

Lama Jampa Thaye
Week 2, *Parting with the Four Attachments*
March 10, 2014
“Attachment to the Cycle of Birth and Death”

So, welcome to Week Two of our Tricycle Online Retreat on the system of practice known as "Parting From the Four Attachments." Last week we considered the teaching meditations that we practice in order to overcome the first of those four attachments that obstruct realization of enlightenment of Buddhahood, and that first attachment was the attachment to this life. So we consider the meditations on the preciousness of our human life and on impermanence and death. And through those we found that there came about a kind of reordering of our priorities.

We dropped our obsession with the worldly concerns, and created some space in our life through which we could engage authentically in dharma. And I called creating this space a kind of renunciation or letting go. But here is the point: that renunciation still doesn't go far enough. Because as Manjushri said in the root verse called "Teachings of Parting from the Four Attachments," but he said it to Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, the second line is if you have attachment to the realms of samsara—samsara the cycle of birth and death—you don't have real renunciation. In other words you haven't really let go completely of the kind of ambitions of ego for security.

Now, to consider this we have to reflect very deeply on what exactly samsara is. And how it is that I can experience all those different samsara states; none of which adds up to freedom because there is the point. This week we are going to meditate on the "defects" as we call them: the defects of samsara, the defects of all those different realms to which I could aspire only to find that I'm still in a kind of prison dominated by suffering. We're going to meditate on that and we're going to meditate on some of the related teaching of karma, cause and effect, the very mechanism through which one is reborn in different samsara realms. So this week is a meditation to overcome that attachment, attachment to the realms of samsara.

You see it's like this, we may be able to cut through that first and grossest and most obvious of attachment, attachment to things of this life. But how we at that point are reading the purpose of our engagement with dharma may not be a vehicle to freedom. Instead we may be thinking of dharma, probably we are thinking of dharma as a way to improve our situation. And that is the rub; improve whose situation? Improve our self-clinging, self-cherishing mind, the same ordinary kind of ego mind, which has been dominating as well from time immemorial we think.

And so we may read religion as simply that, dharma, as simply that: that I can get something better in this life, I can improve and adjust things, make myself a little happier, a little more comfortable by practicing dharma, by revisiting things; moving away from mere materialism and obsession with property and status and become a religious person who will be more able to control their emotions, more able to kind of subdue things around them so they can live in a quiet and pleasant way. And beyond that we may be thinking, "well, the purpose of dharma is to ensure continuity of that kind of contentment and happiness in future lives." In short we may be practicing the dharma for happiness in this life and happiness in future lives.

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Now, it's not that there's anything wrong with that in the sense of wicked or evil or base. But it isn't really the essence of the dharma, because Buddha said the taste of dharma is one taste which is freedom. And simply thinking that dharma is a means to improve our location is rather like thinking if I am in prison—if I move myself from one cell to a more comfortable one—I'm going to be happier there, and that happiness is going to last—that's going to be authentic eternal happiness. Or it's like being in a hotel, which is on fire, and thinking—ignoring the fire—thinking if I can just get an upgrade to the penthouse apartment, there I'll be really happy forever.

That's what attachment to the realms of samsara is all about: it's that misreading, that restricting of the dharma to something that fits with my basic ego kind of framework, something for me; something where all the rough and difficult edges of samsara have been removed, but I will have happiness in my possession. So what we need is to meditate; to meditate to kind of take a trip round samsara. If it's a hotel, let's examine it. If it's a prison, let's examine it and see what's wrong with it. And also along the way we're going to meditate on what produces samsara and that's karma. So let's start.

Often we look at karma first and then samsara suffering, but it kind of works just as well, maybe a little better, to start with samsara and then look at its specific causes. So let's start with that. We'll begin, of course, a meditation session on it with taking refuge and generating *bodhichitta*. To the Buddha down inside, I go for refuge and enlightenment. By the merit of giving inside, may I achieve Buddhahood for the benefit of all beings.

So how are we going to meditate on the samsara? Well what's wrong with samsara is that it is shot through with suffering so to meditate on samsara is to meditate on suffering. Oh, that sounds very depressing. Is Buddha saying we are born to suffer and nothing else—that suffering is inevitable? Are we going to depress ourselves by meditating? No, no more than being told we are not healthy at the moment but health is possible. Buddha's stress on suffering—and our meditation here on it—is to say things have gone wrong. Things are out of balance. Things are disordered, but freedom from that, recovery from that, health is possible. So understand this meditation is about the suffering along the way. It's not to depress us. It's to tell us, “Don't settle for anything less than freedom.”

So how do we do it? Well, traditionally we look at it in three ways. First we call the suffering of suffering, and it's like basic suffering. This is suffering in samsara that is blindingly obvious that it is suffering. And so traditionally we say that's the suffering of the three low realms: the hell realms, the ghost realms, and the animal realms. Wait a minute. Only one of those we can see the animal realms. They are visible. The ghost realms and the hell realms are not. How are we to understand that? Well, as we will see later on in this teaching right at the kind of heart of the Buddhist view of the world is the fact that mind is the king of all creators. It is mind that makes all things and so it is the mind that produces these different realms of samsara.

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I don't mean by that they are just merely human psychological states although the source of them is in our mind states right now. These are states that we can experience at the time of death if our mind is dominated by the causes of them, the disturbing emotions of hatred in the case of hell, and avarice in the case of the ghost realm. So we meditate on them and we are meditating on them as possible realms we could go to, if we don't change our view and activity right now. The suffering of the hell realms—traditionally it's depicted in powerful vivid detail in the sutras and other sources as the eight hot hells, the eight cold hells, the four or six neighboring hells and the infernal variety of occasional hells.

But the key to understanding all of them is that they're projections of the aggression that—if it is dominant in our mind streams at the time of death—we'll create those hallucinatory experiences? So when you read the tradition accounting the sutras, they are real in the sense that they are poetic descriptions of what the claustrophobia of a world turned against you through your own hatred will be like at the time of death; unmediated by the reference of the physical body, because it won't be there.

So is hell possible? Of course it is. Look at your aggression right now. There is the cause of it. There is the seed of it. Now, imagine experience after death in which all that is right with you at that time is aggression. You will be burning or you'll be freezing. You will enter a world of the projection of your own hatred, a world in which that hatred is turned back against you. It's serious, it's real, in that sense that it is possible for us to experience this. And while we meditate on it, think of those people who are there now, those beings. And, as we do that, we think of that awful claustrophobia feeling—that place and experience that feels unending although it's not. It's impermanent like everything else in samsara. Think with sympathy and compassion towards them, because that's the other benefit of this meditation on the hell realms. And when we look at the ghost realms—the ghost again kind of disembodied beings who we can't really see—can we know that such experience happens? Of course we can, because you can look at the avarice in our mind.

If we are dominated by avarice—that insane kind of emphasis on consumption; that feeling of incredible hunger and lack, because we don't have enough objects of whatever kind—if we create a life like that, that is the experience we will inherit at the time of death. It's not punishment from a God or any external being, just as hell isn't. We are the creators of it. So the ghost realm is possible. The traditional descriptions of the ghost realm—beings with distended stomachs and unsatisfiable appetites—is a description of what avarice looks like when it is the kind of what is projected into the universe and turned back on us.

And the animal realm, we can see that. And it's suffering this helplessness caused, again, by the actions and choices of beings who never looked at the connection between cause and effect, so the capacity for intelligence and choice atrophied the animal realm results. We can see that in ourselves now; the kind of chosen dullness, that refusal to look, to put and to analyze what is the

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connection between our actions and the results. Those are the causes of the animal realm and we are carrying them now.

So there are three realms. They can occur for us at the time of death but we can taste them now. So when we meditate today, go back and forth between looking at how these causes are operating in your mind now—the ignorance, the aggression, the avarice—and then back to what would that be like if that's all they experience after death. And along with that kind of sense of firm determination not to get trapped, through these emotions, into those realms, will come this kind of compassion; this fellow feeling for the beings who are right now experiencing only the projections of their own disturbing emotions and a lot from those low realms.

So it's that kind of fierce turning away that comes about out of this meditation on the suffering of suffering. But then one might say, “but there's good states in samsara.” I'm a human being. And there's also, if I believe what the scriptures say, there's also the possibility of being reborn a God, an asura, beings with kind of great powers and with kind of seemingly endless forms of bliss. I need to look at the—having looked at dungeons of samsara—I need to look at the higher selves, the higher rooms, and see is there a problem there? Well there is, and we call it the suffering of change because it's the suffering of change which characterizes the higher realms. What does that mean? Well it's simple. It means every new object, which promises happiness that I acquire, turns out to be a cause of suffering in due course. Whether it's because in grasping it I turn it into something poisonous, or whether it's because it will crumble inevitably due to the law of impermanence.

If I'm grasping at external things in even the high rebirths as a human or a God, they will let me down. In the God realms for instance, the God realms, they have their kind of beginnings, their sources in human actions, in living virtuous life, in practicing religion; maybe theistic religion, or even in meditating on karma binding and so on and other related systems. I create the kind of self-control and calmness of mind which if it is what ripens in my mind stream after death I will experience that rebirth in the heavenly realms. Of course the way it is depicted in our Buddhist scriptures is culturally derived but that they occur we can be sure of because we see their causes in our life right now.

And when those causes ripen in the continuum of mind, then there we come about rebirthing the God realms or the asura realms. What's wrong with that? What's wrong with the idea that it's going to be a terrible disappointment having gone to the land of eternal bliss whether I figure that as rebirth in the realm of Brahma, as according to the Vedic Indian system, whether I think I've been reborn in heaven, according to the Western theistic system, they are all impermanent. Why are they impermanent? Because they're all conditioned states that depend on cause and conditions. And when the cause and conditions disappear, inevitably effect will also disappear in due course. And having gone to the realm of the Gods and thought this was eternal bliss, the shattering disappointment of losing it will be as it says in the scriptures in some ways as awful as

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the pain of the deepest hells. So there is no point going to the temporary God realm, asura realm, if it's just going to bring about that awful suffering when it inevitably passes.

What about human life? Well of course, the suffering with changes operating here. Every new happiness is just suffering in a different guise, it is said. In the sense of every new happiness that I grasp at—see it's not that there isn't genuine happiness in human life as we'll hear later—there's genuine happiness whenever I step outside the network of ego and respond directly to others, without thought of self-interest. But everything else, wherever the self-interest, wherever there is self-clinging, wherever I'm doing it for me, no matter that I might acquire temporary pleasant objects—pleasant situations, pleasant companions, success and the rest—it will crumble. I'll have to let it go, and that's the suffering that characterizes human life.

Well, apart from the other ones, which is birth—meaning from conception to birth—that's no picnic. Old age, that's no picnic either. Sickness follows inevitably, and finally death. The four great rivers which I should remind myself as Nagarjuna says, "You haven't yet transcended." Birth, sickness, old age, and death. Separation from what I want. Contact with what I don't want. Not being able to get what I want. Not being able to hold on what I've got. Those are the kind of physical and emotional parameters, the kind of boundaries of my life.

I'm thinking this is a source of eternal happiness? I must be crazy. So even in the higher realms, it's suffering. Of course it's hidden. It's like, as we say, food that appears to be good mixed with poison. It's disguised. But if you grasp it as eternal bliss, as the answer to your problems, if you practice dharma merely for this, you will suffer. You will suffer at losing it not to mention the incidental sufferings and struggles and difficulties of human life. So it isn't enough.

And then there's a final suffering which we call a suffering of conditionality. You need to consider that—that is that the very grasping, itself, that all of us are doing, is a struggle against reality. We are in conflict with reality. There's a tension, a kind of split between us and reality. The more we grasp at this body in mind as being a real permanent self, the more we are suffering. It's a hidden suffering. It's really only holy beings know this for what it is. But it's the suffering that underlines the other ones. We can perhaps see a little bit of it in the endlessness of our actions. The fact that no action ever produces the result we hope for. As one great master says, "At the end of this life we're still busy making plans for the next one." Ambitions are never fulfilled.

And, secondly, desires are never satisfied. As we chase ego's projects, we are never able to satisfy them. There's always something more. As Gyalse Tokme Zangpo says, "Chasing the sense objects is like drinking salt water. The more you drink, the more you need to drink." And actually shouldn't we be feeling weary? We've been doing this since time out of mind, since beginning this time. We've been acting, trying to arrange reality to coincide with our wishes, and it's never done so. We should be weary. It's just that we've got a forgetful heart and we keep forgetting things so easily. We kind of—our insomnia keeps us stupid, our memory loss keeps us

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stupid, our amnesia keeps us stupid. And that's why we keep repeating the same old sad mistakes. We are trapped. We are trapped in the same old cage. And we have been since beginning of time. What has trapped us is our actions, those actions which were created out of avarice, hatred, and ignorance.

So actually that is Hotel Samsara, and that's what's wrong with it. Wherever we go in samsara we will find suffering, so we meditate on those three ways: suffering of suffering, the suffering of change, and finally the suffering of conditionality. And that obviously brings that other point which is karma. Because if we ask who is the author, who creates the different samsara realms that we go to, it's not a punishment from a God, not a reward from a God. It's not by chance. It's not random. The Communist party didn't do it. The capitalists of Wall Street didn't do it. Your mom and dad didn't do it. You did it. That is to say I, by being dominated by my disturbing emotions, I create my samsara. I create my prison so I need to look at my actions very carefully.

I need to discriminate between those actions, which are dominated by the disturbing emotions—avarice, hatred, and ignorance, the non-virtuous ones—and those which are free of them. Yes, so having meditated on suffering in that way, we need to meditate on this related topic, which is karma, the author of samsara. And particularly we need to look and examine how actions have consequences. Specifically actions done out of self-clinging and self-cherishing, those poisonous emotions of avarice, hatred, and ignorance, they create all the suffering that I experience in samsara.

Whereas to the extent I can overcome that and replace those mental states with their opposites, with contentment with love and with clear seeing, then I create space for myself in samsara; a positive space in myself and others to practice the dharma; to go for freedom. So although the core of this overcoming attachment to rebirth in samsara is to see what samsara is—it's a prison or it's a burning hotel or a burning house—I also need to understand its mechanism, because I need to create the right conditions to become liberated from it; and that depends on my choices and my actions.

So meditations on karma, cause and effect, has that significance as a kind of auxiliary meditation to meditating on samsara. So now, with this true enunciation arises a true turning away. I don't want just to merely improve my situation in samsara. What will be the point of that? I want freedom. That is authentic renunciation and that is how we overcome that second attachment. So please, this week, take some time to think over this, to meditate on it, to look at samsara in your own life and how you create it, how you experience it and how you create it. And out of this a determination will come; a determination that the real point of dharma practice is freedom, is an unconditioned freedom. So we'll leave it for this week and then next week we move on to dealing with the teachings to overcome the third attachment, attachment to one's own benefit. And there we will move from the kind of common—the general dharma that was outlined in these first two sections—to a dharma that is specifically that of the bodhisattva path.

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