

Ayya Yeshe

*How to Be a Light for Yourself and Others in Challenging Times*

Week Two: “Turning All We Meet into the Dharma”

September 11, 2017



This is the second talk of my four-part Dharma Talk series. [It is called] “Turning All We Meet into the Dharma.” The text [*The Seven Points of Mind Training* by Geshe Chekawa] says in point two:

The main practice, which is training in *bodhicitta* [the wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit all beings]. Regard all *dharmas* [psycho-physical phenomena] as dreams. Examine the nature of unborn awareness. Self-liberate even the antidote. Rest in the nature of *alaya* [open expanse of mind], the essence. In post-meditation, be a child of illusion.

Here we're referring to ultimate bodhicitta, or emptiness, which is one of the hardest teachings to understand, but it's what differentiates Buddhism from other religions. When we hear the word emptiness it implies a big, black, empty space which sounds a little bit scary or nihilistic, but actually emptiness also means fullness. Emptiness basically means that everything arises in an infinite web of cause and effect. Everything, for example, a piece of paper has non-paper elements on which it depends. Like an infinite spider's web, every cause and effect, every strand, also has sub-causes and effects and so on and so forth to infinity where you can't actually find a beginning to cause and effect. That's why eastern religions are viewed as a circle, no beginning and no end, whereas theistic religions are linear with a beginning and an end, an alpha and an omega.

In terms of the non-paper elements, if you look deeply into the nature of paper you'll see trees. You'll see the man who cut down the trees. You'll see the oil from Iraq in the truck that took the paper to the mill. You'll see the history of paper being developed in China. If you look deeply at the nature of the paper you will see that it hasn't always been paper and it won't always be paper. Eventually it might become a book and then it might even become recycled into something else or it might be burned. Those particles from the fire will go into the air and maybe merge with

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water particles and come down as rain. That's why Zen masters can say, "The tears I cried yesterday have come down as rain." It means understanding interconnectedness, understanding that everything is in a constant state of flux.

As far as the science of atoms and cells goes, nothing is lost, only transformed. This idea suggests that nothing has a permanent self-existing nature but instead it has a relative self, dependent upon its parts, and its parts are also having sub-parts and so on and so forth. It's like a big net where everything is connected.

But that's not to say that all is one. My mind and your mind are different. Ice cream and soup are both food but they have different constituents. On a relative level there is existence. We are born. We have experiences. We get old and we die. But on an ultimate level the non-you elements are always changing. The mind, which is also illusory, dream-like, and arising due to causes and conditions, goes onto the next life, but it's not the same. It's not a soul. Rather, it's a continuation of karmic causes and conditions and awareness.

In terms of our own personal emptiness there are many non-you elements. Everything we have comes from others. If you think about it, who gave you this body? Your mother carried you in her womb for nine long months and formed your body with her own body and then went through the agony of childbirth, which is the equivalent of having 50 bones broken simultaneously. Imagine being in so much pain you don't even feel your own flesh ripping open. If your mother did nothing else for you but give you birth, she's already done a great thing. The fact that you can look at a sunset, travel or fall in love, or even discover this spiritual path is because of the tremendous kindness of your parents in giving you a human body.

The fact that you can get up and do your job and live your life and create your own children is also because you were nourished by food, which is grown by someone else. The fact that you

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don't freeze to death or die of heat exposure or freezing cold in the rain and snow is because a builder has built your house. Everything we have comes from others. The fact that we can read a book or sign our own name is because a teacher taught us to read and write or because a doctor takes care of us when we're sick. Without all of these causes and conditions we would not be who we are. We are constantly changing. This self is simply a label we give to causes and conditions arising and meeting in a certain place in time—but it's a relative existence. Its ultimate existence is empty of a permanent, separate self. It's not quite as it appears. When you look at your mind, ask yourself: Where does your mind begin? What color is your mind? What was your face before you were born? This is as far as I'll go into ultimate bodhicitta.

When the text says, "Regard all dharmas as dreams," it means, regard all phenomena as dreams, or as dreamlike. See the illusory nature of cause and effect. Examine the nature of unborn awareness. See the mind. See the thoughts arise, abide, and dissolve. See the spaciousness behind those things, like the big blue sky. It is the nature of the mind to have thoughts. Thoughts are like waves on the ocean but they arise, they abide, and they dissolve. The base of the ocean is always calm, like the eye of the storm. Don't grasp at even the philosophy of emptiness because that also is illusory and dreamlike. Self-liberate even the antidote. Rest in the nature of the *alaya*, the essence. That means rest in the seed of Buddha nature. Rest in the pure nature of mind. Even mind itself, like everything we perceive, is affected by mind, created by mind. Mind is the forerunner but even mind itself is empty.

"In post-meditation, be a child of illusion." Don't hold on. See how things arise, abide, and dissolve. When you see things in this way, that everything is in a constant state of change, you're not so disturbed. You're still engaged with life. You still do what you can to make the world a better place but you also have this larger perspective that doesn't let the little things bring you down. Bodhicitta is awakened mind, the compassionate wish to liberate all beings. We've discussed ultimate bodhicitta, or emptiness—that things appear relatively but lack a permanent

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existence. Mind is like a river. All things are in a constant flow. Who you think you are is not who you will be in a few years from now. Even every three months every cell in your body has died and been reborn.

Then we go on to relative bodhicitta in the text, which talks about *tonglen*—the practice of giving happiness and taking suffering in meditation. “Sending and taking should be practiced alternatively. These two ride on the breath.” Next, [the text says] “Three objects, three poisons, and three seeds of virtue.” Three objects are an object of your attachment, an object of your aversion, and an object of your indifference. We believe that people are inherently our friend, our enemy, or we couldn't care less about them. We're indifferent to them because they neither confirm our identity nor deny it, but actually if you think about it the friends you have now were once strangers. Sometimes if they do something that you don't like they could easily become your enemy. We have a 50 percent divorce rate. The person that you couldn't care less about now, the person you haven't even met yet, or the person who doesn't spark your interest may one day become the person that you'll want to marry.

Enemies can sometimes become friends or strangers as well. I remember when I was young I was so intent on who I liked and who I disliked—now I don't know who is my best friend or my enemy. All have passed away. In the *Way of the Bodhisattva* it says, "My foes will become nothing. My friends will become nothing. I too will become nothing. Just like a dream experience, whatever things I enjoy will become a memory. Whatever is passed will not be seen again." It's very true. We're so invested in greed, hatred, and delusion. We're so attached to our loved ones and we're so indifferent to those who have nothing to do with us. We do terrible things to get what we want for the ones we love. We do terrible things when we perceive someone as an enemy, but actually in the end everybody and everything is changeable.

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The three poisons are greed, hatred, and delusion. The three seeds of virtue are practicing the opposite of ignorance, aversion, and indifference. Instead of ignorance we cultivate wisdom. We develop a boundless care and concern for all beings. From a Buddhist point of view there is no one who hasn't been your mother or your best friend in countless lifetimes. Even if you don't really believe in future lifetimes, compassion just makes sense because it makes you feel good. The way we exist is interdependent. Therefore, happiness is not just a personal matter; it's a communal matter. What you do for others, we do for yourself. What you do for yourself also helps us to help others. Instead of indifference, aversion, or hatred, we develop the wish of lovingkindness—that all beings be well and happy. We develop an empathy for the suffering of others.

Instead of too much attachment, we develop equanimity where we understand that everybody has been my friend, my enemy, and a stranger. Everybody is equal in wanting to be happy and not wanting to suffer. Then you understand the golden rule: "Treat others as I would have them treat me." To have a very shortsighted, narrow vision of love isn't very wise in a world where so many relationships are so fragile and fall apart. You love them one day and the next day you're fighting over the dog and who gets the china set. It makes sense to cultivate a boundless, loving heart toward all beings and to make friends with many people, even those who are not easy to be friends with, because to make the world a better place we have to work together. We're in this together.

Begin the sequence of tonglen, of sending and taking, with yourself. The basic practice of tonglen can be a little shocking to begin with, but the premise is that you don't get anywhere by being narrow, constricted, and self-obsessed. In order to loosen that obsessive hold on yourself and your thoughts, you start to open your heart to others and to your own suffering. We're not saying that you should denigrate yourself. You should be kind to yourself. You should practice self-care, relax, and not try to control everything.

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I swear to you there is no lama who needed to go to the psych ward because they did this practice. Actually this practice opens the heart. The way it works is you imagine breathing in hot, heavy smoke on the in-breath. You can start with yourself, where you touch some suffering in your own life. Maybe you're feeling jealous. Maybe you're feeling poverty-stricken. Maybe you're feeling an unfulfilled longing or loss. You breathe in the raw experience of that. You can remember a time where you felt that way. You fully embrace that feeling but you go beyond the storyline. You don't hold on to, "He did this to me. Why did this happen?" You just go to the raw feeling underneath. That way you're able to transform the pain of that experience. You touch that. You neither suppress it nor you act out on it. You breathe it in in the form of a hot, heavy smoke. Then you just ventilate it out. You have a flash of openness, emptiness. Then you connect with something timeless, something inspiring, the spaciousness, the emptiness, the open blue sky—buddha nature mind.

On your out-breath you breathe out a cool, clear, calm, white, bright light, which is well-being. You start with yourself. First you breathe in the hot, heavy, painful feeling. Then you have a flash of openness where you just let it out. You let it go. Then you breathe, sending yourself lovingkindness—cool, clear, white, bright light that you imagine on your out-breath, filling your whole body and mind, You think, “May I be happy. May I be well,” but it's a visceral thing. You're imagining breathing in the pain with the hot, heavy, dark visualization and then opening it out, a flash of openness, and then breathing out cool, white and clear well-being. You start with yourself and then when you've developed a little bit of lovingkindness to yourself, a little bit of compassion, you start extending it to others.

First, you extend it to someone who is close to you, maybe your mother, your father, or your grandmother. Imagine them in front of you as you remember them best. Then breathe in their pain. It doesn't matter if they're alive or dead. Imagine a heavy, hot smoke on the in-breath. Have

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a flash of openness, then send them the blessings of your life—cool, clear, white, bright light on the out-breath. In this way you really can connect with their suffering and you can send them the blessings of your life. You can actually use your suffering as a bridge to develop compassion for the whole world and to gain an insight into the selfless and interconnected nature of all things. You can have an insight of this ultimate nature, which is very freeing, vast, inspiring, and deathless.

Compassion is the path to this transcendent. As Shakespeare said:

The quality of mercy is not strained.

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven

Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed:

It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.

This is what tonglen does. This is a way that we develop bodhicitta. Then we do the tonglen practice for a stranger, someone we don't know very well—maybe a homeless person we saw in the park or a colleague from work. Just as I have moments of intense love, intense pain, intense loss, or just numb boredom, we breathe in that experience with the hot, heavy in-breath and then we have a flash of openness and then send them cool, calm, clear relief.

It's a great thing to do on the train to work in the morning when so many people are looking very gray and unhappy, because we all know what it's like to suffer in various ways. We also know joy. You can do tonglen with joy too. You breathe in that experience of joy and then you send out a sense of relief to others.

Whatever it is—frustration, loss, overwhelming desire—you just touch the feeling underneath the storyline. That way you learn to work with whatever is happening as a path of practice. We

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take all we meet into the path of dharma. That sums up the practice of relative bodhicitta with tonglen. A way that we can further extend our practice of tonglen is to reflect on the kindness of others or to reflect on the kindness of our mother. The purpose of this is to reduce self-obsession and self-grasping, of always thinking of our self as separate and more important than others. It's like it says in the *Way of the Bodhisattva*, "All the joy the world contains, it comes through cherishing others. All the misery the world contains, it comes through only obsessing about our self."

Think of the kindness of your mother. How many lunches did your mother pack? How many clothes did she wash? If your mother was abusive, think of someone who was like a mother should be. Think of their many kindnesses: how they taught you right from wrong; how many nights they went without sleep taking care of you; how they worked until their bones ached just to make sure you survived; how they would gladly give up their life for yours. To have received that kind of love is a great blessing. If no one took really good care of you, think of your children. Think of your best friend. Think of a childhood pet. Just cultivate kindness, a sense of gratitude.

Then see how that person—your mother, your benefactor—is suffering in various ways. They're suffering birth, old age, sickness, death. There's a need to repay that kindness, because if we put an ad in the newspaper for the kind of jobs that mothers do—cook, manager, chauffeur, and all for no money—no one would take that job. Your mother didn't have an ATM on the way out of the hospital saying, "Well actually this is what your human life is worth." She gave all of this from the love of her own heart. Who can repay that kind of kindness?

Then you realize, *Well, I could send my mother on a cruise around the world but she'd still arrive back at home and be unhappy. How can I give her long-term liberation and peace?* Then you realize, *Actually, I have to become an awakened being because a material thing is only a*

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*short-term solution—a band-aid if you will.* The way to do that is to develop great love, which is the wish, “May she be happy.” Then you develop great compassion, wishing that she be happy. You couldn't bear her suffering. Then develop bodhicitta, thinking, *Everybody who's been my mother is helpless, so I vow to become a Buddha to liberate all beings. As long as space remains, as long as there are those who suffer, may I too remain to remove the darkness of the world.* You may think, “That sounds masochistic and miserable,” but actually as a bodhisattva you go from greater joy to greater joy. Everyone is your ally on the path. All those difficult people are helping you make good karma and practice patience. If nobody challenged you, how would you ever gain the perfections of a bodhisattva in awakening?