

Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin

Theory and Practice of Meditation

Talk 2

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Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin: The practice of shamatha accomplishes a sense of freedom, a sense of freedom from clutter, freedom from the continual whirlpool of our thought process and our sense of being continually anxious, continually chased by our own emotions and sensations. This sense of freedom is a kind of ventilation in our life, a feeling of good fresh air. It is freedom from the notion that we must continue in a confused way, continue our life in a confused state of being. That fresh air, that ventilation, through the practice of shamatha, brings about a sense of healthiness, wholesomeness, goodness, because our thought process, our body, our actions, our environment are simple and direct.

We begin to see that it is not necessary to complicate our life at all. We begin to see that it is so simple and direct, what goes on in our life, so simple and direct that there is no reason to continue to believe in a fantasy of who we are and what we are. This is accomplished through discipline and a continued practice of meditation. Dwelling in a state of peace, or shamatha, is recognizing simplicity. And, as we have discussed earlier on, that simplicity is the realization that we do not have to invent anything at all.

So delight in practice is that realization that there is no need to invent anything. And shamatha practice brings about the bold statement, the bold realization, solid realization, that things as they are are simple and good and direct, and we do not have to elaborate. In fact we could say that our elaboration was the cause for speed and aggression, chaos and all the rest. So delight begins to regenerate itself, expand itself. At first when we practice meditation we might feel that taking delight in practice is an artificial mode, and we have heard that delight is not an attitude.

So how is this delight accomplished or where does it come from? Delight and directness go hand in hand—delight that we do not have to invent a sense of identity or a sense of complication, which is saying the same thing. And the more we practice the more we understand a sense of great simplicity. The more delight in practice becomes a continuous occurrence, the more we feel—the more we experience—that such descriptions as “wholesome” or “good” are not invented particularly, but they are simply what is if we can have the discipline to allow that state of mind to be so. So we should say that delight in practice is not an invention, but, on the other hand, we should also say that without discipline or effort, uncovering such delight is impossible. It’s just simply somebody’s dream.

So we are introduced to the practice of meditation, which is, to begin with, recognizing that sense

of being as delight or as wholesome or as healthy, as our ordinary state. However, as we continue to practice, we naturally expand that sense of delight, that sense of goodness beyond the limits of simple shamatha technique, simple state of mind. We begin to have a feeling of our world around our practice, or, I should say, the world of our practice. Shamatha meditation is very simple and direct. Using the breathing technique we begin to see that thoughts are thoughts, sensations are sensations.

But there is at this point the possibility of becoming again claustrophobic in that situation, which is due to a natural expanding of our awareness. As we begin to practice shamatha we begin to feel the edges of our world beyond the simple discipline of what we were taught and how we practice. We begin to feel some sense of edges, outlines of environment, and that is the birth of inquisitive intelligence. That birth of inquisitive intelligence cuts through any sense of nesting in feeling good or feeling healthy.

That inquisitive intelligence is the beginning of the practice of vipashyana, vipashyana being the extension or growth of shamatha. “Vipashyana,” meaning insight or clear seeing, seeing. This clear seeing or experience of vipashyana begins as a sense of, first, recognizing that our thought process is not problematic, beginning to relax with our thought process and our body and our sensations, beginning to relax with that which occurs during our practice. Once we begin to relax in practice, certain flashes of insight occur to us. At first we don’t know how to handle it, thinking that it is thought, thinking, thinking, body, feeling. But somewhat we feel a sense of going beyond controlling our practice, which is not to say that we go beyond discipline, but we go beyond the conventional idea, our own conventional idea, of being disciplined, of practising shamatha. And that occurs as some sense of insight into the fact that we as practitioners and what we are practising is in itself without conventional value. Our practice has no conventional value. We begin to discover that which is intelligent. Hearing that there is no purpose to our practice is not enough. One has to actually experience it fully.

And that sense of no purpose to our practice is the absence of conventional value in terms of the meditator and the meditation. And that absence of conventional value begins to spread, so that we feel a sense of vision, or expanding vision. The room we are meditating in, our lives, our path as human beings begins to become apparent. We begin to develop some real confidence in what we are doing. Why so? Real confidence because there is no conventional meaning; therefore, we can actually develop intellect, inquisitive mind, without being afraid that that intellect is another trap.

So inquisitive mind is the beginning of the discovery that the meditative state of awareness is intrinsic to us, which is much greater ventilation than before, which is the beginning of a sense of open space, freedom to be intelligent. Freedom to make a decision, which seems to be the most difficult thing we do, we have to do, in our lives is make a decision. Whether that decision is about drinking China Black or Darjeeling, or smoking Marlborough or Tarreyton, or getting married or not, or taking a particular job or whatever, we find the most difficult thing is to make a decision.

Why is that? Shamatha teaches us experientially that things are just what they are—smell, taste, hearing, thought, just what they are. But as we move around in our life there are directions which always happen. We always have to take a direction, according to the situation. The problem is, we have absolutely no idea what makes up any particular situation—what are the elements, the factors of a situation. Vipashyana, clear seeing, is the recognition of the elements of a situation, that is, recognizing those elements without having any bias whatsoever. Making a decision is a problem

only when we are ignorant of the situation, the atmosphere, the environment—what makes up an atmosphere, an environment, myself and the rest of it.

What we learn from shamatha is “myself” is very simple: senses, body, thoughts. How about the rest of it? That comes along with the vipashyana practice. Expanding that directness of shamatha into the environment brings that knowledge of things in the phenomenal world as they are. And that knowledge is not knowledge in the sense of category specifically, not knowledge in the sense of description in the conventional way, but knowledge based on the understanding that there is no rush at all to accomplish anything. When we have no rush, no speed or aggression, we can actually see the possibilities and allow that intrinsic intelligence of who we are and what we are to manifest itself.

So, in other words, what we are talking about in vipashyana is the further expansion of nonaggression. Practice of vipashyana is accompanied with—by—the feeling of tentativeness, almost like a sense of sharpness which is tentative, which again is that sense of inquisitive mind, sharp but tentative, open, spacious. No need to hurry, because there’s a basic wholesomeness through shamatha, therefore there is expansiveness of mind, and personal experience of confidence in one’s practice, being confident that we’re not going to fall into a whirlpool of confusion again and again, because our practice is solid and our state of wholesomeness or goodness is solid, continuous and real. Therefore we begin to expand, begin to look out. When we begin to expand, then insight happens by itself, and who we are and what we are is a matter of continuous unfolding.

If you have any questions, we could have a discussion at this point.

QUESTIONS

Question: Concerning the sense of edges which we begin to discover when practising shamatha, is that some sense of limitation which we’re feeling by being too involved with ourselves and then begin to get worried about maybe, and inquisitive?

Vajra Regent: Exactly. Precisely. You see, when you practice very faithfully you begin to feel healthy, but that healthiness itself, for instance, when you feel healthy and good and you practice further and you perhaps begin to fall off in your discipline, you begin to feel threatened. At that point, vipashyana practice becomes very important, because that threatening quality is also, could be, a sense of expansion.

Q: How do we get threatened by the threatening quality and expand at the same time, instead of just kind of freaking out.

VR: Well I think it’s basically, you know, that sense of discipline.

Q: Staying with us.

VR: Staying with it. Coming back to the breath in the shamatha practice. We’re not talking about giving up any sense of the basic breathing practice, but it’s a sense of further extending oneself as you practice. There’s a sense of further extension which might come out as losing discipline, but in this case losing discipline is also turned around back into the practice.

Q: Is it also a sense of things may be expanding too quickly and losing ground, things get a little too freaky?

VR: Yeah, that’s saying the same thing. You see once you have your discipline down pat, or so

you think, you begin to lose ground very quickly, or so you think. [Laughter] And again you come back, and that sense of coming back is much more broad, rather than specific in terms of the shamatha practice. That sense of coming back is sort of panoramic or environmental. It's coming back with a big sense of what is, a larger sense of what is, because you can come back without any effort.

Q: Thank you.

VR: From the conventional point of view. I mean effort.

Q: I'm not sure if I understood you when you said that when we develop real confidence, or we do develop real confidence because we realize that there's no conventional meaning or value. Is that because the conventional meaning is distorted and biased, and that we develop confidence because we see beyond that?

VR: That's right. That's what's called clear seeing, vipashyana, that you begin to recognize that conventional meaning is just a matter of speed. Conventional meaning developed because we felt like we were being chased from behind, and we ran very quickly to a conclusion, "This is what is because something's happening back there." When we sit we realize nothing's happening back there or in front either.

Q: I'm in Karl Springer's class on a Buddhist approach to politics, and in that class he made the distinction between personal neurosis and cultural neurosis. And when you say that when our practice develops we're not going to keep falling back into confusion, if the culture itself is neurotic, I guess I don't understand how we're going to avoid doing that as long as the culture is...

VR: That's exactly what we're talking about. In some sense vipashyana practice is cultural, in a way. We're talking about the sense of environment of our practice. The environment of our practice is this particular hall, in this particular town, in this particular world, in this particular time, and we begin to see that all of that is a combination of factors which in themselves have no specific meaning other than what we attribute at each moment. So we begin to realize that there's no solid definition—what we call "egolessness" in Buddhism—which is tremendous ventilation, freedom at that point. We don't have to rush to condemn this particular architecture, [laughter] because it actually helps us to be here. Or this town or this culture. What I'm saying is there's more space, spaciousness, in our mind, in our attitude—spaciousness.

Q: Okay. Thanks.

VR: If we saw a picture of this place, say that Naropa Institute this summer was being held in..., and we had the conventional idea of it. Yuk! [laughter] It's green and red and this... Luckily we don't print any of those in the catalog. [laughter] 'Til you people sit first, and then they appreciate, the idea of appreciation of being here, being what you are. Who you are is not dependent on conventional idea.

Q: You mentioned two words that caught my mind. One was "claustrophobia" and the other was "decisions." I'll make a choice and talk about decisions.

VR: Oh, I don't know. [laughter] Are you sure?

Q: Coming into Boulder and looking at all the courses that are offered at Naropa Institute presents a very clear everyday situation where decisions are influenced by time, availability, and also personal

effort—the ability to get somewhere, to be in the right place at the right time. I understand from the practice that often the waiting, the spaciousness of waiting, is important. But I wonder at a certain point, there's an old proverb: not to decide is to decide.

VR: Is that an old proverb?

Q: It's a fairly old proverb for me. [laughter] It's a...

VR: I think not to decide is not true, you have to decide. Anyway, did you practice meditation before you came here? Before you picked out the courses, that is. Yah?

Q: I don't have a disciplined practice. [laughter]

VR: [Deep sigh] [laughter] Thank you.

Q: I too was caught by your comment about decision-making. It's been something that's been bothering me ever since I came across the statement—I won't mention the author—who stated that decision-making process is simply the illusion of the ego, and as long as one keeps thinking that he has a decision then he's still caught. Could you comment on that?

VR: Who's the author? [laughter]

Q: I have to decide now whether I should mention his name. Well, I'm sure he wouldn't mind. It's Richard Alpert or Baba Ram Dass. He has made this statement—I think it's in print and he's made it at frequent lectures. But it's always bothered me because I...

VR: Oh, that's a lot of horseshit. [laughter] I mean, our whole life is made up of decisions.

Q: Okay, let me present it from another angle which I heard, [laughter] which I heard the same thing being said to me but in a different context at Naropa. The comment was that when you're in the right space, everything feels right—you know what to take. And again, this goes back to previous comment about what courses to take.

VR: Uh huh. Uh huh. Um. Well, that's what we're talking about. When you are... well you see, there's a little bit of language here we should actually get straight. Language is very important. You can actually say what you mean. If you say, "when you are in the right space," then I take some question to that. When the space is evident, then it is possible to decide without confusion.

Q: Isn't decision-making based on a reference point?

VR: No. No. That's what I'm saying. When space is evident—the space of a situation—the components of a situation make up the space of a situation. When mind is clear and precise, it knows all the facets by itself, so it's not a question of who's going to win and who's going to lose. It's a question of what is. Therefore trust, confidence, is in the basic intelligence of the situation. And decision occurs the same as your thought process. How do you think? How does a thought occur?

Q: Would you like an answer to that?

VR: Sure.

Q: Word, language.

VR: [Emphatically] How does a thought occur?

Q: In response to a need for me.

VR: I mean actually how does it occur?

Q: I have no choice over it. It happens, I suppose.

VR: Exactly. [laughter] Now when we have a decision to be made, does it happen or do we happen it? We don't know.

Q: It happens for me. I can't stop the thought processes.

VR: But when you make a decision, can you stop or do you just decide because it's happening? It's a very interesting point. That's what we call sense of vipashyana space. We don't make any declaration there about, "it happens because it's happening," or "it happens because I happen to it." We don't do that, you see, because when we practice meditation, the intelligence in that situation can manifest itself.

Q: I'm tempted to say then that the original statement was correct. It is an illusion to think that you do make decisions then. At a certain level, though, I would qualify that.

VR: Aha, here we go! That's a decision then. At a certain level you qualified something. You see, if you try to have allegiance conventionally to one side or the other, then we miss the real point of open space. "Not to decide is to decide," is not true. "To decide is not to decide," is not true. And all the rest of it is not true—but we'll get into it later on in this course—but the point here is that in vipashyana practice you begin to feel that conventional meaning, in terms of decision, is not the point, is just not the point. The question and the heaviness of whether to go this way or that way is somewhat dissipated, dispersed into space through practice.

Q: Thank you.

Q: In describing expanding confidence as part of the experience of vipashyana, you also described insight as becoming sharp but tentative. Um, can you clarify tentativeness, in the context of confidence?

VR: Well, I think tentativeness means that once you see what is, you don't have to freeze it into a monument, because you begin to see what is at one moment is not the next. But, at that particular moment, you see what is very clearly, without reference to previous moments or the next one, so that makes it tentative.

Q: It seems as though a quality of that sharpness could be sarcasm or cynicism, and is it the tentativeness that cuts that as well?

VR: Uh huh. Sure. Because then if you start to believe your own sarcasm, what happens? It becomes again a frozen world. So your intelligence might actually cut through nonsense with a certain quickness, at the same time that quickness also dissipates into space, just like your breath goes out in space and dissolves. You see, this sense of intelligence we're talking about is exactly the same as your shamatha practice. Shamatha practice is actual breath going out and dissolving into space. In this case we're talking about intellect going out and dissolving into space as well. It is saying, "yes, right, certainly sir," [laughter] also dissolves.

Q: But there may be something very accurate to that.

VR: Who's to listen? There's no monument.

VR: Ah, Tom, hello. Over there. How are you?

Q: [Tomek P.] I am fine.

VR: I haven't seen you in a long time.

Q: Well, I was only three weeks ago here.

VR: Where?

Q: In Boulder. I am back.

VR: Welcome back.

Q: Thank you. It concerns the discussion about decisions which you had with this gentleman. I had the reflection that there is a fundamental decision which one is making to see the situation, without this decision nothing can happen. So it's in a sense answer to this Ram Dassian statement that there is a fundamental decision, really, to see what's going on.

VR: That's right. That's right. That's right. That's great, thank you. That's what I meant to say. [laughter]

Q: Thank you very much.

VR: But I also meant to say that that fundamental decision doesn't have any identity.

Q: Of course.

VR: It doesn't belong to anybody.

Q: Of course.

VR: But it does happen.

Q: Otherwise it couldn't happen. It would be manufactured. [laughter]

VR: Glad to have you back here in Boulder.

Q: Thank you.

VR: Well, we have a good egg to hatch, I think, in our practice, and that is: There is a fundamental decision and there's nobody making it. Good show, as was said. And a good way to be.

Again, without a strenuous discipline and practice of meditation, I don't see any way we could come upon that. Probably, magically, there might be some Walt Disney thing happening, but that's only in the movies. We have to actually do it ourselves. So I suggest to you, continue your practice vigorously, and our study groups are going on, so we can discuss with the study group leaders this situation we're in and actually understand it completely. So I'd like to thank you again for being here tonight.

There is a Shambhala Training session this weekend. If you have the opportunity to take part in it you should. It is of course sitting practice of meditation, in case you thought it was something else, which is a very healthy and good thing to do. And it might even lead to insight, which, I might say, is nothing in itself. You couldn't actually exchange it. [laughter] So thank you very much and good night. See you next week.