

Buddha Nature

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The principal reason for my visiting Toronto at this time is to present what is known as the empowerment of Kalachakra, Wheel of Time. This is a preliminary talk on Buddhism, about the Dharma, the teachings of Buddha. What I wish to talk about this evening is a very important teaching from the final cycle of teachings, which come from Buddha Shakyamuni. The principal theme of this cycle of teachings is Buddha Nature.

Generally the teachings of Buddhism, teachings which come down to us from the Buddha Shakyamuni, are extraordinarily profound and extensive. The reason for this spread in both profundity and extent is basically the very varied motivations, temperaments and capabilities of individual people. Some of the teachings, which Buddha presented, were directed towards people very much in the midst of their lay lives, ordinary lives and daily lives. Some were provisional teachings, which were intended to lead a person into a deeper appreciation. Some of the teachings were about how things actually are what we call the definitive or certain sections of the teachings.

This vast body of teachings is generally known these days as the Three Cycles. The first cycle is concerned with the Four Noble Truths. The second cycle is known as Teachings of No Characteristics. The third cycle, which will be our principal focus this evening, is known alternatively as Complete Differentiation or Delineation or perhaps more familiarly as Teachings on Buddha Nature.

The first cycle of teachings which concern themselves with the Four Noble Truths, were basically concerned with an exposition of the suffering and frustration we experience in our lives, a very clear understanding of the frustration and unsatisfactory nature of ordinary experience, existence. Then the Buddha explained more at greater length the basis or source of this dissatisfaction, the causes, basically the emotional motivations which arise in all of us. The process by which those motivations become suffering actually comes to the delineation of the workings of karma, how an action becomes a seed and produces a certain result. From that he demonstrated a way, a path or a way of life which will lead one to become free of suffering, basically how to live in a way which will dissolve the unsatisfactoriness of existence. He showed very clearly how this way would lead to such dissolution of suffering, which became known as nirvana or the transcendence of misery. You see from this that the principal focus of this cycle of teachings is on suffering; its cause, manifestation and its resolution. Because the focus was on suffering, the natural inclination and main message of this teaching was how do we become free of suffering itself.

How do we actually make use of that perspective? What do we actually do to clear away the suffering, frustration and unsatisfactory nature of our lives? Buddha was very careful to distinguish between the experience we have of the world around us and the suffering or frustration in our lives which comes from the way we interpret that experience. It isn't simply the world and what we see, hear, touch and feel that is the actual cause of the lack of satisfaction in our lives, it is much more the way we approach and interact with our experience that is the cause of a lack of satisfaction.

The lack of satisfaction comes from a supposition that we always see ourselves as experiencing something. Here we see ourselves as some-thing, which exists in opposition to the world. From this perspective the presence of that sense of ourselves in opposition to the world is the basis of an unsatisfactory experience of life. Buddhism, in its first cycle of teaching, is concerned with examining that sense we have of ourselves as existing in opposition to the world and when we look at it, see that experience can arise without any need for such a sense of self.

Through calming the mind, morality, training the mind, learning how to restrain the mind so that it isn't reacting emotionally and from developing a calmness which allows for the development of insight into actually how the mind works, from all of these we come to an appreciation that the sense of self we feel so strongly that we are, is actually false. An intellectual understanding of this is not by itself sufficient. It is something which must be developed and grow within us until it becomes a functional and operative understanding. This is essentially the method by which one comes to be free from suffering according to this first cycle of teachings.

Generally speaking most people have the impression that religious life or in our context Buddhism, and worldly life or ordinary life are mutually exclusive, they don't have very much to say to each other or very much influence on each other. Furthermore with respect to the teachings of Buddhism, there is the unfortunate impression that Buddhism teaches a way which is to stop all experience so that we cease to experience the world, we block everything. Both of these are quite erroneous, mistaken impressions of Buddhism. In fact the very opposite is much more the case. Buddhism is solely concerned with how to live in a way in which we do not experience life as unsatisfactory or meaningless. It is absolutely focused on how we live not about getting away from life.

For instance as I mentioned before, the first of the Four Noble Truths is the truth of suffering, that life is unsatisfactory. We do experience frustration. This is something, which is relevant to all of us here. This isn't a teaching to get away from things but to pay attention to exactly what our life is made up of and how it is experienced. Rather than thinking of Buddhism as a way in which one leaves or escapes the suffering, the approach in Buddhism is much more to understand suffering and what it means to be unsatisfactory. When we really understand what it means to be unsatisfactory, where this unsatisfactoriness comes from and what the source is, then we know what to focus our attention on. This is to remove the source of the unsatisfactoriness from our experience. The source of this unsatisfactoriness according to Buddha's teaching is in the negative emotions we feel.

One of the principal ways that we remove these is through the development of a very clear ethical approach to life. We take into account what we refer to as the workings of karma, which means that we appreciate how all of our actions are seed and the actions themselves condition us to experience a certain result. If the actions are negative, the result we experience will be painful. Buddhism, far from teaching us to flee from life or to escape life, actually is much more concerned with leading us to understand of what our life consists, of what suffering consists; where it comes from and what we can actually do about it. This first cycle of teachings is really concerned with understanding the unsatisfactoriness of our life and how to resolve this.

The second cycle of teachings is known as Being Without Signs or Characteristics. It is concerned with what our experience is actually made of, what are all these things we experience, how are they in themselves? When we look at how they are, we see that the way they are is fundamentally different from the way in which we conceive of them being. That is, if we look at any particular phenomena

that we experience, even the smallest most insignificant thing, we see that it is made up of many other factors which have come together to make that particular object a possibility to experience. This suggests very strongly that there is no object there, it is simply the product of many different conditions.

However we do not see it as a product of many different factors and conditions, we simply see it as an independent object. We are particularly predisposed to seeing it as an independent object because we feel that we ourselves have some substantial existence. This is what is known in Buddhism as the clinging to a sense of an individual self. We see ourselves in opposition to the world and having made ourselves into some-thing, we then proceed to make everything that makes up the world into other things. This is what is known as the self of phenomena or the self, which we impute to all experience.

When we look at what we actually experience, we see that we simply experience the coming together of many different factors, many different conditions. Nothing has any existence in its own right. This is the essential teaching of the second cycle of the teachings of Buddha.

Now we have to be very careful here because many misconceptions arise at this point. One might feel in saying that there is no actual object means that nothing exists. This would be quite a serious mistake because these teachings do not say that nothing exists and they do not say that something exists. In Buddhism we call the view that nothing exists nihilism and the view that something exists as substantiation or in a slightly different context eternalism, something really exists forever. The view here according to the second cycle of the teachings is neither eternalism nor nihilism. That is, we feel from our subjective experience that something really exists but when we look, see that all we experience is merely the result of many different factors. It can't be the case that something really exists. On the other hand if we say nothing exists, we are confronted immediately by our own experience, something is going on. We can't say that nothing exists.

The point here is to come to an understanding that neither existence nor non-existence is an accurate description of our world. This is why it is termed the Great Middle Way because it goes between all philosophically extreme positions. The way in which we practice this is by developing what is known as awakening mind; awakening to our relationship to the world and awakening to the way the world is. Emptiness is awakening to the way the world is and awakening to our relationship to the world is compassion. So we have loving kindness, compassion and awakening mind being key principals in the second cycle of teachings.

Many of you may have heard of the term emptiness and wondered what this referred to. It is a key principal but it needs to be understood in exactly how it works and its role in this cycle of teaching. We can not understand a concept such as emptiness simply through intellectual reasoning or application of our intellect in any way. No matter how much we may reason philosophically, no matter what logic we may be able to apply, the way we see and experience the world will still be in terms of existence. This is contrary to the way the world actually is. On the other hand we might feel that emptiness refers to nothing, there being nothing. The emptiness in a box for instance, nothing in the box. In this way we feel that nothing is going on and we try to understand that, try to understand the world this way. This would even be a greater mistake for it is directly contradicted by our own experience.

The point here is that emptiness refers to a middle way. Emptiness doesn't simply mean absence or nothing. There is a very wonderful capability or quality, which arises with the understanding of emptiness. This is what we know as Bodhicitta

or awakening mind. This is the natural manifestation of the compassion and concern for others, which comes with the appreciation of the ineffable nature of phenomena. The main theme of this second cycle of the teaching is not that nothing exists, not that something exists, it's that our experience is beyond any conceptualization. When we actually begin to experience the world and ourselves from that point of view, we find ourselves awakening to a very rich and wonderful engagement with the world which is characterized by compassion and gentleness.

In the first cycle of teachings it was taught that life is unsatisfactory and the Four Noble Truths which help us understand the nature of that unsatisfactoriness and how to resolve it. In the second cycle of teachings we are taught that our experience can not be characterized by the extremes of eternalism and nihilism.

In the third cycle of teachings we are concerned with Buddha Nature. We find a very important and wonderful teaching being presented. Every sentient being is not fundamentally different from an awakened Buddha. Every sentient being has what we term Buddha Nature. Now this does not mean that there is some thing inside each of us, which is what we might call Buddha Nature and could grow into a Buddha. The idea that there might be some thing inside us of this kind was eliminated according to the teachings of the second cycle.

However, what this idea of Buddha Nature refers to is nothing else than what we actually are. At this point we exist with a great deal of confusion. The teachings on Buddha Nature suggest that confusion, the emotional disturbances, the pain and distortion of our experience are all incidental impurities and are not fundamentally what we are. What Buddha Nature refers to specifically is what is left over when all the confusion of ordinary experience is cleared away; the clear, empty, open mind, which is no thing in itself. This clear, empty, open mind is in no way different from the mind of the Buddha, of a fully awakened individual and means that we ourselves are no different from Buddha except due to the presence of incidental impurities.

According to these teachings there is no difference between Buddha Nature and awakening mind, which was mentioned in association with the second cycle of the teachings. Awakening mind, which is awakening to how the world is, and Buddha Nature, which is the potential for awakening, are not two different things. They are very closely related. One of the principals of awakening mind is a compassionate attitude towards the world. You will notice that some people are naturally compassionate and it doesn't matter who approaches them, everyone likes them and feels comfortable with them and trusts them. This kind of spontaneous trust, inspiration and calming of emotions indicates in the person we are talking about, the presence of Buddha Nature or awakening mind, whichever way we wish to look at it. If we now consider a person who is naturally angry by nature, what these teachings say is that the anger isn't the fundamental nature of the individual, that the anger is the product of incidental impurities. These can be cleared away.

According to the third cycle of the teachings everybody has the Buddha Nature. Everybody has this potential to awaken. As individuals there is no fundamental distinction, difference or basis of discrimination present in any of us. There is no basis to discriminate between one person and another since we all fundamentally have this same nature, Buddha Nature. The only difference among us is the extent to which that nature is manifest or not. The more impurities or confusion that we have, the less that nature manifests. The task then becomes one of enabling that Buddha Nature to manifest fully in our lives. The way in which we do this is go back to the first cycle of the teachings where it talks about karma, how we act, what we actually do on a day-to-day basis. Learning ethical restraint, how to do good and

how to avoid evil helps this Buddha Nature to manifest. We can also look to the second cycle of the teachings which is concerned principally with the development of love, compassion and the two aspects of awakening mind; awakening to our relationship to the world and to how the world is. It is through the practices of these that we come to clear away our own confusion so that our own true nature is actually present in the world.

Questions (Inaudible)

The point here is not an explanation of why there are the incidental impurities but an explanation of how we experience things now. The incidental impurities are an expression of ignorance, of not knowing. Ignorance or not knowing refers to the lack of experiential understanding, direct understanding, of how we are. Due to this lack of understanding being present, we do not perceive the world or ourselves accurately. While our essential nature is empty and clear, this lack of understanding causes us to perceive emptiness as some thing, which we take to be a self. It sees the clarity, which arises in the mind as something else, which causes us to experience other. This gives rise to duality and it is this lack of understanding and this propensity towards duality, which are the stuff of which the incidental impurities arise.

We learn how to practice and may spend considerable time in retreat. How do we join what we practice with how we actually live? Our practice is best when it permeates every aspect of our lives and everything that we do. Everything, which we experience, becomes an opportunity. Every interaction we have with another individual is an opportunity to practice not being self-centered or regarding the world as originating with oneself, able to acknowledge the needs and feelings of another person. Of everything we learn how to practice, this is what it is intended to be used for.

By study and reflection on the teachings, one will come to some understanding of emptiness. A direct understanding arises when there is no longer an experience of something being understood apart from what is understood. The whole topic of emptiness needs to be approached with a great deal of caution because there are so many misunderstandings. People take emptiness and make it into something, which is one form of misunderstanding. Emptiness can be conceptualized and applied to everything, which is another misunderstanding. This requires careful study and training in order to be able to use. It is very important that one has access to and relies upon an actual teacher who can guide you in this area.

Many people feel that if one dispenses with clinging then one won't have any relationships. This is not what happens. The clinging which is present in a relationship is the basis for the problems, which may arise in the relationship. As one becomes clearer and freer from clinging, the relationship becomes deeper and closer and less problematic.

At the time of death when the structures of consciousness begin to disintegrate, we experience what we actually are which is Buddha Nature. This is in the first intermediary state following the death process. If an individual has trained during their life and had some experience of this, then at that time they become completely free as they realize their own nature.

Colophon

This text was transcribed by Phil Lecso, using tapes from Karma Kargyu Center in Toronto.