

Focus on your practice and remain true to yourself

Dharma roadside dialogue series

February 2021 #2 Dialogue

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Q. My question is, could you speak a little on the alaya and what happens to our subtle form of consciousness after death?

A. In the teachings of the Buddha, when we are talking about the skandhas, and then the aggregates, that sort of like constitute the experience as an individual, a self, we talk about consciousness as being the aggregates. In most of the teachings of the Buddha, the consciousnesses are only referred to as the mental consciousness, and the five sensory consciousnesses. Later on, in the Yogacharya school of Buddhism, meditators mostly, in their practice, sort of discovered the subconscious. They found that the sixth consciousness had several layers, or functions if you want. And so from six consciousnesses we move from seven and to eight. Eight being the alaya consciousness. Alaya in Sanskrit means repository, like in the word Himalaya, like the snow and ice that rests on the mountains. So this part of the consciousness we can maybe compare to the subconscious, as the sort of container, or what receives all the imprints, coming from the intentions and the mental impulses as we did things or say things, said things in the past, and so on and so forth. So that's sort of a big container of possibilities, seeds if you want, often referred to as seeds. And when in different times and different circumstances they are reactivated, they are sort of, you know it's like when you notice a fragrance in the air and that reminds you of your grandmother, because she wore this perfume or whatever. So there is a sort of active memory, it's kind of a reenactment, or it's an awakening of seeds and so on, but you would respond to these impulses, that most of them are unconscious, or subconscious proposition, with your actual situation, your actual way of dealing with things, so that's your mental consciousness that will react to this. Sometimes thinking that you're making a very clear decision, and you don't know how much you've been influenced by these seeds that were sort of reactivated. And in this eighth consciousness, some commentators, and in particular the 3rd Karmapa, in [*The Profound Inner Principle*](#), describes very, very precisely the alaya consciousness, and explained that there are two facets to it. There is one facet which is the alaya wisdom, and that equals the Buddha nature, it equals to all the terms I used, Mahamudra, Dharmakaya and so on and so forth, really the essence of mind, and at the same time, almost simultaneously, actually the word we use is coincident, you have the part of the alaya consciousness that is the repository of all the previous impulses and actions and so on. But they're like traces, and the difficulty I think, to really catch the idea of alaya is definitely not to turn it into some sort of fixed object, like a mind. It's more important to see it like a river. River in a sense that river doesn't exist, I mean we have a name for it, river, but this is just a nominal convention. And it doesn't really cover the reality of what a river is, and if you break it down it is just drops of water, hydrogen and oxygen, there is no river really, per se. As a great philosopher of the past once said, "We never enter twice the same river." Because we are a different person, having a different experience of the river, the river being a stream, it's not 'something.' It's in constant movement.

So, the question of what transmigrates...? Someone once asked the Dalai Lama this question, and he answered, "Bad habits." Bad habits. In the stream of mind there are sort of habits, and they function in the sense that "this" brings "that." The river is a flow and it's a dynamism, and this brings that. The conditions, the width of the river, the depth of the river can change the flow, the cohesion of the different elements will do this and that, so the river will change according to all these circumstances. In the same way the consciousness will be affected by all these external parameters, so to say, or conditions. So, what transmigrates is bad memories, or bad actions, or bad habits. Because in a chain reaction, this brings that. And in the moment of transition what was, disappears, for what comes to be able to arrive, to come. This is illustrated in the sutra called *The Rice Seedling Sutra*, where the sutra tries to explain what is rice. Is the rice the seed, or is it in the sprout? When the sprout grows, is it the stalk? You know, you look at the different things and each one has to disappear for the next one to come, and this entire process we call rice production, but rice remains a nominal convention because, how do you say that...? If you say for example that cotton is the seed of cotton, then you should be able to wear a t-shirt made of seed, because if the seed is the cotton, then that's good enough to make a piece of cloth, and we know that it's not like this. We need to do things to have the thread, and then to weave it, and then have the cloth that we can wear.

So, I think that the question of transmigration is very much linked with the question of who we are. And often I'd rather approach the question of transmigration by asking first, "Who are you?" If you can define who you are, then you get a clearer picture of what might transmigrate. Because when we think in terms of transmigration, we think in terms, often, of what we see as a self, which is a homogenous, independent, autonomous, substantially existent entity. And so that entity must move somewhere. But this entity, when you practice meditation, and for example, when you use the full placement of attention, this entity, me, is not to be found in the body, is not to be found in the feelings, is not to be found in the perception, it's not to be found in the mental phenomena of any sort, and so it's pretty much sort of illusive, it sort of appears, yet doesn't have a defining characteristic. So, I would really start with that. Who am I? To help me to understand what transmigrates. In terms of energy, in the tantra they explain that there are five main values, five main wind energies, so you could say prana, the prana vayus, five main ones and five secondary ones. And of the five main ones, one is called the life holder vayu. The other ones are functional, they are for digestion, evacuation, movement, and so on and so forth...upward, downward, spreading energies. But one is the life holder.

And in tantra they say this life holder energy resides in the heart. Which actually if you look in the heart you won't find it, but in terms of energy, that's where it is, the heart center, the heart chakra. So that's the great tigli, the great sphere of energy, the mind itself, abides in the heart. And when we die, all the other prana, all the other winds, the four others, that were developed during the time before our birth, the creation, the conception, gestation, coming from the elements that we gained from our mother and our father, all these pranas develop. They're sort of like the function; we develop the bones, the flesh, the marrows, the sinews, the nervous system, the veins, and so on and

so forth, and also the network of meridians and the prana that circulates and allows the function of the body, otherwise this body would be just a log. So these four winds are linked to this body, and they will disappear with this body. The fifth one, which is the life-holder, is a very subtle wind that sort of holds the life; the mind principle that used to reside in the heart sort of rides this subtle energy. And so that's in terms of energy. But in terms of the mind's experience, it is just one thing bringing another. And if you read a little bit about the twelve links of production in interdependence you can see that one thing brings another. And that from desire comes grasping, and from grasping comes becoming, and becoming propels us into a story that is birth, and then we are sort of stuck in this story until we die. And it's the mind that experiences all of this. The mind has a physical experience, it's not the body that has a mind. It's the mind that has the physical experience. Or by association, because the mind doesn't have a body, really. So transmigration movement somewhat is kind of like moving from one place to another, and somehow implies some sort of materialism.

So that's why I think it is so important to really understand who we are by studying the twelve links of production in interdependence, by studying the five skandhas, by studying the different layers of consciousnesses, like in the Yogacharya school, particularly the eighth consciousness, and through this, and by practicing meditation, like the full placement of attention, where we try to figure out what is the zip code of the self. Where does the self live? We're experiencing, in our self, the self-less-ness, or the identity-less-ness of the self. So we are in the better position to understand, or to approach, transmigration in a very different way than what we usually do, thinking of, "Okay, the mind is a guest moving from one hotel to another, carrying the suitcase of karma." This is a very simplistic way of putting it. Okay, that's all I can do in a short time.

Q. On the point of making friends with our neurosis, I'm confident that I'm not the only person that when I am in the process of doing that, I just want to run and hide. I have, you know, a strong aversion and the last thing I want to do, instinctively, is make friends with it. So, that's just where I'm at with that point. It's extremely difficult, and I'm wondering if you have a little helpful tip for that.

A. In French we say "A chaque jour suffit sa peine". Everyday you have your little work to do. Okay? So, just pick up the strongest thing first. What bugs you the most, what sticks you the most into habits, and you hate it, you really don't like it. It's kind of like you don't really feel comfortable with that any more, but it's still there. And see how you could just change it a little bit. Don't expect too much. Don't expect an instant resolution. But just, a little step on the side. For example, sometimes I catch myself in the act of enjoying having the last word. And then when I have somebody who is really good at that, like my wife, she should have been a lawyer, I mean, she's better than me, so it's difficult, I cannot. Oftentimes with other people, I can do it, I can have the last word, but with her, not. It doesn't work. So I see I'm really annoyed, and I see that I'm going to become nasty. I see that I'm going to have a really caustic joke that is not funny, because it's acid....and I try to cover it with a little bit of fun and gloss, and I really hate myself for doing that because basically I don't want to concede my defeat. That's so ridiculous. I look at myself and I say, "She knows your trick, you know your trick, who are you playing for, what's that!?" And you hate it.

So that little thing, you know? I hold back some of my finest jokes, that are actually dipped in acid, and I look at myself and I say, “Oh, that was good.” And I look at myself and I say, “You’re such a liar, because you really mean it, and you didn’t say it!” I found a middle way between these two. Between holding back something that is unnecessary and harmful to both sides, and at the same time feeling a little bit that I’m not true to myself, because my “true” self is to be an A-hole. And I refuse to do that, that’s good! Yes, I refuse to be that. I’m getting used to that now. I’m doing that more and more. I will be a saint very soon;~}

You see, little by little. Little victories. And I often mention what I call the red nose strategy, you know, when things get deadly serious, wear a red nose, like a clown. But don’t get another incarnation as a clown, create another avatar. Just step back with a little bit of distance. And your mind is quick-witted, and things go quickly, and you can see both aspects, which is where you get stuck. But use your quick wit, you have it, and it’s a gift, and say like, “Yeah, it’s not worth it, why should I do that. Okay, you can have the last word. That’s okay. Who cares.”

Q. So the difficulty that I’m having is really much more with conventional reality. A little bit like what you were describing, but a little bit different. I went and got myself all involved with worldly matters, organizations, and I find myself thinking that my thinking is clearer than a lot of people, and then they do power moves on me. So I’m dealing with disappointment and frustration.

A. Well, welcome to the world. Sometimes we might think that the only possible companion is oneself. And then all the rest is such a pain. But we cannot escape. We are in a world of interaction, relative reality, or conventional reality, is all interdependent production based, and we have to accept the rules of engagement, as we are part of it. Because our body functions like this, the relation between our mind and our body functions like this, our relations with other people functions like this, so these are the rules of engagement. Remember it for next time. When you’re out of this context and you can say, “Uh, I don’t want to go back.” Say no to reincarnation.

A good friend of mine who was a very devoted practitioner and very devoted student of Shamar Rinpoche, she’s trying to really make her mind ready for Dewachen, you know? That’s where she wants to go. The other day she asked me, “But if I’m a bodhisattva, I have to come back to help beings, but I don’t want to come back, I want to stay there, I want to stay in Dewachen and enjoy myself there.” And I said, “Well, it’s not going to be experienced in those terms. First, go to Dewachen, just don’t think about it, just go there.” And what is Dewachen? Dewachen is the mahasukha, the great unstuckness. So, once you’re there, you are totally unstuck. Then you find out that you can appear, like the moon does, on every stretch of water, without having to leave your paradise in the sky. And then you can be an illusion-like actor with multiple forms and really helping sentient beings in all possible ways without any effort, pain, or tiredness. The tiredness that you conceive is only because of how the world is experienced right now. Once you move to this higher level of consciousness you are free from this context. You are in a different context, and you’re proceeding toward the absolute freedom from all breakthroughs in all contexts. So, that’s gonna be

okay, and for now you can let people do their plays, and you don't have to buy them. Sometimes we think that we have to do what they expect us to do, but deep inside, if you really look into it, you see that you have a horse in the race. Why do you think that you have to do that because you think that they want you to do it? Gendun Rinpoche, and actually all of them, they just couldn't care less about your own little desires of you doing this or that. Gendun Rinpoche, when he received presents, I didn't know that, but I noticed it later. One day he was gone for some teachings, and we decided to refurbish his room, to make it clean and so on. So we took all of the furniture out, and under his bed we found dozens of unopened presents, wrapped boxes. He was like, "Oh, thank you very much." Whoosh, under the bed, he didn't even look at it. It could have been a gold bar, it could have been food, whatever, he couldn't care less. And I think this is a good attitude. You take it, say thank you, it's not for me, it's thank you for your being generous, I'm happy you could find a moment of generosity and that you want to invite me into your world, I'll consider it, but there is no engagement, there is definitely no strings attached with peoples trips, otherwise it would be endless, because they're always changing their mind anyway! So if you agree with this trip, the next day they have another one! They hate the trip they had before that you agreed on. So damned if you do, damned if you don't. So do what you have to do, be kind, be polite, and just let it roll off, like water on a duck. So you're not against them, you're not subject to their whimsical mind, if joining is helpful you join, if disbanding is helpful, you disband. That's the way it is.

In the perspective of the twelve links of interdependent origination, when some sort of a desire created an attachment that propelled you into becoming. Becoming, opening the door to the world, and here you are in Narnia, and then the door in the closet closes and is gone; here you are in Narnia and there's no way back. And you have to go through it until Narnia dies. It's as simple as this. Same with this life. Whoops, I did it again. You didn't have to go in, but you're here, and you have to go until the end of the show, which is death. And then you've got another opportunity not to make the same mistakes. Think of Dewachen next time.

Q.I have a question about the self, I mean, intellectually I can begin to see that the self really doesn't exist, you call it an avatar, which makes sense, yet that sense of self has such power and I can't quite shake that power. I guess the simple answer is to keep meditating, but how does the sense of self degrade, disappear? Are there any tricks?

A. Often when I look at my attachment to the self and how it abuses me, I compare it to an abusive relationship. I always wonder, when I see this beautiful, very resourceful woman who is paired with an absolute idiot, who beats the daylight out of her, abuses her and takes her money, and she still sticks around! And I say, "What's wrong with you, you're all good except for that?" And then I stepback and I say, "Hey, that's what I'm doing with myself." I beat myself up and I want more. You know why? Because I think I'm the only one who understands me. I think I'm the only one that can save me. I think that I'm really important to this person. That's exactly this. We are going through codependent abuse with the self. Because, to go back to the domestic issue. She has an image of who he is, which doesn't correspond to reality. Everybody else has an image of who he is truly to her, and that corresponds only to their reality. Nobody knows this guy, and very obviously

this guy doesn't even know himself. But if you really look at all this, it just doesn't exist really. It's just cross projection that creates sort of an ectoplasm of appearance of manifestation, and we're stuck with it, because of our habits, because of our tendencies and our desire. This is codependency. The codependence of the self in the "need" mind. The self in need of being recognised. And it's just gonna take some time. You need to find a halfway house where you can go when the beatings are too strong. And then try to reconstitute yourself; that's called meditation. And then make some changes, make some decisions, find some help. Because you know, this self, like the abusive husband, is always going to try to find you. And he's always going to find you as long as you need him to find you, for some really twisted reasons that have to do with habits or your personal set up. It takes time, and a lot of beating. But there is a moment where you say, "That's it!"

You know, I'm talking about abusive relationships, but I could have been talking about alcohol, or drugs, or whatever...gambling. It's all the same story. An extension of the abusive relationship between myself and myself. So we have to go down, get to the bottom, anchor ourselves there, grow, and then flourish. Follow the 12 steps toward illumination.

Q.I am in a place with my practice that I can no longer pretend. I'm not comfortable...

*A.*It's new territory, that's why it's strange. You are exploring new territory, there is a sense of freedom to it because you can explore new possibilities that you couldn't explore before, but it's all kind of a little bit scary because we don't know how to handle this, this is new, not to have pretense, at the same time not to disappear, I'm still here, I still have all these residual tendencies and I have to work with them without denying them but without being carried away by them; it's a new territory. And it's great! First of all, what I want to say is that I'm very happy to hear this, even if it's unpleasant, it's great! It's unpleasant because you're not used to it. The rest was like wearing the same old underwear and then thinking maybe you should get a new one, but then, "It's okay, I'm used to it, it stinks but I'm used to it." And now you take a shower and decide it's time to wear a new shirt. But it's kind of like, eww. Like you have to break in the new shoes, you have to get used to it, that's all the idea of meditation. It's a path of discovering freedom and joy and gratitude and honesty and there is something really beautiful in it, it's just a matter of getting used to it, slowly slowly. Not playing tricks anymore. Not playing tricks. Okay?

Q.I would like to ask 2 questions. What should I do to become conscious during sleep?

*A.*That's the first question? Actually, to become aware of the content of your dream, or to become aware that you dream, you have to prepare yourself during the awake state. You have to make strong wishes. You have to be really making strong wishes, "May I be aware, may I wake up, may I notice a little detail that is anachronic, that shouldn't be here in the dream, that will be the trigger to become aware that this must be a dream." So it's kind of like a strong auto-suggestion, you are telling yourself that is what you want to do. And eventually it will work. It will work because habit is of the essence in this process. Repeatedly, repeatedly. Also, what is good to have shorter sessions of sleep.

In a way you could say, I like to get a solid night's sleep, that's good. But very often you don't remember your dreams. You had some dreams, but you don't remember. But I notice now that I am aging and sleep is evading me, escaping me, it's actually quite good, because I remember more dreams. Cause I wake up and I remember, ohhh, I was dreaming about this. So remembering the dream is one thing. But then, remembering that you are dreaming as you dream is more important. So, preparing during the awake state is important. When you go to bed, before you fall asleep, make this wish. "May I be aware of my dream when I dream." And during the day, as you are in the awake state, try to wake up to the dream of the awake state. Like when you are in the thick of a situation and something is happening, and like, some situations now are so surreal, that they could just as well be a dream. So you create a habit of jumping out; during the awake state you're like, "This is so surreal." And instead of being angry and being like, "Oh, I need this, I need that," you just look at this and think, "Oh wow, this is really like a dream." Even if you don't deeply realize it, you sort of induce, in your mind, the tendency to skip out, to step to the side, and that prepares you for the moment of the dream. Okay? Second question?

Q. The second question regards death. We know in Buddhism there is reincarnation. In other religions we often hear there is heaven and hell. So if the mind reincarnates after 49 days, how can certain people talk with dead people, even if it's after 60 days, or half a year, or even a few years, how they still can talk with those people?

A. A friend of mine here in Virginia who is a Catholic said to me once, you who are Buddhists are lucky, you have several attempts, me as a Catholic I have only one shot. I have to do it well in this life. You guys come again and again until you're perfected. So this was kind of a funny discussion we were having, but everybody has different views on the matter. For some people, death is the end, there's nothing after that. For some people, there's a continuity and there is a constant evolution until you reach God. And some people say you can go up and down. So there are many ways of seeing what death might be. It's pretty much like when you have never kissed a girl, and you're thinking about how this feels. So you can create all sorts of religions about what it really feels like to kiss a girl. And then when you kiss the girl, then you have an experience. And probably it's not like the Church of Kissing was preaching. So, we talk a lot about death, but mostly we don't remember, although some do, but most of the people don't remember what happens, and what it feels like. So it's not really necessary to get into big trouble with people about what's going to happen after death. For me I tend to ask people the question, "Is there not so much a life after death, but do they have a life before death?" Because that for me is more important, I'm more into the life before death than the life after death experience. And if they have a life here, what is it made of? Is it made of kindness and compassion and so forth? And then, when you die, you pass the pearly gates, and there's nothing. It's a big nothing. You're actually, you're not even there. That's it. Don't worry, it's cool. You had a good life, you left some good memories, and inspiration for the next generation, that's fine. And then if you pass the gate and you're still doing the same thing, then keep doing the same thing, because it's proven not to be so bad, so why worry. If God is waiting for you, that's good. If not, then you do with what comes. It's really not a problem. Now, how can we talk to dead people? You're right that, you said 49 days, that corresponds to the sort of classic idea that there are seven

times seven days that follow the 3 times 24 hours after the last breath, and then through this you go through the inbetween state of bardo. You go in between states, and it's sort of like the triage, you go this way or you go that way, and so on and so forth. Okay, that's one way of seeing it. Most people, they just go through this very quickly, and the first impulse that is a good one, they just follow that and they're back into the game. Think about mosquitos. They don't go through 49 days. So the 49 days is sort of like a standard number, it's more symbolic, it explains a lot of things if you really want to work in the details of it.

But how can we talk to dead people? What constitutes our experience now as a human being is described as three elements; vitality, longevity, and one thing that is called lha in Tibetan. Lha is sort of like the radiance, the magnetic field that comes from your being; the mind, the body, and the speech. Okay? So there is the vitality, that's the life force, and it can be strong or weak, it depends on your karma and your genetic pool, and it can be affected during your life by your way of misusing the body, for example. Longevity is the lifespan, how many years you can live, ideally, or you could say all human beings could live 100 years, but not everybody does, also because of your genetic pool, environment, lifestyle and so forth. And then there is the lha. And we never really found a good translation, it's very complex. Some say it's almost like the soul, but I don't buy this. Lha. When we die, these elements dissolve, like all of the other elements of the body, they sort of dissociate one from another and they dissolve. And the vitality is gone with the elements of the body. Earth, water, fire, all of this, the four pranas, or values I mentioned, this is gone, and what is left is the lha. And when you die, this lha is like a residual shell of yourself, if you want, that has nothing to do, you've moved, but there is a sort of residual shell, an energy shell, and that's what people think they see when they see ghosts. I mean, there are some ghosts, that means there are beings who went through the bardo and sort of entered the life of what we call the hungry ghosts, the yidak. Okay? These are ghosts. But a lot of people that you can see, like when you do the Ouija board and seances, knock knock are you here, and so on, you're getting more into contact with the residual light, energy of this person who is deceased. And this lasts for a certain time, and you can get in touch with them. And in a way they're kind of neutral, they kind of offer a sort of interface for your own projections and desires.

But also there are some forms of spirits, Tibetans like to work a lot with spirits and elemental spirits, they're a form of mischievous spirit that like to play with grieving people. And they are like the fortune teller, who is good at picking up details of your life; you say one word and they conclude this and that very quickly because that is their skill, and begin with sort of a picture that is quite close to how you think and what you feel and what you experience, and so they play with that, and then you think they are the real deal, and then you give them money, because you want to know more. So there are some mischievous spirits whose idea of fun is to come and fool the people grieving. And they can manifest in the form, because they can perceive how you perceive your person you lost, and so on. They can give you this image, and then build on that. And then as you build on that, they feed on what you give, and it becomes more and more real, and you become totally trapped, and then they can force you to do whatever they want. So there are many options there, in the spook

world;~} But I think the best thing to say is when you're dead you're dead. Farewell, may you find your way towards enlightenment, and maybe we meet in a different form in a different place, and we can resume our conversation. And move on.

Q.I think of myself as a good person, but I don't always do good things, and so is my thinking of myself as a good person just some foggy recognition of Buddha nature, that everybody has, that I have, through no real "fault" of my own? Another Dharma teacher said once, "It's not whether you are good or not, it's what you do." Is this accurate in your assessment?

*A.*It's true that the Buddha nature shines through the lampshade of our afflictive emotions and habits and whatnot, in a sort of burst of kindness and intelligence. You can find it even in wild animals. The way they take care of their young, it's an expression of love. The way a spider creates a spider web, I would be unable to do that. I'm always amazed by birds who build nests with clay, flying with no hands on a rafter, it's just amazing, this creativity, this talent; all of this, this skill, intelligence, and kindness, are the rays of light of the Buddha nature, with it's intelligence and kindness, which shines through the thick lampshade of our habits and ignorance. For sure. And when we see that, we can say, "Oh, that's an outburst of the Buddha nature," and you can appreciate that. And try to have more of this, they come randomly, but you can also work so that they come more often, and maybe in a more controlled fashion. Work to produce them. And so yeah, I understand, like we say, "There is no love, but only proof of love." There is no good person, but only people who are doing good things. So it seems that the quality is in the action, and I think it's true to some extent, but also intention is good, good words are good, good actions are good. We shouldn't just emphasize action. Action is one thing, speech is one thing, intention is another thing, so all of that defines you as a "good" person, and again, good person in this moment. Not a good person as a sort of identity. As you said, "I'm a good person, who is sometimes not so good." Again, we are not creating an avatar of the good person. We don't care about this. The important thing is, how do I engage with myself, and how do I engage with others, from instant to instant; is this a contributing factor to everybody's awakening and liberation? And now if you want to call me a hero, or saint, or a good person you do it.

Gendun Rinpoche, when we came out of retreat said, "Now you have to teach and share what you've experienced and some people will call you Lama. You don't call yourself Lama. Other people will, because they appreciate what you offer, and they want to express their respect and so they use this respectful title, but as far as you are concerned that's not your choice, you don't decide this. You don't decide in the sense that you don't impose your title on others, and you also don't reject being called as such by other people." Like my good friend Khaydroup said, "Call me whatever you want, but don't call me late for dinner;~}

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. So in that sense you could say that if you prove to be of use then you can be called a Lama. If you want to be called a Lama, and proved to be harmful, then you're phoney. So if you want to say, in this instance, in this moment, in this specific situation, through my

body, my speech and my mind I have been helpful, it's very good. It's very good to be able to do this, because we cannot only see the dark side of our being without honoring the positive aspects. We have to be accountable. For example, in the 35 Buddha sutra, the Three Heap sutra. The first one is offerings and homage. The second one is seeing what is wrong, and lay open and lay bare. But immediately after the third aspect, the third heap is to see what is right, and to celebrate and rejoice in it and offer it. So the process cannot be completed if you are only seeing what isn't working; you have to be able to also acknowledge what is working. Stuck, unstuck. Because when you see both and accept them for what they are, just simply facts, you don't have to add a superimposed layer of moral judgement or any qualification, then you see what unsticks you and what got you stuck. And then you can take one side and let go of the other. So it's very important, both aspects are important. Sutras are never random, they are all full of meaning. Even the repetition, the fact that you repeat the same thing again and again in the same sutra, has a reason. Every word counts in the sutra. So the fact that you have at first the homage, you rely upon the Buddha nature, the Buddha, then you see what has stuck you, and what unsticks you, and then the conclusion is, I'm going to lead a transformed life. Very important. That's the process of purification. Moving from dukkha to sukha. So at times you are a good person, and that's fine. At times you just missed a step. Just a fact. You acknowledge it, you learn from it, you don't try to dissimulate it, but you don't also exaggerate. Because we are always doing that. We exaggerate or we minimize. Sometimes we exaggerate our qualities and we minimize our faults. Sometimes we minimize our qualities and we exaggerate our faults. Why can't we just be plain. "Yeah, I did that. Oh yeah, I did that too.. Now you call me a good/not so good person, well, that's okay with me."

Q."Yeah, that would require me accepting myself for who I am, which is a challenge for me."

*A.*That's exactly what Trungpa Rinpoche says, "The first step is that. Stop hiding by pretending or by exaggerating your faults." That's another way to hide. It's hiding in plain sight. "I'm so bad. I say it myself, I show it myself, so you can't tell me about it because I've already said it." This makes you feel secure. You could just say, "Hey, sometimes I miss, hit and miss. It doesn't make me a good or a bad person, as sort of an absolute identity."

You know, on my website or my Facebook, I don't remember, when you have to define yourself, I describe myself as a mammalian with bodhisattva aspirations. So that's what I am.

Q.I wanted to ask you about teachers and the formal guru tradition. If one has a teacher and he passes on, as in my case, then some people say he essentially remains your root teacher, but now I'm switching over to a different tradition, and I realize your group has a lineage. So my question is, is there a specific guru or person when you get into the deeper aspects of devotional practice, what do I do at this point with that?

*A.*I think that the manifestation of the guru is the response to a need and a certain reality. If you are in the early stages, you might have informers, you might have people who help you to understand the basics, the meditation, and so forth, and then you do your practice. And then really when you

begin to have essential experiences through the rigorous practice, then you really need to exchange with one person or a group of qualified people that can help you to sort out through all the things that you may discover in your practice, and that may at some point shed a certain doubt or maybe a contradiction or whatnot. There is, to begin with, no obligation of “signing on the dotted line with your blood” and it’s not like, “I give you my life forever” or something. This is very romantic...I guess it’s like a first marriage;~} You think it’s for life, but after a couple of divorces it’s like, “Let’s just try to get along and be happy together, you know?” And so the idea of guru, and the word guru itself, guru literally means heavy. Something grave, serious. So it is something which is heavy, you’re not fooling with it, and that refers to your buddha nature. It is a serious matter, it’s very important, don’t be a child. That means do your job. Don’t pretend, don’t hide, don’t try to cuddle or seduce or please, just do your job.

And so the guru is that somebody who embodies this seriousness with which you commit to the path. But if at this point you're not committed, it's not really necessary. You're in the phase where you learn, you're trying to evaluate, so you need to have good informants, where people can give you a good image of what the path might be, that's definitely important, but truly the relation to the guru becomes increasingly more important as we deepen our own experience. Because we come to areas where we can easily fool ourselves. And we need to have an external reference to help us cut through our own confusion and entanglements. But in *The Ocean of the Definitive Meaning* by the 9th Karmapa, there is a description of what a guru is. And the guru changes, the function of the guru changes, it's not linked to a person. First, it's somebody who has the knowledge and experience of a tradition. A tradition means something that has been proven throughout countless generations and countless people have benefited from it, so it's a proven fact that this works. Somebody who understands and has the experience of this, and is willing to pass it on. Then, as we learn from this person how to read the texts and to read them free from our usual bias, then the texts themselves become our teacher, and we can read more sutras, we can read more texts and so on, because we know what we are looking for in these texts, and we know how to read, we've learned to read. And then once you have done that and then all the books of the tradition make sense and help you in your meditation experience, then you realize that actually, all books are books, and the nature and the phenomena of books are pointing out some essential teachings, other people that are challenging you are pointing out specific teachings that you can learn from. So phenomena becomes your guru.

Then finally you realize that, who is going through all of this is mind itself, it's the Buddha nature who is sort of self-proclaiming. Then your mind is the guru in the end. So, the presence of the guru is important, but when the guru passes away, what has been created, the bond, the experiences that were felt, the grace that was received in the moments of communion, they still exist in our mind. Otherwise why would we pray to the Buddha? He's dead. The 16th Karmapa is dead, Gendun Rinpoche is dead, Shamar Rinpoche is dead; all my gurus are dead. But they are so alive, because they're sort of like they're in me. They are not external anymore because they are gone, but their memory, what they said, what they told me, how they interacted with me, is still very, very much alive with me in my mind and I totally base my actions and so on on what I received from them. In

my own way! I am not trying to be Gendun Rinpoche, there is one. It's not necessary, I need to be me, that's all. So, the guru, it's a delicate topic because there are not so many. There are not so many authentic and genuine people, really. So when you meet somebody that is that good, somebody like Karmapa, somebody you can really trust, it is really a good platform. But if you are not aiming for the highest league, there are some good spiritual friends that you can benefit from. So, you know, your heart is open, but your eyes remain open. It's not a romance. It's not even a bromance;~)

Like Ram Dass said, "We are helping each other to go home." That's what we do, we are helping each other to go home.

Q. A question about death. My own parents passed on about 10 years ago, so to me it's kind of like, well, obviously they've gone on to whatever is next; and they don't have time to play around with me. So when we think about our parents and our loved ones who have passed on, essentially what is still there is that you are both still within consciousness, even though they might be on another planet somewhere. We're still within Buddha, we're still within the same consciousness. So I feel like, as far as remembering my parents, there's nothing I can do, but hope they are in a good place.

*A. I think one of the best readings on this is from Thich Nhat Hanh, *No Death, No Fear*. He talks about how he's in contact with his dear mother, who died, because he was sad when she died, of course. But now the mother, earth, water, fire, air elements, are back into the earth, fire and other elements, so when he lays down on the earth, he is in contact with his mother, the earth of his mother. When the wind blows through and touches him, he is caressed by his mother, in a different form. And then all beings are seen in this way, and in this way you can expand and see that all beings are my mother. For they're all made of these elements. This is in the same vein as when he sees a piece of paper, he can see the sky, and the clouds, and the trees and so on, when being in contact with all the elements, he's in contact with the former elements of somebody formerly known as Mom. So yes, in that sense, we are in contact, especially in our little microcosm of planet earth. I've heard that there is one rare gas in the atmosphere that is called argon, a rare gas in a very limited quantity, but there is a constant percentage in the air. This means that every time you breathe in the atmosphere of this planet, you're breathing in a certain percentage of the Argon. And this argon has been in the lungs of Hitler, in the lungs of the Buddha, in the lungs of your dear mother. So we are breathing the air of the Buddha, and of Adolf Hitler, and of our dear mother. Because just this little tiny particle of gas, argon, is always in the atmosphere, and since we are in this atmosphere, this planet, we are part of this planet, we are not from this earth, we are of this earth. Everything matters, water, air, and so on, needs to be respected not only as the past of our fore parents, but also as the matter of the present, and also as the matter for the future. For all these reasons also, we should develop tremendous respect for the environment.*