



GATSAL TEACHINGS

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Overcoming Prejudice and Self Dwelling (part two)



*A mind which is very obsessed with itself,
which is controlled by the relative ego
is a mind which is rigid, judgmental and prejudiced ...
a truly enlightened mind would not discriminate*

His Holiness the Dalai Lama meets people every day – new arrivals from Tibet with ghastly stories of their suffering and the suffering of their families and communities. He has to hear these accounts continually. He is the Leader of Tibet yet he's powerless, so imagine the pain he feels. Then, since he is regarded as such a figure of peace he is connected with other aid agencies and communities in many countries. Everyday he hears heartrending tales from all over the world. His Holiness is continually besieged by people coming not only from Tibet but also from India and around the world, many of whom dump their sorrows in his lap, so he's always concerned with the troubles of others. But is he miserable? If we tell him something sad he will weep because he really cares. But the next minute, he's laughing again! Look into his eyes – they are sparkling. In most of the photos of the Dalai Lama, he is smiling.

A mind which is very obsessed with itself, which is controlled by the relative ego – its likes, dislikes, opinions, biases and ideas of how things or people should or should not be – is a mind which is rigid, judgmental and prejudiced. We all have it. We absorb prejudices with our mother's milk. Even people who have dropped out from society have their strong biases. In fact, they are often the most rigid of all. People in alternative societies also have their own opinions, ideas, judgments and standards! They are not free.

Our mind is very conditioned. To a certain extent until we are totally enlightened, it is impossible not to have a conditioned mind because that is the way we think. But we should be conscious of the fact that we are very prejudiced and judgmental about everything. Everyone has their opinions. We think, "This is my opinion", but usually it isn't. It's either the general opinion of the media or what program we have watched on television last night which was crafted very carefully to get us to agree with its viewpoint, or else it is the outlook of the particular group we hang out with. However, we take it as our own opinion. We stick by it and think this is truth and any other view is erroneous. Then a few years down the line, general opinions change and everybody goes the other way. It's quite interesting. If we are old enough we can observe this happening.

When we are young, we imagine that what we think is the only way there is and anyone who thinks differently is crazy. The current trend is the ultimate truth, the final statement, and everything that went before it is old-fashioned and stupid. Then a short time later, everything's changed again and our current style has become outmoded. All you young ones – you just wait! The way you are dressing now will make you laugh ten years down the line. When you look at photos of yourselves later, you'll think, "Did I really look like that when I was that age – goodness!" But at that time, it was the height of cool.

We are all prejudiced, biased, and full of opinions and judgments, most of which are untested, most of which we have inherited either from our families and our social contacts, or from the books we read, or from the programs we watch.

Very few of them have been genuinely examined in the light of reason and understanding. But when we hold an opinion, we will die for it. People die for their ideas all the time, not that they are brilliant ideas. Instead, very often, they are stupid ideas. These beliefs, these opinions and judgments colour everything we see. They are not just innocuous or harmless.

Some opinions are pretty harmless – whether we take sugar in our tea or not, whether we think we should be eating only grain or fruit. These might affect our body but basically, they are innocuous. However, there are some prejudices which are very harmful for one's own mind and for society. Obvious ones are religious and racial prejudices. They have caused so much harm in our world. Millions of people are killed because they don't believe what we believe or because they belong to a different race, and for no other reason. They are not bad people, but "If you don't believe what I believe, you deserve to die".

So, this question of our opinions and our beliefs is not a small question. Most of our own beliefs and prejudices are indeed totally unexamined. Where do they come from? Have we really thought them through? Have we talked intelligently to people with different views? Have we read books about other ways of thinking? Usually, when we believe in something, we will only read books which enhance our beliefs. We don't read books or watch programs which give a different point of view. If we watch someone saying anything we don't agree with, we watch it with a prejudiced mind. It's very interesting to observe that mind, because we are filtering experience all the time, and this also alienates us from what is happening around us.

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which shows us the way back home,
back to our true selves***



So, what do we need to do? We cannot live without opinions and ideas while we are in an unenlightened state. The very fact that I'm a Buddhist nun shows that I have opinions and beliefs! But we have to understand that these are just beliefs -- they are just opinions. In themselves, they have no external verity. They are just judgments and ideas, which can change. There are certain ideas which have been going on for millennia and which definitely need to be examined anew. Certain qualities which we have always admired (which may or may not be admirable) should be examined with fresh eyes even though they have lasted all this while.

The important thing is not to identify ourselves with our thoughts and feelings, but to see that thoughts and opinions are just mental factors. Even a belief system in itself is a mental artefact. The Buddha, when speaking of the Dharma, said, "This is a raft, it's a boat. It can take you from this shore of relative reality to the other shore of absolute reality". Now, while we are mid-stream, we would be foolish to discard our raft, but when we get to the other shore, we would be equally foolish to then place the raft on our shoulders and carry it around out of respect. When we reach the other shore we no longer have need of the raft. The Dharma is just a device; it is the path, but it isn't the goal.

All belief systems and religions are just relative. In themselves, they are not the truth but they can help us to realize the truth. Without them, it would be hard to gain spiritual realization. We may be able to get a glimpse, but to stabilize that experience is quite difficult without some kind of spiritual discipline. Even the highest and noblest of opinions, ideas and judgments have to go in the end. Meantime, we should understand that all our prejudices, all our conceptions and biases should be understood as being just a passing phenomena. They do not possess ultimate validity from their own side, they are just mental states and not 'me' or 'mine'.

We all appreciate that a truly enlightened mind would not discriminate. We know that a master who embodied genuine wisdom and compassion would be totally open and accepting of everyone. How could an enlightened master say, "Yes, I accept this person but I don't accept that person"? It's not possible to even imagine that. Therefore, the more we close our hearts to certain sections of society or religion or race, the less we are embodying our genuine enlightened nature. The more judgmental and rigid we feel, the more we are caught up in our likes and dislikes, the further we are away from an enlightened state, because an enlightened state is non-discriminating.

We come back to this question of the ego again. The ego leads us very much astray. In a society like ours which is so based on self gratification, we are far away from the true path. That's why people are often so empty inside and feel so lost. We have to embody a way of life which shows us the way back home, back to our true selves, so that we are living from the point of view of our true nature and not from this false ego.

In the Dharma there are two ways to do this. First is the way of inner introspection, of learning how to calm the mind, of making it one-pointed. Then looking into the mind's own nature so that we can distinguish between that which is false and that which is true. This way we can begin to let go of all our false identifications, especially our very strong identification with the ego. At the same time, we can begin to open out towards others through generosity. Not just generosity in the giving of material things but also giving time, giving understanding, giving space for people, being there when people need us. We cultivate non-judging, being open and being patient, understanding, tolerant, and not reacting angrily when things don't go our way and when people don't do what we want them to do. We gradually learn to accept things and take these difficulties of life onto the path, using them skilfully instead of reacting adversely and becoming angry. We develop kindness – what the Dalai Lama calls the good heart, – a heart that cares about others, not just about ourselves.

There are people who are desperately concerned about wild animals, trees, our environment. That's wonderful. But sometimes these same people are rude to their parents and cause them much pain and worry. We have to start from where we are, and with whom we are. That starts with our parents, our partners, our children and our colleagues. Make them happy! Practice kindness, generosity, love, tolerance with those who are around us, towards those with whom we work, towards people we meet. Just be there for them, be kind to them, think that they also want to be happy. Try not to cause unhappiness to anyone. Try to make people a little happier; a smile or a kind word goes a long way. Stop being so self-absorbed. Think about others. What we want doesn't really matter so much.

Usually we've been trying so hard to find our happiness by getting what we want for ourselves, that we stop thinking about what others want and how to make others happy. The irony is that if we genuinely think more about others than about ourselves, we become happy. We find that one day we wake up and realize that we feel good without even looking for it. It's one of the paradoxes: the less we think about ourselves and the more we think about others, on the whole the happier we will be. The more we are obsessed with our own happiness and couldn't care less about others, the more miserable we will make ourselves and all those around us.

There are so many things we can do. First of all, we start with trying to make happy those people around us. That's our challenge. It's much easier to sit and think, "May all beings everywhere be well and happy!" And when we think of those dear kangaroos, possums and wallabies jumping around, tears come to our eyes. But then, if we are planning to go out just as our mother wants us to do the washing up, we're so angry. However our mother is a sentient being, our partner is a sentient being, our children are sentient beings and they are the sentient beings in front of us. They are the ones we have to wish to be well and happy.

In the Tibetan tradition, when we are meditating on all sentient beings, we have our father on the right and our mother on the left and then our enemies in front of us. We put all those people we don't like right in front of us, followed by our family and friends. This is skilful because it reminds us that it's not just sentient beings in general out there – those little specks on the horizon – who are important, it's the people we have to deal with right now. That's who we are talking about – people we are associated with and with whom we have a karmic connection. Whether we like these people or not, they are sentient beings wanting to be happy and it's our responsibility to make them happy.

We come back again to the first thing we started with which was the sense of inner connection with the family and with the tribe, and then with one's culture. This is very important. We have to strike a balance between being totally subjected to parental and tribal restrictions and being so free that we don't connect anymore with anything. One way to do this is to develop a sense of inner centeredness. From this we can begin to radiate out towards all the beings around us. We don't feel lonely any more because we know that at a profound level, we are connected with those beings. We are no longer concerned with what other people think about us; we are only concerned with how we can benefit other beings.

Society has become so distorted. It doesn't give us what it promised it was going to give us. It doesn't give everlasting happiness or peaceful joy. It just gives us a sense of despair, separation, frustration and this insatiable longing which can never be filled, a great hollowness within. Many people feel that everything is meaningless and they despair totally. There is so much depression – look at how many people are on medication like Prozac. Tibetans have never even heard of things like Prozac.



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So, it's up to us. No one can do it for us. We each have the responsibility for our own lives, to really get our lives centred and well-oriented. The methods are there, but we alone can implement them. When it's clear in our mind, when we really see things with some clarity, then everything falls into place. Then it is very obvious what we need to do. But nobody can do it for us. It's like swimming upstream. Society is flowing downstream to the swamps, flowing down to the wastelands of despair. If we go in that direction, that's where we are going to be shipwrecked. So we have to swim upstream and that takes a lot of effort. So we are going in the opposite direction to the general flow but strangely enough that doesn't alienate us.

Somehow once we really connect with our inner centeredness, far from feeling disconnected from all the beings around us, we feel intimately related in a deep sense. When we can direct our own lives in the right way we can then help guide others. We will attract like-minded people who are also beginning to question the modern ethos. Soon we may enjoy the society and friendships of many compatible people.

The Buddha praised friendship very much. There's a curious dialogue in the Sutras where Ananda, the Buddha's attendant, says to the Buddha, "I think that good companionship is half of the spiritual path". And the Buddha replies, "Don't say so, Ananda. Good companionship is the whole of the spiritual path". Companionship with minds which are supportive, understanding and helpful is very important. In our lives as we travel in this new spiritual direction, these people will come to us. They are drawn like magnets.

Questions

Q: I have a question about the use of the word 'media'. You used the device of generalization with regard to the media as a fairly negative force. I'm just wondering however, if the term 'advertising media' might be a good addition to that because the media per se is not fully intent on drawing people away from 'swimming upstream': there are many instances of media experiences which give you a realization.

A: That's true, of course. For example, in journalism and on television, I have seen many very beautiful, inspiring and helpful things. But the general trend – a good 90% to 95% of the media – is based on propagating this consumer consciousness. Of course there are good, responsible and dedicated people out there who are writing and producing wonderful things, but they tend to be submerged in the avalanche of all the other stuff which is what most people are watching. This is the problem. You turn on the television and most of it is mindboggling junk! I think one realizes it more if one is from outside. We don't have television at our nunnery in India and I don't go to the cinema, listen to the radio or usually even read any newspapers. So we are not being inundated by the media day by day. So when coming to a place like this, we can see with clear eyes. Then we realize how appalling the standard is, and the lies that are being propagated to the public in general.

Q: One of the most difficult things involved in my work is to try to unhook all the thinking that goes towards how people behave towards the rest of the world and tracing it back. But the process seems never-ending. And suddenly, you come to some root and incredible anger is aroused: people really resist. They feel their problems, their ideas are so true and so real.

A: I'm sure that there are many people like that out there. We just have to connect. Because we cling to our prejudices, our ideas and opinions, we think they are 'me' and 'mine', they uphold the ego. Therefore if we take the ego's opinions and judgments away, where is the 'I'? Because that's who I am – I'm a person who believes in this and that, and when we demolish this, we haven't got anywhere to stand. So of course, people will defend to the death. Therefore, it's very important, as I was saying, to trace back and then start from the beginning point and try to help people go in a different direction.