

Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin

Kindling the Flame of Enlightenment ITS

Talk 2 of 4: Discovery of Buddha Nature: Celebration and Doubt

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Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin: Continuing our discussion about the bodhisattva path, we should consider at this point the importance of the practice of shamatha-vipashyana meditation, or hinayana practice of experiencing the components of what make up belief in a self.

If we practice strenuously, diligently, we begin to see that what we call ourselves is a combination of events strung together in a very immediate and quick manner, so as to indicate in appearance that there is something definite about consciousness. That's extremely important in beginning on the bodhisattva's path, that we understand that, that we have experienced that. Experiencing that, we have a sense of egolessness beginning to come to fruition in our life, a sense of ourselves as transparent and not particularly solid, and a sense of our world as not particularly definable either.

If you practice very hard and very diligently in terms of the breathing technique, hinayana technique of meditation practice, eventually you must come upon a sense of transparency of oneself, your thought patterns, your emotions, your body, your environment. That the value judgment that you put on such things is transparent. In other words it has no particular solidity, it has only relative solidity, and therefore you feel some sense of loss. This is what generally happens, anybody who practices sitting meditation.

That sense of loss is associated with boredom, because ego's tendency—what we call ego in Buddhist terminology—is the tendency to entertain conceptual ideas, continually, conceptual format continually. And sitting meditation sort of ices through that whole process. In a sense it actually produces a freezing quality of the process of conceptualization. When your conceptions, when your creations, your thought process, are congealed into an iceberg, then you can begin to realize that that iceberg has formed, and vapor and water, cold temperature, and become solid, but by itself it is not. In other words, if it moves south, it'll melt. So we could say that the process of meditation is moving south [laughter] with our preconceptions. [laughter] It's a, in other words, melting our ideas about ourself and our world, which we have held very dear from beginningless time. We don't even know. If you try to say, "When is the beginning of me?", you can't find it. There is no way you can latch on to, "When is the beginning of you." So we say therefore, "From beginningless time we have held these beliefs to be true, that we are so-called solid entities, icebergs."

So we practice this meditation which begins to melt the iceberg of ourselves, of our solid conception of ourselves, which is very difficult and doesn't have particular goodies to hold on to, which

makes it all the more difficult. That if you ask somebody in a buddhist tradition, “Well, what am I going to get from this?”, especially in the mahayana tradition which we belong to, “So what am I going to get from this?”, they say, “Nothing.” So okay, nothing. I’ll go with nothing. And then you conceptualize “nothing,” and that becomes an iceberg. But if you continue to practice, “nothing” also begins to melt.

The basic point in the whole process of meditation is boredom. Boredom is a key point which you should all understand very clearly, that when we say ego, we mean the opposite of boredom. Boredom in whatever form is very helpful to us, and if you train your mind properly, you recognize boredom and begin to practice along those lines.

Generally we don’t recognize boredom at all. What we have in terms of boredom is just simply a lull in the energy, which means depression, which is not boredom. Boredom is not depression at all. Real boredom is the absence of depression and excitement, which is a sense of nothing to hang on to. A sense of complete aloneness is real boredom, which is a result of sitting practice. If you practice in the hinayana fashion, then you arrive at this boredom and consider it to be enlightenment. But from the mahayana point of view, this is not real enlightenment. This is simply the entrance to the larger vision and a larger sense of our minds and our lives than what we ever expected. We arrive at boredom and think we’re home, which is simply the fact that we would like to still protect something, protect boredom, which is, let’s say, boredom is no solidity.

Let’s say boredom is egolessness. But if we try by meditation practice to solidify boredom or egolessness as an entity, then we have reached some sense of peace with ourselves. But that sense of peace with ourselves is also temporary. It may last for many, many, years; it may last your whole lifetime, however long we live. But in the mahayana tradition that is called temporary sense of peace, simply because you take boredom and the initial experience of boredom as enlightenment and solidify that. Rather, in the mahayana sense, boredom is extremely deep, so deep that it produces a thought. That boredom that we experience is so fundamental that it produces a thought—and that thought is called enlightenment.

Now we have to actually file down our experience to the point where there’s only dust, and when there’s only dust, wind blows on the dust and creates a pattern. And we see that pattern as enlightenment, something to be achieved. Once you experience boredom in terms of real depth, in other words you’re not trying to get out at all, then that boredom becomes very solid, substantial and has a feeling of profound being, profound sense of being, which is not talking about existence particularly. Profound sense of being there. Like very deep well, like tapping an underground spring, which has no particular source, but just runs. When you practice meditation with a complete conviction and strenuousness, you come to, definitely should come to, if you practice very hard, underground spring. But the point of that underground spring is, it has no source.

Suddenly we get confused. We have good sense of practice, very good, very strong, very continuous, very boring. Then boring becomes solid. How come? Solid not in the sense of latching on to, but the only alternative; there’s no other way to go, nothing else to experience except very boring things as they are. You say, “What’s the origin of those things as they are?” Can’t find it, but they are that way. So practicing very hard, which is a sense of goal because you believe enlightenment to be a thing, produces sense of boredom which is not a thing. So we have big contradiction there.

That contradiction leads us into the mahayana teaching, which is a very simple teaching, but takes

lifetimes, it seems, to talk about. The simplest form of talking about it is saying that all beings without exception possess—or are in their basic nature—buddha, awake. This is a teaching of the mahayana, and all the rest of it beyond that statement is meant for people who don't understand that statement. So we come to sense of depth in our very existence as we know it and find no particular bottom to our experience, which is very shocking. At the same time we hear the teaching of tathagatagarbha, buddha-nature, which simply states that all beings possess buddha-nature. Therefore buddha, awake, is already there. It's the transcendental good news, which at the same time produces shock. Because we have been practicing with such diligence, at the same time it's like horse with blinders walking along, plodding along—which we must do, we have no choice—until somebody says, “Hello. There's 360 degrees besides those blinders. You can take them off because it wasn't necessary,” or, “it isn't necessary,” let's say. We say, “Okay.” Then we get quite frightened at that point, that perhaps our eyes on one side are not strong enough to actually look, and light would be damaging.

So we have two things going on when we hear the teachings of tathagatagarbha, buddha-nature. One is: tremendous excitement that it is possible, as we are, without exception, that the quality of awake is present. At the same time we have tremendous doubt that that is a lie and not true. That comes about through practice, and is very necessary, very important, very crucial, that that sense of doubt and sense of celebration exist together. Too good to be true, suspicion that it's not quite so. Ordinarily, from the hinayana point of view, that sense of suspicion would be called simply the skandhas or the production of ego. And therefore we should just concentrate it, simply be in our meditation point of view, and forget it—it's just another thought. But, from the mahayana point of view, that sense of suspicion is also included, as we talked about last time, that positive and negative come together. Sense of real celebration that the buddha is no different than what you call “you.” Euphemism. Second point is that you don't believe it. Fine. That's what makes the bodhisattva path click together. If you have just simply somebody coming out with unfurling the banner and saying, “Buddha is you. Be happy, don't worry,” or “Don't worry, be happy.” You say, “Oh, I can relax now. That's great. Buddha is me. What do I have to think about anymore? No problem.” And therefore it's very simple at that point to lock in to another confused state of mind which is so solid and so devastating that you could spend many many years thinking that way and making people aggravated [laughter] wherever you go by smiling and saying, “Buddha is me.” [laughter]

But fortunately we have a direct path which has actually kindled flame and that flame is doubt—best flame you could have. In other words, buddha-nature and doubt both go together, and bodhisattva's path is the only path that brings those two together. We don't say that, “Well, those are bad thoughts; get rid of them. And those are good thoughts; keep them.” What we say simply is that—with both good and bad, both enlightenment and confusion—there is space which accommodates both, which is called buddha-nature. The most complete sense of nonaggression, the most complete expression of nonaggression that there is in the whole world as we know it is buddha-nature, which includes both elation and depression in its whole picture.

So what is this sense of celebration of buddha-nature? It's simply the sense that wisdom, intelligence or enlightenment, is already here. What is the sense of kindling, burning? Doubt. What is the thing in the middle? Flame. Flame is what we call bodhicitta, awakened mind, awakened heart, which happens very organically, should happen very organically in two ways. One is your practice

of meditation pushes you to a space which is unreconcilable, not reconcilable at all. Second part of it is that the teacher, or the spiritual friend, confirms that experience and says to you, says to the student, “That particular experience you’re having cannot have any root, there is no basis for it at all.” So you have that, those three things. That bodhicitta is the action of tathagatagarbha, of buddha-nature as it begins to burn, as it begins to burn any sense of clinging to personal territory whatsoever.

The bodhisattva path is comprised of two things, wisdom, in this case we could say knowledge of what is, and skillful means, which is called compassion. And compassion is born out of doubt. That very same experience of bodhicitta—I’m sorry—tathagatagarbha, and doubt about such thing existing, is called transcendent knowledge and skillful means. Without those two there is no bodhisattva path. There is just simply hinayana enlightenment which is basically egocentric or complete egohood on the other hand. Two must go together. Doubt about whether or not you possess buddha-nature is ongoing sense of practice. In other words any inclination of ego that creeps up, because of that doubt, you undercut, which is the action of the bodhisattva. At the same time it co-exists with a sense of luminous awake quality of one’s own nature, buddha-nature.

In order to progress on the path in a very literal sense it is necessary to acknowledge these episodes, experiences of our lives, in terms of commitment. In ter-... In the bodhisattva path is such tremendous commitment, such nonstop commitment, that once you realize those factors you also realize at the same time that there’s no way you could possibly say that you don’t understand. You can never come off saying, “Well I don’t know about that.” Because it’s too late. Once it arises, it is there. And there’s no way you could say, “I don’t understand that.” Because that sense of awake and also that sense of doubt as we’ve been talking about, is simultaneously arising all the time and you cannot deny—there’s no way. As you talk, your words are empty.

So that sense of really being alone is fundamental, monumental, inspiring, frightening. Inspiring in the sense that you must pursue it further because if you take two little things which are embryonic and pulsating and infuse energy of inspiration, they become huge, monumental, magnificent things. So that little sense of buddha-nature, which is something we all experience now, and also that same sense of doubt, becomes wisdom and skillful means if we infuse energy of inspiration and practice into those. Doing so we develop an attraction toward enlightenment, and in the bodhisattva path that attraction is not for ourselves. In other words, basic understanding of the bodhisattva way is that whatever territory, whatever sense of self-preservation exists is surrendered completely all the time, continually.

We get that message that that is really the means toward enlightenment. In fact, so much so that one’s own enlightenment is also surrendered for the benefit of everybody else. Taking enlightenment as the highest goal that we can achieve, whether it’s the cherry on the top of the fudge sundae, whatever it is, the very top of whatever we experience, we also give away. Taking that to be true, there is no particular position you can hold in terms of ego which is solid—which pushes us in terms of taking bodhisattva vow. Refuge vow and bodhisattva vow, those two. These vows are very important in that they actually say, “I, so and so, I, John Smith, from this day forward, until I have achieved enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, ta dah, ta dah, ta dah... .” Some very concrete recognition of ego, which is our doubt, displayed in the vow to dispell such doubt and ego.

So, in other words, working with those situations. They’re not unworkable at all, but actually the

path brings those negative situations into the process of workability. Which is saying that those negative possibilities are also intelligent. This attraction toward intelligence, buddha-nature, this attraction, which is innate quality in us, is, once we recognize it, is not possible to stop. We have no choice, which is the bodhisattva's way. Build tremendous momentum which increases and increases sense of awareness, because whatever territory we preserve is let go, which produces another bigger world. Every time you let go of some little part of your own world then you recognize somebody else.

So taking the vows of refuge and bodhisattva, some sense of relinquishing privacy, some sense of diffusing poison into medicine, some sense of antidote for any kind of ego-clinging. Once you feel intention—you feel the intention to move along this path—you're drawn to actually doing so. Once you do so, take the vow, everything changes, not in the sense of the spectacular scenery or fireworks, anything like that, but basically in the sense of huge statement, "What have I done? Did I make a mistake? Can I really do this?" Which shows at the same time two things. One is the tremendous scope of the bodhisattva path, and on the other hand tremendous compassion for oneself and saying, "Can I really do such a thing, can I do such a fantastic thing?" As we go along those two things come together.

If you have any questions we could have discussion.

## QUESTIONS

Question: When you speak of boredom and achieving a state of boredom, it seems to me that this would involve a lot of activity in order to do this. Am I understanding you correctly?

Vajra Regent: In sitting meditation?

Q: Yeah. In, in the practice of meditation, to ...

VR: Yeah. The practice of meditation is only the kind of mirror to boredom which happens all the time. But it seems that the practice of meditation is necessary, sitting meditation is necessary in order to reflect such boredom which exists no matter what activity we do.

Q: The reason I asked the question is to try and see a—make a distinction between boredom and, say, a trance-like state. It seems that ...

VR: Trance-like state. Well, boredom is very simply the inability to create further entertainment, which means that a trance-like state would be the idea of entertainment doesn't enter into it, but it's simply stuck, like glue. But in boredom, entertainment always enter in, enters into it, but you can't do anything about it.

Q: So in that case it, it really is kind of an active state.

VR: Active?

Q: In a sense that you're busy sort of maintaining it. Maybe that's just at the beginning stages.

VR: Maintaining? Yes, very much so. Maintaining, not maintaining boredom, but maintaining preoccupation with not being bored. No? Let's try again. If you sit, sit, sit, your whole past comes up, also your expectations of the future, whatever there is. If you sit long enough with it, it becomes stale. And you run through your complete history, biologic as, as well, you know, beginning of creation, whatever you want to do, you know, as far as you can go, Star Wars, doesn't

matter, beyond that [laughter] you know, light creatures, doesn't matter. You can go through the whole thing, and then there's no more entertainment. Then there's a sense of irritation that there's no more entertainment, and that sense of irritation starts getting worn away. Basically what you have left is just flat land, sun beating down on the earth. Our allegiance at that point is still to the earth in terms of who we are, rather than seeing the sun and earth being one thing. So that sense of boredom at that point is continuous and also irritating, but there's nothing we can do about it.

Question: Could you explain more about how skillful means comes from doubt?

VR: Yeah. Basically you can't have any compassion for anybody unless you have doubt. If you have an attitude of certainty then you have a fixed attitude about human beings. Since human beings are as numberless as infinity and as beginningless as space, then therefore there is no fixed attitude about human beings. So therefore that same doubt which you have about yourself can be transformed into openness. So that you can actually see that human beings, the varieties that we have in this very room, and the neurosis and sanity that mix together, we can't put any particular formula and say, "Om Mani Padme Hum," [laughter] and everything's okay. But rather bodhisattva would actually talk to each person individually because the same doubt is also the same compassion. Does that make any sense?

Q: Yeah.

VR: Somewhat. Okay. [laughs] In other words, you've seen the whole play in that sense, that doubt itself manifests as our whole world, which is skillful means, which is compassion. Our world is based on compassion, which is everything everybody likes and would like to be. We all would like to think of ourselves as tremendously open, radiant, warm, intelligent [laughter, laughs], but we have doubts about that, [laughter] which allows us to communicate with each other. [laughter, laughs]

VR: Anybody on this side? Microphone. Long stretch? Huh? Oh, oh. Here comes, No, no. Here comes one. Oh oh. Who gets there first? [laughter]

Question: What's the relationship of loneliness and boredom? I'm not sure how they connect.

VR: Well, I think that's the same thing.

Q: That's what I was wondering.

VR: Yeah. Well when we say two things, we have loneliness and we have aloneness. Loneliness is our initial experience. Aloneness is when we become saturated in loneliness. In other words when we see the surface we think, "I'm lonely," but when we penetrate deeper we think, "I'm alone." Which doesn't mean nobody else exists—there isn't a lot of people in the room—it's just that we're each alone as we are, which is a very strong.

Q: Would, would loneliness be more emotional?

VR: Yeah. Definitely. Which is some gateway, very necessary feeling of loneliness; very ordinary, you know. "I feel lonely. Nobody's around. I got to get on the phone." You know, that kind of thing. Very necessary, not at all discarded, because that very act of picking up the phone, if you practice, something clicks as you're dialing. You say, "Ha. Who? What? What's going on?" Some sort of solid, huge moment in time and space, past, present and future becomes completely there—yourself. Happens that way. Just by doing a simple thing of feeling slightly hungry and

going to the refrigerator, getting an apple. It's a monumental statement of being alone. [laughs] [laughter] Click. Okay, that's it for tonight.

In terms of what we've discussed, tomorrow we have what's called a full day's sitting meditation nyinthon. And again I would encourage everyone not to try to remember what we've discussed together, but actually try to experience those things for ourselves, not by producing thought patterns which are secure, saying, "That's exactly what so-and-so meant. Now I feel...", which might last you about a half-an-hour (laughter). But rather just simply keep your mind in a state of being wherever we are—just here in this shrine room. Sense of being here, no matter what your particular position in the world is—time, place, age, health, whatever it is. Just somewhat a sense of being here without condition for one day, which is a tremendous achievement and at the same time nothing special. Anybody can do it, any human being can sit here for one day. That's one end of the stick. You take any human being. They could sit here tomorrow, all day. Further along down the stick is human beings who have heard the teachings of the Buddha and who also think about those teachings in terms of their own experience, and therefore meditate on those teachings. That's further along down the stick. At further along down the stick, which is the nature of our tradition and where we are, is that hearing, contemplating, meditating, is simply childish. Recognizing your own nature, recognizing intelligence as it exists presently is the practice of meditation, which means that discipline is a sense of allowing nondiscipline together. As you sit tomorrow don't hold too tight; don't let go.

Thank you.