

GATSAL

TEACHING

Jetsunma
Tenzin Palmo

on

37 Practices of a Bodhisattva

Part II

Deer Park Institute
Easter Weekend - April 2012

*2. In my native land waves of attachment to friends and kin surge,
Hatred for enemies rages like fire,
The darkness of stupidity, not caring what to adopt or avoid, thickens –
To abandon my native land is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

We continue with what was said previously about attachment [in Gatsal issue 30], so another problem is that if we are in our ordinary environment, it's very easy to still cultivate antipathies and conflicts, maybe from childhood. We like this person but we don't like that one. It is easy to feel long term hostility towards our neighbors or even our siblings, which we have not examined. It is hard to see people that we know well, like our family, as they really are and not as our projection.

So it is helpful sometimes to just step back and look at people who are very familiar to us as though we had never seen them before. Just try to drop all our preconceptions, all our ideas, all our opinions and judgments. Just see them, without any kind of judgment at all. Just look at them as they are. Listen to them. Hear them as if for the first time. See them as if for the first time. Afresh. Because we get locked into our habitual reactions and judgments, with usually too much attachment or with antipathy. Even people who love each other are often locked into a quite hostile way of reaction, which they don't examine. They're sparring off each other the whole time and they're not hearing each other. It is like one of those soap operas which are endlessly being rerun. So why not change the channel?

So this is what it means by leaving one's homeland. It doesn't just mean physically removing ourselves, but much more importantly, it means inwardly shifting to a different space. This is so important, and this is why this advice comes near the beginning of the practice. To really start seeing things from a different angle as if we were in a new place, meeting new people for the first time, and seeing them with affection and the wish for their happiness. So basically just seeing people with no pre-judgments.

Another helpful practice is to step back and just hear oneself speak. Not judging, just listening. The tone of voice. The kind of language we use. The way we speak and what we say. So often we're not even conscious anymore. It's so automatic. How we speak to one person compared with how we speak to another. Just listen. We don't hear ourselves. Often if someone plays back a recording, the person speaking doesn't recognize themselves. They don't know their own voice. "Oh goodness, do I sound like that?!"

We can try to see things anew. So it's important to look at our mind and to start clearing out a lot of the junk and debris, which we carry around with us, as if we were in an old attic. We sort through all the junk and think, "Why on earth did I keep all that?" So we can start throwing stuff out and cleaning up a bit. Especially concerning our habitual responses. Because the Lojong teaching is all about how to cultivate skillful responses in place of our habitual unskillful responses. We need to look and question and see without pretending. We need to cultivate inner change. Where we see something in our responses which is not helpful, which is negative, that is our path. That is our practice. To change and transform. Everything can be changed.

So, "the darkness of stupidity," because the whole problem is that we just don't see. Why do we get so obsessively attached to other people? Why do we get angry with people who don't do what we want them to do? Why do we keep doing and saying the wrong things when we know that was stupid? Why do we not do the things which we know would be helpful? Ultimately because of this darkness of our own unknowing, but also one might say because of our habitual inertia. It's so much easier to go along with the way we've always done things. It takes such a lot of consciousness and effort to change.

Even though we know that going along the way we have been going doesn't lead to anything that we want and just creates more problems. Still there's this heaviness when it comes to actually making the efforts to change. This is like a thick fog which comes into the mind and prevents us from seeing with clarity, what is to be done, what would be skillful and what is unskillful. Even if we've read about it a thousand times, we still find ourselves caught up in the same old habitual responses.

To change physical habits is a challenge, but to change mental and emotional habits is so much more of a challenge. However the good thing is that it's possible. As we all know, nowadays neuroscientists are very busy mapping out the brain and the good news is that they say that we can indeed create new neural pathways. We can also slowly close down old neural pathways. So, it's not that we're set

in stone. The brain is quite pliable. It can change. It's like a river that flows in a certain direction but it can be diverted somewhere else.

Likewise we can make new channels. We can create new pathways. Imagine a forest with a familiar path that we always use. After a while this path becomes well worn, compacted and clear so we know just where we are going. But now we don't want to travel on that road anymore. For instance somebody says something unkind and we get all upset, angry and hurt - which is just the ego being sad that people don't love it.

So we don't want to go on that unprofitable road. That doesn't lead anywhere. We want to go on this new road of skilful responses, but there isn't yet a road. We have never before tried this new road of thinking, "Well, thank you, I'm glad that you're so horrible because now I can practice patience." We don't have a road in our brain for that one. So we have to start. We start to go along this new road but then the grass springs back and it doesn't look like we ever went that way before. But if we keep going along this same path every day, eventually we create a road.

Then that other pathway which seemed so set in cement, gradually the grass and flowers start pushing up through it and after some time, we don't see a pathway anymore. This new way has become the pathway. But this comes from repeated and repeated effort. It just doesn't happen overnight. It just doesn't. Anyone who promises that it's all effortless is just deceiving you, because these habits are very deep inside our psyche, like thick, deep roots. It takes a lot of conscious awareness and effort and determination to transform. But the good news is we can all change. Of course we can. As the Buddha said, "Yes we can change. If we could not change, I would not tell you to do so, but because you can, I say for goodness sake get on with it ..." or words to that effect.

So, nobody can do it for us. That is important to remember. Even if we met with the Buddha himself, he could not do it for us. It is up to us and each one of us is responsible. Teachers can help, they can guide, they can encourage but they cannot do it for us: if they could, they would. We must accept that we are responsible for our own heart-mind, even though other people are there to help us. They are there to help us either by being very kind and encouraging or by being absolutely awful and obnoxious! Either way, they are genuine spiritual friends, as the text will explain.

We recognize that these three poisons inside our heart - our attachment, our hatred and our basic unknowing or ignorance - are the cause of our sufferings in Samsara. That is what's causing the problems. It's not just out there. It's inside us and so we can do something about it. This is the whole message. We don't need to discard anything thinking that is an obstacle to my practice. In fact this is a help to my practice. Everything is a help to the practice if we have the right attitude. So it's a matter of changing our responses. That's all.

*3. When unfavorable places are abandoned, disturbing emotions gradually fade;
When there are no distractions, positive activities naturally increase;
As awareness becomes clearer, confidence in the Dharma grows -
To rely on solitude is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

Of course these texts were written for monks and hermits. But we can also understand this in a deeper way. It doesn't just mean outer solitude. It also means an inner solitude. "Unfavorable places are abandoned, disturbing emotions gradually fade." The point is that - what are unfavorable places?

Of course the foundation of Buddhism is renunciation. In Tibetan, the word for renunciation is Nge jung which signifies to really get out of something. If we are serious about becoming the masters of our minds, instead of the slaves of our emotions; if we are dedicated to leading a life which will be of benefit for ourselves and others, then we have to be selective. We cannot do everything in this lifetime. We cannot spend all our nights in discos and then get up at five in the morning to do our practice. Well we could, but it wouldn't work very well. We have to decide in our lives what is really of importance to us and what is not. Then simplify. So this is renunciation.

Renunciation is looking at our life and our activities and recognizing what is counterproductive to our spiritual path, what is a distraction, what encourages the growth of the negative emotions and does not encourage the growth of positive emotions. Then we can decide, "I am not interested in going along with that anymore." In English the word 'renunciation' has a sense of gritting our teeth and giving up something that we really want but know we shouldn't have. When I was eighteen and became a Buddhist, I gave up Elvis Presley. I gave away all my records and magazines and it was a renunciation. But really renunciation doesn't mean that.

When we are a small child and we have favorite toys like a teddy bear, we take that teddy bear around with us everywhere and we really love teddy. So if someone tries to take teddy away from us - even though he's dirty and scruffy and he's lost an eye - we love him. It hurts. Something in our heart is torn out. We are not ready to give up teddy. But as we get older our interest in our children's toys fades away. We're just not interested anymore. We've replaced them with computer games, or whatever. But we've shifted our object of desire. We've got different interests. So now if we lose our teddy bear, so what? We've outgrown him.

So as the wonder of the Dharma takes over our life more and more, we lose interest in other things which previously had seemed so important to us. It's like in the spring and the summer when the trees are in full bloom, if we try to pull the leaves of a tree, there's a resistance because the leaves are firmly attached. But in the autumn, they naturally just fall. They naturally fall because they are getting ready for new growth.

So therefore, as our interest and involvement in the Dharma deepens, then our involvement and interest in so many other worldly distractions just naturally fade away.

We are striving to grow up and become adults, in the true sense of the word. The Buddha called ordinary people caught up in worldly distractions 'the childish'. We are trying to mature. Often the path is called Mindrol. The word minpa means to ripen, to mature and drol means to be liberated, to be free. So we have to ripen or mature our mindstream in order to be liberated.

So therefore, when it says, "unfavorable places are abandoned, disturbing emotions gradually fade," it doesn't just mean moving to a different country, but it could also mean outer circumstances, like where people are endlessly watching television, or drinking

and partying, or just talking a lot of useless gossip and worldly talk. Those situations create a lot of disturbance in the mind. Therefore it is beneficial to avoid those kinds of places and instead frequent places where people are interested in more spiritual topics - such as going to Dharma centers or anywhere that has a good atmosphere. We should associate with people who are kind and have good values and then talk about subjects which have some genuine meaning. These are good places so one's negative emotions begin to subside.

As much as possible, we should look for an environment where the afflictive emotions such as our anger, aggression, jealousy and attachment begin to grow less. At the same time, our good qualities are given a chance to increase because everybody else is trying to be kind and friendly and so naturally one wants to be kind and friendly too. It becomes natural when we are in an environment where these qualities are admired and appreciated.

It's also important that we should be selective with the company that we keep. Later on in the text it talks about avoiding bad company. What it means is that as ordinary sentient beings we are very influenced by the society around us, usually much more than we would like to admit. Unless we're very careful, we often take on the values of the people with whom we habitually associate. So therefore if we're with people who are only thinking about worldly distractions and worldly aims, then gradually, bit by bit, our interest in the Dharma could begin to subside and our fascination with outer things begin to increase. Even though we don't intend it, it just naturally happens like that.

So we have to be very selective. This doesn't mean that we're rude to people who don't want to meditate for six hours a day. But it does mean we should closely associate with people who basically have the same kind of values and appreciation for the Dharma life. Even if they're not Buddhists, they should at least be genuinely good people. As they say, if we put even an ordinary piece of wood in a sandalwood box then it will take on the smell of sandalwood. But if we bury it in a dung heap, then we know what it will smell like. So we should be very careful.

As we begin to practice and our minds begin to calm down and our innate virtue begins to appear, so our appreciation of the Dharma deepens. Nobody adores the Dharma in the way that the great realized masters do. Just one word of Dharma and their eyes fill with tears, even though they've heard the same thing a million times. Because they know how precious the Dharma is: they have not just studied, they have not just thought about it, but they have become it. Their appreciation and devotion is genuine so they are deeply grateful.

Gradually our minds begin to see more clearly, with less delusion, less judgment and more clarity, and all our upsets, anger and ego defenses begin to quieten down. Then our incredible gratitude to the Buddhas - and all the masters who came later and have preserved this precious lineage - just spontaneously arises in the heart. Our faith is uncontrived. Imagine a world without the Dharma. Imagine our lives without the Dharma. Then we feel deeply grateful. Deeply grateful.

The text is going through the Four Thoughts which turn the mind away from ordinary worldly activity. The first is the precious human body, how lucky we are to be here with all the endowments which we carry with us. Now we consider impermanence.

*4. Close friends who have long been together will separate,
Wealth and possessions gained with much effort will be left behind,
Consciousness, a guest, will leave the hotel of the body -
To give up the concerns of this life is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

Of course this goes completely against the mentality of our modern consumer society, which is so completely centered on this life and how happiness depends on close relationships, success, money, possessions - the more you have the more you are. The text points out that our consciousness is just a guest in a hotel. This body is only here for a short time. However long life lasts, in cosmic time it's less than a finger snap. Then the guest has to leave and find another hotel. All the stuff that we've accumulated has to be left behind for somebody else, even if our whole life was spent in gathering and accumulating. At the end, no matter who we are, we don't take one single coin with us, nothing. However many loved ones and friends, disciples or groupies you have around you, not one of them can go with you. You're all alone. Naked. The only thing we carry with us is our karmic imprints. And what have we done about that?

Recently I read an article which was written by a woman who had spent many years taking care of hospice patients and people who had drawn-out terminal illnesses. She made a number of observations which were fairly common with all of them. One is the tremendous transformation as they accepted that they were going to die, which most people don't ever want to think about. That they acknowledged that death was there. Of course we're all going to die. We don't have to be a cancer patient to know that. But normally people don't want to think about it. Now these patients had to think about it.

This transformed their lives because they began to recognise what is important and what is not important. One of the major regrets was that they had spent so much of their life working so hard to accumulate all their possessions - big houses, more cars, an important position in their company and so forth - instead of giving more time and energy to what was really important, like spending more time with their children and with their partners and concentrating more on spiritual issues. Also doing things which have real importance in this world. They had been lulled into believing that what really mattered was getting on in life. That was the primary regret of everybody. Which is interesting.

Many of them also felt happy that they had some time to say sorry to people that they had hurt and to tell their loved ones that they really loved them. They just reevaluated their whole life and it was more what they had done for the world than what the world had ever done for them that was important.

One of the good things in Buddhism is that it talks a lot about death. This is important because by talking about death, it reminds us that we're alive and to assess what we are doing with our life because we're not going to have it forever. We can appreciate something if we know we're going to lose it. If we think we've got it forever, then we don't value it anymore.

When I was a little girl, I used to think that we were all on a train journey but the train was going to crash, only we didn't know when. So why were we wasting our time just gazing out the window and going to sleep? Why weren't we doing something more important with the short time we had before the train crashed? I can't remember if I did anything about that, but that's how I used to think.

It's very important to recognize that even the closest people who have been together with us since the beginning, are one day going to separate and we don't know when. Just because we love somebody doesn't mean that we can stay with them forever. It is not possible. People for whom in our last lifetime we would have given our life because we loved them so much, now where are they? And next lifetime it's going to be a whole new cast.

We spend so much time trying to cultivate relationships which are very precious while we have them, but we should make them as harmonious as possible because they will not last forever. Also worldly possessions will definitely be left behind. We have to recognize that whatever we have gathered we leave behind. Only the karmic seeds, our samskaras, our habitual mental patterning, that we take with us. But we are usually very careless about the karmic imprints in our substratum consciousness. And yet, that's our wealth. That's what we can take with us.

Right now our whole future, not just this lifetime but future lifetimes, is being decided. It's in what we do with our mind, with our speech, with our body. Moment to moment to moment we are creating our future. Nobody else can do it for us.

So therefore:

*5. In bad company, the three poisons grow stronger,
Listening, reflection, and meditation decline,
And loving-kindness and compassion vanish –
To avoid unsuitable friends is the practice of a bodhisattva.*

So again we come back to the fact that we are so easily influenced and if we hang out with the wrong set of people, we start to take on their attitudes and we want to be part of the group. We begin to imitate them and get into bad habits. We know very well that among young people one of the reasons that so many get into drinking binges, drugs and promiscuous sex and so forth is not necessarily because they are really that interested. It's because they want to be part of the gang. They want to belong. So therefore they get in with the wrong crowd and down they go. It's very hard then to pull out. Sometimes they end up addicted or in serious trouble. So we have to be very careful. The Buddha himself said that good companionship was essential on the path.

As much as possible we try to be with people who inspire us, whose example we want to follow since this will increase our virtues and help decrease our negative emotions. Otherwise it's difficult. Obviously if our family are not particularly spiritually minded it doesn't mean we have to ignore our whole family, but it does mean that we don't have to take up their values. For example, if our family are all heavy meat eaters and we want to be vegetarian, we become vegetarian. We don't have to eat meat just because they're eating meat.

When I was in Italy at one time I was in a large hospital and I said I was a vegetarian and they had never heard of such a thing! So then the head chef came up to see me. What to cook? So he said, "Well why are you a vegetarian?" Since my Italian is not good, I said the simplest thing I could say. I quoted Bernard Shaw, who was a vegetarian: "Animals are my friends, and I don't eat my friends." So the chef said, "Ah! Si, certo, certo," and he cooked me delicious vegetarian food. The rest of the ward was so jealous.....

The point is that we don't have to adopt the values of others if we think their values are wrong. In fact, often if we just carry on acting from our point of view and can explain in simple language why we're doing so, people get interested. They might even follow. For example, being a vegetarian, then people start to think about it and recognize that actually they are eating animals who want to live as much as anybody else wants to live. Slowly maybe others in the family will become vegetarian or at least cut down on their meat eating. It doesn't hurt them.

If we cannot be an example, then what? Even though we are not Buddhas radiating light, still if one tries to be a person of integrity, honesty, kindness – people are attracted. We don't even have to say a word. People are drawn. So this question of how easily we are influenced by the company we keep, is very important. As much as possible we try to associate with friends whose values and way of life we truly appreciate and that we honor. They don't have to be Buddhists or even on any particular spiritual path, but they are good people. Then we begin to emulate that.

We should be careful because nowadays people could be nice and friendly but their values might be all wrong - we're very easily influenced. People who are only thinking about money, about physical comfort, about food or intimate relationships – they might be very charming but we have to be careful. We're like tiny saplings that still need protection. Otherwise strong winds or anything can come along and destroy it. We're not great big Bodhi trees. Only very little saplings, just starting to push up a few very tentative sprouts. This has to be nurtured, protected, fertilized. If we start spraying it with noxious chemicals, then it's finished. These negative ideas and thoughts are like poison..

Sometimes it might look like the fruit is big and beautiful, but actually it has no taste and it's lifeless inside. At the Nunnery we were testing our food with a pendulum. Of course coffee and sugar and so on were negative but we also tested the apples and oranges and carrots: big beautiful looking carrots.... no movement or even slightly negative. Then when we tried some organic products – the pendulum swung around enthusiastically in a big Yes.

So even some things which look outwardly fine, actually they have no essence. They have no value. Outer beauty but inwardly nothing. Like roses nowadays. They look beautiful but have no smell. Those carrots look beautiful but they have no taste and no nutrition. Likewise we should be discriminating with the company we habitually keep because we can be in a group where people look very good and prosperous, everything going okay on the outside, but then actually inside there is nothing. Of course we should be friendly to everybody, not heavily judgmental, but at the same time discerning. So as we are easily influenced, then we should strive to be influenced by what is good and worthwhile.