

## Talk 7

### Buddha Nature

#### **The Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma – Hinayana, Emptiness and Buddha Nature**

Today we are going to discuss Buddha Nature which is a very important teaching of the Mahayana. This talk is a talk on view. Generally, teachings can be about *view* or they can be about *practice*, and both are important. Last fall, we introduced the *Hinayana view* of the Four Seals and the Four Noble Truths, and the *practice* of Shamatha and Vipashyana meditation. In this course, so far, we have introduced the *view of Emptiness*, especially in the talk by Pema Chödrön on Prajnaparamita, and we have introduced several *practices*, including the four immeasurables, Lojong training and specifically Tonglen which is part of Lojong.

Within the Mahayana tradition there are two main streams of teaching on view, both having originated in India most likely between 100 and 400 AD. The teachings on *Emptiness* originated with Nagarjuna who taught at Nalanda University. All emptiness teachings can be considered an elaboration of Gautama Buddha's "noble silence" whenever he was asked to answer questions of a metaphysical or speculative nature. Emptiness is letting go of any beliefs, however subtle, that keep us from being in the present moment. The emptiness teachings and practices relating to them are designed to root out even the most secret and hidden assumptions we make to supply ground to our ego-bound mind as you can see by reading the Heart Sutra. This is why Pema refers to these as "pulling out the rug" teachings.

The other stream of Mahayana teachings, the teachings on *Buddha Nature*, has its seed in a statement that Gautama Buddha made at the time of his realization under the Bodhi tree. Upon attaining full, complete enlightenment he is said to have remarked in surprise that all sentient beings are already enlightened but they simply have not realized this, and so wander around in delusion. This was elaborated in the Buddha Nature teachings brought into this world by Asanga who lived some time before Nagarjuna. The Buddha Nature teachings offer an elaborated description of the body, speech, mind, qualities and action of the Buddha, and at the same time use vivid examples or analogies to remind us that the essence of the Buddha is always alive and well within each and every one of us sentient beings and will shine forth spontaneously whenever it is not covered over with defilements.

Mahayana tradition divides the teachings of the Buddha into three turnings of the Wheel of Dharma which he gave at different periods of his life to different audiences. The first turning is the Hinayana teachings which teach of the suffering of the self, its cause, its cessation, and the path. These teachings are shared among all Buddhist schools. The second turning of the Wheel of Dharma is the teaching on Prajnaparamita and Emptiness, first given on Vulture Peak Mountain in Rajagriha, and expounded and elaborated by Nagarjuna. The third turning of the Wheel of Dharma is the Buddha Nature teachings

attributed to Maitreya, the future Buddha, and first presented in this world by Asanga.<sup>1</sup> Note that both the second and third turnings of the wheel are within the Mahayana tradition. The three turnings should not be confused with the three yanas which are Hinayana, Mahayana and Vajrayana.

The second turning teachings on Emptiness and the third turning teachings on Buddha Nature complement each other. Each is useful to counteract misunderstandings one might have about the other. The Emptiness teachings work to strip away our dualistic tendency to see a world polarized into self and external other, while the teachings on Buddha Nature show us what lies on the farther shore, the Buddha which is within each of us waiting to be realized.

While the Emptiness teachings are stripping away the apparatus of self layer by layer, we might fall into the pit nihilism, thinking that there is nothing at all, or that nothing is meaningful or that nothing matters. The Buddha Nature teachings are an antidote to nihilism and present a vast view of what lies beyond the boundary of our concepts and imagination. This can help us to overcome the fear of groundlessness and have a very uplifting effect on our minds.

Conversely, if we had only the third wheel teachings, we could misinterpret them as a permanent pleasure palace for our personal self. This is the danger of spiritual materialism—using spiritual teachings to solidify the realm of ego. The stripping away of personal self, the “pulling out the rug” of the Emptiness teachings are an antidote to this mistaken view.

### **The Uttaratantra Shastra**

The root text for all the Buddha Nature teachings in Mahayana is a book called the *Uttaratantra Shastra* which can be translated as the Commentary on the Highest View or Highest Continuity. The traditional story of how this text came to be is quite interesting. You may want to pause and read it now. One version of this story is found in *Buddha Nature* by Thrangu Rinpoche, pp. 13-14. This is posted on our website as “Asanga’s Story.”

By now you may have experienced a bit of rug-pulling-out in the teachings. This is not for the purpose of confusing us, or to proclaim that a previous teaching is false. But it is the case that as our confusion starts to wear out, we are able to encompass a greater view at each step on the path, and the our purpose and motivation on the path becomes

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<sup>1</sup> This explanation is often felt as a put down by Theravadin teachers, who do not recognize any of the Mahayana teachings as authentic. They may see it as an imputation that their teaching is incomplete. They may point out that scholars engaged in historical research are hard put to attribute any Mahayana teaching to the historical Buddha. Our intention here is certainly not to criticize Theravadin teachings which only those trained in this tradition can expound correctly, nor is it to make any comparison of Theravadin and Mahayana at all. The teachings of the Mahayana are the accumulated wisdom of many great lineage holders who have taught them for the purpose of liberating sentient beings, not for the purpose of establishing historical accuracy as defined by scholars. The Mahayana is widespread and includes all the lineages of Tibet as well as all Zen lineages.

increasingly less egocentric. When we first enter the path, we feel that our self is very solid and real, and our motive is to overcome the suffering of this self. We may even feel sympathy for the suffering of other people which is excellent motivation, but the belief in self and other is very solid and we do not experience all dharmas as dreams. As we enter the Mahayana and start to get glimpses of emptiness, the fixity of our view starts to soften, and we are able to hear a teaching on “no form, no feeling, ... no suffering no cessation of suffering, no path.” This does not make suffering go away, but it gradually allows us to be freer in experiencing our own emotionality, and freer to engage others without being limited by our conventional experience of how we take ourselves and others to be.

The third Turning of the Wheel of Dharma with its Buddha Nature teachings is a further expansion of view and a huge leap. It is completely consistent with the Second turning teachings on Emptiness, but further surprises us by describing the world from the view of awakened mind or Buddha mind rather than from the view of us sentient beings aspiring to become Buddhas. And the message is indeed both surprising and delightful. Usually, when we undertake to learn something, such as high school geometry or how to play tennis, we regard it as a skill or knowledge that we do not possess innately but have to learn from a teacher, book or other source outside of our self. However the Uttaratantra Shastra teachings on Buddha Nature assert unequivocally that our nature is intrinsically enlightenment, and that it is impossible to lose our awake nature. We are already Buddhas and always have been. Enlightenment does not have to be taught or acquired from some outside source such as a person or god who has it while we do not have it. All that is necessary is to abandon our confusion which keeps us from realizing enlightenment. Our enlightenment is permanent, while our confusion is temporary. The Uttaratantra Shastra dares to describe the fruition of Buddha Nature as transcendental purity, identity, bliss and permanence!

The Uttaratantra Shastra drives this point in repeatedly with nine famous analogies. For example, Buddha nature is compared to a shining Buddha which is not visible because it is inside a decaying lotus flower. Again, it is compared to honey which is inaccessible because it is surrounded by thousands of angry bees. Or it is compared to buried treasure which is hidden beneath the hut of a poor man who does not suspect that it is there. In the first of these examples, the lotus flower is an object of desire, but its beauty does not last, and the petals become decayed and putrid. This is the klesha of grasping onto what is desirable. The bees represent anger or aggression which prevents us from realizing our Buddha nature. The poor man in his hut is ignorant of the treasure close at hand, and therefore cannot make use of his own Buddha nature which he is not aware of.

The third turning of the Wheel of Dharma, the Buddha Nature teachings, are the highest view of Buddhism according to our tradition. The language of the Uttaratantra Shastra is uncompromising in presenting the view of the sun-like Buddha rather than the view of sentient beings whose essence is obscured by clouds of confusion. Since all Buddhist teachings are offered for the purpose of benefiting sentient beings, we should be curious

and ask how we can make use of such teachings right now. The Uttarantra Shastra itself provides five answers to this question.<sup>2</sup>

1. As the second Turning of the Wheel peels away all our conceptual defilements, we may encounter great fear and experience nihilism, feeling that everything is bleak and meaningless because Buddha Nature is beyond our conceptual experience. The Buddha Nature teachings are here to reassure us that our original nature is intelligence, compassion and luminosity beyond our present comprehension. We can overcome nihilism.
2. On the other hand, we may think that we understand these profound teachings, and feel arrogant toward our friends and neighbors who appear to be steeped in ignorance and have no inclination to overcome this. The Uttarantra Shastra reminds us that the Buddha does not see in this way. He sees all sentient beings as enlightened Buddhas who simply need to wake up and realize this. We can overcome arrogance.
3. As we practice, we become very aware of our own faults and egocentricity. We may be overwhelmed by our own shortcomings compared to the enlightened ones. The Buddha Nature teachings show us that our faults are not truly existing, and have never diminished our intrinsic nature. We need not take them as ultimately real and feel that we are unsuitable as practitioners or that we cannot attain enlightenment. We can overcome doubt and discouragement.
4. Without at least a glimpse of this profound view, we may feel that all this talk about enlightenment is just hype and disparage it. If we deprecate wisdom and doubt that it is our essence, we will be content to drift through samsara and live a materialistic life. We can overcome disillusionment.
5. Only by realizing Buddha Nature do we generate transcendental compassion and cease to treasure ourselves more than other sentient beings.

### **Buddhist and Shambhala Teachings – Same Essence, Different Pedagogy**

Any *genuine* spiritual teaching has to accomplish several things. First, it has to grab the practitioner's attention and offer a *view* which makes sense given the present experience and hopes and fears of that person. Second it has to offer a *path* of transformation leading the practitioner to overcome habits, fixations, beliefs and behaviors that limit and circumscribe his or her experience. Meanwhile the view must become less egocentric and more cosmic. The path must deal skillfully with the right mix of motivations and continually address discouragement, regression and a vast array of misinterpretations and seductions. Finally, it must lead to a *result* that is fresh, awake, compassionate and free from all forms of spiritual materialism which can manifest as arrogance, opinionatedness, piousness or pleasure seeking. Ego has many ways of mimicking enlightenment.

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<sup>2</sup> See *Indestructible Truth*, pp. 421-422.

How this is accomplished varies immensely with the times, the culture, the student and the teacher. The Tibetan Buddhist pedagogy, which has evolved over many centuries, addresses suffering and impermanence in Hinayana, the first Turning of the Wheel, then Emptiness and Compassion in the second Turning of the Wheel, then Buddha Nature and Compassion in the Third Turning. (Both the second and third turnings are within Mahayana.) All of these are prerequisites for Vajrayana.

Chögyam Trungpa, who was preeminent in bring the teachings of Tibet to the West, is renown for the thoroughness with which he taught the three yantras of Tibetan Buddhism, but also for the Shambhala teachings which are the fruits of his own mind transmission or *terma*.<sup>3</sup> The Shambhala teachings are very much based on the tradition of the ancient Kingdom of Shambhala, a kingdom of enlightened monarchs and subjects who were themselves on the path of dharma. But the Shambhala teachings are also sculpted to be directly relevant to the present age and to a planet governed by the materialistic assumptions of western culture and technology.

The Shambhala presentation differs in several ways from the traditional Buddhist one:

- The fundamental message of Shambhala is *Basic Goodness* which is the first and most important message of the whole Shambhala teaching. Basic Goodness in its transcendent or absolute sense is not other than Buddha Nature. And when presented as something to be realized within ourselves, as a seed which can be glimpsed and then stabilized, it is Bodhicitta. So the Shambhala teachings start with the good news.
- The presentation is more “secular” in being offered to householders who are like the subjects of the ancient kingdom in having to earn a livelihood and raise families, and it avoids discussion of rebirth and other religious views. It offers a secular path of fearless and gentle warriorship.
- In keeping with the present planetary condition, Shambhala teachings are for the purpose of creating *enlightened society*. The path of the warrior of Shambhala is one of skillful engagement in the family, business, cultural, artistic, political and ecological issues that surround us. Personal practice and social engagement are seen as one.

Those of you who have taken Shambhala Training know that the teachings begin with Basic Goodness. To realize Basic Goodness we have to overcome laziness before we can experience more joy. Although we start with the good news of Basic Goodness, this does not mean that there is any way to avoid the hard work of relating to our suffering and defilements. The meditation practice of Shamatha is the same in both the Buddhist and Shambhala paths. And in Shambhala Training, the suffering of samsara is presented as a “cocoon” that limits our freedom and obscures our basic goodness. In this and other

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<sup>3</sup> *Terma* means treasure, and refers to a teaching which has in some sense been hidden until the moment in history when it is needed. While such texts do spring from the human mind, they come from a place beyond personal self. Someone who can discover *terma* is known as a *tertön* in Tibetan. Trungpa was certainly such a person.

respects, the Shambhala path is a complete teaching which has qualities of all three turnings of the Wheels of Dharma and all three yantras. However, Trungpa wanted his students to master both the Buddhist and the Shambhala paths simultaneously.

### **Summary of This Year of Teaching**

It is our hope that the teachings on Hinayana and Mahayana offered this year have been useful to you. There has been so little time and we have presented an aerial view of a vast amount of territory. Any one of these talks could easily be expanded into a semester course using source readings. If this course leaves you with some sense of the overall ground to be covered and where various teachings fit in, it will have been valuable even if the details are not clear. If there are a few things we hope might stick, they are:

- Shamatha meditation is the only vehicle for understanding and personalizing the teachings. Shamatha is not primarily about attaining a pleasurable peaceful state of mind while on the cushion, but is the way to develop stability, clarity and insight into the teachings and one's life.
- Buddhist teachings have a definite structure and present a view which is essential for the meditation to work. The path or journey has stages, and as one progresses on the path the meditation deepens and the view becomes less egocentric, and more vast and profound.
- Overall, the path has two aspects which are (1) working with the self and understanding how the self deludes and limits us and causes suffering, and (2) transcending the self and developing the Bodhisattva Warrior or Shambhala Warrior which is our potential.