

## **The Path of Accumulation**

*Dharma roadside dialogue series*

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*Lama Tsony*

This month's theme, or subject, after reviewing your requests, seems to point to questions about how best to proceed with Dharma practice. I have posted some materials on my website Tsony.com under the heading of Dharma Roadside Dialogues. You will see previous recordings and transcriptions, and then also some materials that pertain to today's topic. In particular is a text by Patrul Rinpoche, which is a summary of the five paths that is a quite interesting teaching about what the progression is from now, this moment, until enlightenment.

Some of us, it seems, cannot make a lot of progress in one lifetime, and might even be tempted to give up. What are the long term and short term goals? What are realistic goals? Examples of goals for this life could be the continuous aspiration for enlightenment, developing mental stability, and generating open and welcoming benevolence. These seem to be good goals. Is there anything missing? Anything else that can be said? What should be abandoned? So the questions are around this. And it's important because sometimes we have a sense of being a little bit lost on the spiritual path. The sense that, "Am I progressing? Regressing? Are we here yet?" These kinds of questions come and of course, oftentimes they bring along doubts. Especially when they collide with our sense of self-deprecation of not being good enough or up to the mark or whatever, some of those things we carry along with us.

So I wanted to talk about that and discuss this and I thought about what could be my angle and I found that discussing the five paths, and in particular the first one, the path of accumulation, would be a good way to proceed. We can begin here and then open it up as we go.

So when we want to have an idea about where we are going, the Mahayana Sutras will give you an explanation based on five stages that we cross as we progress towards enlightenment. They're also called five paths. Just to briefly name them, the first one is the path of accumulation, the second one will be the path of junction or the connecting path, the third one would be the path of vision, the fourth one would be the path of meditation, and then the final one would be the path beyond training that refers to enlightenment.

The first two, the path of accumulation and the path of junction are training posts, they are preparing the ground for mind to meet itself, and that happens at the beginning of the third path, which is the path of vision. The path of vision is also known as the first bodhisattva bhumi. That's the moment when you have the first insight into the buddha nature, into the truth of emptiness, the wisdom of emptiness, which is irreversible. There's no relapse. From then on you keep moving; you

may linger, explore all possibilities and take time, but you are moving forward. So that's when you truly become a bodhisattva. Before that you are training. You cultivate deep aspiration and you cultivate what really makes you a bodhisattva as you follow the first two stages. And I wanted to talk about, as we only have a limited amount of time, I wanted to talk about the first one, accumulation.

We might think that this is for beginners, that we need something more "special," and I think it's important to be really humble regarding practice, and that comes from really knowing what we are. So this description of the five stages, or the five paths, on the way to enlightenment will help us to get a clearer picture of where we are now. In the text that I have posted on my website you will find the five paths, and I will read out about the first one, an excerpt from *Guide to the Stages and Path of a Bodhisattva* by Patrul Rinpoche.

"On the path of accumulation, the bodhisattvas, or 'heirs of the victorious ones', generate positive intention and bodhicitta in both aspiration and action. Having thoroughly developed this relative bodhicitta, they aspire towards the ultimate bodhicitta, the non-conceptual wisdom of the path of seeing. This is known, therefore, as the stage of 'aspirational practice'."

This first stage is the stage of aspirational practice, this is where we build up our intention and aspiration. It is called the path of accumulation because this is where we make a special effort to gather the accumulation of merit, and because it marks the beginning of many incalculable means of gathering the accumulation. So this path of accumulation is divided into lesser, intermediate, and greater stages. On the lesser stage of the path of accumulation it is uncertain when we will reach the path of joining. When we begin the path of accumulation we don't really know yet when we'll be entering the second part, the second stage, which is the path of connection or junction, joining. On the intermediate stage of the path of accumulation it is certain that we will reach the path of joining in this very next life. Not this life, the next life, because we've created the conditions for that, for the first, or lesser stage of the path of accumulation. On the greater path of accumulation it is certain we will reach the path of joining within this very same lifetime. This is how they are presented and I would like to come back on a few things.

On the path of accumulation we are basically cultivating a very strong aspiration, and we put it into practice. The question maybe would be, when does the path of accumulation begin? I think that is when you formally take refuge. When we decide in an official manner through a ceremony that we see Buddha as the enlightened state as a valid goal, Dharma as a valid path, and Sangha as valid guides. And we want to rely upon these three. Before that, of course we have a very long history, a lot of ups and downs, but we have sort of built up, without really much of a methodology, a mind that is ready for this adventure. It's not that nothing happened before we formally took refuge in the three jewels, the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, but what you've been and been doing before led you to this moment. So at this point when you take the refuge vows, and even more so when you take the bodhisattva commitment, you begin a path which is a conscious path with a clearly defined methodology. Step by step.

And of course it will take time. Here it says it's just the beginning of many incalculable eons of gathering the accumulation. So bring your lunchbox;~}

Gonna be a long journey. So this is a very important step that we cannot overlook. If we don't have solid foundations our subsequent practice will be wobbly. There won't be any ground for the house of enlightenment, or the tree of enlightenment to grow. And one way or another we always have to come back to the fundamentals. And we don't want to go back and check the foundation of the house when you are busy window dressing your house. So it's better to do what has to be done at the right time.

Now maybe we are at this moment, we have taken this commitment, we are very dedicated, and we need to cultivate accumulation. So what is accumulation? It's a poor translation, I am always a little bit uncomfortable with this. Accumulation. Merit. Wisdom is okay. But accumulation of merit, accumulation of merit, it's kind of strange, right? Because it sounds like a savings account. You know, like we put our little nuts in a hole like a squirrel. But that's not what it means. The merit here is the driving force, what moves you to the path. Like I was mentioning, we are going for a holiday; but if you don't have the merit of gasoline in your car, you don't go anywhere. So you need to have a car or a means of transportation, you need to have electricity or gasoline or whatever your car takes to make it move. So the merit basically is the result of a healthy lifestyle that is a result of your aspiration as a bodhisattva that you express through cultivating generosity and ethics and patience and perseverance and meditation, but all of that becomes the ground for a liberation of the mind from whatever inhibits the experience of mind's innate wisdom. So as you dispel obscurities with the practice of merit accumulation — positive actions — you free your mind so that wisdom can shine through the cracks because they have been created and enlarged by the practice of merit. So it's sort of a twofer. One side you regroup and cultivate positive momentum that will push you forward, and as you do so you're also breaking up old habits and tendencies and so on so that the light of innate wisdom can shine through. That's how you accumulate wisdom. Actually you don't accumulate wisdom, you liberate wisdom by gathering a good dynamic that liberates the mind from what obscures it. So that's the idea of the accumulation of merit and wisdom.

So let's begin with the lesser stage because that's where we enter the game, right? So the root text, the original text on which this commentary is based says, "The applications of mindfulness... may we engage....!" The dots indicate that there is more before and after, but basically here the emphasis is on the application of mindfulness. This lesser stage of the path of accumulation will be mainly working with what we call the four applications of mindfulness, which is a very classic teaching that you find both in Theravada or Sravaka literature or in Mahayana literature. Very, very classic practice. Let's see how we do that. With the practice of meditation, and in particular the practice of calm-abiding meditation, shamata in Sanskrit, shinay in Tibetan, we cultivate the capacity to remain one-pointedly aware of what is happening in this very moment. And we can also direct this one-pointed attention towards anything we want to analyse, observe and understand.

So we are going to do that. Training our mind with regular practice of shamata silent meditation, maybe using the breath as a support, or an object, whatever, or the mind just resting in itself, one-pointedly present to what is. And the first thing we are going to apply this mindfulness to is the body. Here when we say body we have to understand that there are three ways of understanding what body means. There is the outside body, the outer body; this is the world, the environment. There is the inner body, which is our body, and then there is an in-between body which is the body of everybody else, all the other people. So when we talk about applying mindfulness to the body, it's not only to our body, it's to all bodies; external body, the world, internal body, my own body, and the in-between, that of sentient beings. And the idea in this practice is to debunk the myth about bodies. What is the main myth? It's that the outer body is one entity, the inner body is an entity, and the in-between body that is sentient beings is also an entity. It's that these three things are homogenous, solid entities and have nothing to do with one another.

So what we are going to verify is, is this body, whatever body we look at, the outer, the inner, or the in-between, is this body a homogenous entity that is autonomous, independent, changeless, substantially fixed? Because this is our assumption right now, and since beginningless time we have been operating on the basis of this assumption. And that's why we have been in conflict between this body of mine and the body of other beings in an environment; trying to get all the goodies for me, and then keep away all the outside problems, outside in the environment or onto other people. This has been our M.O. since beginningless time. And now we're going to really observe, very deeply, with what is here called "precise intelligence," we're going to re-observe if this assumption is true. Is it valid or invalid? Because if it's invalidated, that will really lead us to completely change the relation we have to the inner body, the outer body, or the in-between body. So there is much at stake in this observation.

So we examine these three with precise intelligence and what does it mean? It means that basically we deconstruct what seems to be a homogeneous, almost monolithic entity, the body. And then we look at it and see that it's actually composed of many, many different parts; molecules, atoms that are in constant change, that are interacting and that actually it is very difficult to make a sort of factual difference between, let's say, the space between you and me, and the space between my organs, and the space between the atoms of our body. So we begin to see that the body is actually an aggregate. It's a compounded experience onto which we superimpose the mental representation of the oneness of an entity, and then we name it "me." Or "you," or "that." All of that is just a mental construction, a mental representation; it does not represent reality. But we observe this. We sort of cut through the levels of our body, or other phenomena we see, like houses, rocks, cars, whatnot. And then when we come to this experience that actually it is not a homogeneous entity, but rather it's very spacious, there is more space than matter between the different atoms. We realize there is no such thing as a fixed and limited body, and we abide in this experience of the space-like nature of what we once thought was a solid entity. That would be the goal of this first meditation, to break through the solidity so that we can abide in the stasis.

During the post-meditation, once we are not meditating anymore, we keep this awareness that we have cultivated regarding the body as we go along with our life, and we realize that all of this is just like the dream experience; it feels real, but it's not. It feels solid, but it's not. And on top of that we realize that the way we consider this body makes it a basis for all forms of illnesses, whether they're physical or mental. It makes it a basis for aging, old age, sickness, and death. All of this comes from grasping to the solid, homogenous entity that we see in the body. So we sort of debunk this first myth.

Once we have done that, then we're going to direct our attention one-pointedly towards a different objective, which is feelings. Whatever feeling — pleasant, unpleasant, neutral — arises, we direct our attention and we look at it. And it seems very heavy. When it's pleasant, it's exciting, when it's unpleasant, it's depressing, and when it's neutral it's very boring, and all of this seems to be extremely really heavy, but when we look at it we see that actually it's much more fluid than that. It arises, and disappears. It arises, and you name it. And then you play with the name, and the feeling you had before is gone. All that is extremely fluid, so you begin to really see that even though it may feel as very heavy, they're actually very fluid, all these feelings. Then again you invite in the experience of spaciousness, which will be the end result of this practice.

Thirdly, you apply this observation to mind, we use precise intelligence to investigate greater, lesser and intermediate types of perception. Greater, lesser, and intermediate means outer phenomena, big thoughts, big emotions, and lesser, the little things that are passing through. Thoughts that arise and disappear. And then when we realize, in the same manner, that all of that is extremely fluid. The only thing really that makes it heavy is the attachment we have. The way that we freeze them into some sort of solidity because we have no interest in whether it's pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, we want some sort of insurance, we freeze it and we want to keep it, but when we realize this and manage to just let it go, then it is flowing. And then during the post meditation we understand the nature of the mind to be free. Mental events arise, but they don't really feel heavy and solid. They're just flowing.

And then fourthly we apply this to all phenomena, we apply this mindfulness to all phenomena. We use the intelligence of discernment to analyse all phenomena that are included in that particular section of the five aggregates, the five skandhas, that are called formations. Where you have the fifty-one mental events, which are the eleven positive reactions, the virtuous reactions, and twenty-six negative reactions, there are way more negative than positive, faith and joy, anger, spite, and so on and so forth. And also the different mental events that allow manifestation to be perceived. Attention, sustained attention, engagement, mental events that allow manifestations to be perceived by us. We analyse all of these fifty-one mental events one after another, and we come to the same conclusion; they feel real, they are not true. They're just like a dream experience. Okay?

So these practices of the four applications of mindfulness each have their own object of focus. As we've seen, it's the bodies to begin with, then we have the feelings, we have the mind, and then phenomena. They all have different angles, we could almost say, but each of them lead to the same

conclusion or the same realization, the fact that all phenomena are just the play of mind. They have no solidity or substantiality. They arise through interdependent origination, production, and they're just a dream-like experience. And then we abide in this fluidity, and that is pretty much the result of the calm-abiding practice. What we have trained using support, the breath, visualization, an object; up to the point where we don't need this anymore because our mind can rest in itself. All the things that were distracting our mind are seen to be dream-like events, and therefore the passion, the rejection, or the grasping we had for them has been calmed down. And as the mind is peaceful and calm, it abides. And as it abides it feels spacious, because it's not squeezed into reaction, rejection, grasping and so on. We've dropped the load of all these unnecessary reactions. And as we are calm and clear and abiding, the form of inner lucidity arises. The mind is able to see itself, it sees that at times it's peaceful, at times it's agitated, but it's only agitated because there is an engagement, we are following what mind produces, and peace will come from letting go of all these entanglements and projections. So that's where we stay. So when we have developed this we are in a good place to move to the intermediate stage of the path of accumulation. In this intermediate stage the main training will be what we call the four correct abandonments, the four things we are going to learn to let go of, and actually let go of.

The first one is developing a new tendency to not develop any non-virtuous tendencies. We decide to stop throwing wood on the fire; we're not going to do that. We're not going to come with more greed or more rejection, not going to come with more indifference. We're just going to try to deal with what we have now, and not replenish the stock as we liberate some of it. So that's the first training. This is part of the training of ethics in a general sense. If we were to make a link between this and the three trainings, ethics, meditation, and discernment, there would be the training of ethics.

Secondly we try to swiftly eliminate any non-virtuous tendencies that we have developed, so this is really a time of very in-depth spring cleaning. There are many practices that are related to this, such as the 35 Buddha Sutra, the preliminary practices, prostrations, 100 syllable mantra of Vajrasattva; there are a 100,000 ways of working this out, but it's basically to lay open and lay bare. Lay open means you look at your tendencies, you realize that they are toxic, you really don't want them anymore to pollute your life and the life of other people, and you decide to change. And you take a firm stand on the inner sanity of the Buddha nature; you take the Buddha as an example, the Sangha as an example, and the dharma as a guideline, and and you say, "okay, I'm done with it! I'm going to do a detox." And then you do it as quickly as possible. Quickly as possible means you don't linger or postpone, you do it now and you do it as deeply as possible. Total detox, that is the next assignment.

Thirdly we're going to cultivate any virtuous tendencies that have not yet been developed. So the first two are kind of connected; you don't create more mess, and you detox your body, your speech, and your mind. The third is you create the positive energy and the positive qualities that were not developed yet, and you make sure that those that have been cultivated do not wane, that they grow stronger every day. So after the detox, when you change your diet, and you need good organic

probiotics, all sorts of things that will bring your immune system and your body to the best possible situation. So that's gonna be, basically, the intermediate stage. The assignment of the intermediate stage is mainly concerning our conduct whether it is body, speech, or mind. Because of course all of the toxins that we get rid of, and all the positivity that we cultivate, will be done through the body, through the mind, and through the speech. A lot of things that need to be readjusted and checked. When you are at this stage, you begin to see how things may fall into place, and how we are actually proceeding towards the path of junction. Then this moment might fall into place, maybe not in this lifetime, but in the next life, that's for sure, if you have created the dynamic that leads to this point. You can see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Of course it always depends on how much effort you have put in. If you're just a tourist on the path, and you pick up some flowers, that's fine, you may be happier; but you're not moving in the general direction of enlightenment. There is determination and effort that is necessary. And that actually brings us to the third stage, which is the Greater Stage of the path of accumulation. On this stage we practice what are called the four supports of miraculous ability. So what is a miraculous ability? Miraculous in that it's quite unexpected. It's a collateral benefit. You've been cultivating the four placements of attention, then detoxifying body, speech, and mind, replenished your body, speech, and mind with good attitudes, good energy, and good intentions, and so on, good action, and there are perks that come along.

The first one is determination. It's a miraculous support. Determination to meditate with enthusiasm and aspiration so that you can deepen and stabilize your meditation. Because you've had a taste of it, through the first two stages, and you know that it's very wholesome; you know that it's good, it's milder, it's friendlier, all the things you cultivated before. And it works! So you have a determination, it comes along because, maybe you have not expected it, but it comes along because of the previous effort and it's a tremendous support. Determination is a tremendous support. If you don't have determination you don't move forward because you're wavering, waffling in your commitment to sit. But determination is not a sort of violence, it's joy! The determination's origin is joy, it's not violence. It's not coercing. Because if you're forced to do it, that means you don't adhere, you don't fully embrace the validity of the path and the practice. So determination is the first miraculous support.

The second miraculous support, the collateral benefit that comes, is exertion. We apply ourselves with diligence to the practice of meditation, and then we exert ourselves in both eliminating the obstacles and cultivating the necessary qualities. So in French we say, "L'appétit vient en mangeant," which means to grow your appetite as you eat. It means that the more you practice the four basic attentions, and the detox, and replenishing your qualities, the more you realize that, "Hey, that's good!" And you want to do more of this, you're very engaged, and so you remain sort of very committed to this path. Not because you've been forced to do it; no one twisted your arm. You know it's good and you're happy to do it, you're determined and you have a lot of energy. Energy is joy, joy is energy. And then you're not easily pulled away, nothing compares to it, everything pales in

comparison to the joy you have in cultivating this lifestyle. Really, there is no comparison. So that's the miraculous support of exertion.

And then the third miraculous support or the perk that comes, is attention. You are here! You are not drifting, daydreaming, checked out, you're really here. And that comes because you are happy to do it. You're determined to do it, you're putting all your energy into doing it, but it's a soft and gentle energy; it's not a coercive obligation. So this one-pointedness, that to begin with was cultivated with some effort, becomes now effortless. In the text on mind-training it says you are like a seasoned rider, even if your horse stumbles and you are not really paying attention, you don't fall. You hang onto your seat immediately. So that's the idea, you're always very attentive, but not forced, you're attentive by nature. And so that's the miracle of support, and through this we will gain all the different experiences and realization of meditation. Particularly here shamatha, calm-abiding meditation, and that will open the gate for insight, for vipassana, which will be the fourth miraculous support, which is discernment. Discernment is another way of saying wisdom. The discernment here is what is true and what is false; what is appearance and what is reality. The sort of discernment that comes from the one-pointed observation of whatever you pay attention to. This discernment helps us to realize and sustain meditative concentration even during daily activities, not only on the cushion. Obviously on the cushion we can do it, but also it's very important that the qualities you cultivated or realized during your meditation bleed into your daily life, so that whatever you do, all of your tasks, taking care of the family, working, whatever, will be done in the full presence, the full attention. This is very good because then you won't be tempted to fall back into the old habits of cultivating toxic reactions, and instead you will try to nourish, replenish, and stabilize positive behaviors of body, speech and mind. And all of that is thanks to attention. Because if you're not here, the answer is by default, and what's default is the opposite of presence, mindfulness, and attention. You just keep doing what you were doing all the time, which isn't very successful. So, through this discernment, the big perks that come along are the supernatural powers, supernatural powers here means clairaudience, clear vision, memory of past lives, this sort of thing. Sometimes they can be helpful, but sometimes they can be a curse because you might think you are actually a super person and become attached to that. Anyway, they come from the miraculous support of attention.

Among these perks, these supernatural powers, is one that I think is the most important, which is that you are extremely receptive to Dharma. Because Dharma is the expression of reality. It's a way to help us understand what is reality, and help us to understand what is not reality; regarding the nature of mind, the nature of phenomena, whatever. So when you are attentive it is more difficult to be fooled by appearances, emotions, and habitual tendencies; so that the Dharma makes more sense. You're more attuned to the wavelength of the exposition of reality that Dharma is. So for me that's the biggest perk, that's the biggest benefit of it.

So you see, throughout all this, we really have, frankly, a program for a lifetime. So what is important to remember? I would say that maybe this life is to be spent creating the dynamic of positivity and

cultivating as much discernment as possible. Cultivating strong and deep aspiration, taking Buddha the enlightened state as the goal, the Dharma as the path, the Sangha as spiritual friends showing us the path. Generating enlightened mind attitude, both in relative aspect and ultimate aspect, both in aspiration and engagement. Engagement in the practice of the six paramitas, to cultivate both the wisdom and the merit; this creates the dynamic and this dynamic will result as the four miraculous supports. And so that will bring us to the point where we can sort of enter the path of junction. The path of junction is what connects the stages of accumulation, clearing away, replenishing, so mind becomes more and more ready to meet with itself, to come to meet itself, that would be the path of vision. The path of junction is when everything falls into its right place. And also there will be a lesser, an intermediate, and a greater level in the path of junction, of course. But already with the path of accumulation, in the intermediary state and in the higher state, we begin to see how things can fall into place, and that gives us hope. Hope and confidence, the confidence that we are on a path and that this path is valid.

And that's very important, because most of the doubt comes from the fact that we don't know if we're on the path. You know, we do a bit of practice here, a bit of practice there, we listen to a bit of teaching here, a bit of teaching there, but it's very discombobulated. We don't see the red thread that sort of passes through all of this. And now when we're working on this first part which is the path of accumulation, we begin to see a coherency on all this study, reflection, and meditation; they're all going in the same direction. And of course there are 100,000 ways of doing it. In all of the teachings on meditation we may have received, they are actually here to support what we have seen; cultivating mindfulness, attention, and carefulness. Transforming negativity into positivity, detoxifying our body, speech, and mind, and then nourishing our body, speech and mind with positive intentions and positive actions. All of the practices are leading to that. And with these practices you also come to see that what appears to be solid might be only an appearance. Most of it is just a play of mind. Not to say all of it is just a play of mind. And so there is more fluidity in relationship to your body, the external body of the environment, and the in-between body of sentient beings. So when there is fluidity there is gentleness paired with discernment, you're really on the good way, and just keep doing it. So the confidence that we're on the path will be more and more stabilized. And so at the end of each day, and at the end of our life, we'll be happy to share the fruit of the day and the fruit of our life with everybody else, and may that become the source of awakening for everybody. And as Milarepa said, "In my tradition we practice so that when we die we have no shame or regret." So that's a good way to live your day, and that's a good way to live your life. And don't worry too much about the next, next, next...it will come. And if now is good, next will be fine. If now is in place, next will be in place. You don't really need to worry. Don't worry, be happy, and work at it. And if you want to read further the document is on my website:

<https://tsony.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Guide-to-the-Stages-and-Paths-of-the-Bodhisattvas-copy.pdf>