

Lama Jampa Thaye
Week 3, *Parting with the Four Attachments*
March 17, 2014
“Attachment to Solitary Liberation”

Okay, so, welcome back to our online retreat. This is Week Three of our retreat on the Sakya teaching known as “Parting from the Four Attachments.” So we’re half-way through the text and—as I mentioned right at the beginning—the way this teaching works is that the verse spoken by Manjushri, which is the core, the source of the teaching, indicates indirectly what are the stages of practice that we should follow. Because what Manjushri revealed to Sachen Kunga Nyingpo is that what obstructs us gaining the qualities of a Buddha, fully Awakened One, are four increasingly subtle attachments.

First, attachments to things of this life—kind of the ordinary, worldly ambitions, which prevent us even becoming an authentic dharma practitioner. And then having cut through that—having moved out of kind of the restriction of that attachment—we find there’s a more subtle attachment, which is the attachment of using dharma practice merely for improving our situation, whether it’s our situation in this life or in future lives. In short as (inaudible) said, “We’re using dharma to gain merely a good rebirth, when the purpose of dharma is freedom.” So through utilizing four reflections—preciousness of human birth, impermanence and death, and then suffering and its cause, karma—by using these famous four thoughts to turn our mind to dharma as they’re called, we’ve created a sense, a longing, for real freedom.

We have a real, authentic kind of turning away from samsara and consequently a longing for, well, for nirvana, for the cessation of our suffering. Isn’t that enough? No. Not really, because as Manjushri indicated in his third line, there’s an even more subtle attachment, which we must now encounter if we’re to follow the path to its real end. And that attachment is, as he put it, if you have attachment to your own benefit, you don’t have the thought of enlightenment; or as it’s called in Sanskrit, *bodhicitta*. It’s this—the question is this—we should ask ourselves now, “For whom am I practicing?” Up till now, in a way, it might be that we’re simply thinking, “I need certain freedom.” Well, that’s good. “I need freedom from this suffering,” that’s undoubtedly true.

So I need to see that this house of samsara is burning, is on fire. I need to escape. But now here’s the question: What about everybody else? Can I really practice dharma as a means only of my own individual liberation? Isn’t that just like a person who rushes out of a burning house and leaves everybody else behind? How can I do that? And what’s more, how can I do that when I consider, as is truly the case, that all those beings are related to me? ‘Cause there’s the astonishing view of dharma: that every single being in this realm of samsara, in the cycle of birth and death, has actually been related to me. Not just once, but countless times. It doesn’t matter how many sentient beings that I’ve had—there’s an infinite number—because there’s no beginning to samsara. Everyone has been connected with me. Of course, I don’t remember that. I

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can hardly remember who I knew when I was two, but I don't. But that I've been related with everybody in innumerable lives. It follows from understanding the beginninglessness of samsara and the beginningless of the continuum of minds.

So in that light, with that kind of bigger view—a view that's a step out of just looking at my own self-interest—to practice dharma for oneself alone, to conceive of liberation as a merely individual liberation, is the kind of most hard-hearted of emotions, the most stony, the most in a way, self-centered. So that's the attachment I must now turn to and I must cut through: the attachment to practicing the Dharma for one's own benefit.

It's here that a talk of the distinction between vehicles—the so-called Hinayana, the Lesser Vehicle, and the Great Vehicle, the Mahayana, the bodhisattva—becomes realistic; because they are not to do with sects really or to do with kind of geographical locations of different forms of Buddhism. They're to do with what is in our heart. And is our motivation for practicing only for oneself? In which case, no matter where you're born and what tradition you're allegedly connected to, you're a follower of the Lesser Vehicle. But if instead in you has arisen this sense, “I must practice for others, not myself,” you're a follower of the bodhisattva vehicle, the Mahayana. Here's the great division. So how are we going to meditate? What are we doing to meditate on to overcome this attachment merely to one's own benefit?

Well, Manjushri said, “If you do this, if you have attachment to your own benefit, you don't have bodhicitta.” So we need actually bodhicitta. What is bodhicitta or the thought of enlightenment? Well, at this level, it's precisely this: the dawning in one's mind of a sense of universal responsibility. That is why I should practice the path: to relieve the sufferings of others and not merely one's own. But not just that, but also the dawning of the sense that the only way I can do that is through possessing the capacity of a Buddha endowed with limitless wisdom that sees phenomena as they truly are and why they manifest in specific ways; endowed with compassion that embraces all beings impartially in response to their suffering, and the power, the effectiveness of action, which fulfills the wisdom and compassion.

Only a Buddha possesses them and therefore only a Buddha can show beings the way out of samsara. I don't possess those right now. If I think, “Maybe gods do?” Actually, they don't, they're still in samsara. Even the arhants and arahatis, the great Hinayana saints, don't; but a Buddha does. So bodhicitta, however I articulate it, is that dawning sense, “I must do something in response to the suffering of others and what I must do is become a Buddha.” Whoever has that, has generated bodhicitta, is a bodhisattva. How do you generate it, then? Well, that's what we're going to do this week. We're going to meditate on the process through which we can give rise to this bodhicitta.

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So let's start with our usual preliminary prayer: To the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, I go for refuge until enlightenment. By the merit of the virtue of giving, and so may I achieve Buddhahood for the benefit of all beings.

For some people this bodhicitta arises just out of their character, so to speak; out of their natural aptitude for sympathy, for love, for compassion and hearing about the Buddha and being inspired by his example. For some people bodhicitta arrives just like that and in kind of a very natural way. For others it arises only when they take the bodhisattva vow, the specific ritual in which we formulate this resolve to become a Buddha for the sake of others. But for many of us, bodhicitta arises through a series of meditations and that's what we teach in the “Parting from the Four Attachments” system. So let's go through those.

There are three really: loving kindness and compassion, which are two kinds of preliminaries, and then the bodhicitta itself. Why do we need these preliminaries? Because it's really, in a way, like this: up till now, we've been living in a kind of separate sphere. It's imaginary. We imagine we're separate spheres with no interest in common with others. We're all in these little boxes and we need to break down those walls, those boxes, the walls of those boxes that separate us from a sense of kinship or fellow feeling of interconnection with others. And the best meditations for this are love and compassion. So to meditate love, first let's define it. Love is wishing that other beings have happiness and the cause of happiness. Happiness now and the cause of happiness; that they practice goodness, virtue that will lead to future happiness. All beings, not just a few.

Everybody loves somebody, as Dean Martin told us. But all beings? How can I do that? By meditating step-by-step with the sense that, actually, everybody has been as kind and selfless in one's own care as my mother of this life. So we start with our mother, through thinking of all that she did for us, until our heart is filled with the wish, “May she have happiness and the cause of happiness.” And when we've done that for one being, we bring in others encompassing our family and friends, dear ones; then moving beyond that, even encompassing enemies; and finally to all sentient beings, regarding each in the same way as being our mother in a previous life. If the mother root doesn't work for you, so to speak, think of them as your father.

If neither mother or father work to evoke the sense of indebtedness, gratitude and love, start with seeing beings as your children. It really doesn't matter. But the core is to start with somebody who you will easily feel a sense of gratitude—and therefore love—to. Meditate on that love and kindness and you will sense, you will feel, a great joy; a wonderful joy and that is the sign of authentic love arising in you. So practice that until it really arises, not just a thought, not just an idea. Certainly, it's not a political ideology. It's a real heart-felt sense of wishing everybody that you encounter happiness and the cause of happiness.

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When you’ve done that, compassion is possible. Why not start with compassion? Because it says in this, as it says in the scriptures, compassion flows through the channel created by love. Love opens one’s heart, to a certain extent, to others. Compassion will open it further, more radically. It’s almost like you need to ease your way into compassion, lest engaging as we do in compassion with being’s sufferings is too much for you at first and you instead become resentful and aggressive; as we so often see with those who are trying to become compassionate with others without a sense of balance and ease and lightness that comes through meditating love.

To meditate compassion, follow just the same sequence as with love, starting with one person, probably your mother. But see her this time as in—she is—in a situation of distress. I mean she may be happy in the moment, but to be faced with old age, sickness and death, or even to have gone there, is to face distress. Your sense of connection with her, your sense of gratitude to her, will cause you to respond to that situation of distress affecting your mom with compassion, which is the wish that she be free from that suffering and all future sufferings. What is the cause of future sufferings? It’s if we practice non-virtues. So you’re wishing her not to act non-virtuously, but instead with goodness. Once that’s arisen authentically for your mother and kind of in the heart, not the head, then again extend it in the same sequence: first to all close ones, dear ones, relatives, friends. Then even encompassing enemies and then finally to the whole world.

So in this way, step-by-step, we pervade all beings. First, we love them with compassion. Why do it in this step-by-step way? Well, because it makes it real. It makes the emotion really happen in our heart and not the, so to speak, the petals of our heart open this way. Whereas merely mouthing platitudes of universal love and compassion, so easy for us to mouth, doesn’t have that effect. So there may be some extraordinary beings who have love and compassion universally right away. But for most of us, it has to kind of grow gradually and that’s the way.

These are just the preliminaries to bodhicitta. So the third meditation we should make is on bodhicitta itself. How? It says, “I now awaken in myself the sense that I want beings to have happiness and freedom from suffering.” But as I mentioned earlier if we reflect on “How can I do this? How can I make my wishes actually a reality?” the sad fact is that I can’t. I as an ordinary person, I don’t have that capacity. I’m hemmed in by my ignorance. I’m hemmed in by my habitual disturbing emotions and so on and so forth. And if I look around in the world, powerful beings, they can’t do it. Even the gods, if I could find them, they also couldn’t do it. But there are types of being, there’s one type of being who can: that’s a Buddha, a fully awakened one, one who has stripped away the obscurations surrounding his or her spiritual capacity for limitless compassion, infinite wisdom and unrestricted power as the application of wisdom and compassion. So loving kindness and compassion make me ask this question, “How to achieve this happiness and freedom from suffering?” And as I meditate now on that question,

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“How to achieve it?”, bodhicitta will arise in me the aspiration, “Let me become a Buddha for the sake of all beings.” Not “let” in the sense of asking for permission, but “may this come about.”

Now it’s so astonishing, this. It’s like Shantideva says, “That thought is like lightening suddenly on a dark night, like momentary lighting up the sky.” ‘Cause it’s arising in somebody who otherwise is completely ordinary like ourselves. But it is the most important thing that will ever happen in our lives, because when that thought arises we have, well, we’ve entered the bodhisattva path. We’ve entered the path, the highway, the direct way to Buddhahood itself, because we now have the motivation to do that, to become a Buddha out of our sense of responsibility for others.

So this bodhicitta—this bodhicitta aspiration, as we call it—is the real turning point in our lives. Again Shantideva says, in his masterpiece, the Bodhisattvacharyavatara, “In whoever that arises, they have become a child of the Buddha,” a child in the sense of somebody who will grow up to inherit that state of a Buddha. They will become a Buddha. Now that’s the general meditation on bodhicitta. But how do we stabilize that motivation and, in fact, increase it? That is the significance of the meditation known as “sending and taking,” or more elaborately, meditations of equalizing oneself with others and exchanging oneself with others.

Let me explain. When we follow the sequence through—love and kindness and compassion and bodhicitta aspiration—then we need a method for strengthening and growing what has arisen in us. And that is these further meditations taught by Shantideva in his masterpiece and taught also in the *lojong*, or mind trainings, that Atisha brought to Tibet. And the sentiment is this: What is so special about me? I want happiness. I want freedom from suffering. So does everybody else. And what’s more: I am one, they are legion. They are countless. So instead of privileging myself in every situation, I should actually privilege all beings equally in that there is nothing unique about my wish for freedom and my wish for happiness that transcends, that’s more important than anybody else’s. That is the equalizing meditation. We should reflect on that. But we can go further. We can do something even more radical, which is to exchange ourselves for others.

As Shantideva says, “This is the supreme secret practice of Mahayana—whenever wishes Buddhahood should practice this.” And here’s how we meditate on this very simply: This self to which I am attached, it’s just a name. It’s just a label. It’s just a concept. I’m attaching it to what? Well, to a union of body and mind, a temporary union of body and mind. I could attach it to any unions of body of mind and there’s limitless number of them in this endless universe. And I could project the notion of self on that and take that as myself. Why not? Self is just a concept and a designation. In other words, I can reverse my habitual grasping at this particular

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phenomenon of self and project it on all those other ones. And what will that do? That will completely subvert all my self-centeredness—the self-centeredness, the tightness—that prevents me from opening out with love, compassion and bodhicitta.

See, to put it in a very simple way, see things through others’ shoes. Inhabit their lives. See things from their point of view. Whatever arises in my life, take it first through the perspective of others. Put others truly first. And in this way, I cure that habitual attachment to this phenomenon first. It’s not that I’m of less value than others; it’s just that up till now my values have been skewed. I’ve been thinking, “Only this is important, nobody else is important.” Let’s change that around by this radically liberating meditation of exchanging oneself for others. So we can do that in both meditation sessions and as we’re engaging in everyday life, ask ourselves the question, “Why me? Why me first? Why not others first?”

And instead of my happiness being uppermost and my freedom from suffering uppermost in every decision and action I make, put other’s wish for these things first. See things through others’ eyes. And we have the great antidote to self-centeredness. So let’s try that this week. That concludes the meditations on love, compassion, bodhicitta—the antidote to attachment to your own benefit, of practicing the Dharma for your own benefit. We’ve gone some way now in understanding how Manjushri’s teachings cut through attachments, but we have one less attachment to do because—although we’ve entered the bodhisattva vehicle, the Mahayana—there is still something obstructing Buddhahood and that is attachment to wrong views. We’ll discuss that next week.