

Lama Rod Owens
Week Two, *Compassion, Love, and Healing in Times of War*
July 11, 2016
“Calling on Tara, the Mother Liberator”



Hello again, this is Lama Rod. I am joining you again for week two in this series of dharma talks with *Tricycle*. In this session, we will be focusing on the practice and lineage of Tara, the mother liberator and a fierce female deity, to generate compassion in our experience.

To begin, we will continue our practice of taking refuge. I invite you to take refuge in any way that's comfortable for you, in your tradition and in your practice. A very simple way to take refuge is to think about our teachers, elders, and gurus, and how much we rely on them. When we consider what we've learned from them, we're considering the dharma. Then we think about the communities that we're a part of that help to sustain us and support our practice.

Take a few moments to think about these three rare and precious jewels that manifest in different ways in our lives. Give rise to a sense of gratitude and a sense of appreciation for this beautiful gift of the Three Jewels. If you are Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhist practitioner, you can also take refuge and reflect on the blessings of the guru, the yidam, and the dharma protector, if you've been initiated into that practice. It's a matter of giving rise again to our reliance on the blessings of the guru, the teacher, the yidam, and all the realizations that we experience through our practice with them. Lastly, when we think about the dharma protector—spirits, energies, and guardians that we connect to—that actually help to create the causes and conditions through which we are able to have our practice.

When we think about the three jewels or the three roots, we give rise to this poignant gratitude. In our minds, we can even visualize and imagine that we're offering all kinds of precious substances to these sources of refuge that we hold within our experience. As we move out of our contemplation, we make a very simple aspiration that we will continue to benefit beings in the best way that we can, from this life onward.

Thank you for your practice.

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As we move into exploring the nature of Tara, we will learn that deity practice is very central to Tibetan Buddhism. If you are not part of a deity practice already, that's fine; I think that it's still appropriate to learn about. Within Tibetan Buddhism, the deity itself is very different from deities in other religious traditions. When we talk about deities in this tradition, we're saying that we align ourselves with an emanation and expression of our own true nature—the true natures of our own minds. As we discussed in the first session, the nature of the mind is an integration of the energy of potential (luminosity) and space itself (emptiness). When we combine them, we give rise to this incredible diversity of phenomenal reality—the expressions of the mind itself. Within this expression, the deity emerges.

There are many ways to talk about deities as they relate to us and as they relate to the embodiments of beings that we perceive as being outside of ourselves. What has been helpful for me is to hold both the view that the deity is a being that appears outside of me, along with the understanding that the deity is *not* appearing outside of me. Thus, I am able in my practice to integrate them and say, “Yes, the deity may appear outside of me, but the deity is no different from me or from my own mind.”

This is definitively true for Tara, and will also be true for Medicine Buddha, as we will explore in the third session. But Tara is associated with the development of and deepening of compassion, and with the cutting-through of fear. Tara represents a profound practice that helps us to be fierce and direct in the world, and to practice being vulnerable and compassionate. Tara is a very close deity to me; she is a practice that I have grown to rely on. She is my friend, my mother, my homegirl, and my sister-friend. She is everything.

I think it's important to develop an intimate relationship with the deity in our practice—regardless of who the deity is—in order to see the deity as being very close to us, almost like a best friend. This helps us to be more vulnerable in our practice of the deity, even if that practice comes within *sadhana*, which is the formal ritual practice within Tibetan Buddhism. Even in that formal practice, we're able to develop an intimacy with Tara.



Tara’s origins are very varied and diverse. The origin of Tara that I often write and teach about is a story where, many eons ago, Tara was a human, a sentient being, a princess who was devoted to the Buddha of that particular age. She was a very fierce dharma protector, a woman within a sangha of mostly men. As she was practicing, her community of men kept telling her, “Oh, it would be great if you were also praying to be reborn as a man, because only through a man’s body could you achieve enlightenment.” Of course, Tara rejected that and said, “You’re deluded, if you think that this body means anything, that your body is somehow better, that a male body is privileged over any other body.”

She vowed during her practice that she would only attain enlightenment as a woman, in order to reveal that the body does not matter—that gender and sexuality are only illusions—and that one can achieve enlightenment, wherever one is born and whatever body one is born into.

Tara did eventually achieve enlightenment as a woman, and in that enlightenment, she let go. She began to see through the illusion of ego itself, and when she attained enlightenment, she was able to let go and to manifest as a buddha and as a yidam. Within the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, she is the only manifestation of a female buddha. Tara was able to achieve enlightenment, and through her compassion for all sentient beings, she emerged in a form that would be most beneficial. That is the ultimate aspiration of anyone seeking to achieve enlightenment and buddhahood: to emanate in the form that can best benefit others.

When that happened, Tara let go of ego and rested her mind within awareness itself, within space and luminosity, and achieved a direct awareness of all those factors together. That was buddhahood. Tara is able to manifest on both the ultimately level—that of emptiness and luminosity—and on the relative level, in a way that we’re able to connect with her through practice, through visualization and other direct experiences.

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Tara is what we call the “Mother Liberator.” As a female liberator, Tara represents compassion as a form of liberation for us in our own lives. Manifesting in a number of forms, mostly she is recognized as Green Tara and White Tara. Green Tara direct action; she is called upon when we are in danger, when we need help this very instant. White Tara represents motherly love; she helps us to develop the practice of cutting through and letting go of fear, just as a mother would help her child work through fear.

Now I want to share a short Tara practice with you. Make yourself as comfortable as possible. If you’re sitting on the floor and have a meditation practice, assume your normal meditative posture. If you’re like me, sitting in a chair, sit all the way back in the chair so that your back is aligned and your feet are firmly on the floor. Keep your eyes open or closed, whatever’s most comfortable for you. Just feel your feet on the floor, your hands firmly in your lap, on your knees or thighs. Breathe deeply in and out. Allow the body to relax. Simply sit in the chair, allowing yourself to trust that the chair will hold you.

Begin to imagine that you’re breathing in and out from the very bottom of the seat. Just feel that foundation, that stability, breathing in and breathing out. Ground the body. Become aware of the body.

In front of you, imagine a person who has been a source of compassion to you. Someone who has shown you unconditional compassion, someone who has helped you or guided you, someone who’s helped you especially when you feel like you didn’t deserve help. Someone who’s offered you support—maybe when they shouldn’t have had to offer support or when they didn’t have to. This can be a person or an animal, any being, any deity, any spirit. If you are initiated into the practice of Tara, you can visualize Tara right in front of you—Green Tara, White Tara, or any other manifestation.

Whoever you’ve invited in front of you in your visualization, imagine that they begin to gaze upon you with the feeling and energy of compassion, of nonjudgmental loving. Remember all the



acts of kindness and compassion that they've been able to offer you. Feel how that triggers certain things in your own mind and in your body. See them in front of you, smiling and gazing. Imagine that they are wishing that you experience nothing but deepest wellbeing, happiness, and joy, and that you be free from suffering.

Imagine that they are repeating that over and over again; that you experience the deepest wellbeing, happiness, joy, and freedom from suffering. As they repeat that wish, a brilliant but soft white glow develops around their bodies, starting within their heart-center and then moving out, like something growing and blossoming. Imagine that it gets so big and so thick that it begins to envelop you—this glow, this whiteness, this warmth, this energy of compassion itself—and just feel your whole body fill with this energy of compassion, until your body overflows with this energy. You begin to glow and to emanate the compassion that you are receiving from your benefactor, from your friend.

Just sit in the energy of that compassion. Slowly begin to bring to mind other people that you would like to express compassion towards, an aspiration that they experience the deepest wellbeing, happiness, and joy. Start with the people who aren't so difficult to work with: not your worst enemy, not the perpetrator of the worst violence in your life. Not right now, not in this session.

Start with people that maybe you see in passing: people who are neutral in your life. Start with them. Generate this compassionate wish for others to be free from suffering. Continue in that practice, as much as you want. Then, slowly, begin to dissolve the figure, the being or person in front of you—whomever you've summoned—so that they disappear into the white brilliant light. Then let the light come into you, into your own heart-center. Place your hand over your heart and feel that source of compassion generated and concentrated here. Let this gesture remind you of your aspiration to be loving, kind, and compassionate, not only to yourself but to all sentient beings.

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This is a practice you can deepen at any point. You can also find other examples of this practice in your sangha, with your teachers, through books and online. As we end this session, we generate the aspiration that this practice will be of benefit to all beings, in this life and lives to come. Ultimately, we wish that all beings may have the access to all of these sources of liberation that we have and that we're able to walk out of this session into our days, carrying the energy of compassion, embodying the energy of Tara, embodying the energy of all those who have loved and cared for us.

Thank you for your practice today. Please join us next week for the third installment of this series of dharma talks, where we will continue to explore deity practice with Medicine Buddha.