

A Calm Mind in Turbulent Times

Dharma roadside dialogue series

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Lama Tsony

Q. Advice about the difficulty of change.

A. I think, the habits, first are not seen. They sort of lead us; they drive us, without us being aware of it. It can be comfortable in a way. Sometimes it's creating trouble, and putting us into a very unpleasant situation, but it's kind of like our nest. It takes a lot of courage to decide to step out of this, because there is a conscious choice that has to be made. Like, I want to be aware of what's happening in my mind, I want to know why I react in this way, and you enter an area that is somewhat uncomfortable. Trungpa Rinpoche said, "Cultivating awareness is irritatingly refreshing." It's irritating; it's not comfortable, because you are exploring areas that you have never explored before. Going into uncharted water. Uncharted water, your position is not on the map when you are sailing, you don't know where you are and where you go. So, in order to do that you need to have the capacity to connect, or rely upon, your inner resources. What I call your refuge. In Buddhist classical terms we would say the Buddha as a goal, the Dharma as a path, the sangha as support and friends and inspiration. But even more so, I would say the experience you have of Dharma and how you can also relate to the sangha, and of course the sort of connection with the Buddha as an inspiration, but also the connection with the Buddha nature as your deep inner resources. So even if you are in unfamiliar territory, because you've decided to step out of your comfort zone, you are not traveling naked, you have some tools that you can bring with you, which give you a sense of fearlessness. The fearlessness of a Buddha comes from his or her realization. The fearlessness of a bodhisattva comes from his or her confidence in the Dharma and in the process. So that's very, very important to build up this trust. And that's why our regular practice of meditation, study, and reflection contributes to creating this foundation that we can take with us, so that we are never away from this splendor of Dharma, you know, there is a Tibetan prayer that is translated, "Throughout all my existences, may I never be separated from a genuine inspiring teacher, never be separated from the splendor of Dharma, and following the steps, one after another, may I reach the state of Vajradhara, may I reach enlightenment as quickly as possible." So this is a very important form of inspiration that you keep with you. And of course they are ups and downs, and as long as we're not fully enlightened there will be ups and downs, but they shouldn't discourage us. And also, the task sometimes is heavy, you know, and what I really like in the chapter on diligence in Shantideva's Bodhicaryavatara is that is throughout the entire chapter he says how we should be courageous, how we should work, and how we should keep doing and pushing no matter what happens, and then in the end he says, and that being said, it is very important to know when you have to relax. It's very important to know when you have to make a pause, you can't be always on the front, there are times where as a bodhisattva you need to step on the side, disappear a little bit from the world, or the engagement, a little bit of time of restoration. And it doesn't have to be a year; it could be a day or two, a couple of days, a week, or whatever, or just, when you're in the midst of a very tense

situation, just a little while. Like, just give me a breather. Literally...breathe in and breathe out. Take some minutes, and come back with a fresher perspective.

A lack of determination can be caused by laziness. Having a sort of ambition to achieve something can cause the excess of determination, and really there is no plan, it's kind of unfolding as we do it. It's kind of like the old saying, "There is no path, and there's just a step." So you try your best on this step, and then you do another one, and you try to remain as aware as possible. And you don't take more than you can decently carry. No Buddha or bodhisattva will judge you for not doing your best, and failing to do the impossible. You see, this is very important, we are the only ones asking to do the impossible tasks and things, and I always question this, why do we ask ourselves to do the impossible thing? I came up with the idea that maybe we do that so that we can fail and then we don't have to do the possible. You see, when you ask too much, somehow you try to undermine what is already quite a lot of work, the possible. So let's be reasonable, let's be kind, let's give our best, and let's be humble with the result. Because all these things will take several generations of ourselves and other people to be done. I'll give you one example. You know that I was asked, not only me, but also I was asked by both Gendun Rinpoche and Shamar Rinpoche to create an art school, while I was in Le Bost in charge of Kundreul Ling. And for some reason, causes, and conditions it never actualized. And I was very bitter somehow, because I felt like I failed. You know, I was asked by both Shamar Rinpoche and Gendun Rinpoche to do this. And I failed. And, then really for years and years, I was thinking, like, "How arrogant are you to think that this failed because of you, and would have been successful thanks of you? You know, you're just an element in a multiple factor situation that includes a lot beings, the merit or the absence of merit, and so you're just an element, so you can't take all the victory and you can't take all the blame." And then recently, I called my friend Kunkyab in France, who was also part of this project, and he said, "Do you know what? Gendun Rinchen (who you know is the reincarnation of Gendun Rinpoche) asked that we create the art school in Le Bost. And I was like, "Okay!" It's not on one generation. It's going to happen on several generations. He has interest, I guess I would say, still has interest in this project that couldn't be concluded. Another example: Shamar Rinpoche asked me to make an empowerment vase out of crystal. He didn't want a metal one, he wanted a crystal one. And I couldn't find a way, you know, I tried when I was in Austria, good friends offered me to sit with Mr. Swarovski, and go to Bohemia, and then try to see there if we could do it, and it wouldn't work. And then when I was in Germany, in Jaegendorf I met a lady who said, "I'm going to do it, what are the prescriptions." And so I gave her the details and so on. And she was very, very persistent. And she met Shamar Rinpoche and he said, "Oh yeah, but that was a long time ago, I'm not really into it anymore." And she said, "But I am, and I will make it." And she was ill. She had cancer, and this was really one of the last projects she did. She found one artisan crystal maker in Austria, and she had two vases made. And so the group in Graz gave me these two vases, and I was going to bring them to Shamar Rinpoche, but he died. So I have the two vases in my closet, and I'm just waiting for the 15th to be old enough and say, "Oh, by the way, we finished the project, it just took two generations." You know, that's okay. So relax, and keep doing a good job!

Q. Thank you for the wonderful lecture. It helps me a lot. I was brought up in Austria where I understood the values, and now I live in the Netherlands where people are completely different. For example, my son was taught in school for two hours with a Covid positive teacher without the distance of protocols that I would expect. So daily I am put in situations where I feel unsafe or uncomfortable. What should I do now? I'm anxious, sometimes. Okay, meditation and stepping back helps me a lot. It supports me. But I have to be honest, very often I'm very angry, or I run away, or...I don't know, a lot of things coming up in my mind. I think it's a process I have to follow, it's also a challenge for me, and I have to practice Dharma. And, well, I always try to remember in the situation, first to think, or to step back, breathe, and then try to react but it's not always easy. It's just sharing, not really a question.

A. Thank you for sharing. I think this is something that we all, maybe differently, experience. Where I live, this county where I am living, has been quite preserved in a way from Covid, until recently. And now there is a really big surge, it's really getting really, really bad. And so the question is, do you succumb to panic and become irrational and lose your quality of life and your peace of mind? Or, do you do your best and also trust that causes and conditions are operating and there might be things beyond, even all the precautions you take, as a mother you take care of your son, but then the son goes to school. And then the school is maybe not processing this wisely. And I have friends and members of my family who are teachers and they are also as lost as the parents because, do they do hybrid classes, or do they do online classes...there are a lot of choices to be made that are not easy. Where I live here in a rural county it's very poor; you have the little town, which is well off, and then you've got the county, which is mostly farmers, which is very, very poor. And like us, a lot of people don't have access to Internet. And so how can kids go to school. And then their parents have to be at home, because they have to work, and sometimes work two jobs, to make ends meet. So of course, this is a lot of stress! But I think we should, and that's where the stepping back is important; we should be able to differentiate between rational, fear-based action, and irrational action. When I go into town, I'm very careful, and follow the recommendations of the CDC, the distance, the mask, washing hands, sanitize my hands, and so on and so forth, but I also know that there is always the potential risk, you know, there is a risk to just simply be alive, called death. And I think if we can't accept our vulnerability, we live in irrational fear of what might happen. And I'm not a parent, but I guess this is what the parents feel most, like what might happen. This can happen, that can happen. We sort of follow the irrational tendencies in our mind. And that is a source of anxiety. We do our best, and you know, you can think that one day you will die and that's the end of it, but you can also think that every day, until the one you die, you live. And every day you can do something. I also feel for the kids who are in school and they have to wear masks and they can't be close to their friends, they can't hug them or they can't play, I mean, it is also painful, and for them somehow it is more painful than the possibility of dying, or the possibility of Covid. So I think we have to keep a certain reason, like we are not dare devils, you know, like we have in this country unfortunately people that think that wearing a mask is a sign of weakness. And it's an infringement on their 1st amendment rights and freedom, and so they are a danger for themselves and others. So that's ridiculous. But also, to succumb to the irrational fear and you end up like Howard Hughes, you know, who was so afraid of germs that he locked himself in his apartment and would never see anybody. So, something between these extreme should be found. Because this is not only a learning curve for you, it's also a

learning curve for your son, because he has to learn that life is dangerous, yet full of opportunities and possibilities. And the absolute security doesn't exist. When you want to trade your freedom for security, you actually as Benjamin Franklin said, "You do not deserve either of these." Freedom requires intelligence and a little bit of risk taking. And that goes with what I said earlier about becoming aware, "woke" some might say, becoming aware is uncomfortable. When I think, from my perspective, white old male, it's kind of okay, but if I think about what's happening for disenfranchised people in this country, my neighbors, then, you know, it really sort of like spoils my evening, and I'd rather like to be happy and so not think about that. But I have to be aware of what's going on so that I have a broader perspective that will nourish my actions and my words. So, that's life. Life is death, death is life. Life is life. And that's part of the game. But we need a little bit of rational discernment, but it shouldn't cut the fun, really. You know, the enjoyment of the pleasure we have.

Q. I just this morning finished my retreat, and I am in quite a dilemma, but I don't expect you to give me an answer, but I hope to find more security to find and answer. I'm very used to do Guru yoga and pray a lot, but at the end of the retreat I was hoping to clarify but I am more confused actually. I'm at a point to decide whether to continue with retreat or if I should go back into the worldly life, or do more at a Dharma center, and support more in activity. I feel split. And there is some joy missing, I feel confused and it is scary.

A. First, congratulations for finding the time to do retreat, it's really good, because everybody is really busy and has good excuses not to step back and do the work of exploring the mind. So, very good, I'm very happy to hear that. You know, in the old days, people, and when I say people I mean meditators, would alternate times of retreat and times of validation of what they have found in retreat through different activities. You put to the test what you have found in retreat in the meditation moments. And I think this is a very good way of alternating moments of retreat and moments of immersion into what was life, and to see if maybe your life now has a different taste, because you're in a different position can you deepen the work that you began with the retreat, can you deepen it as you are involved with action? And then there will be maybe a time when you lose the connection with the experience of retreat, because of course the involvement with life brings a sense of heaviness, and reality management and all of that, and suddenly everything becomes so real that we lose the sort of distance we had maybe touched in retreat. And then maybe it's time for another moment of retreat. The same applies for retreat; there is maybe a time where retreat becomes like a comfortable shell in which we hide, when reality is too unbearable. It's important to have the courage to go into retreat, it's equally as important to have the courage to go out of retreat. When I finished my second retreat, when we finished our second cycle of the 3-year, I had a dream. And at this point we had to decide whether we wanted to stop being in retreat, or if we want to go on, and then, some of my friends are still in retreat. They've literally been in retreat since 1984. Maybe you were not even born yet. So they are still in retreat. There was a discussion whether we wanted to do this, or that, and as I really liked it I was kind of inclined to go on with more retreats. And then I had this dream. And in this dream I was in the ideal hermitage, a little house in the mountains, very well organized, nice view of the valley, all my books on the shelf, and I was just like

so happy...And food was provided, everything was really, really fine and very comfortable and very peaceful. And then, I kept hearing people calling my name, from outside, like a lot of people calling my name from outside, and then I realized I had to answer to this call. And I also realized it was a very selfish attachment to the quiet peace, the peace of the non-confrontation with the world. And so, this dream was so powerful that it influenced my decision of coming out of the retreat, and make myself available. And then after that, for seventeen years, I've was a business monk, in charge of the monastery, and Gendun Rinpoche put this on me, and said, "Whether you like it or not, you do it." And I did it. And after seventeen years I realized that I had done it, and I wanted to keep exploring other ways, in different situations. So I passed on the responsibilities and then I left the monastery. And as I wanted change, I changed continents, I changed my lifestyle, and I got married! So that's quite a change, and looking for a challenge, this is a lot of challenge. The monastic life was easy sometimes. And so I really embrace this, and now every day I'm curious what is coming up. But I think, until you have a very stable mind, that means the quality of calm abiding, samatha or shine, which are body and mind at ease, clear mind regarding itself, in the sense that you can go through anything in your mind without being turned upside down. Okay? Until you have this, you really have to concentrate on practice and choose solitude. Shantideva would say that, and Paltrül Rinpoche would say that, but when you sense that you're attached to solitude and you're attached to quietness, then it's time to step out and go outside and see how true is your realization, because life will put you to the test. And can you work with it; can you still be insightful and gracious? Or do you want to run back to your cave? This is also another form of learning, and it's very important. So, I think, my view in general is to alternate, with moments of solitude and moments of action or being with the world, so that you learn to be with the world but not a prisoner of this world. And that's really important, because there's so much to learn there. You know, before you were born, in '77 when I met the Gyalwa Karmapa, the previous one, he told me to stay with Gendun Rinpoche, and study the life of Milarepa, and follow up and try to emulate his example. And I did, I studied with Gendun Rinpoche, I stayed with him until he passed away and beyond, and at some point I realized that actually my life in the monastery was only maintenance of the monastery, you know, this particular aspect of samsara which is called monastery. So, I was in charge of this samsaric aspect, and I felt that I had sort of lost what the Karmapa had asked me to do, because I was a business monk, as I said. And so I had a discussion with Shamar Rinpoche and I asked him, "Something went wrong, I was supposed to follow the example of Milarepa, but now when I look at it I'm more busy than Marpa." Marpa was famous for having nine wives and business and many kids and whatnot. And Rinpoche just made a pause and then looked at me and he said, "If you can really be Marpa, it's better." And even Milarepa said that, that he would never compare himself with Marpa, in terms of the scope of his activity and the depth of his wisdom. I'm not saying we are all Marpas, but at our own scale, that's the idea of balancing, finding the stability and the depth, bring it into life and put it to the test, and then go back to the stability, and so what you will discover in doing this is that there is a red thread that goes through all the moments of your life, whether you're in retreat or in action in relation to the world, and once you find this thread, there is no contradiction any more in you're life, you'll not divide it anymore, between retreat and activity in the world. And this is what we need to find this red thread, the continuum, and that gives us courage and confidence and joy, because

wherever we are, we keep doing the same thing, which is clarifying the natural state, coming to realize the true nature of our mind, that's the intention of all Buddhas. That's what we are here for, that's what we are supposed to do. This is not advise, this is just reflection on your sharing. And you have to remember what Shamar Rinpoche called the pushy crowded karma, like when you're in a crowd of people they push you somewhere, even if you want to go this way they push you the other way. Karma has its ways. I'm here living in America and married. If you had asked me this fifteen years ago I would have said, "Are you crazy?" There is no way to know what's for you, and this doesn't matter, because whatever your life will be, if you are connected with the Buddha nature, and your refuge in Buddha as the enlightenment and the Dharma as a valuable path, then everything goes. Everything is good. So there is no need to be too anxious.

Q. I have a question, and you were talking about going in retreat and out of retreat, but some of your friends are still in retreat after a very long time, and as people say, you need to be in the market place sometimes, and sometimes you need to be in the cave. So long term, your friends are still in retreat for decades, and you are in the world. Are your friends further along because they stayed, or are you farther along on your path being engaged in the world's activities? This question is about me, after working for my whole life, and now thinking about retiring, and so now I have time to consider a retreat. What brings someone further along in their spiritual life, a blend of both things, or a retreat, or what?

A. I think we are all different and we have different paths and different modalities, and I'm not really interested in seeing who is farther on the path, them or I. I trust their path, I trust their dedication, but I also trust what I do. I think as a bodhisattva, the activities of a bodhisattva can be very different. A classic example, we say some are like kings, they want to reach enlightenment quickly so they can help other people, so they try to find the quickest way to the realization of the true nature of the mind. Some are like a ferry person, as they take the ferry to the other shore they take people with them. And then some are like a shepherd, they make sure that everybody is safe and that everybody is in a good place, then once everybody is safe and in a good place, then they can enjoy the splendor of their realization and become Buddhas. And so I think these three ways of being are valid, and I remain really confident that actually a good measure of all would be important. Some people are basically contemplative at heart. That's their history, that's their background, that's what they've built up. They're contemplative. And some people are more like literati, they need to understand, they need to understand the words, the concepts, and so on. And some other people are more active, they're the ones that build up the monasteries, the ones who build up the centers, and so on and so forth, So, each one of these three types of characters need to have a fair dose of the two others, so if you're contemplative, let's say that's half of your motivation, you should have 25% of study and 25% of action. If you are literati, then you should have 50% literati, 25% contemplation, and 25% action. And if you are an active type person, you should have 50% activity, 25% study, and 25% contemplation. So you really have to evaluate or judge your character, you know you can't make a cat bark. We have to respect our basic nature, not that it speaks forever, but this is who we are now. And we cannot force ourselves to do something that is against our nature in this moment, but we should also know that we shouldn't be excessive

And when I say my friends are in retreat since '84, it doesn't mean they never stop, they had every 6 years or so, they had little holidays of couple of months, they went out of retreat, they went to see their family, they travel, they taught, they had some encounters with people. When they're in retreat people write to them and ask for prayers and ask their advice and so on, so they're in touch with this world; not as much as I am, but they are in touch with the world. They're not out...they haven't disappeared. When you look at mind, let's say like a piece of cloth, and you fold it so there are little wrinkles on the surface, I work mostly with the wrinkles, manifestation, and they work mostly with the cloth. But when you work with the wrinkles, you cannot ignore the cloth. And when you try to understand what is the nature of the stuff mind is made of, you cannot ignore the wrinkles. So, contemplatives are very important because they don't solve the problems, but they work on the cloth. Everybody benefits from their blessing that is unknown; we don't know it, because we can't relate to this level of presence of bodhisattvas in the world. But believe me, if it was not for the bodhisattva's prayers and activity, and in particular contemplatives, this world would be worse than it is now. They bring into the network buckets of goodness that we benefit from and we don't even know where it comes from.

And then you have other bodhisattvas that are more into the action, either to show, hey, look at your mind, that's where things are happening, or to help people in need, you know, bodhisattvas are not only teaching Dharma, bodhisattvas can be baking bread for hungry people, or working for a Habitat for Humanity and building houses for people who have no home. So there are many ways, and all of this for me is a source of rejoicing, because I realize that the Buddha mind is at work in many, many ways. And what I have to do is not to compare myself with others, but I have to come to know myself, and do what I'm good at, what my call is, and answer to this. It sounds very Christian, but that's the general idea. In order to be truly helpful, when requested, when asked to be helpful, I have to be free. And that's my responsibility, to work on my freedom, so that I can be free to help. And that's why, even though I'm in this world, I didn't get a 9 to 5 job, or I didn't get a whatever, but basically my wife and I decided to live frugally so that we don't need so much to live. By the grace of Shamar Rinpoche we have a home to stay in, we can use the car of the center, so a lot of money we don't need to earn to have like everybody's necessities of life covered. So I'm still, somehow it's strange, but I feel myself being more of a monastic than when I was in the monastery. And this is a choice in life, what do you want to do, and what do you need? This the reflection we had, and we decided to live like this; we don't have a retirement plan, we don't have savings, we don't have a second home, or whatever, but we have space and freedom, which is probably the most luxurious thing in this world. This is a real richness. And I use this not to indulge myself in my freedom and liberty, but to share, to be with everybody. So I don't see really a difference between now and when I was living in the monastery, it's kind of the same thing. Roof and food came to me in mysterious ways. And it still does:~) And I know where it comes from, it comes from the accumulation of merit, so I try to replenish my credit by being generous and ethical, patient, and so on, cultivate the 6 paramitas. Because I know how you cultivate, and you have to be also careful about how you use the resources and blessings that have come to you.

So that's my life now, and it's really the best time of my life, frankly. I feel like everything I did before was to prepare me for this moment now where things are much more natural and direct and simple. I'm totally free. One of the last conversations I had with Gendun Rinpoche, he told me, "I'm free, you know, if I want to leave I leave. If I want to die, I die." And I thought, "Wow, someday I come to this point."

There are a lot of illustrious examples if you read a book called *Buddha's Lions*, the lives of the great accomplished masters of India, the 84 Mahasiddhas, the great accomplished. They all had a job. The founding father of the Kagyu lineage, Tilopa, his name means sesame, he was grinding sesame seeds for oil during the day, and during the night he was the go-between for a prostitute to bring customers to her. So, you see, very glorious past we have;~} and some of them were shoemakers, some were musicians, and some of them were freaks. One of them was called the all-eater, he was a glutton, and he was eating all the time. Okay? Another one was so lazy that he could hardly breathe, you know, when he had to go into town to get food he couldn't do it. And so his practice was based on laziness. The other one his practice was on eating all the time, and another one was a fisherman. It is very interesting to see that there is no standard, because of course when we think about a Buddhist practitioner, we see the sangha of the Buddha, we see the well ordained and very sound and politically correct Arhats and bodhisattvas around the Buddha, and this is one example, a wonderful example, they're inspiring but there was a lot of other people who reach enlightenment in strange ways. Like the first Tibetan masters, you know, Marpa, Milarepa, Gampopa to some extent, we probably could have had a hard time to relate to them. It seems that the history of the lineage tells us that Marpa was short-tempered, he was always angry, and he was very busy and so on. Kalu Rinpoche once told us, he said, "You are lucky, because if you had to meet Milarepa, you would see a green yidaks, a hungry ghost in a cave, and you would be scared and run away. And if you met Tilopa, then you would meet a crazy guy, like you see in New York in the streets, people talking to themselves. Maybe it's Tilopa, you don't know, totally weird. And Naropa, sometimes you see him, some times you don't. So you couldn't relate to these teachers, so that's why you need this very nicely ordained sangha, who give us a sort of a human, reliable and relatable representation of what a path is. But I really believe there are many ways, many ways to do this as long as you keep your foundation of refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha for the sake of all beings. You keep this basic sanity, and you keep it by sometimes learning, contemplating, sometimes meditating. And you do that in action and in retreat, and then you're all set.