

Opening the Heart, from Introduction to Tantra, by Lama Yeshe

Selfishness or Dedication to Others?

So far the spiritual path has been described in terms of our own fulfillment. As we realize that our accustomed way of relating to desirable objects has been keeping us trapped in a circle of perpetual dissatisfaction, we become more and more motivated to activate a deeper level of our being. Our purpose is to experience a type of peace and happiness that is stable and reliable, unruffled by changing circumstances and uninfluenced by the passage of time. But even this higher aspiration to win release from the frustrating cycle of desire and dissatisfaction is still incomplete. Why? Because it is primarily concerned with only our own welfare.

Before, perhaps, our desires were limited to the possession of sensory objects, while now—through the development of some renunciation—they are directed toward the realization of our deepest potential. But the emphasis still remains, “I want this, I don’t want that.”

This narrow concern for our own happiness and our own liberation makes it impossible for us to realize the vast potential of our human mind and heart. Such self-centered concern values the welfare of just one being—ourselves—over the welfare of the countless others who share life’s problems with us. This extremely restricted view inevitably causes our heart to close. Then, even if we do not say so consciously it is as if we feel, “I am the most important person in the world. The problems that others have are of no concern to me; it is only my own happiness that counts!”

As long as we remain so tightly focused upon our own happiness, whether temporal or ultimate, we will never experience the expansiveness of a truly open heart. The only way to achieve the total vision of complete enlightenment is to free ourselves from the restrictions of this narrow, self-cherishing attitude. In the teachings of all the highly evolved men and women of the past it is dearly stated that this narrow, self-cherishing habit of mind brings us nothing but spiritual suffocation. If we truly wish to fulfill our highest potential—or even if we only want to achieve a certain mundane satisfaction in our daily life—then we must overcome this self-cherishing and dedicate ourselves as fully as possible to the welfare of others. This is the only way to achieve a completely opened heart, the only way to experience lasting happiness.

Dedication simply means that, having created a certain atmosphere of positive energy within yourself, you determine to share this happiness with others as much as possible. According to Buddhist psychology, if you do not have a dedicated attitude to some extent, you will never be totally satisfied. Instead, you will remain bored and lonely.

As the First Panchen Lama says in his tantric text *Offering to the Spiritual Master*, “Self-cherishing is the cause of all misery and dissatisfaction, while holding all mother sentient beings dearer than oneself is the foundation of all realizations and knowledge. Therefore, inspire me to change my selfcherishing into concern for all others.” This is not some complex philosophical theory but a very simple statement. To see whether or not our self-cherishing is the cause of all our confusion and frustration all we have to do is look at our own life’s experiences.

The Panchen Lama goes on to suggest that we take a good look at what Shakyamuni Buddha did with his life. He gave up all his self-attachment, dedicated himself completely to the welfare of others and as a result attained the unsurpassed bliss of complete enlightenment. Then look at us. We are obsessed with me, me, me—but the only thing we have gained is unending misery and disappointment. This is a very simple, straightforward comparison and we do not need to rely on the authority of the Panchen Lama or anyone else to see the truth it is pointing to. All the evidence we need is available in our own life and in the lives of others. Check up carefully and it will become clear that narrow selfishness always leads to disappointment and equally clear that open-hearted dedication to others brings about happiness and a sense of well-being.

The Open-Hearted Bodhicitta Motivation

We have already seen how our habitual attachment to sense objects prevents us from experiencing the happiness and satisfaction we all want. If we are sincerely intent on achieving the highest human pleasure, therefore, we must give our mind space by developing an attitude of renunciation. That is, we must renounce our habitual grasping after pleasure so that we can experience true pleasure. Similarly, as long as we remain obsessively concerned with our own happiness alone, we will never experience the supreme happiness of a fully enlightened mind. In other words, if we wish to reach the highest possible destination we must cultivate the highest possible motivation for following the spiritual path.

In Buddhist terminology this supreme motivation is known as bodhichitta. It is the impulse to achieve full enlightenment (bodhi, or buddhahood) in order to be of the most benefit to others. Only through dedicating ourselves to working for the happiness of all beings—in other words only by cultivating the open heart of bodhichitta—can we ever experience supreme happiness ourselves.

The dedicated attitude of bodhichitta is the powerful energy capable of transforming our mind completely. This can be shown to be true through our own experience; it is not something we have to believe in with blind faith. When you have developed bodhichitta in your heart all the good things in life are magnetically attracted to you and effortlessly pour down upon you like rain. At present, because our heart is filled with self-cherishing thoughts, all we seem to attract is misfortune. But with bodhichitta we automatically attract good friends, good food, good everything.

As the Dalai Lama has said, if you are going to be selfish, at least be wisely selfish. What he means by this peculiar-sounding advice is that in a way bodhichitta is like a huge selfish attitude: when you dedicate yourself to others with loving-kindness, you get back far more happiness than you could ever experience otherwise. Ordinarily, we get so little happiness, and it is easily lost. So if we want to be as happy as possible, the only thing to do is to dedicate ourselves wholeheartedly to the welfare of others.

Liberation from Self-Cherishing

We should not think that bodhichitta is a “religious” attitude, something that we have to believe in and accept on faith alone. This supremely compassionate outlook is a direct result of clear insight into our own essential reality and the reality of others. Whenever we are concerned just with ourselves, our problems seem insurmountable. Preoccupied with thoughts of me, our mind is filled with worry and anxiety—“Maybe I’m not good-looking enough,” “Maybe others won’t like me,” “I wonder if I will succeed”—and so on. Everything related to this “I” becomes a problem, a worry, a threat to our well-being and security.

The only way to break free from this neurotic obsession with ourselves is by opening our hearts to others. When we are truly concerned with the welfare of someone else we automatically cease to be so concerned with our own problems, at least for a while. And as compassion for others replaces pity for ourselves, we discover hidden treasures of strength and wisdom within us. It can be said that

merely possessing this compassionate bodhichitta is a type of enlightened experience. As we create this open space in our consciousness, we take on a much more universal character. Instead of being confined in our own petty reality, we move into the larger sphere of universal concern. This automatically liberates us from most of our problems.

So often we make such a fuss of insignificant events in our life that we turn minor difficulties into major problems. As we develop the universal view of bodhichitta, however, these small concerns become unimportant and no longer bother us. As this burden of self-concern drops from our shoulders, we experience a small taste of the complete freedom that comes with full spiritual fulfillment. Experiences like this are encouraging because they demonstrate so convincingly the practical, day-to-day value of training and transforming our mind.

Misconceptions About Bodhichitta

When some people first hear about bodhichitta they confuse it with a sentimental, highly emotional state of mind: “Oh, how I want people to be happy! I cannot stand to think of their suffering.” They feel so overwhelmed by the needs of others that their mind becomes depressed. But true bodhichitta is not at all like this; it has nothing to do with such an upset and paralyzed state of mind. Instead, it is clear and easy going, possessing a calm wisdom as well as a deeply felt compassion. It is an attitude of opening our heart completely and leaving it open as much as we can.

There is another mistaken idea that many people have when they first hear teachings on bodhichitta. Because it is necessary to develop our own inner potential to the full in order to benefit others in the deepest, most complete way, they believe that they cannot do anything to help others until they finally become a buddha. “First I must study hard for many years,” they think, “and then I can begin the practice of mental training. After a long time I might develop renunciation and bodhichitta and then, some time in the distant future when I become enlightened, I can begin to benefit others.”

Such an attitude is completely mistaken; we are only burdening ourselves with a rigid conception of how our spiritual life can develop. It is just another restraint, another fantasy. If we believe strongly in such a fixed program for our life, before we know it our death will come and we won't even have started! The fact is, while we are cultivating love, compassion, wisdom, and all the other insights that lead to

enlightenment, we can be helping others continuously. First of all, merely by living a simple life with a heart dedicated to overcoming selfcherishing, we automatically benefit others. And secondly, each stage of spiritual development, from the first to the last, has its own power and ability; depending on which level we have reached, we can help others to that extent. To be realistic, we should help others to the limit of our present capacity. The thought that we cannot do anything until we are enlightened is in fact egotistic and ignorant and reflects a basic misunderstanding of what spiritual training is all about. This misunderstanding is related to an attitude we have had throughout our lives. At school, for instance, we thought, “I must study these boring subjects now so that eventually I can pass my exams, receive my degree, get a good job, make a lot of money, and then I will be happy.” All this emphasis on the future—“When I have enough money,” “When I own my own home,” “When I retire”—is easily transferred to our spiritual practice: “When I have finished practicing,” “When I am enlightened.” But to think in this way is quite deluded. This dream-fantasy of an unreal future makes our present actions unrealistic as well.

It is important to understand that true practice is something we do from moment to moment, from day to day. We do whatever we can, with whatever wisdom we have, and dedicate it all to the benefit of others. We just live our life simply, to the best of our ability. This in itself will be of enormous benefit to others; we don’t need to wait until we are buddhas before we can begin to act.

Developing Equanimity: The Foundation for Universal Compassion

If you have a clear and simple understanding of the philosophy and psychology of bodhichitta and try to act accordingly in everyday life, experimenting with this open-hearted dedication to others in all your actions, that is a sufficient spiritual practice. That is good enough. Of course, the development of the actual bodhichitta—the state of mind in which we are automatically more concerned for others than we are for ourselves—is a profound realization, and we have a long way to go before we achieve it. We do not develop a completely opened heart merely by wishing for it; there is a long and gradual training to be engaged in.

In my mind, one of the beauties of Buddhism is that it offers us a practical training for our mind. It does not say, “Bodhichitta is fantastic because Buddha said so!” Instead, it gives us the methods for developing such an attitude and we can then see for ourselves whether it works or not, whether it is fantastic or not. According to these methods, the first thing we need is a sense of equanimity, or equilibrium. Just as level ground is the basis on which you build a house, so too is

equanimity—an unbiased attitude toward all other beings—the foundation for cultivating bodhichitta. The experience of past meditators is that when you have achieved such equilibrium, you can cultivate bodhichitta quickly and easily. However, because our habit of discriminating sharply between friends, enemies, and strangers is very deeply rooted within us, such even-mindedness is not easy to achieve. With our tremendous grasping desire we become attached to and cling to our dear friends, with aversion and hatred we reject those we do not like, and with indifference we turn a blind eye to the countless people who appear to be neither helpful nor harmful to us. As long as our mind is under the control of such attachment, aversion, and indifference, we will never be able to cultivate precious bodhichitta in our heart.

Equanimity is not an intellectual concept; it is not just another thought or idea to be played around with in your head. Rather, it is a state of mind, a specific quality of consciousness or awareness to be attained through constant familiarity. For this to happen you have to exert a great deal of effort. In other words, you have to train your mind and transform your basic attitude toward others. For example, when I first encounter a group of new people at a meditation course, say, I feel the same toward each of them. I have not met any of them before—they seem to have suddenly popped up like mushrooms—and I have not had time to develop attachment or aversion toward any of them. They all seem to be equal to me. If I take this unbiased feeling of equality that I have toward these new, unknown people and apply it both to my dear friends to whom I am attached and to my enemies and critics whom I dislike, I can start to develop true equanimity toward everyone.

There is a detailed meditation technique for the full cultivation of such equilibrium. In brief, you imagine yourself surrounded by three people: your dearest friend, your worst enemy, and a total stranger. One way is to visualize your friend behind you and the enemy and stranger in front with all other beings in human form massed around you. Having surrounded yourself in this way, you carefully examine the feelings you have toward each of the three people and analyze why you have categorized them as you have.

When you ask yourself, “Why do I feel close to just one of these people and not to the others?” you will probably discover that your reasons are very superficial, based on a few selected events. For example, perhaps you call the first person a friend because whenever you think of her you remember instances of her kindness or affection. And the second person appears to be your enemy because you remember some particularly nasty things he has done or said to you. As for the

third person, the reason you call him a stranger is that you have no memory of his having ever helped or harmed you.

Your reasons for these different reactions are in fact arbitrary. If you search your memory honestly you are certain to find many instances when the three people you are thinking about did not fit comfortably into the categories you have so rigidly placed them. You may very well recall times when the enemy you now despise so much acted kindly toward you, when the friend you now care for so much provoked anger from you, and even when the person you are now indifferent to once meant a great deal to you. If you really think about this there is no way you can continue to see these people in the highly prejudicial way you do now. And when you reflect that each living being has, over beginningless past lifetimes, done the same kind and unkind things to you as the friend and enemy of this life, you will come to see that all are equal in having been friend, enemy, and stranger to you over and over again.

By training your mind in this way, your feelings of attachment to your friend, aversion to your enemy, and indifference to the stranger will begin to subside. This is the sign that you are beginning to experience a measure of equilibrium. Hold onto this feeling, and eventually, with practice, it will become an integral part of your mind.

Meditating on equilibrium is the best way of producing good mental health. Instead of paying a hundred dollars an hour to a therapist, meditate on equilibrium! Close your eyes and ignore all physical sensations. Abandon the five sense perceptions and allow yourself to sink deeply into intensive awareness of your mind's experience of equilibrium. You will definitely become more balanced, open, and peaceful. After even ten minutes of this type of meditation you will come out into a different world.

There is a common misconception about the development of equilibrium. Some people think that it means becoming indifferent to everyone. They are afraid that if they lessen their attachment to their family and friends, their love and affection will disappear. But there is no need to worry: with true equilibrium there is no way we can close our heart to anyone.

The more we train ourselves to see the basic equality of everyone—having overcome our habitual tendency to stick them rigidly into categories of friend, enemy, and stranger—the more our heart will open, increasing immeasurably our capacity for love. By freeing ourselves from prejudicial views we will be able to

appreciate fully that everyone, without exception, wants and deserves to be happy and wishes to avoid even the slightest suffering. Therefore, from the basis of equilibrium we will be able to cultivate universal love, compassion, and eventually the full realization of bodhichitta, the open heart dedicated totally to the ultimate benefit of all.

Bodhichitta is Necessary for Practicing Tantra

As a prerequisite for the successful practice of tantra, the development of bodhichitta is absolutely necessary. It has been said by all masters that to be properly qualified to practice tantra, we must possess very strong bodhichitta motivation. Truly qualified tantric practitioners wish to follow the speediest path to enlightenment, not with the desire to gain quick liberation, but because they have unbearable compassion for others. They realize that the longer it takes them to achieve enlightenment, the longer everyone who needs help will have to wait. The lightning vehicle of tantra is therefore intended for those who wish to help others as much as possible, as quickly as possible.

Although it is true that bodhichitta is the most important prerequisite for tantric practice, in fact, it is more accurate to say that the opposite is true: that the purpose for practicing tantra is to enhance the scope of one's bodhichitta.

There are so many tantric deities—Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri, Tara, and the rest—into whose practice you can be initiated; there are so many deities you can meditate upon. But what are all these deities for? What is the purpose of all these practices? It is nothing other than developing and expanding the dedicated heart of bodhichitta. There is really no other reason for all these deities. In fact, all tantric meditations without exception are for the sole purpose of developing strong bodhichitta.

Take the practice of thousand-armed Avalokiteshvara, for example. The whole reason for having your consciousness manifest as a divine light-being with one thousand arms is so that you can lend a hand to one thousand suffering beings. What other reason could you have for wanting so many arms? And, if you do not feel comfortable manifesting in this way, you can always relate your meditation to your own culture and manifest your inner being as Jesus, Saint Francis, Kwan Yin, or any other holy being.

What we have to understand is that Avalokiteshvara and Jesus, for example, are

exactly the same; the essential nature of each is complete selfless devotion in the service of others. Therefore, when we try to be like them, through the practice of tantra, prayer, or any other method, it is only to be able to serve others in a similarly selfless way. This selfless dedication to others is the true meaning of bodhichitta and that is why bodhichitta is not only the major prerequisite of tantra, it is also the most important fruit of this practice.