”*
- 4) Seeing the unsatisfactoriness of all forms of mundane life: from realms of intense suffering, to joyful states which have in them the seeds of suffering because we are attached to them and one day they must end.

These four thoughts could be reduced down to the following mottoes:

- 1) This life is a real opportunity;

- 2) Everything changes;
- 3) Everything you do counts;
- 4) Mundane life always ends in tears.

Or, if we wanted to reduce all this down to one short sentence, it might be: 'Seize the day; seize the Dharma!'

Taking these reflections to heart, Patrul Rinpoche practised the Dharma as hard as he knew how, and transformed himself into an extraordinary person. This Dharma transformation was very radical indeed. It turned inside-out the values on which most of us rely. We tend to feel that:

- 1) Life is meaningless, or an opportunity to enjoy ourselves;
- 2) In theory we acknowledge that things change, but in practice we act as if they don't - heaping up possessions for the future, acting as if we're immortal, and being shocked when anyone close to us dies.
- 3) We either feel that we are powerless victims of outside circumstances which are responsible for our lives going wrong, or that what we do does matter, but that we can get away with acting on our own account if we're smart enough;
- 4) Mundane life is basically good and happy, but somehow from time to time it inexplicably goes wrong. Or alternatively, mundane life is pretty awful but there is nothing else so we just have to make the best of it.

However, Patrul Rinpoche knows what we are like, and has some very straightforward advice for us in something he wrote called '*The Heart Treasure of the Enlightened Ones*':

*'Expecting a lot from people, you do a lot of smiling;
Needing many things for yourself, you have many needs to meet;
Making plans to do first this then that, your mind's full of hopes and fears;
From now on, come what may, don't be like that.'*

If we are honest with ourselves, so much of what we do is not worthy of ourselves as human beings. Even with those things which do have real value we often do not count the overall costs. We are unrealistic and become embroiled in situations which we did not intend.

To take a very mundane example, I write books and articles when I have the time, working on a computer. Recently there has come on the market voice recognition software, which would enable me to use my computer like a secretary, just dictating into a microphone.

Great! But when I investigate it, I discover that in order to save time using this software, I would need a faster computer, with more memory, and an upgraded operating system, which would mean changing some of my other software. Then I would need a week to buy the new computer, install the software and make it all work. Then I would spend more time learning how to use the new programs, and adapting to a whole new way of working.

We will often go to incredible lengths, jumping through all kinds of hoops, in order to get something which we soon are either tired of, disappointed in, or start taking for granted. All this takes energy and our valuable human life, and reinforces our tendency to believe that there is a magic solution - out there somewhere – which will make our lives all right. In this way, we go round and round, driving ourselves crazy. The sad thing is that were we but to stop and explore our own minds more deeply we should find everything that we ever dreamed of, and more - closer than our own back doorstep. Patrul Rinpoche's analogy for this is of a man who spends all his time roaming around begging, convinced he is destitute, when all the time his hearthstone is made of gold.

The way we live our lives is enough to make any bodhisattva weep.

It is obvious why Patrul Rinpoche says to the thief: 'Here you are again, driving yourself crazy!' The man has spent all the time since he saw the silver ingot offered to Patrul Rinpoche in working out how to steal it. He has doubtless also fantasised about what he will do with it once it is his. He has had to follow Patrul Rinpoche for hours, and then creep up on him at dead of night, breath held, hoping to find the silver without waking him. Then after the confrontation, which didn't go at all as he had planned, he has had to trudge back to the place where Patrul Rinpoche was teaching. Then having found the silver he has realised the true nature of the situation – that stealing it was a terrible idea all along, and will cause him much suffering. Finally distraught and desperate he has rushed off again to find Patrul Rinpoche to beg his forgiveness. From the point of view of Patrul Rinpoche, who was quite happy to leave the silver lying where it was given to him, never giving it a second thought, all this fevered planning, fantasising and running around seems like madness.

However, Patrul Rinpoche could equally admonish me, any of us, in the same way. We rush round chasing our tails, constantly scheming and working for that day in the future when everything will come right, constantly convinced that this or that person, situation, bank balance, home, job, etc. will make us truly happy. So we dash about, never satisfied, never peaceful. Oscar Wilde famously described English fox-hunters as 'The unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable.' Patrul Rinpoche could similarly describe us as 'the insatiable in pursuit of the unsatisfying'. When will we ever stop?

We need to recognise that our minds can keep this up forever: always inventing new 'get happy quick' schemes for us to chase. Unless we realise this, and stop panting after these enticing mirages, our life which is a precious opportunity will be finished before you can say 'I was just about to get around to seriously practising the Dharma'.

So Rinpoche's advice to us is to stop rushing around, driving ourselves crazy, but to practise the Dharma urgently - taking instant action, he says, like a coward who has found a snake in his lap, or a dancing girl whose hair has caught fire - in order to make our lives meaningful.

At this point you may be thinking that it is impractical or impossible to leave everything behind and go and live out in the wilds. This may well be true, though what we think we need changes on different levels of consciousness. In a situation where our cravings and insecurities are being constantly stimulated by the media, advertising and so on, we think we need all kinds of things. In a quieter environment, when our mind has settled a little more peacefully, our needs become much fewer. As Patrul Rinpoche's guru demonstrated by living on a barren hillside, if your mind is deeply contented and focused on the Dharma then you need virtually nothing at all.

Whether it is possible or appropriate for us to live a very simple life, we can all take three steps to stop driving ourselves crazy. Firstly we can work to find ways of reducing the amount of input we take in. Nowadays living in cities we are bombarded with information. Large companies pay thousands of dollars for any opportunity to grab our attention. Then there are all the news, shows, sports, entertainment, and so on. Next add books, mail, email, text messages, phone calls, people dropping by, and so forth. These experiences, even if many of them are quite trivial in terms of their emotional impact, all leave some impression on your mind and have to be assimilated, which takes energy. More subtly, much of this input has values woven into it, and these values all too easily insinuate themselves into your mind. In effect you end up being infected with other people's views and suffer as a result.

You may be fifty years old, and a serious Dharma practitioner. You may recently have been on a meditation retreat during which you had feelings of contentment and happiness that your life was meaningful. You come back to the city, and after a few weeks of being exposed to TV and adverts you may feel vaguely dissatisfied and worthless, because in the world of the media it is important to be young and blond. Over those few weeks you have been subtly infected by other people's views of what is desirable, which causes you to feel dissatisfaction and self-dislike.

Now, it is possible to be exposed to a lot of input without taking on others' views, but you need to wield a sharp sword of wisdom to do so. And it is more difficult when you are avalanched with experiences. Although you cut down many of the wrong views as they come at you, if there are too many of them and they keep on coming all day and every day, after a while some will find a way through and hurt you. So the more we can reduce the amount of input of this kind which we take in the better.

There is a second step which we can take to stop driving ourselves crazy. Our lives may need to be very full. We may have responsibilities or valuable work which it would be wrong to leave. As you may have noticed, many serious Dharma practitioners lead lives which are not exactly havens of tranquillity. However, even if our lives are full, we can simplify them by ensuring that every aspect of them is connected to our core

principles and values. If we manage to do this then, even if they are full of different aspects and activities, they will have an order to them which gives them a kind of simplicity. Though they have many elements they will be not a mess but a mandala.

Thirdly, as we go about our lives we can focus on our mental states rather than taking external situations at face value. We can become really interested in how our minds work, how we respond to situations, what we tell ourselves about our lives and the people we meet.

This focus on the mind, exploring how it works and its characteristics will eventually lead us to the development of wisdom, the third of the three principles of the path (and a subject for a talk another day).

These three steps boil down to pruning back what is unnecessary, making sure that everything we do is related to our deepest sources of meaning, and not taking life at face value but exploring our mental states.

We'll come back for a minute to the first of these steps - pruning back what is unnecessary, as this is a good start in initiating a satisfying process of renunciation. (We don't renounce anything for the sake of it. There are no Buddhist gold stars for sitting in a totally empty flat, or a depression on a windswept hillside just for the sake of it - you only need to renounce things which limit your freedom and clutter up your path to Enlightenment.)

We could say that essentially there are three levels of experience of life which we can have. The superficial and distracting; the truly human; and the profound. By the first, I mean all those activities which are simply the mind becoming distracted by pleasures, hopes and fears which, even in most human societies would have no meaning. Worrying about whether you've chosen the right designer label jeans, or whether you're developing cellulite, trying to decide whether to have the Black Forest Gateau or the raspberry cheesecake, wondering whether to see a car chase movie or stay home and watch TV. All these are the froth on the top of life which people can sometimes get caught up in. They have nothing to do with satisfying even your real human needs, and can easily take up a lot of time.

Be very wary of chasing after things you never knew you needed until you heard about them in the media. Be very wary of doing anything just in order to improve your image or have people like you.

The second level, the truly human, involves activities like developing loyal friendships, looking after your health, enjoying literature and the arts, and so on. The third level includes meditation, helping other people, studying the Dharma, and so on.

However, it is not that we can neatly arrange activities into these different levels. From the Buddhist point of view it is the mental states in which we do things that is the key. We could spend a whole so-called meditation period feeling upset because the shop had

run out of our favourite brand of Colombian coffee. Whilst outwardly we would appear to be doing something profound, actually our mind was caught up in the froth of life. Our aim, if we are to take the opportunity offered by this life, must be to have nothing to do with the superficial and unsatisfying; to ground ourselves solidly in the human, and then give ourselves as fully as we can to the Dharma, to solving the existential issues which confront us. To put it another way, we have to do our best to give up acting from the quest for pleasure, praise, fame, power, success and wealth and trying to avoid their opposites. We need to base our lives on the core values which are embodied in the Five Precepts: love, generosity, contentment, truth and awareness.

Our thief is a very fortunate man. In his crazy running around he has unwittingly bumped into someone who has stopped. Patrul Rinpoche may spend his life roaming from place to place, but his wanderings do not come from an unsatisfied search for meaning. They are the spontaneous movements of a free and contented heart. Let us hope that in our frenzied search for the silver ingots of mundane security we too shall meet someone who is 'solid like gold' . (Which incidentally is the second talk in this series.) For now it is enough for us to reflect on the antidotes to our crazy tail-chasing, remembering that life is an opportunity; that everything changes; that all our willed actions count and have an effect; and that worldly life always ends in tears and never gives us what we really want. Reflecting on these four points, hopefully we shall learn to seize the day, and to seize the Dharma.