



# GATSAL TEACHINGS

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## *Overcoming Prejudice and Self Dwelling (part one)*



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Perhaps we should start this talk with the subject of self-dwelling. One of the differences between modern Western society and the traditional societies which still exist to a certain extent in parts of Europe and in Asia, is the modern Western glorification of the individual. It's a very interesting phenomenon. I don't think it has ever happened before in our history - it's hard to know yet whether it's an evolution or devolution. But it is certainly a departure, and one we may not be completely conscious of since we were born into this culture.

When someone is born into a traditional society, they are automatically part of a very large network right from the start. That network is usually not national. A person's first thought is not, "I'm an Australian" or "I'm an Indian". Their first thought is directed towards their locality, their particular social setting in that locality and towards the family. That is what they identify with. They are very much a network of a family. Now, being a part of a network of a family does not just include our parents, sisters or brothers, but also our cousins, aunts, second cousins and third cousins as well. If we are from India, for example, and we go to a new place, we still have family in India somewhere - this person may have married that one seven generations ago, but we are still family. We have always got this underpinning, this network of people with whom we are somehow connected, however many generations back. The sense of belonging to this big network is important and sustaining. It is hard to fall through the holes; there are so many people upholding us who will take care of us.

One side of this situation is that because we belong to this network, this infrastructure of family - in India, of caste or in other places, of clan - we are safe. However, we have duties and obligations to that family, to that caste, to that clan; we have a sense of honour towards those to whom we belong. Even if it's a very low caste, there are rules and regulations and ways of conduct which are natural to that caste and which we respect. And within the familial structure, we know where we belong. When we were very small, we had to respect, honour and serve our elders whether we personally liked them or not. We belonged to them, they belonged to us; we had our duties. We served and took care of them and they looked after us. Then, if we were a girl, we married out of the family or if we are a boy we brought someone into the family. The sense of knowing what to do, what is appropriate behaviour for our age group and social standing towards everybody around us remains the same. It's all very set and very clear. This gives a sense of security, a sense of belonging.

The negative side, of course, is that we have to do more or less what we are told. There are certain obligations which have to be fulfilled. We are not a free agent, especially where marriage is concerned. In India, marriages are usually arranged for us and we don't have any choice. It is considered that the age when we are about to get married is just the time when we least have any sense of real discretion about whom we should be marrying. We are more likely to be swept away by our hormones than by common sense! Therefore, it shows better judgement for our family to choose someone they feel would be suitable for us both socially and astrologically, as one's parents have more experience and are not so emotionally involved.

Thus, there are both good and bad sides to belonging to this extended familial network. This is not just an Asian pattern, it also happened in Europe until a hundred years ago. There is a sense of security because we know how to behave to those who are older than us, those who are our equals and those who are our inferiors. We know what is appropriate, whether or not we like our status or the person our parents have chosen for us.

In the West during recent generations, this whole traditional structure has almost completely broken down. In the old style, one was a part of a group and one's own wishes and desires were subjugated to the wishes and desires of that group. To rebel against that and to push for one's own individual wishes when they were not in the interests of the group was the greatest crime. Thus, to be thrown out of that familial structure, to be expelled and rejected, was also considered to be the greatest horror. Because then one had no support system; one didn't belong anywhere. We were in the void - alone without protection.

Today we have the cult of the individual. It's the individual who counts; it's the individual who has the right to control his whole life even at an early age - and have you noticed this age is getting earlier and earlier? Control is given to people so young and inexperienced that they could not possibly have the wisdom to actually safeguard their own lives. What is happening is that each person now, at a very young age, has a strong sense of themselves, but not a sense of their interconnection with all the others.

Traditionally, children were brought up to naturally respect their parents and their teachers, and they didn't question it. I know Tibetans who have extremely difficult and often very selfish parents, but their children love them anyway. They respect their parents and are understanding and sympathetic towards their problems. They know their parents have their faults, but never mind, they are still their parents. They are still their mother and their father who gave them life and brought them up. Without these parents, they would not exist in this world. So they have gratitude. This quality of gratitude, this quality of appreciating people is often missing from our modern society. People are rarely grateful anymore -- we think we can all do it ourselves. But in fact nobody can do everything themselves; we are all dependent on others.

Now we have this society where it's every man for himself. What I want is what counts. There is little sympathy, empathy or consideration for the wants of others, or the thought that perhaps what we want might hurt someone else. By rights, we would think that as it's "Everything for me and too bad about the others - let them take care of their own problems!", we should therefore feel very fulfilled. Now we have the freedom to do whatever we want. Think about it - we have enough food, we have somewhere to stay, we have lots of clothes and freedom. We can do whatever we want, so why aren't we perfectly happy? Why is there such a high suicide rate among the young who have fought so long to get this freedom which was going to make them so everlastingly happy?

What's gone wrong? Our consumer society worships the individual - especially the successful individual. To be a successful individual, we have to do what our consumer society tells us. We have to look a certain way, eat the same kind of junk food, we have to drink, smoke, and look cool. Then we'll be successful and have lots of friends and be happy ever after. But this isn't working. Why?

Somehow, this over-emphasis on 'me, me, me', 'my wants, my desires, everything for me' doesn't work. People who are really mentally sick are usually obsessed with themselves - it's one of the ways you can tell they are unwell. They can't talk about anything but themselves. They can be very fascinating about themselves but nonetheless, all they are interested in is *their* problems, *their* mental hang-ups, the terrible things which happened to them in *their* childhood or *their* horrible relationships. They are so completely obsessed with themselves that they can't think of anything else. If you try to change the subject to something more general, they get bored instantly and will quickly get back to 'me, me, me'. This is a sign of some kind of neurosis.

Think about the society which is encouraging this, which is encouraging us to think only, "Me, me, me - my wants, my desires, my ambitions, my dreams - go out and get them if that's what we want. Don't think about anyone else, they are unimportant". If this worked, if this made us happy, peaceful and fulfilled, then maybe okay. But it doesn't work, even if it looks like we are succeeding. I meet many people who outwardly look very successful - they have beautiful houses, big Mercedes cars, they are very beautiful and fashionable. They have everything they could possibly want, but they are not happy. Talk with them for five minutes and it all comes out. All their anguish, their dissatisfaction, their pain, the façade they are trying so hard to maintain which has nothing to do with who they really are inside. But they can't talk about that with other people because no one wants to hear about that - everybody only wants to talk about their own problems.



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This whole question of what we call self-dwelling, occurs when we become obsessed with the 'me, me, me', thinking that if we could only satisfy our insatiable desires, then somehow, at some point, we will get it right and be happy ever after, like in the story books. Even when I was a small child and read fairy tales where the prince finally met up with the princess and they lived happily ever after, I always wondered what happened after that? After the honeymoon, then what? Then the trouble would start because so often they were incompatible types! You could see that right from the start!

It could be that we are looking in the completely wrong direction for happiness. Society is telling us that selfishness will bring us eternal fulfilment, joy and bliss, but this is the biggest lie ever told. Of course society is lying to us - it wants us to buy things, to be like hamsters in a wheel, running until we are exhausted even though we never get anywhere.

The Buddha said that desires are like salty water; the more we drink, the thirstier we become. We never quench our thirst, we just become thirstier. So maybe the way to happiness is not always to be thinking about "What I want, my happiness, my fulfilment, realizing my inner potential". Perhaps realizing our inner potential is not through gratifying our own desires. Maybe our genuine satisfaction lies in a different direction altogether. Maybe it lies in dropping our obsession with the 'me' and 'mine'. Perhaps true happiness lies in thinking about others.

Our society with its cult of the individual creates this terrible problem of alienation. Somebody wrote a book called *Alone with Others*. The title sums it up. We are always having get-togethers, we go to the pub, we're with our mates, or we go to parties and hang out with our friends, but there's still this sense of non-real connection, of being alone even with others around. That's mostly why people get together to drink - to try to drown out the sound of their own aloneness because they are afraid, because they feel so cut off. Young people get especially caught up in this because they are so lonely being alone. It can be very painful to think that we not the same as everybody else, that we do not conform to that standard generated by society. Every year we are expected to look a certain way and people do what they can to conform. Then the next year, we all have to look differently and purchase a new wardrobe. Even the counter-culture people all look the same - to find someone who is really original is very hard.

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Anyway, the fact is that we get caught up in this cycle and we are engrossed in trying to make ourselves happy. We try to get everything we want in order to become a successful person in this world. Yet we become increasingly alienated from ourselves. It's a paradox. The reason why people are so miserable and feel so estranged is not just that they are alienated from society, but because they are alienated from their true selves. They are acting out the distorted wants of the ego. This ego that dominates us is like a big spider weaving a web around us, so we become further and further separated from our true being. And the more we become separated from our true being, the more we also feel separated from all those around us. So we have to come home -- come home in a very real sense, because we are all living in the streets as far as our psyche is concerned.

Meditation is one of the ways to learn to come home -- to discover our true being. When we begin to make contact with our inner being, we find that that being is not 'me' or 'mine'. It is what connects us with all beings. Actually, we are not separate; we are all very deeply interconnected. The more we go inside, the more we find ourselves radiating outside. There are varying approaches to this so I would suggest two which we could all successfully incorporate in our daily lives. There is the breathing-in, the meditation where we begin stripping off the layers of our false identifications. But there's also the breathing-out, which means becoming more connected with others in a meaningful and compassionate way. We have to realize that we are each only one among billions of others, and that others are of equal importance to ourselves.

How do we interconnect with others? Perhaps, the first thing is to stop worrying about what other people think about us. Once again, this is just a disease of the ego. Who cares what other people think about us? They are not really concerned about us -- they are just worrying what we think about them!

The point is, we don't have to worry about what others think of us because they are more worried about what we think of them. From our side, what we have to do is to be fully aware that there are other people out there and to realize that they are just like us. Everybody we meet is fundamentally like ourselves: they want to be happy, they don't want to be miserable. Everybody wants to be happy, however they designate what happiness means to them. But we are so confused that often, in trying to gain happiness, we create more pain for ourselves and for those around us. But that's our confusion, it's not the intention. The intention is to create some kind of happiness. Therefore, whenever we meet anyone, we should be conscious of this.

We share this in common - we all want to be happy. Not just human beings, but animals, insects, birds, any being. Any being wants happiness. Therefore, when we meet anyone, we should have this thought in our minds, "May you be well and happy". We don't have to say it verbally, but just have that feeling of good-will in our hearts. Whether we like that person or not is irrelevant.

To have a heart which is open to others however they treat us is a happy heart. If we begin from our heart to relate to people, wanting their happiness and not caring whether they make us happy or not, just from our side wishing good will to others, then slowly our heart begins to open up. And an open heart is a happy one even while it absorbs the sufferings of others.

*Tenzin Palmo*

*(To be continued in Gatsal Teaching ,Issue 20)*