

Second Turning of the Wheel

Week One—Talk Three

The Mahayana Path

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This is the third talk of the first week, and I'm going to talk about the Mahayana path in two sections. I mentioned in the prior talk that there's often an earthy quality in the sutras of Foundational Buddhism where the Buddha is talking with specific individuals, and you have a sense of the suffering or the difficulty the people are encountering and how the Buddha is trying to help them. In the Mahayana, the sutras often have this vast, almost cosmic level of description that doesn't have that immediate sense of earthy, human directness. It's considered to have great profundity to it. But, nonetheless, the Mahayana sutras can be a little daunting in their majestic vastness.

The bodhisattva vow itself is this inconceivable undertaking that you vow to help all beings attain buddhahood. This is not only understood to encompass all human beings, but also insects and everything that flies and swims and all the animals that roam the earth, which is an inconceivable number of beings. It's said also that the attainment of buddhahood for just yourself will take three incalculable eons, let alone then proceeding to help all these other beings. So it seems just impossible, inconceivable to be able to do this. So, in discussing the bodhisattva path, I thought it'd be helpful to comment in a more earthy level of discussion about how one might conceive of taking such a vow. And then in the second section of the talk, I'll explain the classic, traditional description of the path.

To understand the more pragmatic way in which one could actually connect to this aspiration of attaining enlightenment for the purpose of helping all other beings attain enlightenment, it's very helpful to look at the roots of the Mahayana in Foundational Buddhism. In Foundational Buddhism, the core teaching is the four noble truths: the truth of suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the path to the cessation of suffering. The encouragement in that tradition is to actually face up to the amount of suffering that is occurring.

So there's the question of how do we work with our experience? How do we work with suffering?

To answer that, I'd like to share a teaching from Foundational Buddhism that I think is particularly profound, and it's not widely known. It occurs in the *Abhidharmakosha* of Vasubandhu, the Vaibhashika Abhidharma. It's the teaching of the three principle causes for the arising of an affliction or *klesha*. Why do we experience kleshas? The tradition says there are three main causes for this. One, we have habitual and latent propensities

for certain patterns. We differ as individuals to what afflicted mental states we tend to have. One person tends to be self-deprecating and lonely. Another person is very angry, aggressive, and yet another person can be frequently proud and arrogant, jealous, and so forth. There's a range of emotions that we as individuals can have, and we tend to play certain keys on the keyboard of the emotions more than others. So we develop habitual patterns. These habitual patterns are understood to be present all the time, but they're not firing all the time. So the mere presence of a habitual pattern isn't sufficient to understand why we have an actual painful episode.

A second condition is called the "observed object condition," and the objects that trigger us vary significantly. Think of what in your life triggers your afflicted mental states. You could take out a piece of paper and write a little list—maybe not so little—of what triggers you. Now, if you have five people compare lists, there would be a wide range of objects. And if you knew the same people and worked at the same place, you wouldn't necessarily be triggered by the same things. So there's an interesting feature here that a given object does not have the same effect on all people.

So there are observable characteristics, but is the desirability or adverseness of those objects intrinsic to the object if different people react very differently to the same object? If you really are irritated at someone else, but for another person, they're their best friend, are these qualities intrinsic to the person? The implication here is that objects have observable features. For example, when we look at people, we see all sorts of things that we impute, whether its sexual orientation, economic status, political values, and so on. You see a person dressed a certain way, they're in a hemp T-shirt with a marijuana leaf on it; you're going to be less likely to impute one political party over another, and so forth.

We do all sorts of imputations and interpretations all the time, and we have emotional reactions to those interpretations. So, from this point of view, the object has observable qualities. But the emotional reactions that we have to them are not intrinsic to the object. If they were, would not everybody have the same reaction to the object? Even the same object doesn't produce the same reaction.

The third factor is the crucial one. It's called "improper mental engagement." If you generate anger towards an object, it's your mind doing that. In an earlier talk, I mentioned how all beings are worthy of compassion, and that if you have an afflicted mental reaction to a person, you are very actively a participant in creating that emotion. It's not an intrinsic, automatic reaction to the person. They may be doing lots of negative activities, but the suggestion here is that is not an actual cause of your affliction. It's the way you interpret that, the way you react to it. That instead of feeling compassion and sympathy, you generate all sorts of other negative emotions.

This is a Foundational Buddhist teaching that indicates that we have a tremendous amount of responsibility for the types of reactions we have to people. They can be very

deeply ingrained, and it can be very hard to experience them as something that we're creating. But, from the tradition's point of view, you can undo that over time too. You can slowly undo the improper mental engagement. Then, when you experience a difficult person, you can just experience the qualities directly without interpreting them negatively, and then feel compassion for them.

Now the Mahayana takes this type of insight from this teaching of Foundational Buddhism even further, which is the teaching on emptiness. There's a strong flavor in the Mahayana tradition of seeing the illusion-like quality of the way you experience the world, the interpretive stance you take. That you project all these qualities and interpretations. You realize that those are your projections, that they are created by the mind, they're imputed, but they have a shimmering, ephemeral existence. They're there as long as you produce them. Furthermore, you train more and more in not solidifying the other as a dualistic solid object over there. They're this vividly arising process in front of you that is often confused and acting in a very harmful way, but you don't interpret that as they're intrinsically evil. A much more fluid, open sense of sympathy towards this process develops.

So, as you progress along in working with difficulties both in your own mind and in others', you develop insight. You know that you understand something, and once you begin to see that about yourself, for example, if you see that you project a lot of qualities onto someone and you believed them, once you begin to catch on that you are doing that, it's hard to undo that insight. You begin to realize that you've begun to understanding something. You have experienced it for yourself and know this to be the case, and you have a lot of responsibility in creating that. When you have that type of insight, there's a certain confidence that that is the case. You know that.

It's like asking someone, do you know the flavor of an orange? And they say, "Yes, I love oranges and oranges are amazingly vivid, and I know what an orange tastes like." It has that knowing quality from having the experience to stop demonizing another person. It causes the experience of one's mind to soften. There's a sense of kindness to yourself and towards them. I've experienced that. I've tasted that myself. So there's this sense of growing confidence. However, life is quite complex and demanding. So it's not like I'm this hyper-confident, I know everything, I can handle anything person. It's not like that at all. It's much messier than that.

But within that uncertainty that you don't know if you can handle things, there is still this growing trust in yourself that you have this capacity for insight. You have this capacity for kindness, for compassion, for patience, for exerting yourself in the face of real fear. So it's a messy path. The Mahayana path is quite messy, but there's this growing trust in yourself that you do have these positive qualities.

There's a phrase from a current master in the Tibetan tradition, Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, "Erring and erring, I walk the unerring path." Erring meaning to go astray, to go off, to be harmful, to do something non-virtuous, to be harsh on yourself and to then inflict that on others. "Erring and erring, I proceed along the unerring path." That is to say that we learn from this process. This is how we learn. We have insights from our confusion, insights from our negative actions, insights from the harmful actions of others. So, paradoxically, you begin to become interested. You're drawn to understanding difficult people and difficult situations instead of being fearful and put off by them.

There still can be a sense of not being sure you can handle or understand the situation, but there's this sort of turning allegiance to your own capacities for insight and compassion. Once you start having that sort of insight, it will unfold and, therefore, you don't really have a choice. Choiceless awareness is one term that's been used for this. You can't stop it and, therefore, it's your heart's desire. You have this fascination about really pursuing this type of path of developing these qualities of insight and compassion. So it's not like you feel like you've won five gold Olympic medals already, and you're ready to go earn three more. It's not like that.

It's much more hesitant, uncertain, messy. But, nonetheless, there is this sort of real trust that you have this "basic goodness" or "buddhanature." You have the seeds and capacity to be enlightened. So this is the quality of the Mahayana path when you take the bodhisattva vow. You know what you've seen, you know what you've understood, you know how you've developed in a very skillful way to this point. It's been a messy process, but you feel inspired. So the teacher will offer a bodhisattva vow. There'll be a public ceremony, and that's an important moment when you publicly make this statement that, from this day forward, you will act to help all sentient beings attain enlightenment. It's a very personal matter, but it's also a public thing. The teacher has the trust and confidence in you that you can do it and is encouraging you to do it, but you have to decide to do it yourself. It's your own motivation.

Now I'd like to shift to the second part of the talk, which is the discussion of the classic way in which the Mahayana path is described. So this is the more vast, majestic quality of the Mahayana teachings. In general, if you were to ask, "What is the Buddhist path, what does it consist of?" There's two classic ways that it is described, and they both sort of equate to each other, and they occur in Foundational Buddhism as well as in Mahayana Buddhism.

The first way of describing this is the three trainings: *shila*, *samadhi*, and *prajna*. Shila is conduct, engaging in your daily life in an ethical way that transforms yourself. Samadhi is meditation. Meditation works with your mind, with your patterns, helps you to relax those patterns, to have insight into those patterns, and discover a sense of well-being, of just the sheer simplicity of being present. There's two aspects to meditation. On one hand,

it's this immaculate mirror that reflects your mental state and allows you to have insight into it. And meditation also reveals this quality of just the sheer simplicity and the sense of well-being of being present.

Then the third component is prajna, insight, or knowledge, and insight includes a range of things. It's often described in terms of the three prajnas, the three insights, or the three knowledges. These are hearing, contemplating, and meditating. These occur in Foundational Buddhism as well as in the Mahayana. This is a pan-Buddhist teaching. In the Mahayana, there's this emphasis on the profound insight that comes from prajna. Prajna is virtually the enlightenment of a buddha. It's this sense of understanding the ultimate truth, suchness. There are these big terms that are used for prajna, but essentially it is an omnipresent mental factor. It's said to be present in every moment of mind. The most deluded being has prajna going on. Even diluted knowing is type of knowing. So prajna has this vast range.

In terms of the path, it's said that you start with hearing. Hearing is the learning of the teachings. It involves conceptuality or listening to someone teach. Then the second phase is contemplation where you ponder what's been taught. You investigate it, you probe it, you compare it to your experience, you check it out to see if it makes sense. So there's a process of engaging with the teachings that you've heard in a more personal matter to see if they make sense. In the Buddhist tradition, there is an emphasis on the quality of having faith. In this way of thinking about faith, it's best to actually understand the teachings yourself, to personally understand them. So, from that point of view, just blind faith is not considered all that useful. You're encouraged to probe, investigate, and connect the teachings to your experience and see if they make sense to you. And if it doesn't make sense to you, you should be honest that you don't understand it or agree with it.

The Buddhist teaching of selflessness is a pretty tall order, right? That there is no self in here, that there is definitely stuff happening here, but there is no core in there. This is very tough for people, right? So the general view is you really need to understand it directly, personally for yourself, for it to really benefit you.

The third level of prajna is meditation. By meditation, they mean that you fully embody this insight; it's deeply a part of you. You've really worked to transform those patterns so that when you find yourself in a difficult session, what comes out of you is compassion. You have worked at a deeper level. That becomes your primary motivation when responding to difficult situations. There's this understanding that it becomes non-conceptual. You embody it. You *are* the teachings. You don't just accept the teachings, think about the teachings, agree with them conceptually, but your mode of being has been transformed. You embody the actual understanding, so that it just comes out of you effortlessly.

So prajna is understood to go through this progression; at first you hear teachings that are very foreign, that are very distressing. (What do you mean there's no chair here? I spent, \$200 for this chair. There better well be a chair here. And no, it's just a bunch of parts.) At first, it doesn't make sense, and you want to reject it. So you have to investigate it, to chew on it, think about it, ponder it, and then, eventually, if it makes sense to you, it becomes very deeply a part of who you are as a being. So prajna, the highest prajna, is considered to be non-conceptual. But it doesn't mean that conceptuality is some sort of enemy to be rejected. The Buddhist tradition has this vast ocean of texts and ways of teaching. So conceptuality is never its referent object. Strawberry is not a strawberry. That's a deep Buddhist view. That language is limited. It is just intrinsically limited, but still helpful.

So this is the basic understanding of the Buddhist path. You have the three trainings of shila, samadhi, and prajna. Engaging in conduct in your life to develop a skillful ethical conduct, engaging in meditation to transform your mind, to have insight into your mind, and developing prajna to the point where you not only understand it, but it's what comes out of you in your engagement with the world.

The other way of describing the path is the noble eightfold path. This is very widely known. I won't go through the details here. Again, this occurs in Foundational Buddhism and in the Mahayana, and they correlate with the three trainings. The first two of the eight in the eightfold path is related to prajna, the next three are related to conduct, and the last three concern meditation. So the noble eightfold path and the three trainings are interrelated with each other and are saying very similar things. The eightfold path just lays out more details.

Now to turn to a more distinctive Mahayana approach to the path. This particular approach comes from the second turning of the wheel of dharma from the Madhyamaka school, the Middle Way school. Although, it shares many elements with the Yogacarín, Cittamatrín third turning wheel. This consists of describing the journey from the point of view of ground, path, and fruition. This is a triad that one sees commonly in Buddhism. The ground of the path is considered to be the two truths, the relative truth and the ultimate truth. There are many ways of describing the two truths, and we'll talk more about this as the course proceeds, but the relative truth is concerned with where we experience samsara. It relates to appearances, all the relative experiences that we have in our world.

The ultimate truth is often described as emptiness, the unfindability of any solidity within the process of appearance. But it's also described as suchness, or freedom from elaboration is another classic term. That means that we create an illusory world, the way of relating to appearances that produces all sorts of dualistic polarities and struggles and solidifications. So the afflicted mental states dance on the ground of duality. Proliferation is this process where you create an illusory world that's so real to you, and you then react

with not only emotions, but you actually act on your projections. You hit the person, you steal from them, you lie about them, you actually do things based on your belief in this solidified world that you've produced. So freedom from elaboration is a description of the ultimate truth that says, if you don't do that, whatever's left after you stopped doing those things is the ultimate.

Now I'll speak briefly from the Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. There is a preference in this tradition to use the term freedom from elaboration as a description of the ultimate rather than emptiness. They will use the term emptiness, but it tends to be one-sided if you will. The second turning teachings, in general, feels that of the two extremes, nihilism and eternalism, most people tend to lean to the eternalist side. We cling to things as real. We think we're really solidly real. We have a solidified world that we have lots of thoughts and emotions about. So Madhyamaka tends to emphasize emptiness rather than appearance.

But, again, the Mahayana is about the union of appearance, the union of compassion and emptiness. The union of dependent origination, the process of appearance and emptiness. So the use of the language of freedom from elaboration can point to this more dynamic, less negative style of language. The emptiness style has more sense of the union of appearance and emptiness. That whatever the mind experiences, once you've stopped that solidification process, it is empty of solidification. But it's not just a nihilistic vacuum. So you might think that one truth is superior to the other. If you asked, which is the more important truth, naturally, you're going to say the ultimate truth. Well, the tradition says that can't be the case, because the relative truth is the stairway to realizing the ultimate truth. There's no other way to do it. Therefore, it's considered a major obstacle to reject relative truth. It's the basis upon which one can learn about the ultimate truth.

You use the relative truth. It's like you use falling to right yourself up. If you're dealing with someone who has intense emotions and they're projecting all sorts of negative emotions, they're paranoid, they're blaming everybody, and you're looking at them and saying, you really are misunderstanding. These people are trying to help you, and you deeply don't understand. You have to work with their state of mind as it is. You have to deal with what their thoughts are, what their emotions are, and you have to use that to try to engender insight, and, eventually, they can discover how their experience is fabricated. They're creating this world that seems so real to them, but you can't just say it's all empty, get over it.

Beyond that, it's not said frequently, but, occasionally, you'll hear statements like "the union of the two truths." This is the *Heart Sutra*. Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Emptiness is no other than form. Form is no other than emptiness. There's this type of talking in the Mahayana tradition about the union of appearance and emptiness, the union of relative truth and ultimate truth. That there's this natural purity. Again, we talked in a prior talk about how, from the Mahayana point of view, there's an inseparability of samsara and nirvana; the natural purity of samsara is no different than the purity of

nirvana. All of the negative qualities that we create within samsara actually have no root and can be transformed into a luminous, compassionate state.

So the two truths is the ground. Understanding these various qualities and elements that we've been talking about is the ground for proceeding on the path. Then the path itself is described as the two accumulations, the accumulation of merit and the accumulation of wisdom. This is the more applied part, you might say. You're grappling with your life from the point of view of trying to figure out how to understand it from the wisdom side, its luminosity, its openness, the creative possibility of really transforming how you engage in it that involves insight into the emptiness of it all. And then the accumulation of merit, of learning to engage in a way that produces well-being.

So the two accumulations are the path, wisdom and merit. Then the fruition is described as the two *kayas*, the two bodies. This correlates to what I said in a previous talk about how when a Buddha enters into nirvana, parinirvana, that they still manifest to help the world. It's not a one-sided nirvana; it's a non-abiding nirvana. They're not rejecting samsara. They still are motivated spontaneously to manifest to aid beings. The two kayas are the *dharmakaya* and the *rupakaya*. The dharmakaya is this sort of profound suchness level, the ultimate truth level, which is the personal experience, if you will, of the Buddha. There's no solidification. You could describe it as luminous as well as empty. It's considered to have limitless qualities of compassion and skillful means and patience, and all of these insights and so forth.

Then the *rupakaya*, *rupa* means “body” or “form.” It's how the Buddha manifests out. The *rupakaya* is divided into two kayas, so you end up with three kayas. This is the more common teaching in Mahayana, that the Buddha manifests two levels. There's a subtle level that the Buddha manifests for high-level bodhisattvas as way to communicate among really evolved beings. That's called the *sambhogakaya* or the enjoyment kaya. Then the third one is *nirmanakaya*, the emanation body, which ordinary beings are said to experience. So we, as ordinary, deluded beings, can interact with the Buddha at the level of the *nirmanakaya*. It's said that this spontaneously occurs, the Buddha has accumulated the aspiration to help beings for eons, has developed skillful means, and just automatically manifests compassionately to help beings.

So, in summary, the ground is the two truths, the relative truth and the ultimate truth. The path is the two accumulations, the accumulation of merit and the accumulation of wisdom. And the accumulation of merit corresponds to the relative truth level, and the accumulation of wisdom corresponds to the ultimate truth level. Then the result is the two kayas, the two bodies, the *rupakaya*, which is the manifestation of the Buddha, which corresponds to accumulation of merit and relative truth, and the *dharmakaya* is the profound realization of the Buddha, the inner experience that realizes the ultimate truth and the wisdom aspect of the path.

