

## TALK TWELVE

## Relative Bodhicitta Practice: Tonglen

GOOD EVENING. Tonight we are going to discuss the relative bodhicitta practice, which naturally stems from the practice of absolute bodhicitta. Absolute bodhicitta practice starts with realizing our alaya, our kunshi, as a working basis. We use that to develop our basic naive state of realization, pakyang, which is the practice of absolute bodhicitta that we discussed yesterday. From there, we begin to discover that our fundamental state of mind is unborn, nondwelling, and free from the extremes of conceptualization. Therefore, we can rest quite happily in the nature of alaya. And because that resting process, or pakyang process, is based on an unconditional state of mind, on basic goodness, natural goodness, kunshi-ngangluk-kyi-gewa, therefore we are able to practice relative bodhicitta at this point.

Relative bodhicitta comes from the simple and basic experience of realizing that you could have a tender heart in any situation. As we discussed last night, even the most vicious animals have a tender heart in taking care of their young, or for that matter, in taking care of themselves.

From our basic training in shamatha-vipashyana, we begin to realize the basic goodness in ourselves, and we begin to let go with that. We begin to rest in the nature of alaya: not caring and being very naive and ordinary—often casual, in some sense. When we begin to let ourselves go, we begin to have some feeling of good existence in ourselves. That could be regarded as a very ordinary and trivial concept of having a good time; nonetheless, whenever we have good intentions towards ourselves, it is not because we are trying to achieve anything at all. We are just trying to be ourselves, basically speaking. As they say, we could come as we are.

At that point you have a natural sense that you can afford to give yourself freedom. You can afford to relax. You can afford to treat yourself better, trust yourself more, and let yourself feel good. That basic goodness of kunshi-ngangluk-kyi-gewa is always there. It is that basic sense of healthiness and cheerfulness and naivete that brings you to the realization of relative bodhicitta.

This process could be described as a different kind of educational system. Ordinarily, particularly in the western system of education, a person is supposed to be completely suspicious of his professors, his textbooks, his classes, and everything around him. He is supposed to feel that somebody might cheat him, or that he might miss something. Those who have the most paranoia, the highest level of paranoia, become the greatest scholars. But in this training, we work in the opposite way; this training is completely and utterly the opposite. Here we relax; we give ourselves a good time. During our practice sessions, when we are sitting on our zafus, backaches and knee aches might provide us with sharp points. Nonetheless, there is a sense of goodness all along, which provides the basis or background for resting in basic goodness; and the product of that resting is absolute bodhicitta, which is basically good—basic goodness.

## BODHI

The term “enlightenment” in Sanskrit is *bodhi*. *Bodhi* means “wakefulness.” Those who have achieved bodhi are *buddhas*, bodhi-ists, and the Buddha is the bodhi-er. Basic bodhi is wakefulness. We are talking about two levels of wakefulness here: absolute wakefulness and relative wakefulness. The meaning of wakefulness here is related to *why* people are awake, why they search for wakefulness. They are wakeful because they decide to abandon aggression and its activities: aggression in themselves and towards others. Therefore, the fundamental definition of bodhi, or wakefulness, here is being awake because you are gentle. When you are awake, you are no longer able, or willing, to cause harm to others. You are gentle, and the more gentle you become, the more wakefulness happens.

The very idea of enlightenment here is that of wakefulness. From the dictionary’s point of view, the term “enlightenment” has a different connotation. The dictionary would probably say that an enlightened person is somebody who is brilliant, intelligent, learned, and ambidextrous in all kinds of ways. [Laughter.] But in our case, enlightenment is based on the translation of the word *bodhi*, which means gentle, and therefore capable. The more gentle you are, the more capable you are. And the more capable you are, the more you have the power to influence others. Buddhist logic works that way, always. For instance, as we have discussed, the meaning of dharma is passionlessness. Passion means trying to assert one’s own energy or strength in the service of egohood; so passionlessness is egolessness. Similarly gentleness is wakefulness. That is how buddhist logic always works.

All that is the basic idea of *bodhicitta*. *Citta* means “heart,” and *bodhi*, as we know, means “gentle, awake.” Because you are gentle, therefore you are awake. Please don’t misunderstand the meaning of awake. It is not that somebody wakes you up in the middle of your sleep by punching you in the head, and therefore you wake up with tremendous anger and outrage. That is not the kind of wakefulness we are talking about here. [Laughter.] We are saying that wakefulness is gentleness. You feel very homey about your world. Your world is workable, people are workable, and your senses are workable. Therefore you feel very gentle and tender toward everything. Everything you touch, everything you experience, is tender. Because there is more tenderness, because there is no irritation, therefore you feel very cheerful and very awake.

## RELATIVE BODHICITTA PRACTICE

### Remembering the kindness of one's mother

Tonight we are discussing the notion of relative wakefulness mind, relative bodhicitta. The heart of relative bodhicitta is connected with another form of tenderness, which is also a practice. The relationship between a mother and child is the foremost analogy used in developing this practice. In medieval times, usually there was no conflict between mother and child. However, in modern society, there might be problems. Mother and child often have a great many fights, and there is hatred between them. However, disregarding the sociological problems, we should just go on in the straight medieval style tonight.

In order to develop relative bodhicitta, relative wakeful gentleness, we use our mother as an example, as our pilot light, so to speak. We think about her and realize how much she sacrificed for us. She fed us; she wiped our shit; she cleaned our snot and saliva by sucking it from our face and spitting it out. [Laughter.] A lot of good mothers do that. A good mother usually feels that her child is not an object of disgust, but a part of her. Therefore the cleaning process, the feeding process, and the clothing process are very natural and very ordinary. Obviously, if she looked at her child from a businesslike point of view, seeing how much chaos the child was creating, she would be disgusted. But mothers don't regard their children as problems. Your mother has no intention of presenting you with a big bill [laughter] when you grow up, for the service she gave you. Hopefully that won't happen in the future, either. It hasn't happened so far, not *quite* yet. Actually it *has* happened—somewhat. But we are going back to the medieval system, anyway. [Laughter.] Your mother displayed such kindness and felt such joy at having you when you were a little person who could not even move or breathe properly. It was your mother who took care of you all the time. Her kindness is the perfect example of making others more important than yourself.

The starting point of relative bodhicitta practice is realizing that others could actually be more important than ourselves. Other people might provide us with constant problems, but we could still be kind to them. The relationship of mother and child is the analogy for putting others before ourselves, and we could extend that to our wives, our husbands, our pets—our anything. We could take care of others. We could actually be patient enough to develop selfless service to others.

According to the logic of relative bodhicitta, we should feel that we are less important and others are more important—*any* others are more important. Doing so, we begin to feel as though a tremendous burden has been taken off our shoulders. Finally, we actually realize that there is room to give love and affection elsewhere, to more than just this thing called “me” all the time. “I am this, I am that, I am hungry, I am tired, I am blah blah blah.” [Laughter.] We could consider others. From that point of view, the relative bodhicitta principle is quite simple and ordinary.

## TONGLEN

You practice putting others first by means of a very literal discipline, which is called *tonglen* (gtong.len). *Tong* means “letting go,” and *len* means “receiving.” So *tonglen* means “letting go and receiving.” How are you going to do that, in the ordinary sense? Should you just run up to

somebody in the street and say, “Hey, take my candy and give me the kleenex in your pocket”? [Laughter.] Of course, you can do that, if you like. If you are versatile enough, you can probably do it without offending anybody. [Laughter.] But that is just experimenting with others on a very crude level. What we are doing here is different.

According to the traditions and disciplines of the Kadam teachings, we have another way of practicing putting others first: letting go and receiving are put on the medium of the breath. It is the same as what we do in shamatha practice, but much more so. How do we actually practice tonglen? First we think about our parents, or our friends, or anybody who has sacrificed his or her life for our benefit; we think of them. In many cases, we have never even said thank you to them. We should think of such occasions. It is very important to do that, not in order to develop guilt, but just to realize how mean we have been. We always said: “I want,” and they did so much for us, without any complaint.

I’m sure you have a lot of stories about how badly you treated your parents and friends, who helped you so much. They dedicated their entire being for your sake, and you never even bothered to say thank you or write them a letter. There are a lot of situations like that. You should think of the people who cared for you so much that they didn’t even want you to respond to how much they had done. They didn’t even look for confirmation. There are many people like that, including your parents and basically all of your relatives, or whoever it might be. Sometimes somebody comes along out of the blue and tries to help you completely. Those people do everything for you; they serve you, they sacrifice themselves; and then they go away without even leaving an address or a number to call. All along, there have been people who have done those things for you.

You should think of those situations, and realize that you could actually work them into your own practice of tonglen, sending and receiving. As your breath goes out, you give those others the best of what is yours, in order to repay their kindness. In order to promote goodness in the world, you give out everything good, the best that you have, altogether. You breathe in other people’s problems, their misery, their torment. You receive that. You take in their pain on their behalf.

That is the basic idea of relative bodhicitta practice. It is a very action-oriented practice. We give as much as we can give; we expand as much as we can expand. We have a lot to expand because we have basic goodness, which is an inexhaustible treasure. Therefore we have nothing at all to lose, and we can receive more; we can be shock absorbers of other people’s pain—all the time. It is a very moving practice—not that I’m saying we are all in a train, particularly. [Laughter.] But the more we give our best, the more we are able to receive other people’s worst. Isn’t that great? [Laughter.]

Tonglen seems to be one of the best measures we could take to solve our problems of ecology and pollution. Everything is included. Tonglen is the fundamental way to solve the pollution problem; it is the only way. Quite possibly it will have the physical effect of cleaning up pollution in big cities, maybe even in the entire world. That possibility is quite powerful.

Sending and taking is not regarded as proof of our personal bravery; it’s not that we are the best people because we do tonglen. Sending and taking is regarded purely as a natural course of exchange; it just takes place. We might have difficulty taking in pollution, taking in what is bad, but we should take it in wholeheartedly [Vajracarya sucks his breath in], completely in. We should begin to feel that our lungs are altogether filled with bad air, that we have actually

cleaned out the world out there and taken it into ourselves. Then some switch takes place, and as we breathe out, we find that we still have an enormous treasure of good breath, which goes out all the time.

That is the basic idea of relative bodhicitta practice. We should try to do it honestly and earnestly, as much as we can.

If you have any questions, you are welcome.

QUESTION: I'm wondering how tonglen affects our relationships with the people whom we think about when we do it. Would we relate with them differently in postmeditation?

VAJRACARYA: Well, once again, the proof is in the pudding, although it doesn't matter. On the one hand, you can't expect an extremely friendly letter from your grandmother with whom you have been engaged in warfare for the past five years. She will probably not write you a kind letter after three days of tonglen. On the other hand, sending and taking will definitely have a good effect, quite naturally. I think it is a question of general decorum and of your attitude toward such situations. It takes time, but it works.

Polack?

Q: Rinpoche, I am quite disturbed, because in my class on tonglen, I presented a slightly reversed logic: that the sequence of exchange starts with taking in the badness, and then the goodness comes out. If I understand what you were saying, we start with giving out goodness, and then the badness comes to us.

V: Well, it depends on which particular breath you catch. [Laughter.] It doesn't really matter.

Q: It doesn't?

V: It doesn't really matter. You see, you shouldn't make a big deal out of it. Whatever happens is all right. If you are breathing out, you breathe out. If you are breathing in, you breathe in. It doesn't matter at all.

Q: But it seems that when we breathe in the badness, the goodness somehow comes out of that automatically.

V: Not necessarily. You have both. Bad and good are always there. Neurosis and sanity are always there. It doesn't really matter which comes first.

Q: So it is—oh, it's—I—I think—I—I see.

V: It doesn't matter.

Q: Thank you.

Q: I feel as though there is only one way to approach what you are talking about tonight, and that is extremely personally. As I look at the stars next to my notes—[Pause.]

V: Yes?

Q: Well, let's see. You just said that it doesn't really matter which breath we start with.

V: That's right.

Q: Is that the same thing as my feeling that it doesn't really matter where we actually are?

V: That's right. As long as you can go out and in, it doesn't matter where you are.

Q: So what is this big—

V: You could be in the black hole of Calcutta.

Q: Where else could you be?

V: Nowhere. This is called samsara.

Q: Well, what is, what is—

V: You are in it already, anyway.

Q: Then what is this big concern that I feel, and that I suspect many people feel, about where we are, about whether we're in Boulder or Vermont or Timbuktu, or anywhere? There's still just this giving and this receiving.

V: That's right, that's right. That's why we call it the universal goodness of bodhisattva action. You could be anywhere. [Laughter.]

Q: Thank you.

Q: Rinpoche, in postmeditation experience, it seems very obvious to me that exchanging oneself for others actually has some effect on the environment and in relating with other people. But on the zafu, in the shrine hall, it seems like I'm basically just working on myself. I have the feeling that I'm doing tonglen practice to overcome my own neurosis, my ego. Is there any way to get beyond that feeling?

V: Maybe you should leave it like that for the time being. As you keep on doing the practice, you begin to feel that something is more real. And particularly when you return to your home town, you will find that it all begins to dawn on you. You may realize that it's something more than what you thought.

Q: Rinpoche, in spite of your saying tonglen is not intended to make us feel guilty, I feel very guilty. I don't feel as if I could ever repay the kindness of all the people who have given their lives for me in various ways.

V: Good! That's good! [Laughter.] In fact, that's much better than what a lot of people feel. Many people hate the world; they resent everything so much. What you're doing is better than that. If you feel guilty, it's all right. Just keep going.

Q: Well, is tonglen considered the best thing that we could do to repay other people's kindness to us?

V: Yes. Absolutely.

Q: For some reason though, I'm feeling extremely selfish at this point. That feeling has been developing momentum over the past couple of years. I have begun to realize that I have to get my livelihood together, and that I have to come out of some sort of free-form shopping lifestyle. Therefore I feel defensive about anything that might threaten my so-called progress in that direction. So tonglen is very scary, and it hurts. I guess I would just like some reassurance from you, that it just puts a little hole in that defensiveness, and—

V: Well, I don't think I can reassure you about anything.

Q: Oh. [Laughter.]

V: You have to do it. Just start doing it, and you will find that you don't need to philosophize about it. Just do it.

Q: Just start doing it?

V: Just do it very naively, and you will find out what it is all about. That is what we call the upaya principle.

Well, ladies and gentlemen, maybe we could stop at this point, so that you can get up early and do your practice. But before we close down, I would like to say quite bluntly that it is very important for you to take the next two days of intensive tonglen practice quite seriously. I doubt that you will freak out. [Laughter.] The main point is actually to do it: do it properly, do it thoroughly. You should relate with the slogans that have been provided for you, as well as the commentaries on them. Just simply do it.

Beyond that, it is important to take delight that you are in a position to do such a thing, which no other human beings have ever done—at all. The problem with most people is that they are always trying to give out the bad and take in the good. That has been the problem of society in general and the world altogether. But now we are on the mahayana path, and the logic is reversed. That is fantastic, extraordinary. We are actually getting the inner scoop, so to speak, on Buddha's mind, directly and at its best. Please think of that. This practice will be extremely helpful to you, so please take it seriously.

Tonglen is also very important in terms of vajrayana practice. Without it, you cannot practice the vajrayana disciplines of utpattikrama and sampannakrama at all. You become a deity without a heart, just a *papier mache* deity. Therefore, vajrayana practitioners should also pay heed to this practice. They should do it very carefully.

There is a story about two vajrayana masters who were exchanging notes on their students. One said, "Well, my students can perform miracles, but somehow, after that, they seem to lose their heart. They become ordinary people." Then the other one said, "Strangely enough, my vajrayana students cannot perform miracles, but they always remain healthy." The two teachers discussed that question, on and on. Then somebody said, "Well, how about having all of them practice tonglen?" Then both teachers laughed and said, "Ha! That must be it." [Laughter.]

From that point of view, it is very important for us to have a basic core of the real thing taking place, so that when we do vajrayana practice, we don't just dress up as deities, with masks and costumes. Even in hinayana practice, we could just wear our monks' robes and shave our heads, and all the rest of it. Without tonglen practice, both hinayana and vajrayana become like the lion's corpse.\* As the Buddha said, his teaching will not be destroyed by outsiders but by insiders who do not practice the true dharma. At that point the Buddha was definitely referring to the bodhisattva path. It is the mahayana tradition and discipline which hold the hinayana and vajrayana together. Please think of that. Thank you.

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\*Because the lion is the king of beasts, when he dies, it is said that his corpse is not attacked by other animals, but is left to be eaten by maggots from within.