

**The Bodhisattva Path of Wisdom and Compassion**  
**An Online Course on the Mahayana Teachings of Chögyam Trungpa**  
**Taught by Judith L. Lief**

**Talk One: Beginning Genuinely**

**JUDY:** Welcome. We're now beginning the study session of this retreat on *The Profound Treasury*. As you know, the focus in this retreat is on the second volume, the mahayana volume, called *The Bodhisattva Path of Wisdom and Compassion*. But to begin with, I wanted to really do a review and to place what we're doing in context. The title of the talk is something like "Beginning Genuinely." I've been thinking a lot . . . what you can do in just a few talks on this kind of material . . . and what I've come to is that hopefully I can help bring up guidelines or questions or ways that will deepen the experience for you when you study this material on your own, because obviously, in a short program like this, we can only touch on a few highlights.

**The Three Yanas**

So I want to review some of the key topics of hinayana to begin with (the first *yanā*), and whenever I'm teaching on this material, over and over again, I always have to remind you that the whole notion of the three yanās—the three stages of the path, as described, as three vehicles—is a system coming out of tantric Buddhism. It's within what's called *Lamrim* tradition—the stages of the path—and the teachings are designed to be practical guidelines for a student to increase their qualities as a discipline and meditation and understanding. So I picked out a couple of quotations that I wanted to focus on.

Basically, I'll give a talk on two sentences, maybe three. The first one is "The hinayana is like having a body, and the mahayana is the outfit that goes with it." The hinayana is like having a body, and the mahayana is the outfit that goes with it. I also was thinking, Why is the hinayana volume so fat? It's really fat. I also thought, If the Vidyadhara decided to teach something—he could teach many, many things, and he did—why was it so important to teach over and over again on the three yanās? Why was he so obsessed with that topic? It was the same topic at every one of the seminaries. Every one was hinayana, mahayana, and vajrayana. Obviously he thought it was important that we should understand that, and that somehow would provide a framework for that vast body of teachings. Why did he put such emphasis on the hinayana foundation? Why didn't he just launch in further along on the path? These are questions that came up to me.

## **Shila, Samadhi, Pranja**

The other structure that goes throughout all of these teachings, which I think it's helpful to come back to again and again—another group of three (everything I looked at today was in a group of three, or seemed to be, almost)—are the three qualities that are called “shila,” “samadhi,” and “prajna.” Every vehicle, every teaching, every practitioner is working on all three of those things.

### *Shila*

Shila is discipline; it means discipline. It means behavior; it means ethics, morality—how you're actually living your life. Sometimes the practice of meditation is presented without even mentioning anything about that, but what is the point of doing any of this? It's supposed to affect how we live our life, so as to be helpful: feedback, guidelines, inspiration for how to live a more genuine life. Each of the yanas has a different emphasis in shila, samadhi, or prajna. So in the hinayana, the ground, shila has to do with simplifying—coming into the present moment, exploring what it is to be without pretense, without unnecessary elaborations, with less preoccupations. Another way of thinking of shila in the hinayana is that of reducing our harm to ourselves and others—not being a nuisance, not causing harm. So there's a quality of gentleness; you become a little bit more gentle with yourself and with others. This shila also includes commitment—what commitment you might make at this stage—and the primary commitment is called “refuge,” taking refuge.

Each yana has a vow, and in the hinayana the vow is a refuge vow. What is that? That refuge vow is making a commitment to three things (always three): the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha. Buddha, dharma, sangha. Buddha is a quality of wakefulness. So in thinking about that first refuge, in the example of wakefulness, the Gautama Buddha himself—the historic figure—you could say, How committed are you to wakefulness? How central is it for you? How do you even know when you're more awake and when you're less awake? Exploring that dimension: What is wakefulness? What are we waking up from?

The second of the commitments is dharma, which means “teachings”—teachings of the Buddha. But it also means more generally “truth.” What is true? There's a quality of straightforwardness of the hinayana: a commitment to straight talk; not saying more than you need to or less than you need to or twisting; being willing to hear what is true, recognize what is true, and make a commitment based on what you know to be true.

The third of this refuge vow has to do with the sangha and a sense of community—of like-minded fellow travelers—a sense of being one among many travelers, present, past, and the future, entering a stream. It’s called “entering a stream of practitioners.”

So these commitments of the shila of the hinayana go all the way through—those same kinds of commitments. Without those kinds of commitments, without paring down and simplifying and knowing yourself more deeply, it’s very difficult to move on to the mahayana. In some ways, that aspect of the shila is giving up the romanticism and coming back to just what is, right in front of us, here and now. The Vidyadhara talks a lot about what he called “nontheism”: the importance of abandoning the notion that someone’s going to save you, that somehow there’s some other reality that you’re going to be able to pop into, and that you don’t have to stay with the reality that you happen to have. I think we all have one of those places, at least mentally. We think, “I could just go there, and things would be fine. If someone would just get me out of this, things would be fine. If I didn’t have to work this out myself, things would be fine.” So there’s a constant of being thrown back on your own resources. And you could think of that as a loss, or you could think of that as a gain, depending on your mood. The loss of delusion is a gain. The more times that you are thrust back on your own resources, the greater the strength and fortitude that is developed within us, and you need a lot of that strength and fortitude if you’re going to be a practitioner on this path. And you do have a lot of it.

### *Samadhi*

The second is samadhi in the hinayana. Here, *samadhi* just means “practice.” The formal practice of hinayana is twofold: mindfulness and awareness (*shamatha-vipashyana*). There is a quality of incredible respect and precision in experience, in your experience, a calming and taming of the wildness of mind, a softening of the prison of ego fixation, and a reducing of the overwhelming power of the emotions to take us over and cause endless suffering. In some ways, the simple practice of sitting meditation is a form of boycotting all our preoccupations, activities, and dramas. This thread of looking at where we fixate, where our mind is captured and where our heart is captured—mind is captured by continual discursiveness, and heart is captured by continual emotional upheavals. These are considered to be the grist, which we grind away at in the process of training ourselves in the hinayana: kind of manual labor, just breath by breath, thought by thought, emotion by emotion, just grinding, grinding, grinding, grinding. And in that grinding, things become really smooth.

### *Prajna and the Four Noble Truths*

Finally, in terms of the view or prajna, the learning or insight of the hinayana path, it has as its fundamental core what are called the “four noble truths.” Those are two good ones, and they’re two bad ones [*laughter*], depending on your point of view. The first noble truth—and I actually heard the Vidyadhara say at one point that if you understood the first noble truth, you would have the whole picture—and that truth is the truth of discomfort, of suffering. Some people say, “Well, Buddhism is such a downer. We talk about suffering.” But that’s not the point—just to get all depressed about suffering. At the same time, the reality is that life is hard: nothing works, fundamentally, and certainly nothing lasts. Nothing lasts. Nothing lasts. It really is hard to actually accept that. Everything that’s happening, we would like it to last. We would like things to be solid; we would like things to be real. We would like to be solid. We would like to know what’s going on. We would like lots of things. And we don’t get them.

That’s very connected with the second noble truth: the cause of suffering is endless desire and a lot of confusion and ignorance. We don’t know whether something is possible, what’s actually happening, what isn’t; we have misunderstandings. As soon as we have one desire, as soon as we actually fulfill that desire, another one comes along. As soon as we fulfill that, another one comes along. There’s no end to it. There’s no end to what we want. We’re never satisfied. And we all collectively pretend that isn’t so. We mutually or collectively create an illusion that things are satisfactory—things are solid, things are predictable. We all participate in this grand, theatrical performance that we’re together, that we have it all together and we’re okay and we don’t have to look into too much. So personally, oddly enough, when I heard someone teaching this book about things not really working out, that the truth is that people do suffer in all sorts of ways, to me, it was a relief to hear—that someone would actually say that. I had a great appreciation that the Buddha just said it outright because then we don’t have to pretend. The point of this is not having to pretend. It was a good relief to me. Wow.

Sometimes I’ve found that situation. A lot of times, I give little programs for people who are dealing with loss or death or change and things like that. And those are hard topics, topics we don’t tend to want to talk about all that much. And I found, if there’s a little circle of people and they’re starting to introduce themselves or have some kind of discussion—like some of you coming here, many of you . . . these are people you don’t necessarily know or have ever met before, so it’s a little bit intimidating; you, like, walk in to the party—and what I’ve found is, as soon as one person, *one person*, says what they’re actually going through, it’s like there’s a collective sigh of relief, and everybody feels free to drop their mask and be more real. We don’t realize how much pressure we feel all the time to try to appear to be a

certain way. So in the hinayana, being a genuine practitioner, we say, “What a relief it would be to drop that completely.”

That goes to the third noble truth: we don’t have to do that. It is possible to be liberated from those kinds of painful patterns—patterns that not only *are* suffering but that *perpetuate* suffering, *feed* suffering, *increase* suffering. Of course there are many circumstances—many, many, many circumstances—totally beyond our control, but to a great degree, our sense of lameness, our sense of inadequacy, our sense of pain and suffering, we’ve created it. Which is great news: because we’ve made it, we can unmake it. That’s the hopeful quality of the notion of cessation. It also comes back to that theme of self-reliance. Nobody else made it. You can try to find all sorts of people to blame—spouses are convenient. But nonetheless, it comes back to “you broke it, you fix it.” That’s the basic hinayana slogan: you broke it, you fix it!

Then the opposite, the fourth noble truth, is the path, and it’s like a repair manual: all the things you can do in terms of how you relate to your body, how you relate to your emotions, how you relate to your speech, how you relate to your mind. All sorts of guidelines and techniques are provided, so it’s not just left hanging there. Things are bad; they could be better . . . “Thanks a lot!” No, it’s just how you get from here to there. It’s laid out—a little path. So that is a little bit about the hinayana view.

Another pattern that is established in this level, this first yana, is the beginning of relationship: how do we relate to a teacher? Throughout the dharma, the teacher is an important figure. Historically, the teachings have been passed on from humans to other humans directly and verbally—or in other ways, somehow person to person, transmitted as a living thing. In the hinayana, the notion of a teacher is an elder—just someone who knows a little bit more and has a little bit more practice and understanding. There’s kind of a chain notion that you can learn from those people that are a little bit further along on the path, and then you can help people who are a little bit less experienced or knowledgeable. It’s like a hand-me-down thing that creates threads—threads of connection. On the one hand, hinayana has such an emphasis on the individual, on aloneness, on being with yourself—maybe for the first time really fully. At the same time, there’s already a sense of connectedness in the hinayana.

I wanted to read one more quote. The first one—remember what the first one was? [*A student answers.*] Right. Great. This is a little longer one: “The hinayana notion of peace is based on the cessation of grasping or holding on to the phenomenal world through our sense consciousnesses. It is based on renunciation. We are actually paying attention to every detail in our lives: how we hold our pen, how we pour our cup of tea. Everything is scrutinized down to the very basis of our lives, and we

find that every situation brings pain. [*Laughter*] So we try to overcome that pain, which started from ignorance, uncertainty, and bewilderment.”

Many, many, many times in presenting the three yanas, the Vidyadhara stressed how important it was to establish this hinayana foundation. So many of the basic views and practices are introduced at this point, as I’ve been saying: the notion of nontheism; the notion of painful and conflicting emotions and ego fixation; the notions of shamatha and vipashyana (mindfulness and awareness); notions of paring down to what’s essential, simplifying; letting go of delusions and dreaminess; being more real, more genuine, less guarded, less hidden to yourself. At the same time, it’s a discovering—oddly—that you’re not so bad, that you’re okay, that you have what you need. There’s kind of a self-sufficiency. I think a lot of times we don’t feel very self-sufficient. We feel always there’s something lacking. “If only I had this or that, if only I had this situation or that, if I only was smarter or more disciplined or taller, shorter, fatter, thinner, whatever. If only, if only, if only . . .” And there’s a sense of, “Well, don’t be so hard on yourself.” When you actually quiet down and stop your evaluating, judging mind or soften it a bit, you’ll find there’s a lot there to work with. There’s a lot there to work with. That’s the beginning of a very important thread throughout these teachings: the concept of workability. *Workability*—that’s a word that comes up many, many times. No matter what’s happening, no matter how difficult things may seem at any given time, there’s a quality that is workable: it can be worked with; *you* can be worked with. Workability.

You could say, “Well, why is hinayana so important? This narrow vehicle, this looking into our own situation—isn’t that selfish? Shouldn’t we be going out and saving the world? Shouldn’t we be helping each other right away?” Not necessarily, because a lot of times we go out to do things and we don’t know what we’re doing and things get worse. So how do you know? How do you get in touch with what you in particular have to offer? You’re coming from your unique gifts, your unique situation. In just a very conventional, ordinary sense, you need to train yourself. It’s all about training yourself: taking the time to do the work, to do the practice, to do the study, et cetera. In terms of just understanding the logic of the path, it can seem pretty complicated over time. But it’s really not meant to just be annoyingly complicated, if you understand the structure of the path.

And at the beginning, there’s the notion of, What does it mean to be this sense of “I”? (It was great in the cafeteria: “The shortest sentence: ‘I am.’” [*Laughter*] “What is the fact of the day?” I loved it; it was perfect! “I am.” They’re becoming Buddhist just by our presence here. Somehow, I don’t know. [*Laughter*] Did anyone else notice? That’s good. I also thought of other things, equally short, like “I do.” “I go.” Yeah . . . I. I. I.) There is a systematic way that the hinayana breaks down “What is it we

experience that we label ‘I’?”—they look into that very systematically and deeply. Some people last year studied the Buddhist psychology class, and that deconstruction of what we label “I” is very important to study and understand because it comes up as a counterpoint in the mahayana and as a further twist in the vajrayana—the same pattern of ego components, or *skandhas*, and the energies of ego or the fuel for ego, or *kleshas*, the conflicting emotions. We deal with those guys, so to speak, all the way through, and we start right now.

I wanted to allow a little time for dialogue. I’ll touch on one more thing: I think it’s important, since we’re all here, right now, to point out a little bit the specificity of teachings, the specificity of the teaching situation. We’re here. Teachings always take place at a particular time, particular place, particular teacher, particular students. That mix of a time and a place, teacher, students, and a particular teaching that is presented is a mutual creation, unique to that group, unique to these circumstances, and, like everything else, arising and then dissolving. So I wanted to encourage you or to remind you or point out to you that what we’re doing here is unique, and it comes from this mix that we create together. The students evoke the magic of the teachings.

What I love—one thing I love . . . I shouldn’t go on, but I’ll say it anyway. An example of this is in the *Heart Sutra*, which some of you will be studying. There’s the Buddha, who is the environment of wakefulness—wakefulness—just there, just hanging around there, expressing its energy through Avalokiteshvara. So wakefulness arouses some energy and movement. All that’s kind of swirling around, so the Buddha is just waiting to be asked—just waiting to be supplicated. And the teaching, when it really happens, is when Shariputra asks a question. The teachings arise from a question within the environment of wakefulness and the energy of compassion. It’s wakefulness, compassion, and inquisitiveness, and you put those together. We could learn a lot. So you all have your part to play.

**STUDENT 1:** Could you please speak a bit about renunciation in hinayana as applied to lay people in the way that Trungpa Rinpoche presented it?

**JUDY:** Well, we chant about it every day—not being attached to food and wealth, cutting the ties to this life. There are different translations of *renunciation*, but basically it means . . . It doesn’t mean that you throw away all your computers and you give your car away and you live in a cave, necessarily, for a lay person. Usually it’s expressed—renunciation—in terms of not being caught in what are called the “eight worldly concerns,” not being caught in possessions, not being caught in praise or blame or success or

failure, good or bad, having some kind of way of being in the world without being trapped by desire and attachment.

There are many stories in different traditions. You can be very much trapped by attachment as a monastic or as a renunciate, or you can be a person with many things and not fall prey to that kind of attachment. So it's an individual thing. But there's some kind of notion that you know that you don't own anything—fundamentally. You don't really have anything, so why worry about it? You can enjoy the colors and the patterns.

We'll talk much more about that in terms of mahayana, but in terms of hinayana, just say, "Don't take any of this as a solid possession you have that you then have to defend and protect." Particularly this [*gestures to her body*], you know? So there are constant points where you can explore, like when you buy something. Something's just sitting there in the store, and you're walking along: "That looks pretty good. Let's get a look at it." At first it's just this object (like it's a beautiful pen or something), and you can appreciate it; then you go look at a couple and put your money down, and you take the pen, and suddenly it's *your* pen. The situation has changed totally. [*Laughter*] What are those little points? We are working with little pinpricks of building, putting all the building blocks together to keep our sense of solidity. That doesn't mean you shouldn't buy a pen, but you should be curious about what happens in your mind. It's a good thing to explore: What is letting go? What needs to be let go? And the most, most, most bottom line—ignorance and grasping—that's really what needs to be let go.

**STUDENT 2:** Could you explain this line, which is on page 5: "From the point of view of ego, there is a total nonexistence of personality."

**JUDY:** It means you don't exist. [*Laughter*] We'll talk about that more later.

**STUDENT 3:** Would you talk a little bit about the release aspect of *tonglen*? You're taking in dark or plotline or whatever, and then actually just releasing it. I don't quite know how you get from A to B.

**JUDY:** You just need to release.

**STUDENT 3:** Release, letting go, the transition from taking in either specific or not specific bad things and then releasing it—I actually don't quite know how that works. In fact, I don't think I've ever heard of it, but that's probably me.



**JUDY:** In the exchange happening with the breathing in and breathing out, all I meant is that you're not holding anything in as though you're stuffing it into you—the negativity. You bring it in completely, and you let it go. You breathe out completely, and you let it go. That's all it meant. So there's a continual flow, in other words. There's not a stopping point. Maybe that's another way of looking at it. It's not like hold this and breathe, but it's an exchange. Sometimes it's just called an "exchange," just flowing back and forth, back and forth within space.

**STUDENT 4:** What is the *shamatha* and *vipashyana* experience from a hinayana point of view?

**JUDY:** [Laughs]

**STUDENT 4:** Because we're going to be going into shamatha and vipashyana in mahayana, how is it distinctively understood in hinayana?

**JUDY:** That's a good question. Shamatha-vipashyana continues all the way through. They're really important. Not only is the hinayana volume really fat, but at least two-thirds of the hinayana volume is on shamatha-vipashyana. It really was an important topic for Trungpa Rinpoche, the Vidyadhara. Not only did he spend all that time on it—in the seminary setting and elsewhere—but I have many, many memories of seminars of various ilks where there would be a sitting period or a sitting day included, and he would just plead and implore people with the importance of sitting practice. He just couldn't express more how important it was that it's not just an intellectual, conceptual learning we're doing—it's a full, embodied learning. It's important, and I don't think that there's one answer to your question, like "what is *the* experience." There is no "*the* experience" as far as I know.

In general, the shamatha (or mindfulness) is a quieting of the mind, a calming of the mind: fewer thoughts, less jumpiness or drowsiness, just really simplifying: quiet, quiet, still, still, quiet, still—like that—which is, in itself, very wonderful. And you get a sense of being present in some way—a different way. The vipashyana is the aspect of the mind beginning to relax and open out a bit more, and it's kind of a natural process. As you really focus, at some point, your mind just opens a little bit—relaxes a little bit. So you could think of it as a relaxation, a little bit, of the practice. Also, vipashyana is described in terms of the inquisitiveness that comes up: being really curious, asking questions, really thinking about what you're doing, noticing. Vipashyana—as the Vidyadhara presented it in hinayana—also is very much

associated with postmeditation and a sense of tuning in—tuning in to what’s going on. He used lots of analogies, like having antennae, picking up on what is happening. You’re not just self-absorbed; your mind is open enough to pick up on what’s going on around you, and that’s a helpful analogy, I’ve found.