

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE TIBETAN BUDDHIST TRADITION

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I would like to discuss the Buddhist path of human development and its relationship to the psychotherapeutic process of development. Though I do not have any experience working as a psychiatrist or psychotherapist as such, I have worked with many people in the context of their practice as they enter the meditative path, people in a great variety of states of mind and social situations.

It seems to me that our life is basically involved with journey, or movement. Ideally, we move from a less developed to a more evolved, a more open state of being. There are different ways in which people have come to think about this human journey. There are different belief systems or life-interpretations into which people enter and on the basis of which they proceed.

In the case of the Buddhist teachings on human development, and also in the case of the psychological tradition, we are receiving from the past much hard-won wisdom. People have struggled and worked with good intention to come up with an explanation of human existence and searched for ways of knowing themselves and helping others. When entering into any tradition, there are two ways to go. One possibility is that the wisdom of that tradition with its techniques and insights can become a way of further evolution for ourselves. As far as I understand, those in psychoanalytic or psychotherapeutic work often regard that work itself, or their training in that

work, as a means of personal growth or evolution for themselves as well as their clients.

But it is also possible that involvement in a tradition can limit us and make us more narrow-minded. That is always a danger with any cultural tradition: scientific, religious, political, academic, aesthetic, and so on. Any traditional path of learning and knowledge can become a means of fostering human wisdom or a means of self-entrapment. I would like to offer some reflections from the Buddhist point of view on how to remain with the genuine intent of our human journey. The question then is how to take an attitude in which our work with ourselves and our work with other people can lead us to further awareness and openness rather than to entrapment within another system of conditioning.

FOUR COMMON SIDETRACKS ON THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

On any journey one can be sidetracked from the main path. Such a sidetrack is not so much morally wrong as it is counter-productive to our original inspiration. I would like to discuss four common sidetracks in spiritual or psychological work.

Trying to Achieve Happiness

The first is a result of our desire for happiness, in a primitive sense. We tend to approach spiritual or psychotherapeutic means as ways of escaping the pain and irritation inherent in human life. However, we understand from both the Buddhist and the psychotherapeutic tradition that personal growth involves accepting personal imperfection, openness to the viewpoints of others, change, loss, and many other things which are inevitably irritating and frustrating to us. Such irritation, discomfort, embarrassment, fear, and so forth — the messages

that our wishful thinking is not being confirmed — can be the ground for real self acceptance and growth.

If we abuse spiritual or psychological methods by trying to use them to escape all sharp edges, trying to achieve happiness and success in a superficial sense, such methods will not bring about any fundamental growth, but only another version of imprisonment in our habitual ways. In this case the fault lies with a lack of genuineness in our approach.

Basking in the Reflected Glory of the Teacher

A second sidetrack may come up in our attitude to a spiritual teacher, or towards the ‘scene’ that develops around any charismatic figure. I’m sure this is as true in the psychological profession as it is elsewhere. There is the tendency for us to want to get in with what we perceive to be the fashionable crowd, and to bask in the glory of the great man. There are, no doubt, people with exceptional perspicacity and vision from whom we can learn a great deal, and there are also teachers who are spiritually evolved and whose very presence can be transformative. But if we do not have a personal commitment to our own journey, this basking in reflected glory, so to speak, only makes us arrogant, or reinforces our sense of personal poverty. Then we are preoccupied by validation from external sources, and closed to the actual message of the teacher.

Relying on Conceptual Interpretations

A third seduction involved with any path of learning that we might enter is the desire to rely on external authority and to find security in some conceptual interpretation of our experience. Several previous speakers referred to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)*, as an interpre-

tive scheme of mental experience. With regard to any teaching which attempts to interpret reality for us, there are pros and cons. The positive aspect is that there are meaningful insights to be gained from such sources. Someone tells us "These particular patterns and behaviors tend to take place; people go through this type of transformation." You can see such things described in the DSM-III, or in meditation manuals. When you recognize the patterns such examples are describing, it sparks an insight. But if we believe these descriptions are the way the world really is, for instance that the DSM-III presents the mental repertoire that you can actually have, that it encompasses the sum total of possible experience, then we become locked into the mental ward of a conceptual interpretation. In actuality, states of mind cannot be contained in conceptual interpretations. In particular, to the extent that we believe any particular interpretation to be how life really is and how people really are, to that extent we will be involuntarily committed to the mental ward of our own dream. We will be victimized by our conceptual fixation and suffer the limitation of that view. If, in a spiritual or psychotherapeutic relationship with someone else, we cling to our view until the other person is convinced of it, we are really only creating an echo chamber of our own imprisonment.

Using the Teachings to Build Personal Charisma

A fourth sidetrack from our main path comes about from a mistaken attitude towards our training. We receive a lot of knowledge, a whole bag of tricks, as a result of our training in whatever discipline we have adopted. As long as our basic intention is our own development and the development of others, then such knowledge and techniques may be very helpful. However, sometimes we take an inverted attitude, and the knowledge and techniques become the means of building up

personal charisma and power over others. We think that people will be impressed by our acuity, and that we have the means to intimidate our enemies or competitors. In this case, the information and wisdom of the tradition and the insight we are receiving from it are perverted. Instead of following our original intention of realizing who we are and helping others to do so as well, we become poisonous to ourselves and to other people; we become a social menace.

From the Buddhist point of view, all of the above sidetracks to development are a manifestation of what we call the process of ego or the clinging to self. My teacher, Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, often referred to this process as the desire to confirm oneself. We want reassurance that our lives are meaningful and worthwhile, that we have an identifiable name, that we have an identifiable role in life. We may derive our sense of meaning from power, from love, from our job, even from our sense of worthlessness. The underlying dynamic in all such identifications is the wish to confirm and define “I,” “me.” This becomes an obsession for us. In the Buddhist tradition, the principal method for loosening this obsession is the practice of meditation, which makes us at home with who we are fundamentally and brings about an understanding that our existence has a certain loneliness about it. Other people may confirm us, saying “You’re doing a great job,” or they may insult us and say “You are really off the wall,” but basically it is up to us to sort out how things are. We receive wisdom and encouragement from our teachers and mentors, but at a certain point we have to sort things out for ourselves. In that sense our journey is a lonely one. Our existence can never really be confirmed from outside, and if we look inside we start to discover that such confirmation is not necessary.

From the point of view of the Buddhist tradition, those are some of the basic issues involved with how to maintain a genuine aspiration in our work with other people and in our work

with ourselves. By genuine aspiration, I mean an approach in which what we do will continue to open and develop us, as opposed to bringing us further and further into a net of conditioning.

THE THREE YANA JOURNEY

I would now like to discuss this notion of journey according to the Buddhadharmā of the Karma Kagyu tradition, and, in fact, according to the view shared by all the Buddhist schools preserved in Tibet. The path of practice within this tradition works on several levels of personal development simultaneously. There is the basic level of working with our day-to-day experience which we call the hinayana, or “direct vehicle,” and there is a somewhat more visionary way of working with our day-to-day experience, which we call the mahayana, or “great vehicle,” and there is, at the same time, a profound level of working with our day-to-day experience, which we call the vajrayana or “vehicle of indestructible wakefulness.”

Each of these levels of personal experience and personal development is related to a particular “vehicle” (in Sanskrit, *yana*). The notion of vehicle describes a certain approach to our life journey. A vehicle implies a certain landscape, and also a certain mode of transport. In other words, in terms of vehicle, you are journeying over the geography of your experience. You might be in a valley with rolling hills on either side, or you might be looking down from a mountain pass, or you might be suspended in outer space. And you might be walking, which everybody learns instinctively, or riding on horseback, which requires some skill, or you might be in a jet plane, which requires special fuel and special training to operate. Without suitable preparation, you may not be able to take off, or, if already aloft, you may not be able to avoid a crash landing. So

there are different kinds of vehicles and different landscapes and different levels of experience.

The Hinayana Journey

With the first vehicle, the direct or narrow path, or hinayana discipline, we come to understand that the human condition comes about largely as a result of ignoring.

Many of our actions and motivations are actually governed by subconscious patterns and subconscious feelings. These patterns and feelings are covered over by the surface consciousness, surface awareness of the mind, which is in a state of continual movement and distraction. Therefore, because the basic ground on which we operate involves a lot of ignorance, we feel inner conflict and continual dissatisfaction. Our path for dealing with that, according to the Buddhist tradition, is the meditation practice of mindfulness and awareness.

Mindfulness and awareness entails mental focus, as well as interrupting the mind's habitual distraction from itself and its undergrowth. It involves obstructing the flow of subconscious habitual tendencies that keep us from being 'present' with our state of mind. When we do that two things tend to happen. First, we begin to experience psychological room or openness. The habitual identification of one's 'being' with the thought content of one's mind, and the habitual claustrophobia that such an identification creates, begins to abate and we experience psychological space. Then, within that space, a lot of hidden neurosis begins to churn up and surface. When meditators begin their practice they often feel quiet and calm but then begin to feel terribly neurotic, because the subconscious gossip, the subconscious neurosis of the mind, begins to rise to the surface and be experienced. Our journey at this point is to make friends with that neurosis and develop humor and non-judgmental awareness toward that gossip. The more we

experience our mental content and emotions with non-judgmental awareness, the more relaxation there is. In other words, the more we are willing to be raw with our experience, the more accommodation and space there is.

The process of developing mental peace in the Buddhist tradition is not a process of suppressing mental content but, on the contrary, is one of allowing one's being to be open to the energy and the emotionality of the thought process that arises. If one can embrace what arises with non-judgmental awareness, one will develop a sense of relaxation and acceptance. Out of that one will begin to develop sympathy with others because the universality of pain of the human condition becomes more obvious. With this awareness of human suffering, a sense of values or ethics starts to emerge, not because you were told the five precepts or the ten commandments, but because a natural sympathy, a natural disinclination to harm others, a natural sensitivity begins to arise. We become less opinionated about things, less fixed in our ideas, less personally arrogant.

At this stage, the teacher serves as an example of one who manifests sanity in his or her life. A traditional analogy is that of the teacher as physician, and the practitioner as someone suffering from an illness. The teacher offers insights into the practitioner's condition and prescribes the proper remedy or course of cure. But to overcome his illness, the patient must apply the remedy himself. In this sense the journey can only be voluntary on the part of the student, and must proceed from his own motivation and commitment.

The Mahayana Journey

The second stage or landscape is what we call the "great vehicle." The great vehicle is so called because there is an explosion of perspective at this stage. It's like going from the valleys to the mountaintops. Suddenly the perspective changes. The

view of the human situation is broader. We discover that we have been preoccupied with personal development, personal illusion, and now we discover that there is a bigger world than that. Here, we understand the basic human situation as having the intrinsic potential for sanity beneath the ignorance and neurosis. That sanity, or Buddha nature, exists not only in ourselves, but in every living being and in every situation. That is the fundamental viewpoint of the mahayana.

As a result of this expansion of view, we realize that our project of personal transformation and personal growth has been a limited one, and we no longer feel ourselves to be separate from the rest of the world. On the basis of the first vehicle or level of practice, we have some notion of personal liberation or personal ease. But, when we confront other people, we might experience their pain very sharply too. Sometimes we extend to them, sometimes we retreat from that pain. The viewpoint in the mahayana, or great vehicle practice is that we and others are not actually separate, so that their journeys and our journey are interdependent. From the mahayana perspective, the notion that our existence is separate from the existence of other things is the result of the process of ego, or clinging to a conception of self. The practice of the mahayana is to work on dissolving or mixing that boundary, overcoming the deep-seated, habitual pushing-away of other, pushing-away of the environment, in the attempt to preserve a particular state of ease or pleasure for oneself. Meditative practice, at this stage, is not typified by introspection, but involves expanding awareness and dissolving the boundary between self and other.

One of the practices of this level involves what is called "exchange," in which the basic attitude is that whatever pain or confusion others are experiencing, one will embrace that oneself. And whatever kind of clarity one has he aspires to make available to others. One finds that, as a result of developing psychological space in one's own mind, one may create

an ambience in which other people can experience greater fluidity in their state of being. That is expressed in the notion of exchange. The basic motivation of exchange is to experience the emotional texture in the environment, and, as we experienced at the earlier level with our own minds, to transform its claustrophobia into space. The practice of exchange might sound like martyrdom, but actually it is based on an enormous sense of cheerfulness and confidence that you have boundless health, boundless resources to give away.

The discipline for this second vehicle involves extending our meditative mindfulness and awareness out to our relations and work with other people. Your own notion might be that you would like to go into retreat and do more meditation practice. But what will often happen is that your teacher will say, "Well, don't you think it's time to get married?" or "Well, we have to create Naropa Institute," or something like that. Glassman Sensei's Zen community in Yonkers, New York, is a good example of this kind of meditation in action, where the so-called contemplative life and the so-called active life are not seen as separate.¹

The Vajrayana Journey

The third vehicle, involved with the profound aspect of our everyday experience, is called the vajrayana. It occupies yet another landscape. From the mountaintop perspective of the great vehicle we glimpse yet another and even vaster perspective, that of soaring in outer space. In the vajrayana it is no longer a question of making our way along a footpath, painfully cultivating ourselves; from this vehicle the journey is already and has always been accomplished and the universe is already and has always been functioning in a sacred and powerful way. Briefly, it is characterized by deep conviction and deep trust in the basic goodness of all experience. There is

trust that if we penetrate to the bottom of the world it is made of pure gold. There is conviction that the life we are engaged in and the world we are living in is powerful and sacred. It is not sacred because somebody blessed it, but it is that way just by itself. Generally, we are not willing to see from this perspective. We might be afraid of it because it demands a sympathy beyond what we have been willing to give to the world. It demands a lot of personal exposure, personal nakedness. If one could not make a relationship with personal pain, and further, with the process of the open journey and larger vision of the mahayana, one would not be able to progress to this level. At this level of practice there is a very deep view of the world, and a correspondingly deep commitment needs to take place.

This level of practice is possible only with the guidance of a competent teacher. A student needs to assess whether the teacher he is interested in is trustworthy and capable of presenting this kind of teaching, and the teacher needs to make sure that the student is properly prepared and up to it, so to speak. So there is mutual assessment and then possibly mutual engagement. That spiritual engagement is not a matter of the spiritual master imposing things on the student so that he or she will become a clone or robot. Rather, it is the spiritual teacher's position to push the practitioner or place him in situations where he has to surrender his hesitations and manifest his resourcefulness. The discipline of the vajrayana is very definite, rigorous, and precise. It is also very skillful in the sense that if we have any hidden neuroses or hot points in our experience, they will be exposed. If we have buttons to push, those buttons will definitely be pushed. Generally, we find this perspective very demanding or even frightening because personal confirmation and personal territory at this point must be completely left behind.

Vajrayana is also known as the Buddhist tantra. The popular idea of tantra is that it is somewhat libertine and pleasure-

oriented. For instance, one can buy books purporting to reveal the secrets of tantric sex and so forth. These commercial promotions have nothing to do with the real tantric path. However, from the viewpoint of tantra, the basic goodness and purity of reality is so profound that it does not pay homage to the conceptual distinctions of pure and impure that we make as we try to maintain our ego-centered version of things. The real significance of tantra is not that we can be libertine at all, particularly, but that without changing the circumstances of our life, without entering into a religious "system" so to speak, our life as it is can be recognized to be a profound journey which transcends any distinction between "sacred" and "worldly." However, only through trust in and the guidance of a master teacher can we understand how to commit ourselves to that journey fully.

SUMMARY

From a Tibetan Buddhist point of view, then, sanity is a commitment to our life's journey. It does not involve conceptualized interpretation of our experience, but is the measure of our willingness to meet that experience fully. From the basis of this commitment, the three yana path of Buddhist training suggests a progression, but the basic approach to life, the visionary approach to life, and the profound approach to life are interrelated and can be practiced simultaneously.

NOTES

1. The Zen Community of New York, under the direction of Bernard Glassman, Sensei, operates the Grayston Bakery in Yonkers, New York, employing both Zen practitioners and local residents. Due to open in the summer of 1989, a further project, the Grayston Family Inn, will provide transitional housing for homeless families as well as child care, parenting, job training, youth activities, and opportunities for permanent housing.