

*Tricycle Talks*

“A Meditator’s Guide to Buddhism”

Episode #111 with Cortland Dahl

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**Cortland Dahl:** So meditation at its most basic level is about getting to know ourselves. It's not a process of self-improvement; it's a process of self-discovery. And there are no obstacles, really, in this approach because we're getting in touch with fundamental qualities that are the very nature of every experience we have.

**James Shaheen:** Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Cortland Dahl. Cort is a Buddhist scholar, translator, meditation teacher, and contemplative scientist based in Madison, Wisconsin. In his new book, *A Meditator's Guide to Buddhism: The Path of Awareness, Compassion, and Wisdom*, he offers an accessible introduction to Buddhist principles and practices through the lens of the three yanas, or vehicles. In my conversation with Cort, we talk about how meditation allows us to be honest with ourselves, practical methods for experiencing abstract concepts of no-self and emptiness, how different schools of Buddhism understand enlightenment, and what it means to be fully awakened within the messiness of samsara. So here's my conversation with Cortland Dahl.

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**James Shaheen:** OK, so I'm here with Buddhist scholar and meditation teacher Cortland Dahl. Hi Cort, it's great to be with you.

**Cortland Dahl:** It's great to be here. An honor to be on the podcast.

**James Shaheen:** So Cort, we're here to talk about your new book, *A Meditator's Guide to Buddhism: The Path of Awareness, Compassion, and Wisdom*. So to start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

**Cortland Dahl:** Yeah, there's a bit of a backstory with the book. I think what really inspired me to even think about writing this book was thinking about my own early experience as a



meditator, even before I was interested in Buddhism. I've been meditating for about thirty years. I started when I was just starting college, and I got really into it. I tend to be a bit fanatic about anything I do, so I kind of dove in. I was meditating. I was reading everything I could get my hands on. I had zero interest in any new religion, I had a bit of an allergy to what I perceived as organized religion, but meditation as a practice completely changed my life. I had really been struggling at the time with social anxiety and just being really overwhelmed by the whole experience of being a young adult in college and out of home. And so it completely changed my life, and I knew that I discovered something that really was going to stay with me, and it has.

At a certain point I got interested in where the tradition was coming from, but there wasn't a lot at the time that painted a clear picture of what the Buddhist tradition was all about. I remember there being academic books, there were some philosophical books, and there were amazing dharma books, *Zen Mind*, *Beginner's Mind*, and *Path with Heart*. I remember reading Sharon Salzberg for the first time, these books that really inspired me. But there wasn't anything that really just had a clear roadmap, like, “Oh, this is what the Buddhist tradition is all about and where these practices are coming from.” For somebody like me, who was a meditator, I wasn't coming to this primarily as a scholar or just wanting to know the philosophy.

That was the early experience I had, and I would say it was the main inspiration. And then fast forward to more recent years. At a certain point, an editor at Shambhala Publications named Casey Kemp actually called me up and asked if I would be interested in writing a book for Shambhala that would be an overview and experiential intro to Buddhism. And at first I said no, but we started a conversation. That request coincided with the work I had been doing with the Tergar community, where we had been putting together a series of Buddhist courses on an intro to Buddhism. For somebody who has started to meditate and gets interested in Buddhism, how do you learn about Buddhism in an experiential way? And I remember I had the same issue that there actually wasn't a great book that fit the kind of courses we were creating, and so we had to cobble together a lot of articles from Tricycle and other sources. I mean, we found a lot of things



that we were able to cobble together. But there wasn't a book that just felt like, oh, yeah, this is that first book you could give somebody when they say, “Hey, what's Buddhism all about?” That current circumstance coupled with my early experience as a meditator, I think, was what prompted me to take the plunge and start working on the book.

**James Shaheen:** You know, we're always asked what's a good book to start with, because it isn't easy. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* isn't really so much for the beginner as one might think from the title. It's a great book, but when I read this book, I said, “Ah, now I have a book,” and a friend asked, and I said, “Read this.” And it's also, though, for longtime meditators, because I found it brought a lot together and gave context to things I didn't ordinarily think of that relate to each other that I didn't ordinarily consider. But the book aims to offer a meditator's guide to Buddhism, and you say that the origin of the word meditate in Tibetan is to get to know something. Can you say more about this? A lot of people use the word “familiarize.”

**Cortland Dahl:** Yeah, exactly. That's another interesting point. So one of many roles I've played is as a translator. And, just a kind of a geek about language in general and the Tibetan language, having spent many years living in Tibetan refugee settlements. Learning Tibetan, it was eye-opening in seeing how much a language and words could shape the way we see ourselves and shape the way we experience things. This word meditate, I think, is a perfect example of that because we have the English word meditate, which has all sorts of baggage. I think in the current era, we equate it with transcendental meditation or mindfulness meditation. As you said, the actual word in Tibetan is a verb that can mean meditate. It is what we translate as meditate, but the literal etymology of the word means to get to know something or to become deeply familiar with something. So if you just build a habit, for example, you would probably use a similar word. You become kind of habituated to something, and, in this case, it's quite important because, at least from the view of the Tibetan tradition, a lot of the process of meditation is getting to know the fundamental nature of our own minds. And that is meditation, one of the key points about meditation.



**James Shaheen:** OK, so you say that meditation allows us to be honest with ourselves, which opens us to the possibility of awakening, or the idea that a radically different way of being in the world is possible. I like that. So how do you understand awakening?

**Cortland Dahl:** Yeah, there's different views on that even within the Buddhist tradition, as you know. As I just mentioned, in the Tibetan tradition, there is this view of buddhanature, and that's a kind of an abstract term. It's hard to locate that in terms of experience. But one way to unpack the meaning of that is that we have qualities of our own mind, our own inner experience, that oftentimes we're just oblivious to, we're out of touch with. So in very simple terms, you could say things like awareness, compassion, and wisdom, which are what I focus on in the book as the core focal points in the Tibetan tradition.

The idea is not that we are not aware enough, or we don't have enough compassion, or we don't have enough insight or wisdom, and then we meditate in order to get more of these things and to cultivate or build these qualities. The idea is that actually these are innate qualities that we already have, but we simply lose touch with them, or we've never learned how to experience them and recognize them in the first place. So that's one way of looking at awakening, which is simply that we are learning to see these qualities in the present moment, first recognizing them and then nurturing that recognition, not the quality itself because it's always there, but nurturing the attunement, you could say, to it, the connection with it. Awakening is simply when that process has come to its full fruition, when we just don't forget this innate awareness, this innate compassion, this innate wisdom that are always present. We just don't lose touch with them anymore. That's one way to look at what awakening is all about.

**James Shaheen:** So you structure this book around the three yanas, or vehicles, which you describe as different rafts for crossing the over the river of samsara. So we'll go into each in depth, but could you first give us a brief overview of the yanas?



**Cortland Dahl:** So this gets a bit into the history, but I think it's also relevant to us as meditators just to understand all the many practices and ideas that you find in the Buddhist tradition. If you go back and you look at how Buddhism evolved over the centuries, especially in ancient India, how it spread to different countries, it went to different places at different times.

For example, it spread to Southeast Asia in one period, to China and East Asia in another period, and then actually to Tibet and the Tibetan Plateau comparatively later. When it spread to Tibet, it did so at a time where there had been all of these developments in the Buddhist tradition. And there was this period of synthesis, where a lot of different strands of experiential practice and philosophical debate came together, and it was kind of bringing together all of these different strands into one cohesive tradition that could be learned and studied and practiced. So that's what you find in Tibet.

These three *yanas*, *yana* is just a term that means vehicle or something that brings you from the point of confusion and suffering to the point that we just talked about. These three *yanas* are basically three different approaches that in the Tibetan tradition are woven together, that are brought together, and you practice them together.

So you have what is called the Hinayana. This is not the same as, say, the Theravada tradition that you find in Southeast Asia or in Sri Lanka. This is simply the way that the Tibetan tradition understands itself and a part of its own tradition. So we can translate that as the foundational vehicle, the basic fundamental teachings for the entire Buddhist path as presented in the Tibetan tradition. Then there's the Mahayana, which brings in principles like compassion, *bodhicitta*, this open heart, the idea that we're working not only for our own awakening but to help all beings be free from suffering, and then other experiential ideas like emptiness. And then finally, the Vajrayana, which brings in this radical notion that our own nature is fundamentally pure in this very moment and a lot of powerful meditative tools and practices to directly tap into that, to touch into that. So all of that is brought together in the Tibetan tradition. And the three *yanas* are



basically a way to understand that. It's almost like the roadmap that kind of shows you how to make sense of all of these different principles and practices.

**James Shaheen:** OK, so I'd like to go through each of the yanas with regard to entry, view, meditation, application, and fruition. So let's start with the foundational vehicle or what Tibetans are referring to here as the Hinayana. You say that the entry point to the teachings for this vehicle is the act of taking refuge. Could you say more about this act? What is the starting point here?

**Cortland Dahl:** Refuge, of course, is a primary central idea and practice in all Buddhist traditions. And in this presentation, this way of understanding the Buddhist path that we find in the Tibetan tradition, the starting point is the idea of refuge. But there's a very unique way of thinking that I think is quite helpful. We have, of course, the classical idea of taking refuge in the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha, which in the Tibetan tradition is called the outer refuge. And one way to think about that is it's basically helping us to get in touch with the true refuge, which is our own buddhanature. Or said differently, it's the awareness, compassion, and wisdom that we talked about a moment ago.

So we have these qualities, but we don't see them, we don't recognize them, because we don't see ourselves clearly. We suffer; we get caught up in the dance of attachment and aversion and all the many different emotional patterns and things that create problems in our lives. So the question is, how do we get in touch with that? How do we learn to recognize these qualities in ourselves?

The outer refuge is the catalyst for that. So the Buddha and all of our teachers are those who point us to look within. They teach us how to get in touch with these qualities. The dharma is basically the path, the step-by-step training. And then we have of course the sangha, all of the support network, the companions, the guides, and so forth that help support us on our journey. So you really need both of those. You need all of that external support. If we didn't have teachers, if we didn't have a clear path, we wouldn't know how to look or where to look.



But it's all ultimately this inner refuge. It's this true refuge of our own inner nature, our own innate qualities, that is what we're ultimately taking refuge in. So the starting point on the path, and this is the beginning of the foundational vehicle or the Hinayana as the Tibetans call it, this is really just the entry point where you see that there are these supports that we can have in our lives, and you sense that potential within yourself or the willingness to simply look and explore our own inner experience to find that lasting sense of inner peace and well-being.

**James Shaheen:** So let's move to view. You say that the core view of the foundational vehicle is the principle of no-self, which you say can be a powerful window into our direct experience. So how can meditation help us explore the nature of no-self, which in fact is a very challenging concept?

**Cortland Dahl:** Another great point. We could spend probably a few days just talking about this one. I think that the basic idea of no-self, this is a technical wonky term. It always sounds a little weird when you hear it for the first time. But the basic idea goes back to the story of the Buddha, the historical Buddha, and this question that he had of basically, why do we suffer? He had everything that the world was telling him he needed to be happy and content. He had wealth, he had power, he had a wonderful relationship. He had essentially everything you could ask for from a worldly point of view. And yet there was this nagging sense of dissatisfaction, this chronic, low-grade fever of discontent that followed him. That was really the genesis of the whole Buddhist tradition, because it was that experience that he had, that many of us have, that prompted him to start to look at his own life differently. And what he discovered, and there's of course a whole story behind this, is really that it comes down to a fundamental misperception of who we are.

We have all sorts of beliefs that we carry around, oftentimes completely unconsciously, and we just assume uncritically that they're true and that the stories we tell ourselves about who and what we are are true and accurate. And what he uncovered through his own practice was that things are very different, radically different, actually, than what we often think about ourselves.



So when I think about my life, I mentioned that I had struggled with a lot of anxiety, and in many ways, that's what got me started on the path of meditation. But when I look back on that, what I thought about myself, what I believed to be true about myself and about the world, was really distorted. For example, just the simple idea that I equated my identity with the anxiety I experienced. I just thought of myself like I'm just an anxious guy, I'm just sort of wired this way, and this is how I'm going to be, maybe I can learn to cope with that a little better, but I am an anxious person. So that's just one example, but we all have something like that, right?

Frankly, we all have many things like that that we just link our sense of self to our personal narratives, our memories, our emotional patterns, our habits, a whole range of things. And the principle of no-self is basically just calling that into question not from a philosophical point of view but from a deeply experiential point of view. It's calling us to look deeply at our own minds, our own inner experience, and to simply ask the question, Who am I? What am I? Are all these beliefs that I hold about myself actually true? If I take the time to step back and observe my inner experience, is it actually true? Like, really, am I fundamentally anxious, for example? Am I this role that I equate myself with or this personal story and this old history that I always am thinking about? And in looking and in examining, we start to see things that we didn't see. We start to see through the illusion of a lot of these rigid belief patterns and thoughts and emotional patterns that we have. And simultaneously, we start to see qualities that we didn't see so clearly before. So from the point of view of this perspective of buddhanature, we might start to see that, for example, awareness is with us every moment. We just don't recognize it. And there are these impulses to be free from suffering and to flourish that are always playing out in every moment that are the roots of kindness and compassion, and those, too, are with us every moment. So we basically just start to see ourselves more clearly, and that's a huge part of what Buddhist practice is about more generally, and specifically here in the foundational vehicle, a lot of this idea of no-self is very rooted in that exploration.





**James Shaheen:** Yeah, it's interesting, and you point this out in the book. There is that period between the identifications falling away before you're actually touching these other qualities that itself induces anxiety. Is that correct?

**Cortland Dahl:** Yeah. Actually, there are so many interesting things that we're learning about scientifically. We're not talking about this much now, but I have this other hat I wear as a scientist at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, and it just reminded me that one of the things we're finding in our research is that there's this interesting thing that happens very frequently in the first week or two of people learning to meditate where a lot of the things that we measure and equate with well-being and flourishing and mental health actually get worse in the first week or two. Really, what's happening—what we think anyways, we need to study this further—is not that people are getting worse. It's actually what in the Tibetan tradition they call the waterfall experience, which is simply that at the beginning, we are not really very aware of what's happening in our own mind, and when we begin to look, it can be a little overwhelming, even something as simple as how distracted we are. We might think, if I were just to ask somebody off the street who's never meditated, “How distracted would you say you are?,” and they might give an answer, what they would probably say after a week of meditation would probably be very different. It's not that they got more distracted that week. It's that they started to look and saw, “Whoa, I'm totally distracted way more than I thought I was.” And so it can be really overwhelming. It can induce anxiety. You can have all of these reactions when you begin to look, and a lot of the things we just assume are true actually might be radically different than the way we think they are. What that opens up into can be profoundly healing and inspiring, but there's this phase where we start to get in touch with our own minds and it can be humbling, to say the least.

**James Shaheen:** When I first started to sit, I would say, “When I sit, my mind gets really noisy,” completely missing the point that it's always noisy. So talking about meditation, you say that two common categorizations of meditation in the first vehicle are shamatha and vipassana, or



tranquility and insight, and together they offer us a way of experiencing no-self. Can you say more about these types of meditation and how they work in tandem?

**Cortland Dahl:** There's a great image in the Buddhist tradition that I think captures what is going on in meditation and specifically with two forms of meditation, shamatha and vipassana, and the image is of a candle flame with a glass enclosure. I think this is such a simple, beautiful example. The candle flame here is the flame of insight, and the glass enclosure is the shamatha aspect. It's the inner stability that allows that flame of insight to be sustained and to continue to burn bright. And you can see that you really need both of them. If you have just the insight but the mind is unstable, so in the example, if you just light a candle, it'd be like lighting a candle outside on a windy day. Of course it would be blown out. You could light it again, but it would get blown out. So if you map that onto experience, I think it's what a lot of us have probably had in our lives at various points where we might have a genuine insight. It might come through meditation, or it might come just from some profound experience that shifts your perspective.

And in that moment it feels like you're never going to be the same, that something fundamental has shifted. But the power of habit is still there, the power of the circumstances within which we live, all of these things can basically pull our mind back into habitual ways of thinking and seeing the world, seeing ourselves and so on. And so what shamatha does in providing that glass enclosure for that flame is it allows that flame to be nurtured. So when you have that moment of insight where you suddenly see something that you had never seen about your own mind or about experience or about the world, it doesn't just get snuffed out or blown out by the winds of experience. You can immerse yourself in that. You can learn to integrate that with other things in your life. So it's profoundly helpful, and you need both of these elements. You need the inner stability that comes from shamatha practice, and also, of course, just having the stability on its own is not enough. You need to have that insight, because that's what brings about the deeper changes that we're all looking for when we meditate.



**James Shaheen:** So let's talk about application now, following the structure that you've provided for us so helpfully. You say that the guiding principle of the foundational vehicle in terms of how we live our lives is *ahimsa*, or nonharming. So how do we cultivate ahimsa in our daily lives?

**Cortland Dahl:** This is a great question, and to step back a little bit to this classical framework, a lot of the book is structured around this very classical Buddhist unpacking of what practice actually looks like. What does it mean to actually practice Buddhism?

There are many ways to think about that and to dissect that. But in the Tibetan tradition, one common way to do that is through thinking about the view, meditation, and application. And this question is getting at the third part of it, which is the specific idea of nonviolence and ahimsa, which is also the same principle that was kind of the motivating force for Gandhi's work and what we've seen in the historical movements in India and Martin Luther King Jr. here in the United States. Just the idea of application I think is an interesting one from the point of view of what Buddhism is all about and how this hopefully can be relevant and be helpful to us in the modern world.

One big insight that came to me was understanding that the way the Buddhist tradition has come down to us is through the scholarly route. So there are traditions within Buddhism not just in the Tibetan tradition but really across the Buddhist world where there's a strong scholarly element and in terms of view meditation and application, this threefold process of what Buddhist practice is all about, the scholarly approach really emphasizes the view. So there's a lot of study, there's debate, there's analysis, what we call analytical meditation and self-inquiry, things like really trying to deeply understand the perspective of Buddhism and apply it to direct experience. That's kind of the scholarly approach.

And then you have the meditative approach. You have great yogis like Milarepa in the Tibetan tradition who were primarily meditating. They were basically full-time meditators. And so the



books they wrote, the teachings they gave, are embodying that emphasis on really hardcore, intensive meditation practice, oftentimes in retreat.

I realized at a certain point that I myself was really judging myself against those two ideals. And for me, because my passion has always been meditation and retreat, I kind of always felt like I should basically *be* Milarepa. Anything short of just living in a cave full time, I really wasn't meditating as hard as I could be or should be or something like that. So it was kind of what I jokingly call a neurotic Milarepa complex. Basically anything short of that wasn't quite legit. And I realized that actually, in the modern world, it's probably not a helpful way to view the tradition, and there's a third way to think about things that's there in the Buddhist tradition but maybe not as mainstream or as common as the scholarly approach and the yogic approach, which is what you might call the householder yogi, to use a technical term for it. In that approach, the main focus really is application, because you do some study, you do some meditation, you might do periods and retreat, but most of our lives, you and me and anybody listening to this, most of our lives is spent with our families at work. And maybe we can take time off and we take time each day for our meditation practice, but the real question for us as modern yogis and yoginis in this model is what is that application element?

Because this isn't the tradition that has come down to us largely in the form of books, the teachings that are given, to me, the invitation is that we need to write these books. We need to acknowledge that most of our life is spent in Zoom meetings and answering texts and sitting at the dinner table with our family and all sorts of other things and running errands. What does dharma look like in those moments? What is the practice of awareness, compassion, and wisdom in those moments? And that's kind of exciting, because rather than being a failed Milarepa, what does a successful householder yogi look like in the 21st century? So that's, in my mind, kind of the frontier here.

And now back to your question, when we look at the three yantras, it's giving us some guidelines, some guardrails to help understand what that might look like. So in the foundational yana, that



fundamental principle is ahimsa, which literally means nonharming or nonviolence. And the way I like to think about this is that, at the most basic level, we are learning to be more sensitive to the effect that what we think, say, and do has both on our own inner experience and on the experience of others. So it's not as though there's some divine commandment that somebody else or some divine being is just telling us what's right and what's wrong. We are rather learning to discern that for ourselves by seeing the ripple effect of all of these small moments of our lives. And through that, we can simply see that some things that we do, some things we say, can create a ripple effect that ultimately leads to more suffering. And other things we do might lead to a feeling of contentment or to compassion and more positive experiences. And through that discernment, through simply seeing more clearly, going back to the ideas of Buddhist meditation and how we train our minds, basically, we're just learning to see more clearly, and that makes us more sensitive, and thus, we quite spontaneously and naturally let go of things that might be harmful to ourselves or to others simply because we're just seeing it all more clearly.

**James Shaheen:** So let's get to fruition with the foundational vehicle. What does fruition look like?

**Cortland Dahl:** In the way this is laid out in the Tibetan tradition, we have this idea—and there's a lot of kind of technical terminology here, because there are four levels leading up to this. But ultimately this idea of cessation where you learn to tap into the groundless nature of experience. You're essentially learning to tap into the unconditioned nature of our own inner experience in which that suffering is no longer occurring. So basically that direct experiential glimpse into no-self, that part of our own inner experience that is beyond all the conditioned patterns of our emotions, our memory, our personal narrative, and so forth. We learn to get in touch with that, and ultimately, we're kind of deconstructing the conditioned nature of experience. Later, we'll see, and we can talk about this, there starts to be a bit more of an embodied view of awakening. But in the foundational vehicle, as it's presented in this idea of the arhat, or the foe destroyer, you're essentially learning to access something in which all of that experience is no longer



occurring anymore. You're essentially deconstructing everything that causes suffering and the unconditioned nature of experience.

**James Shaheen:** You mentioned Milarepa earlier, and you use him as a model to describe the Mahayana. So could you say something about that and what the Mahayana is?

**Cortland Dahl:** The Mahayana is really, if you think about this from a personal point of view and a meditative point of view, you can see this almost as though it's a continuing of the journey and the unfolding of inner experience that you find in the foundational vehicle and that we just talked about. So there's many different layers to that. But what we find, for example, is that in that guiding motivation that prompts us to set off on the path of awakening in the first place, that might begin by simply recognizing that we're suffering, and we want to find a different way to live.

In my own personal story that I've mentioned a few times, I was overwhelmed. I was completely stressed out. I didn't really know what to do. All I knew is that my own mind and emotions were becoming a bit unmanageable. It was just getting to the point where I was like, I can't continue down this path. I need to do something different. I need to make a change. And so we often have that insight. It might not be anxiety. It might be any number of things.

But in the Mahayana, the extension of that is at a certain point we realize that we're not in this alone, that we all have our own stories, but everybody is suffering. We're all in this confusing mess of samsara together, and so our motivation begins to deepen and expand, and we start to think about our own personal journey of awakening as including the well-being of others. We want for others what we want for ourselves. We see the potential in others that we see in ourselves. And so that becomes the backdrop and context for our practice. We simply are motivated to help all beings wake up to these qualities and to discover their buddhanature and to have access to these insights. So part of it is that motivation and the view, and then there's a



whole lot of other things we could say too about the perspective and the practices. But I think the starting point really is that view that we know as bodhicitta. That’s the technical term for it.

**James Shaheen:** Right, you talked about taking refuge as the entry to the foundational vehicle, and you talk about the bodhisattva vow as the entry to the Mahayana. Can you say something about that?

**Cortland Dahl:** It’s exactly that. So if taking refuge is that formal step where we say, yes, I’m really going to set out on the path, I recognize this potential in myself, and I take refuge in the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha as the practical means to getting in touch with that, that’s the entry point to the first vehicle, the foundational vehicle. With the Mahayana, it’s something very similar, but it’s that moment. in which this altruistic impulse takes root in our mind. The moment in which we think, I’m now doing this not only for myself, I want to help all beings. All conscious forms of life have this potential to wake up. I want all beings to be free from suffering. And I want my path and my journey to be helping to make that a reality. That is the entry point. In the same way that refuge is the entry point in the first yana, that moment of giving rise to bodhicitta, which is that altruistic impulse, that’s really the starting point of the Mahayana journey.

**James Shaheen:** So you say the core view in the foundational vehicle is no-self. So with Mahayana, we’re talking about buddhanature. Can you talk about buddhanature?

**Cortland Dahl:** Yeah, so buddhanature is an interesting extension, you could say, of the journey that begins simply by exploring our sense of self. And the idea is that a lot of the path of meditation and what’s going on when we meditate and we do these practices and explore these principles is we start to see through some of the illusions of our old beliefs and patterns. But there’s also qualities that we’re getting in touch with. It’s not just a letting go. It’s a blossoming, almost like we’re attuning to aspects of our own being that we were not so in touch with before. So the idea of buddhanature is simply that, yes, we do let go and we start to see through some of



these illusions we've created for ourselves. But there are also these innate qualities that are just waiting to be recognized, and we start to get in touch with them.

So in some cases, in the Mahayana, for example, this is viewed as a potential. It's almost like a seed that exists within us all conscious living creatures, and we can all recognize that. And the human mind has a unique potential to get in touch with that. As we'll see in the Vajrayana, which is the third of these three vehicles, that's no longer viewed as a potential. It's viewed as the actual reality in each moment. So it's not just a seed; it's as though that has always been in full fruition, we just are not seeing it.

In any case, the idea of buddhanature that we find in this second vehicle introduces this idea of these innate qualities that we can learn to get in touch with and that we can slowly nurture through our practice. Again, things like awareness, compassion, and wisdom are a simple way to think about those qualities.

**James Shaheen:** So buddhanature then is also linked to emptiness. How does that work?

**Cortland Dahl:** Emptiness is another example of an extension of what we find in the foundational vehicle. So, when we look, for example, when we start meditating, if you just sat down to meditate, or even as you're listening right now, if any listeners are just listening to this podcast, there's just this sense of self that we carry with us. There's a sense that I'm here talking to you, or you're there just listening to the words you're hearing. And there's just this sense of kind of a solid me or self, and there's a kind of a unitariness to it. There's just this me, this thing called me that is just moving through the world, our beliefs, our old emotional habits, our thought patterns and so forth all contribute to that. But there's just this kind of sense of me-ness or I-ness that we carry around, and there's kind of a solidity to that. So the first thing we recognize when we start to meditate is just that there is that assumption of a self, and we feel that it's not just a thought. We really feel that when we begin to look at what we saw with this idea of no-self is that you look at experience, and if you ask, OK, it feels like there's this solid me that is





the same me that got up in the morning yesterday and had breakfast, and that me is the same one that was alive ten years ago, or thirty years ago, or fifty years ago. It feels like it's the same me or I that has moved through the world. But is that true? What do I find when I actually look? And what we find is that things are actually shifting and moving. Our experiences of our bodies are changing every moment. The things happening in our mind are changing every moment. So we do not find this seeming solidity. We actually don't find that. What we find is movement and change.

Emptiness takes us to an even deeper level, because if we then ask, OK, well, what is it that's moving and changing? And we start to investigate that, again, not just philosophically, but deeply through our inner experience, what we start to see is that there is a fundamental openness as well. We can find and we can directly experience this feeling of a vast open spaciousness within which all of that is happening. This what in technical terms you would say is the unconditioned ground of experience. It's the part of our experience that is beyond all of the complex web of causes and conditions that are going on and constantly playing out in our lives.

So this is a really hard concept to experience, but it's that basic open space of our minds that we can begin to tap into through meditation practice. So it's not just a nothingness, it's just simply saying there's a dimension of our experience that is in some respects the most fundamental aspect of who we are, but it's so subtle that we often don't even see it. It is rather the very essence or nature of who we are. All of the thoughts, emotions, and perceptions that form the fabric of our lives.

**James Shaheen:** You know, a lot of people think of meditation as a solipsistic exercise. Yet in the Mahayana, one meditates for the benefit of all beings. What does it look like to meditate with the motivation to ease the suffering of all beings?

**Cortland Dahl:** I heard this great example of one of the 20th-century legends of Tibetan Buddhism, a great master named Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche, and I heard this story, I don't even



know if it's true, but it's a great story, so I'll tell it anyway. He evidently was in Paris, and somebody was taking him around Paris. He lived for years in France, and he was a great meditation master of this tradition that we know that's called Dzogchen, for those familiar with Tibetan meditation, a true master of the tradition. And he was just walking around, as the story goes, the streets of Paris. As he was walking around, he was just looking at all the people he was encountering in the subways and on the streets, and he was commenting to the people he was with: “Oh, that person is just right there. They're right on the edge of seeing their own buddhanature, their own pure awareness,” as he was probably saying in his own tradition. It was amazing. I love this story. And it's so simple, because it was just how he was seeing other people, seeing that every person he came into contact with not only had this pure inner nature, and he was seeing that in them, but seeing that they were just right there. It's almost like it was just right on the edge of their conscious awareness. And he was seeing that they were so close not only to having this but actually to seeing it for themselves.

So this idea that awakening and enlightenment isn't this far-off, distant fantasy. We're all right on the edge of that all the time, and I think there's something in that story that just shows this idea of compassion and bodhicitta. It's how you see people, it's how you see the world. You're seeing the potential in yourself. You're seeing this potential in other beings, and you're seeing that we're all just right there on the edge of this life-changing realization. So it's a tremendously uplifting and empowering way to view each other. And it's not as though you don't see the problems, because you equally see all of the confusion that ensues and all the suffering that happens when we're not in touch with that and all the horrors of humanity that play out, that can and do play out when we're not seeing that. But we're not also losing touch with this beautiful potential that we all have as well. So the motivation of bodhicitta, I think, fundamentally is about seeing that potential in everyone and everything and the willingness and the courage to want to help not only for oneself but for everyone to get in touch with that. That doesn't always mean that you're running around trying to spout off about spiritual principles. It might mean giving somebody a meal if they're



hungry, but we're just committed to doing whatever we can to lead others along that journey of getting in touch with their true nature.

**James Shaheen:** Let's talk about application in the Mahayana, especially with regard to the paramitas. Can you talk about that?

**Cortland Dahl:** We talked about the principle of nonviolence and nonharm in the foundational vehicle. So naturally if you continue along that path, I think there's this very natural movement that starts to happen where of course we want to avoid things that are creating difficulties. We want to avoid anything that's causing us or others to suffer. But in seeing that potential, there's also this natural movement to want to benefit others. We naturally see that potential, and we want to help. We want to do whatever we can and be responsive in the moment to benefit others as much as we can. So that can play out in many ways. And I think a lot of this is really a fundamentally responsive stance to the world of just simply doing whatever we can in the circumstances we find ourselves in to help.

And again, like I just said, that could be giving somebody a meal if they're hungry. It could be simply being there to listen and holding space for a friend or somebody we care about in a time of need. Or it could be giving somebody a book. The first book I ever read, if I think about what got me started on the path, I got because I had subscribed to this thing called the Quality Paperback Book Club. I was a college student, so I was all about how I could get free books because I loved to read and I had no money. So I will forever be grateful for whoever created that company that did that, and whoever made the choice to put out some books about meditation and Buddhism. That person was a bodhisattva to me. If that hadn't happened, I mean, who knows, I certainly wouldn't have started meditating when I did. So it can look many different ways.

But I think there's a lot of ways, and the six paramitas are kind of the roadmap of these principles like being generous, ethical conduct, being patient, diligence, joyful effort, meditation, wisdom. There's all these different aspects, and it's a whole conversation about each of them, but basically



it's that we're just open to helping and being of service however we can and whatever fits the moment we're in. It's just a beautiful way to live, and it has a way of not only benefiting others, but it has a way of also further putting us in touch with our own buddhanature and these innate qualities that we're exploring through our meditation practice.

**James Shaheen:** So, in the foundational vehicle, arhatship is the fruition. What is the fruition in the Mahayana?

**Cortland Dahl:** In the Mahayana, there's this idea of full buddhahood. So it's not as though there was the Buddha 2,500 years ago, and he was just this lucky guy who got the full package and the rest of us get reduced-rate enlightenment or something. The idea here is that actually anybody can become a buddha. We all have buddhanature. We can all get in touch with that buddhanature, and we all have that capacity to be buddhas. And there's also this idea of the union of samsara and nirvana. In the foundational vehicle, there's this idea of cessation where our stream of consciousness just ends and we're no longer suffering, but we're no longer in the world either. In the Mahayana, there's this idea of nirvana or awakening within the world. And the driving force, rather than confusion and karma propelling us into all of our existences, is really compassion. It's that willingness to engage the suffering of the world, simultaneously seeing that potential that all beings possess and that driving, propelling force of compassion keeps us fully present and manifesting in the world, but to be of service to others, to help all beings recognize that potential. So that idea of buddhahood as the union of samsara and nirvana is a shift of what awakening looks like and what fruition looks like in this Mahayana view.

**James Shaheen:** Could you say more about the union of nirvana and samsara? Because in the foundational vehicle, of course, that can seem an irresolvable paradox.

**Cortland Dahl:** Yeah, this is a big discussion, and to fully do it justice would probably take a whole series of podcasts probably, but in some views of Buddhism, for example, in the foundational vehicle, as it's presented in the Tibetan tradition, there's this view of samsara and



nirvana as opposite ends of the spectrum. If you have samsara, you don't have nirvana, and vice versa. So nirvana is basically the ending of samsara and our existence, for example, our embodied existence, our stream of consciousness. It is the ending of those elements of our existence and the innate suffering that comes along with them. That basically is nirvana, right? So there's no being in the world. Eventually that essentially comes to an end. There's this idea of the conditioned nature of samsara, which is one of suffering and impermanence, and then the piece of nirvana as sort of like a separate experience.

In a Mahayana view, there's this idea that the nature of samsara has these qualities, like emptiness, for example, as the nature of samsara, and awakening is basically getting in touch with that nature of things. And since the nature of samsaric experience is emptiness, and you can get in touch with that nature, and even the relative expression of that as compassion, for example, and these other qualities, you can experience nirvana. You can essentially be in samsara while experiencing nirvana. So the image that you have here is like the lotus that's growing from the mud. The mud is samsara, and the lotus is growing up out of that, but it's not as though the lotus needs to somehow be outside of the mud. It's actually rooted. It's there in the mud but has the beautiful blossom of the lotus. And that's the idea here that you can be fully awakened, in other words, not touched by the suffering of samsara, and fully in the world with all of its messiness. And you find this in the stories of great masters, like we've talked about Milarepa, or I just mentioned, Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche, or somebody like His Holiness the Dalai Lama would be viewed as an awakened being. He's in the world but not touched by the suffering, because he's viewed, at least by Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhists, as he's really reached the point of awakening. So it's a very different way of looking at awakening and the idea of nirvana.

**James Shaheen:** OK, well, let's move on to the Vajrayana. What is the Vajrayana?

**Cortland Dahl:** So Vajrayana is basically a powerful technology that helps us get in touch with that true nature, this buddhanature, but using very powerful methods that, again, according to the way the Tibetan tradition views itself, are simply more effective, powerful, and it's a weird word



to use, but almost efficient. You have these words like the swift path, the direct path, because it has a way of putting us in touch with our own buddhanature in the immediacy of the present moment. There are lots of debates actually in the Tibetan tradition: Does it have a different view, or is it basically the view of the Mahayana? There are different viewpoints on that, but there's general agreement that what really sets the Vajrayana tradition apart is the powerful meditative tools it has that help us to get in touch with that.

**James Shaheen:** So you say that the premise of the Vajrayana is that awakening is not a goal or a destination but rather the true nature of our mind in every moment. How can this be?

**Cortland Dahl:** This goes back to the point I made a few moments ago, or a few minutes ago, where if you talk about buddhanature and you basically say, OK, there's this idea that we have these innate qualities, and the path is really not so much as achieving something that we don't have or getting, building more of something that we don't have, like we're not compassionate enough and therefore if we meditate for a while, we'll train ourselves to be more compassionate. There's a view of the path that looks like that. When we get to the idea of buddhanature, there's this idea that no, actually, these are qualities we already have. So meditation at its most basic level is about getting to know ourselves. It's not a process of self-improvement; it's a process of self-discovery. And there are no obstacles really in this approach because we're getting in touch with fundamental qualities that are the very nature of every experience we have.

So for example, when I started to meditate, I remember this incredible kind of battle I had with my own mind, where even things as simple as getting sleepy or having a torrent of agitated thoughts in my mind felt like this insurmountable obstacle to my meditation practice. From the point of view of these teachings and this way of looking at the mind and looking at experience, actually, these aren't obstacles. These are opportunities. Rather than viewing them as something we need to overcome, we just explore these inner experiences, and we discover qualities about them that we normally wouldn't have seen.



In the Vajrayana, the radical shift that happens is that these qualities are not seen as a latent potential but rather as the fully present reality of our own inner experience. And so it's kind of the most radical expression of buddhanature, the idea that it doesn't matter how neurotic you might feel, how overwhelmed you might feel by suffering or whatever emotional habits and patterns you might have. In my case, in the throes of feeling super anxious, I had a phobia of public speaking. It's amazing to me that I do podcasts like this now, because back in the day when I started meditating, I had a genuine phobia of any public speaking.

**James Shaheen:** So did I.

**Cortland Dahl:** It's amazing. And so meditation can profoundly help with these things. So the idea here is that awakening is not found in the absence and the elimination of these difficult experiences but as the nature of those experiences. So in that moment where I could have been totally overwhelmed by the idea of, Oh my God, I've got to come on this podcast, thirty years ago, that would have sent my mind into a tailspin for months just thinking about that.

But how do we deal with that? What's the approach? At the time, I would have probably thought, I can't be happy. Forget about awakening. I can't even just be basically sane and content until I get rid of this difficult emotional experience I'm having. That's the natural intuition that we often have. This is actually saying no, actually, if you learn to look and view and explore that experience from the inside, you will find awareness, deep insight, a deep connectedness with others, a deep insight into interdependence of all experience within that very experience. That very painful experience you're having will be the gateway to awakening. And that, I think, is the promise of the Vajrayana view in working with the messiness of life. It's giving us the tools to explore that in such a way that we can discover the buddhanature within every experience so there are no obstacles. There are no roadblocks to awakening. Everything becomes an opportunity.



**James Shaheen:** You explain that the first two vehicles take a causal view and that Vajrayana takes a fruitional view. Can you explain that distinction?

**Cortland Dahl:** It's another way of saying the same point. If you look at the first two vehicles, the idea is that by traveling the path of awakening, we're going to do X, Y, and Z, and eventually through that, we will achieve the fruition of awakening, whether that's becoming an arhat or full buddhahood, however we want to define awakening. It's basically the endpoint and what we achieve as a result of the process.

So even if you take when we talked about the six paramitas a moment ago, in the Mahayana, you have these six practices, for example, being generous and practicing meditation, the idea is that if you practice those things and you take that deep enough and do that in a sustained way, eventually you're going to become awakened. So it's kind of the result, the endpoint of the path. What you're doing on the path from this point of view is basically you're setting in place the causes and conditions for your own awakening. That's maybe one way to think about it.

The Vajrayana view is different. In the Vajrayana the view is that you're already awakened. It's not that you're going to achieve anything, because your own nature in this moment is already as awake as it's ever going to be, which is to say, awareness, compassion, and wisdom are as present now as they will ever be. Again, it doesn't matter if you're just having a moment of inspiration or you're feeling totally overwhelmed and stressed out. In all of those moments, the nature of those experiences is this awakened mind and has these awakened qualities.

And so this idea of taking the fruition as the path is basically just a wonky technical way of saying that the way we view the path and the way we view the whole process of meditating and being on the journey of awakening is not as though we're going to get awakened in the future by doing X, Y, and Z. It's that actually we're fully awakened now, and the basis for our practice is just to learn to discover that.





And so everything is just an exploration, kind of a playful, experimental exploration of our own heart and mind so that we can learn to see this in everything, in everyone, and in every moment.

You could see just as an example, one of my main teachers is Mingyur Rinpoche. He went on this wandering retreat a number of years ago. He got back in 2015. A lot of that time he was in caves. He was meditating like Milarepa, but there were times where he was, for example, at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, which is kind of the Mecca for the Sikh religion. He's a Buddhist monk, but he was washing dishes for pilgrims at the Golden Temple in Amritsar. And you might ask, What was he doing? Why would he do that? Why wasn't he just going and meditating in a cave? And it was because he was doing this radical process of seeing how you can stay in touch with your own buddhanature all the time, anywhere, no matter where you are, what you're doing. And at a certain point, when you're a very advanced meditator, like he is, you put yourself in kind of radically challenging situations. He was almost at the point of death at one point, or in this case, begging for food in a tradition that wasn't his own with people he didn't know in a culture he didn't understand. It's almost like intentionally putting yourself in very challenging situations, almost like a champion swimmer in stormy waters: Can I stay grounded in this recognition, even now, even here? And so there's just beautiful stories like that from the tradition. But that's the basic principle. It's always here. We're just learning to see it.

**James Shaheen:** You know, in the foundational vehicle we have taking refuge, in the Mahayana we have the bodhisattva vow. What is the entry point in Vajrayana, particularly with regard to empowerment?

**Cortland Dahl:** The ritual is just that. So there's this term *abhisheka*, which is just the Sanskrit term. And like you said, you have this entry point of refuge for the foundational vehicle. In the Mahayana, it's this moment of giving rise to bodhicitta and this altruistic impulse to help all beings awaken. In the Vajrayana, it's this ritual symbolic experience of empowerment, which basically is a way in which you work with a teacher. Sometimes it can be in a group, sometimes it's just a single teacher and a single student. But it's kind of actually going back to that story I



told about Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche. It's starting by working with a teacher who has come to recognize these qualities in themselves, somebody who has some degree of realization. And by that we mean somebody who has recognized the nature of their own minds, or said differently, recognized their own buddhanature and grown deeply familiar with that. And then Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche is really seeing the world through that lens. So when you're sitting in the room, you might walk in the door, you're not seeing yourself that way. You might see yourself as just the confused neurotic person that needs to meditate to get rid of these patterns, but the person who's sitting across the room from you is actually seeing you as a buddha, not as a potential buddha, but they're actually seeing your own buddhanature.

And you could sense this, actually, forget about empowerment, even when you're just around people who are really deeply steeped in this tradition. You hear this about the Dalai Lama all the time, for example. I've been around scientists who are not Buddhists, in many cases not even meditators, who are deeply transformed just from meeting him. And I think it's probably for many reasons, but in part because somebody who's just seeing you through the lens of buddhanature, it's healing. It's not something they say or do. It's something just about how they see you and how they relate to you. And so an empowerment is almost like a ritualized way of enacting that where you kind of go through this whole process, and the idea is that at the beginning, you start out seeing yourself as we normally do as these confused beings who are suffering. The teacher is seeing you as a buddha. But by the end of the empowerment process, you are that awakened being. It's sort of helping you shift into what we call pure perception in the Vajrayana tradition. You're learning to shift to see your own buddhanature, and the teacher seeing you that way is kind of the catalyst for that. It's almost like somebody is mirroring back to you your own buddhanature to the point where ideally you start to see that or at least see the potential of that for yourself.



**James Shaheen:** You know, a lot of people who are not practitioners of the Vajrayana misunderstand the guru principle and the student's relationship with the teacher. Can you say something about the guru principle, particularly the role of devotion?

**Cortland Dahl:** Yeah, this is a tough one. I was somebody who when I first heard about this I was so turned off actually just by the idea of guru, and for good reason. It's been misused, and there have been a lot of circumstances where it just really has not gone well and times where it's really gone off the rails, and so that's often what we hear about.

But the tradition is actually quite empowering and beautiful. The true meaning of guru, you could say, is actually buddhanature. So one way to understand the guru principle is that you have the outer guru, which is much like the outer refuge of the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha. And that's a physical teacher, right? That's the person who you meet and who helps you get in touch with this.

But the true guru, the ultimate guru, is your own buddhanature. So there are all these practices, and the way the guru is viewed always ends by seeing this in yourself. It's never this power hierarchy where the guru is some master, and you're always this groveling, ignorant being. The whole point of that is to see that the qualities you initially see in the guru, you eventually see in yourself. That's the whole reason for that. And I think now we're starting to understand how and why it actually works that way. I mean, if you think about really anything that you learn in life, we learn through social interaction. The vast amount of learning that takes place is not just information we get reading books and other ways. It's actually through modeling and through seeing other people and our relationships. So for example, right now, the Olympics are going on. I've been watching Simone Biles, for example, this icon of the athletic world. You can just imagine people all over the world, especially little boys and girls at home watching this and seeing this just complete mastery of somebody who has trained themselves to such a degree and seeing that potential suddenly in them. There are probably little kids who are now going to a gym



nearby to start messing around, and some of those people might become Olympic athletes one day. And it starts by seeing Simone Biles just do her amazing performances.

Really, the guru principle is based on the same neural wiring in our brains. It really is about seeing these qualities in someone else so that we can get in touch with them for ourselves, but it never ends just with the power being outside, so to speak.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, I think your teacher, Mingyur Rinpoche, has been very clarifying with regard to all of this in the wake of a lot of confusion that followed various mishaps in sanghas when it goes wrong. I thought he was a very clarifying voice. Meditation. In the Vajrayana, the path of meditation consists of three stages, developmental, conceptual completion, and nonconceptual completion. So can you briefly walk us through these stages? How do they offer a swift path to awakening?

**Cortland Dahl:** Yeah, a lot to unpack here, but to give a summary of what meditation in the Vajrayana is all about, the idea is, again, based on the view that our true nature is always pure and we can access that at any moment. Based on that, there's this idea that really you can use any experience as a gateway to awakening.

That really is what Vajrayana meditation is all about. It's basically just using different human experiences, and rather than having them reinforce this confused understanding and view of ourselves, we use those same experiences as opportunities to discover our own buddhanature. One of the most common things about the human mind is that we're constantly imagining, daydreaming, projecting into the future, remembering what happened in the past. So the development stage, which is the first of these three forms of meditation, is just taking that overactive imagination that we all have, and using that to help us get in touch with our own buddhanature. So instead of imagining ourselves, like I would have, for example, when I would imagine some disastrous public speaking event when I had a phobia of public speaking, I was imagining a future me and something horrible that was gonna happen that would cause me



suffering. We all do things like this. We fantasize in sometimes ways that are very toxic for our mental health. So in this case, we imagine ourselves to be a buddha. We imagine what it would be like to be the very embodiment of wisdom, to be the very embodiment of compassion and bodhicitta. And it's not unlike, again, to use the Olympic athlete analogy, if you watch one of these great athletes before they start their event, they're sitting there imagining. They're not imagining, “Oh, what if this goes wrong? And if that happens?” They're imagining the perfect race. Simone Biles is probably imagining perfection. That's basically what the development stage is. You're imagining the awakened state and putting yourself there, and what it does is it shifts how we see ourselves. It shifts us from only seeing the negative things and all the shortcomings we have. It shifts us into a view where we're in touch with and imagining our own buddhanature. And it's just using this incredibly powerful current in our own minds, which is our thoughts, our inner narrative, and our imagination as a way to get in touch with that. So that's the first form of meditation, which we call the development stage, sometimes deity yoga. And again, this is one that could be so easily misunderstood because when you look at all the imagery, it seems very theistic. It seems like there are gods or something because you see all these buddhas, but actually, these are props to help you visualize and meditate, and you're imagining yourself to be that buddha. It's not as though there's some buddha out there. You're that buddha. You're actually using it to develop this symbolic visualization. So that's one form of meditation

The second one that you mentioned, which is what we call the completion stage, sometimes the completion stage with signs or marks or with concepts, is basically a series of inner yogic practices where we use different human experiences as gateways to that exploration, kind of like we did with imagination in the development stage. So there are practices where, for example, you use sleep, dreams, even the process of death and dying, as we do in the so-called bardo practices. There are practices for each of those experiences, again, where you learn to see the buddhanature within those experiences. But the principle is simple. It's a powerful current in human experience. Rather than viewing that as an obstacle to our practice, how can we take these energies in our emotions, our bodies, our minds, and discover emptiness and wisdom and



compassion within those experiences, rather than viewing all of that as an obstacle to our awakening? So again, it's basically just taking these currents of human experience, and the practice is just giving us the window into those experiences, where we can experience them and see things about them that we wouldn't have seen.

The final third, and I'm giving you a kind of a whirlwind tour of a very complex set of meditation practices, the third set we call in technical terms the completion stage without concepts, or the nonconceptual completion stage. These are the nature of mind traditions that have become quite well known of Dzogchen and Mahamudra. Dzogchen means the great perfection. These practices are very directly putting us in touch with nondual awareness, that open space within the mind that is always there, basically the essence or true nature of the mind. So these are viewed as the most direct and the most profound practices, putting us directly in touch with buddhanature. That is the true fruitional approach, you could say. So those are justly treasured in the tradition as being crown jewels of the Tibetan tradition.

**James Shaheen:** OK, so let's talk about application, especially with regard to naturalness and spontaneity.

**Cortland Dahl:** To bring our tour to a close, the application, again, the view, meditation, application, and we have those for each of these three yanas, and the Vajrayana application is all about the responsiveness that I mentioned. So there's a lot of language of letting go of ethical boundaries and norms, and it's not of course that you're going to start doing unethical things. It's that at a certain point in our path, we need to be very grounded in an ethical framework so that we can avoid things that are going to be destructive or toxic. But at a certain point, this becomes just more concepts in our mind, and we need to almost let go of all of the rule book for experience and simply be totally responsive. This, of course, only works if you're truly grounded in this view of buddhanature. If you can be Nyoshul Khenpo Rinpoche and you're viewing the



world in this way, you can be responsive, and you're naturally going to be responding out of wisdom and compassion.

So this is not in the absence of an ethical foundation. This is really the extension of what we've been doing in our practice through the Hinayana principle of nonviolence, the Mahayana grounding in compassion and altruism, and here, what we're bringing in is just a naturalness and spontaneity, as you just said, and we're learning to just be completely open. And that's that clear seeing that we've cultivated, both of ourselves and others, seeing the suffering of the world but also seeing this beautiful potential and true nature of all beings. It allows us to be completely responsive, and that natural spontaneity manifests as compassion in sometimes unpredictable ways. Sometimes it can be a disciplined nun or monk that's embodying that side of the tradition, but sometimes you have this kind of crazy wisdom where it can be very unconventional, and you find this like in the stories of Zen masters as well, where just a spontaneous moment leads to the awakening of a student. So again, it's a natural extension of what we find in the first two vehicles, but in a really beautiful way.

**James Shaheen:** You already mentioned fruition, but there's something I especially liked. It was that the clarity of awareness becomes our new home. Can you say something about that?

**Cortland Dahl:** There's so much language in the foundational vehicle and the Mahayana that makes awakening and enlightenment this very abstract, esoteric thing, and it seems quite inaccessible in a way. When you get to the Vajrayana and you start talking about buddhahood and awakening and enlightenment, it becomes much more ordinary in a sense—not ordinary in the sense of not interesting or mundane but in the sense that it's always just right here. And it's going back most fundamentally to awareness and the nature of awareness. So there's this idea that in every moment of our lives, even in deep sleep, though we usually don't recognize it, there's this thread of awareness that is just this ever present quality throughout our lives. And here we're just getting in touch with the empty, ungraspable openness of that awareness and the fact that's infused with this knowing presence that is always there. And because that's always



there, we can always get in touch with our own buddhanature, our own awakened nature. And so in a sense that it's really that simple. It's just coming home to that quality of ourselves. We start the path living in our emotional habits through our personal narratives. We equate our sense of self with the roles we play in our lives. And through this process, we start to see that, yeah, these are parts of who we are, but these are conditioned habits that change over time. But this quality of the open, radiant quality of our own awareness becomes our new home in the sense that's where we're living from. We never lose sight of that or lose touch with that.

**James Shaheen:** OK, to wrap up, can you say how we integrate all three yantras into our daily lives and how they together support awakening?

**Cortland Dahl:** So it probably seems, even just here, we've been talking about this for the past few minutes, and there's kind of an overwhelming amount of ideas and practices, and in many respects, this is a roadmap for an entire life of practice. So it's not like you're just going to sit down and master all of this in a single moment. But there are ways, and the Tibetan tradition has found a way to really distill the essence of all of this. So even in a few short moments, you can touch into this, certainly in a meditation practice. If you sit down to do your daily meditation session, there are ways that the essence of all of what we've talked about here today is distilled in such a way that you can experience it and bring it directly even into a single meditation session. But just to say simply, even in this moment, forget about formal meditation, as a simple, guiding principle for our lives, this idea that in every moment, we're using our lives and we're surrounding ourselves with things that will put us in touch with our own buddhanature, with our own inner refuge, you could say, and we're constantly reorienting ourselves away from things that might cause suffering or at the very least just not bring a lot of meaning to our lives, and we're learning to reorient ourselves to something that is truly fulfilling.

That's really the essence of what refuge is all about. You don't need to chant anything. You don't need to do any elaborate practice. It could just be a moment of reorienting yourself in the moment to things that are supportive of that process for you and, most importantly, reorienting





yourself to these qualities that you already possess. So that could just be a moment, right? We can do it right now while we're talking to each other, just reorienting to awareness and to our wish to bring more well-being into the world. So that really, you could say, is the essence of that first yana, and you can practice that in just a moment.

And then with that, you can bring in the bodhicitta. For example, we're sitting here and talking, and I could just see that in you, I could sense it in myself, I could think about everybody who might be listening to this, and the wish that everybody who hears this, that might spark something in them. So that, too, could just be a moment. And right there, we've connected with the essence of the Mahayana tradition.

And then bringing in this view of the Vajrayana that we talked about, that we're all right on the edge of that realization. That pure nature that we've talked about is not some abstract, esoteric thing that is inaccessible. That's who we are in this moment. And again, we can just see that and sense that and just let what we do be a spontaneous expression of that. So that can be just a few moments of mind, or even just a single moment where we just remember. In fact, this term we call mindfulness, which is everywhere these days, the Tibetan understanding of that word is that it's not simply about just coming back to the present moment. It actually means to remember. So it's almost as though we're just reminding ourselves to come back to this way of seeing ourselves and seeing the world. Again, that can just be a moment. So all of that rich tapestry, all the ideas we talked about, the different practices, you can distill that down to a single moment that you could experience when you're at the dinner table and talking to your family or sending a message to a friend, just bringing that into your presence in that moment.

**James Shaheen:** You know, as you've said, Cort, each one of these questions could be a whole podcast, which means you'll probably have to come back, but for now, we wanted to talk about your book and for you to walk us through it. So thanks so much for joining us. It's been a great pleasure. And for our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *A Meditator's Guide to Buddhism*.

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“A Meditator’s Guide to Buddhism”

Episode #111 with Cortland Dahl

September 25, 2024



Believe me, it's the beginner's book that we've all been looking for. It's available now. Thanks again, Cort.

**Cortland Dahl:** Thank you so much. It's been an honor to be with you.

**James Shaheen:** You’ve been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Cortland Dahl. To read an excerpt from Cort’s new book, visit [tricycle.org/magazine](http://tricycle.org/magazine). Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at [tricycle.org/donate](http://tricycle.org/donate). We’d love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at [feedback@tricycle.org](mailto:feedback@tricycle.org) to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by Sarah Fleming and the Podglomerate. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!