

Lama Jampa Thaye
Week 1, *Parting with the Four Attachments*
March 3, 2014
“Attachment to the Temporary”

Okay, well, welcome to this Tricycle online retreat. I’m Lama Jampa Thaye. I studied the last 40 years with His Holiness Sakya Trizin and Karma Thinley Rinpoche, and quite a few other lamas. And the subject of the retreat this time is going to be the meditation system known as “Parting from the Four Attachments.” This is kind of very important in our Sakya tradition. We consider it one of the foundational teachings and practices. But it’s a teaching and a system that can be used with a kind of great benefit by all kinds of people interested in dharma, from total beginners right up to those who have real serious experience of practice in meditation and studying the dharma. I’m going to outline it over the next four sessions, step by step, because as the title indicates, it’s in four parts.

But let me begin by saying a little bit about the origin of this teaching to give you some kind of a flavor and the kind of power of this particular set of practices. Of course, the real source of this teaching, like all Buddhist teachings, is in the experience, the wisdom, the realization of Lord Buddha himself back in India two and a half millennia ago. But the direct source of the teachings is a little more recent. It actually comes from the beginning of our tradition, the Sakya tradition, one of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism, in the late-eleventh to early-twelfth centuries. The first of the people we look back to of the great founding fathers was a master called Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, the Great Sakyapa Kunga Nyingpo. And it was actually his father who’d started the first dharma center known as a Sakyan Dharma Center.

And, unfortunately, his father died while Sachen was still a child. He had to kind of inherit his father’s responsibilities. So, with the advice of the guru called Bari Lotsava, he went into meditation retreat, a meditation retreat on the deity, the bodhisattva of wisdom, Manjushri. And while he was in that retreat, having overcome various problems—as you can imagine, he’s only a 12-year-old boy, meditating was quite a arduous retreat—but when he’d resolved certain problems in the retreat with the help of his guru he had a visionary experience, a very powerful meditation experience in which the bodhisattva Manjushri seems to have appeared to him.

And when Manjushri appeared, he spoke four lines, which are these: “If you have attachment to this life, you’re not a dharma practitioner. If you have attachment to the realm of samsara, you don’t have renunciation. If you have attachment to your own benefit, you don’t have the thought of enlightenment. And if clinging arises, you don’t possess the view.” When Sachen pondered the meaning of this enigmatic instruction—seemingly enigmatic instruction from Manjushri—when he pondered it afterwards in the next month or two of his retreat, he began to realize that, in a way, this short verse of Manjushri indicated how the whole of Buddha’s teachings are to be practiced in a single path. Because the purpose of all Buddha’s teachings is precisely the unraveling of our attachments—attachments which start with the kind of most obvious and gross,

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to the things of this life, and go way, way deeper until it's the very attachment to mistaken views of reality that we're dealing with.

So Sachen understood that the teachings of Buddha are precisely that, a means through—cutting through each of these attachments in sequence, in turn. Beginning as we do as beginners—where our primary problem is how to actually enter into Buddhist practice authentically, and then how we must understand that the motivation which inspires us to practice is not to benefit just ourselves alone—until we come to the point of having to look straight into the face of reality itself, to overcome the subtlest of our clingings, the kind of ignorance that obscures the face of reality, that obscures our Buddha nature.

So Sachen used this kind of verse of Manjushri as a kind of framework for his study and practice of the Dharma, and through it he came to extraordinary, great realization. Then he transmitted it. He transmitted it, first of all, to his two sons: Sonam Tsemo and Jetsun Drakpa. And from then on it's been transmitted in an unbroken line to the present day. I've been fortunate enough to receive it a number of times from His Holiness, also from Karma Thinley Rinpoche, and even from His Holiness' sister, Jetsun Kushok, one of the greatest female lamas alive today. So my own studies and practice of his teaching convinced me of its extraordinary power, but at the same time it's a system that is easy to encounter as a beginner.

So that's why I felt that it was particularly appropriate for this Tricycle online retreat. So, as I said, I'm going to present it in four parts. So this is Week One and we start, therefore, with pondering, meditating on the meaning of that first of Manjushri's lines, “<speaks Tibetan>,” in Tibetan: if there's attachment to this life, you're not a dharma practitioner. Notice what he doesn't say there. He doesn't say, “You're not a Buddhist.” You could well be Buddhist. That is to say, you could have accepted the Buddha's teachings. You could have formally become a Buddhist by taking refuge, which is, of course, excellent. You could have received teachings. But what makes you a dharma practitioner is your values—your values.

The questions we must really ask ourselves when we engage with dharma for the first time is, “What are my values? What are the ambitions that drive me? How do I see things? How do I see the purpose of this life? What do I see as the meaning of my life, being here as a human being?” And if the answer is, “Well, what drives me is the eight worldly dharmas,” or eight worldly concerns, as we call them—praise and blame, fame and notoriety, pain and pleasure, gain and loss. If I'm chasing one of each of these pairs and trying to avoid the other, despite me calling myself a Buddhist and engaging externally with Buddhism, nothing's really changed in my heart. I'm still gripped by the grossest of attachments, the attachment to the things that are transitory,

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things of this life, which will insure that I never gain freedom, no matter what dharma I ostensibly am practicing.

So I need to look right into my values, to begin with, and bring about a kind of re-evaluation of what I understand is important for me. How do I do that? How do I overcome the attachment to this life? Notice, by the way, he’s not saying attachment to being a human being or the fact that I am a human being; he’s saying attachment to the things of this life, the material and other transitory, ephemeral phenomena, which I’ve been rushing for, which I’ve been seeking after all the time until now.

How do I overcome them? Well, that’s what Sachen pondered. And what he realized is that there are two teachings which we need to use as the antidote to this first of our four attachments. And they are to meditate on the preciousness and the rarity of being a human being, as we call it, of “possessing precious human life, precious human birth”. And then, following that, we need to meditate on impermanence. And the most vivid manifestation of impermanence is, of course, death. Of these two meditations the first is kind of like preliminary, to meditate on the preciousness of human birth. And then to really bring about a kind of cutting through of that attachment to things in this life, we need to take right into our bones the meaning of the significance of impermanence until it shakes our, kind of, the solidity and rigidity of our attitudes, and space is created for authentic engagement with the Dharma.

So let me now take you through these meditations. They’re reflective meditations. Later on, we’ll be practicing other types of meditation right up to Samatha and Vipassana, calm and insight. But for now we’re dealing with kind of reflective, contemplative meditations using, of course, concepts.

So we begin, of course, all Buddhist meditations with a short prayer of taking refuge and, because this is a system of Mahayana practice, Great Vehicle practice, of generating *bodhicitta*. Later on we’ll be actually meditating on that, but for now let me just recite for you the very simple, condensed prayer of refuge and bodhicitta, which should precede all your meditations in this system. So, “To the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, I go for refuge until enlightenment. By the merit of this virtuous practice, may I achieve Buddhahood for the benefit of all beings.” One can say that once or even three times, if one wishes, at the beginning of one’s meditation.

So we start with the first meditation topic: the preciousness of human birth. What is this? Remember, Lord Buddha mentioned on a number of occasions that every single sentient being—not just human beings, but every single sentient being, including animals and including, as we

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think, disembodied beings—all have the potential to become a Buddha, to become fully enlightened, to gain freedom, to develop wisdom, to have compassion, and finally to achieve enlightenment and Buddhahood. But, although every being has that potential, it’s like this: the seed of Buddhahood that exists in all beings is not always in the appropriate soil. It doesn’t always have, as we call it, the right working basis. Just like a seed, if it doesn’t have a good soil, it doesn’t have other contributory conditions, it won’t come to fruition. So it is with this Buddha nature that we all possess. It’s only in human life.

So that’s why I start by, to reflect, to awaken myself to the enormous significance and power there is in being a human being with the freedom that human beings possess—a freedom that doesn’t obtain other types of realms, whether the animal realms or the disembodied realms or even different types of human life, where there’s a culture of total absence of morality or where there’s never been any contact with the Buddha’s teaching. But in my type of human life, our type of human life, we have just enough space—not too much bliss to intoxicate us, not too much suffering to overcome us with misery—we have space to turn, space to reflect, space to choose between good and evil. We have space to choose liberation. And we have contact with dharma. That’s amazing. The Buddha appeared, he taught the dharma and the dharma remains.

So, traditionally said, there are 18 different conditions that are present, that come together to make a precious human birth. We haven’t got time to detail them all here. They’re in the traditional text, of course, but the main thing we need to meditate on is the astonishing rarity of our situation, rare in comparison with other forms of life, all of which we believe possess Buddha nature but in which that Buddha nature is blocked. Whereas in ours it’s, there’s space. And there’s contact with the Buddha’s teachings, which tells us what this human life is for. One great master said, “It’s like, being human with contact with the Dharma is like being in a boat in which you can row across the ocean of suffering and not just row yourself, but row all beings.”

So that’s the purpose of being here in this human life, suspended somewhere between birth and death. We’ve not fulfilled the purpose of being alive, because the purpose of being alive is precisely that: to discover our spiritual potential and become that being who works ceaselessly for others, a Buddha. How wondrous that is. So that is the first meditation. We need to meditate on our human state until we feel a kind of great inspiration and a great joyfulness in what our precious human life offers for us. So take your time to reflect on that. Ask yourself questions about it. Reflect on it deeply until you become, as I say, filled with inspiration and joy being human.

That’s the first practice we do to remedy attachments in this life. But the second is to meditate on impermanence, death. So we do that, again, in some sessions beginning again with taking refuge

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and generating bodhicitta. And then we'd reflect. We reflect in three stages. Because to reflect on impermanence, to meditate on impermanence really means to bring it right back home, is to meditate on death. And not just any death. We all know, even intellectually, that impermanence is woven into the fabric of everything that lives, from the furthest stars right down to the subatomic particles. Everything is constantly changing. We all know everybody else is going to die, but knowing these things is not yet—we've not yet woken up. We've not yet woken up to our precious human birth and the fact that though it's so precious and is the basis for dharma practice, it's transitory.

Its one thing is for sure: there's no tenure. Nobody guarantees it will last forever. So although I should be inspired to use my human life properly now, because I understand precious human birth, I need real waking up. And the meditation on impermanence, and specifically death, is that great wake-up call. Some people might think to meditate on impermanence and death is very depressing. Nothing could be further from the truth. What is depressing is to sleep through one's life and to have wasted it. To wake up to what it is to be human right here and right now is the most wonderful and marvelous, magical of things, one might even say.

So let's go through the three—the sequence of three meditations on impermanence and death. What are they? First, one should consider this: death is certain. How do I know that? How do I acknowledge it not just in a general kind of intellectual way, but how do I acknowledge it in my heart? Well, first of all, you can think like this: there's nobody in history who hasn't died. It's an obvious thing, but then again, impermanence is obvious and death is obvious. There is nobody in history who has avoided death. No matter how powerful, no matter how holy—even Lord Buddha himself, at the age of 80, taught his disciples one last lesson, which was impermanence at his Parinirvana in Kushinagar. So how can I think that I have any kind of exemption from the certainty of death? I don't.

In fact, as we're walking around, we should think we're walking on a graveyard. We're made of the bones of all those beings who've perished before us. Every one of them clung to their life and hoped not to avoid death, but none of them could. So I certainly cannot. I cannot avoid death because it's actually, as I kind of hinted earlier, woven into the very fabric of my life; because my life, my existence as a human being, is a conditioned phenomenon. It's something that is produced by coming together of the male and female elements in my parents and my consciousness. It's a temporary coming together. And, as Buddha said, everything that comes together will fall apart.

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“One day my mind will leave this guesthouse,” as Tokmé Zangpo says, “One day our consciousness will check out of this hotel.” It’s absolutely inevitable. And, in fact, I should consider this: With every year, with every month, with every week, with every day, with every hour, with every moment, death is rushing to meet me. It’s never getting further away. It’s always coming nearer. Actually, all of us are on death row. All of us are like the cattle in an abattoir who is going to be processed in front of the executioner. And there is nobody who is going to sign an exemption clause for us. That is where we are: certain to die. And one might say, “Well, I can acknowledge that, but I still have much time left in my life to follow worldly pursuits, to engage in this—being the greatest rock and roll star, the biggest businessman, and then I can turn to religion later. I can get, I can look at Buddhism later on when I’ve done all those other exciting things.”

I need a second meditation to overcome this particular foolishness. And that is that although death is certain, the time of its coming is not. Like one, the Udanavarga says, “Some die in the womb, some die when they’re crawling, some die in childhood, some die in youth, some in middle age, some when they’re old and decrepit. But all die.” And as we don’t know when death’s honesty is going to fall upon us, so the idea that I can leave engagement with the Dharma for later is a great deception. If I do that, if I put off engagement with the dharma and carry on sleeping in the kind of chasing the pleasures of transient pleasure, transient ambition, I’ll find that it’s too late, too late on the death bed to kind of dramatically turn to dharma. It’s not going to work like that. It’s here and now I must engage. So that’s the second meditation on impermanence and death. That although death is certain, it’s time is not.

And then I should think like this: what will benefit me in the time of death? It’s certain, it’s time of coming I don’t know, but what, from this life, what are the things I do in this life, what are the things I’ve been chasing—eight worldly dharmas kind of mind—what will benefit me at the time of death? What I’ve been living by up till now is, for instance, the acquisition of property and kind of companions. And they won’t be any use. We’re stripped. We go alone when we meet the Lord of Death. We can take no possessions with us—not our money, not our credit cards, not our houses, none of the things we’ve built, none of the things we’ve accumulated. And as for relationships, we have to leave behind even our most dear ones, even our beloved ones. They can’t come with us. They can’t accompany us. This is one journey we have to do alone.

So if I’ve been living to collect people to give me security and to collect objects to give me security, I’ve been wasting my time. And one might think, “Well, one’s eloquence and knowledge, they will get me through death.” But I’m afraid death isn’t impressed by good speeches. He’s not turned back by that and all the facts that I might know. Death is not turned back by those things.

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Well, what about my power? Maybe I’m a tough guy, maybe I’ve been really strong and built up my physical power and so on during life; I’ve been chasing that. It’s not going to work because I can’t beat up the Lord of Death. I can’t overcome and kill the Lord of Death like I might be able to do with ordinary worldly enemies. So all the power I’ve gathered in that way, physical strength, even bravery is not going to be any good. The great heroes, they all perished. Where’s Alexander the Great? He perished. Where’s Caesar? He perished. Where are more recent heroes? They perished. So these things, whether it’s money, whether it’s relationships, whether it’s power, whether it’s facts and eloquence—these things that I chase that give me the stimulus in this life, they’re all a waste of time, because they will betray me at the time of death.

What will help me at the time of death? Well, there’s only one thing, that which has turned my mind in the right direction, which is the practice of goodness and, most importantly, the practice of dharma—because only dharma gives me the chance to realize that which is deathless. And what is deathless? The nature of mind itself. So in this way, going through this three-fold sequence of meditations on impermanence, there comes about a complete revolution. If I do it properly, there comes about a complete revolution in my understanding of what it is to be a human being, the purpose and meaning, the value of my life. We call this “renunciation,” like, a kind of giving, a letting go. Because “renunciation” is a heavy word, one could understand it in a kind of puritanical way. But actually there’s something wonderfully joyful and relaxing about this renunciation, because one discovers there’s so much one doesn’t need to bother with. There’s so much one doesn’t need to bother with. One doesn’t need to worry about. The things one has been measuring oneself by—am I powerful? Am I successful? Do I have this property? Do I have those friends? They’re all valueless. And so I can let go.

So authentic renunciation isn’t some showy rushing off to a celebrity-designed cave. I’m sure there are a few nowadays. It is actually letting go and becoming relaxed and grounded in what it is to be a human being living in this very present moment. That’s the power of meditating on impermanence and death. Without it, we’re not authentic dharma practitioners. We may be Buddhists externally. We may be in all the right Buddhist clubs, buy all the right Buddhist books, but we’re worldings. We’re people for whom the things of this life are the dharma, not the dharma itself.

So that’s Week One of our retreat. Next week we’re going to progress, to deal with the second attachment, which is, of course, as I mentioned earlier, attachment to the realms of samsara. So please, if you can, take some time this week each day to listen to and reflect over the two meditations: precious human birth and impermanence. Thank you.