

Defeat the Klesha

Part One: By the determination to preserve the ethical commitments that we have taken.

Dharma roadside dialogue series.

Lama Tsongy

January 29, 2022 #2 Dialogue

Q: How do you recognize obsession compared to just thinking about how to accomplish mundane aspects of life...how can we recognize where the red flags are that indicate obsessive thinking?

A: Yes. When does it shift from being reasonable to becoming an obsession? I think when you're kind of OCD on things, like I'm kind of sink and kitchen counter obsessive; I like it clean and I like the sink to be dry, I don't like it when there is a wet sponge in the sink, and so on, and you could say that that is simply part of keeping the house clean, but there is a part of it that is really obsessive compulsive because there's something in me that can't stand a wet sponge in the bottom of the sink. Now I sort of play with it...Like Wendelin is making tea and she puts the dirty spoon on the white countertop and then I have to come with the sponge and clean it. I used to do it unconsciously and now I do it as a "see how aware I am of being neurotic."

So I think it's an obsession when it takes all of your time, and nothing comes out of it, really, but more obsession. Take a practical example. You have to make shelving at your house...of course you think about it. Figuring out what will be the most efficient and functional, cost function assessment and all of that...then you do the damn thing and then forget about it. I think obsession is when you are constantly thinking about, "No,no,no there's a better way, it could be better, I should do it a different way" and then actually you don't do anything...you are living in a world of fantasy. That's where it becomes obsessive. You live with your spouse in the house and so you're lucky, because you can have a mirror who can tell you, "Just do the damn thing and stop thinking about it," and help you to see the obsessive aspect of your dedication to that project.

I think the obsession is when it starts spinning in your head, you know, it's spinning. That's difficult to notice because, for me personally, at first I didn't notice some of my obsessions, and then I noticed them and at first I wanted to get rid of them. Whatever there was, nothing important, just thinking "I really need this, I really need this." Spinning and spinning. And then first I didn't see it, then I did see it, then I wanted to get rid of it...and now they are all my familiar ghosts. I don't even want to get rid of them, I notice them, and just relax and accept. They go around just like a carousel for a while, but I don't ride the horses. I just let them spin, and then when they're tired they go. I don't care when they come and when they go. I don't feel invaded when they come, to the point where I need to get rid of them, and I don't feel deprived of anything when they leave me. Sometimes when it's very repetitive I need to intervene a little bit. There's a part of me that says, "Really? You're back on that...Why don't you let it go?" Because I notice, if it keeps coming back there's a part of me that has not let go of it. Not suppress it! Let go of it!

For a long time now I've realized that suppressing and repressing only leads to more. Trying to fulfill, indulging, brings more, like drinking salt water, you just become more and more thirsty, and eventually you become mad. So that's how I deal now; I have some obsessions that have been with me for fifty or sixty years. They just come and they go now. They're familiar ghosts. It's okay. I'm very cautious that I don't somehow follow them and implement them by a word or a passive aggressive silence, anything that signifies that I have taken the bait...that's where the discipline is; be very careful. Awareness is key. First we assess and be aware of, then after that we learn to live with it and do something out of it. And have a sense of humor about it, otherwise everything is deadly serious.

Q: I would like to hear your distinction between arrogance and intention...because when Gendun Rinpoche was in France he had to establish monasteries and teach teachers and cultivate the Kagyu School in the West for it to be delivered to all of us in the West. It seems to me that all great thinkers, philosophers like Schopenhauer and Camus and others have started with a certain kind of arrogance about ideas or thinking or philosophy. But how does the Buddhist maintain that razor's edge between arrogance and true bodhicitta?

A: That is an interesting topic, and an interesting question. There is definitely a little bit of arrogance. Yeah, arrogance, in any endeavor. Like when you read some of the prayers, especially the prayers like Samantabhadra's Wishing prayer or similar where you say, "I single handedly will liberate all beings from suffering." I have heard feedback from some people exclaiming how arrogant this is. It's a statement, "I will liberate the world from suffering!" Yeah, that's your intention and it's a great aspiration...and you don't do this to be known as "the great liberator," or to be venerated. You do it because you know it's needed and you say it loud and you say it proud;~} Because you have to put a lot of energy to overcome your reluctance to step out or your reluctance to take a big job and to do something to benefit beings. One thing for me in this statement, it can be read as extremely arrogant, but I see it as a big kick in my butt!! "Yeah, I'm gonna do that!" Because that's the kind of energy you need to propel this thing, for the rocket to take off, from the heaviness.

And to come back to Gendun Rinpoche, he never wanted to do this. It's quite interesting, he never wanted it. He said when he came from Tibet to India, he said he was very happy and wanted to be like Tilopa, a wandering yogi. But Karmapa had other plans for him. And the Karmapa told him, "You go to France." First, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche told him to go to France, and he said, "No, no." Karmapa told him again, "You go and you do this and do that..." He gave him brief, but very clear, brief instructions of what he would have to develop. And so he only came to France out of devotion to his Master, his Guru, and did whatever the Karmapa asked him to do. So he of course put in a lot of energy, but he felt totally unqualified for the job. He didn't speak a word of the language, didn't know the culture, had never been in charge of any monastery or project as he was always in retreat, but Karmapa said, "Hey, do you trust me, I'm the Karmapa?" and since the answer was yes, then he just had to follow what was asked. And so he did it.

But I think for us we need to jumpstart the project with a little bit of madness! Like when you start a school, you know how crazy that is...no sane person would ever start a school...because it's just too much. The red tape, the PTA, the whatever. It's just like, ughh, I don't even want to step foot in that building. But your heart is telling you it's what the kids need, and the kids are our future, and everybody needs these kids, and they need to be given the chance to unfold their wings. So no matter what it costs and how difficult it might be, "I'll do it!" Some people might read it as a completely arrogant statement, but it's actually a statement of courage. I'm old enough where I've seen a lot of projects relating to Dharma starting...and there's always the founding members, always the pioneers, always the great donors who gave land and so on...who were in contact with the great masters of our lineage, like Karmapa and others.

There is always a point where the program, the project, starts having its own dynamic and then people who come in, ten, or fifteen, or twenty years after the initial take-off, and they bring a lot. And then you can see these founding members being reluctant to see this new energy take their "baby" over, you know, that's where there is some sort of fixation. Your initial thrust, which was a very generous intention, with a little bit of arrogance, has turned into a fixation. And you can't trust them, you're afraid that they might destroy the work that you did in your life; that's a good indicator that your intention is not free of some sort of possessivity. And it's very important as a founding member to have this in mind, and to let go. It is you and entirely you when you're doing it, but when you pass it on and there's a new generation that comes and brings fresh blood and fresh ideas, and of course there is a burden of transition and training so that they just don't do anything stupid, they also will at some point point out that times have changed and it's time to do it otherwise now. You have to be able to say, "Great, I wish you good luck in this endeavor." You have to pass the torch, there is no other option.

When I left Kundreul Ling it was very clear for me that I came to a point where I was burnt out. I had done that for 17 years and I was not fresh. When there were new initiatives or ideas coming I would be like, "Been there done that...don't rock the boat." And then you're an obstacle to the continuation, so that was one of the many reasons why I left. It was time for me to let the monastery take its new life. And it's very different now, it works fine, people are studying Dharma and practicing and so on, and it's all good. But it's very different. I certainly would not have steered the boat in this direction, and this is a direction that a consensus of all who are part of it wanted to take; so it was time for me to say, "Okay...farewell." And start something else.

Lama Teunsang in France, one of the older teachers, he has kind of a funny attitude. He says, "The older students who now are becoming teachers, they must start from scratch. They must not live in a well established center. They must go to a place where there is nothing and start from scratch. And when it's running, pass it on and go away, and start somewhere else from scratch." You don't stay. You go somewhere, you put in your energy, and when it runs, you go!

You let it have its life; it's like when you have a child and you help them grow, but you spend the rest of their life breathing down their neck, saying, "Hey, you should do this, I would have done it like that" and so on. Nah...let them fly!

He kept telling me, "Yeah, you should move away from Kundreul Ling, just go, take any center, anything that's started where there's nobody, just go there and start everything, because you've got the knowledge, you've got the experience, you've got what it takes to start." And it's true that I was part of the generation of the pioneers. In Dhagpo in the '70s, Kundreul Ling in the '80s...and somewhat by nature I'm more comfortable in the starting years when it's in the far west, not so much red tape. And when it comes to administration I'm like arrrg....so, maybe that is also my nature.

Not to stand in the way, don't stand in the way. Step aside. And it's really heartbreaking, because sometimes you see these pioneers at a time when nobody was thinking about the Dharma, they were there by their karmic connection and their devotion to one master like Karmapa or Shamar Rinpoche or whoever, and they gave everything. They gave their time, they gave their energy, their resources, they gave their land; a lot of money, a lot of time, a lot of energy...and there is a moment where this project is grown up, and has its own life. And then you have to move from being parents to being grandparents. You know, you're just here for fun. But it's hard, when you have been so involved for twenty years. People were surprised when I left Le Bost, they asked me like, "How come?" Especially Tibetans. "How come? You're on top of your game, man. You're in charge of the big monastery of Karmapa and the retreat center, it's very prestigious, and you just disappear?" They couldn't understand! And I couldn't understand what they were saying. Like, why would I stay?

Don't stand in the way...pass the baton, let them run their run.

Q: When I was learning about taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and at first I thought that meant the people in the meditation hall...that lasted for a while, but then I learned it was more like the Supreme Assembly, not the other humans in the Natural Bridge center. I guess I'm confused, can you help me to understand what is meant?

A: Yes. Thank you for this question, it's a very important distinction. I think the word Sangha has been used by extension, in a sort of inclusive manner to bring in also your fellow practitioners, which was never part of the description of the Sangha in the classic literature. That's why I use the word fellowship, to make a distinction between Sangha and fellowship. So, talking about the people who come sometimes to the meditation here in Bodhi Path, I refer to this group as a fellowship. Fellow because we are all equal, we have different functions, you know, sometimes I'm the one teaching, sometimes another one teaches, I take care, they take care, a fellowship. So there is more of a sense that we're equal. And then when I learn something from someone I'm listening to, I have respect, because I don't have this knowledge, and vice versa. But this doesn't mean there is some sort of essential difference, like one is higher and the other one is lower; that's the fellowship.

And Sangha is actually described as the close Sangha, close to us, this is the monastic Sangha. The monastic Sangha, even though consisting of ordinary people in a way, with their own battles, struggles, and qualities, but this is because, as the Buddha explained in one sutra, in the future when physically he won't be present, then when four fully-ordained members of the communities of bhikkhu or bhikkhunis are together in one place, and of course implicitly they keep the Vinaya perfectly, they will be my physical presence, my representatives. Because of their lifestyle, abiding by the rules of the Vinaya, showing discipline and gentleness and so on, they are a sort of presence of the Buddha, 2500 years after he passed away.

So that is why we include them as the Sangha in the refuge, because to begin with it may be difficult to have access to the Dharma, and to comprehend all the details and so on, so even if they don't teach much, like for example in Southeast Asia. The monastic community, the monastic Sangha, don't necessarily teach the lay community a lot, but they provide them with a role model that they can aspire to reach at some point, and maybe try to come close. You know, the Tibetan's word for spiritual friend is *gewe shé nyen*, kalyanamitra in Sanskrit. *Nyen* means close. *Shé* means to expose, or teach. And *gewe* means, what is wholesome. Virtue. So, a *gewe shé nyen*, a member of this monastic community, is someone who is showing you how to come closer to what is wholesome in your life. So for that reason, in their presence they are ambassadors of the Buddha, and that is why they are respected everywhere. And so they have to be up to the task. Like, you know, when you take vows you can say that it's individual liberation, but you also become an ambassador of the Buddha, and you can't just misbehave; you really have to behave, you know, because you're representing more than yourself. They are the ordinary, or close, Sangha.

Then, to some extent you can have the pratyekabuddhas. The solitary realizers who have reached some high level of realization. And they are sort of closer to enlightenment. It's not a common practice, reading about the pratyekabuddhas and the arhats and so on...but it's interesting. And in particular the arhats and the four stages of their enlightenment; entering the stream, once-returned, non-returned, arhat..they are four levels. They give you a reference of your progression, on how your path can be, spiritually speaking. So they become, again, another form of role model. Different maybe from the monastic sangha; it's more on the level of the progression and so on.

And then finally you've got what is called the Ariyan Sangha, the Noble Sangha, that is the Sangha of the Bodhisattvas. Not the trainees, the actual bodhisattvas who have crossed the pass of the first bhumi, who are the bodhisattvas abiding on the bhumis, especially the higher bodhisattvas of the 8th, 9th, 10th level of bodhisattva...the great bodhisattvas like Manjushri, Avolokiteshvara and so on. Samantabhadra and so on. So these are the great aspiration to develop capacities and qualities that are way beyond what we are able to do now. So that's the Sangha.

And sometimes we need this close to us, nearby Sangha and their very simple and clear lifestyle that reflects the Buddha's guidance, because they give us a sort of gauge...you can match your behavior

to their behavior and maybe see where you need to adjust a little bit. And then the Arhats and the Pratekyabuddhas. The Arhats and their levels of realization which are already very, very advanced are another form of refuge in the Sangha, or aspect of the Sangha, and then the Noble Sangha, the Sangha of the bodhisattvas abiding in the bhumis and the Mahabodhisattvas who are extremely close to enlightenment. So that's the Sangha in which we take refuge.

The other men and women who sit with you are part of your fellowship. And they need to be treated with respect because, of course, we are trying to help each other. Like Ram Dass said, "We are walking each other home." We are walking each other home, so let's be friendly and courteous and nice. But yes, they are not the Sangha in which you take refuge. And this was a common mistake for awhile, I mean, several decades, until Shamar Rinpoche stepped in and said, like, "Uh-uh, nah, you don't take refuge in them." Not these guys;~} No no. They are not the Sangha in that sense. And he really didn't want us to use or put in the usual common language towards the Sangha, to describe the fellowship. He was very, very clear about that. And that's why I use two words. Sangha and fellowship, to show that there really is a distinction. It's very important.

Q: My thoughts are about work versus retreat and practice. I am wondering if, in order to make the best progress on the spiritual path in our lifetime when we are still working, if you think short quarterly retreats suffice in building a scaffolding in our practice until we get to a place of more leisure? I also get a lot out of being in the midst of the fellowship as part of my foundational practice, interacting and sharing experiences. So I guess I'm asking for a good roadmap of how to best spend my time and how to balance it to make the most progress.

A:I think basically what you have outlined is a good scenario. We are lay people, and we all have different levels of responsibilities according to the time of life where we are; responsibilities if we have children, or work, etc. And we have to make a really good assessment of what reasonably needs to be fulfilled, so that we don't spend too much time making the money that is necessary to purchase and sustain superfluous things. Simplify. I like to say enlightenment is lighten-ing, like, you know, making it light to travel. Make it light to travel. And everybody is different, so everybody will have to see how they could cut corners and be reasonable, but also save a lot of time. Because everything that you own you can translate it into dollars, and these dollars can be translated into hours. Hours to purchase, hours to maintain. So that's where you need to apply your discernment to see, let's say on a 5 year plan, how can I deflate, how can I head towards a sort of minimalist movement where I could do that without being excessive and ridiculous? Gaining a little bit of time here and there. Reorganize your day, reorganize your priorities; all of that is part of the general process. That will allow you to have, from time to time, a little spare time, or free time, to unplug. And that goes from one day to however many days you can afford, regarding your responsibilities.

But this unplugging is extremely important. Like you said, these are the pillars that hold the bridge up. If you don't have the pillar of "me time," time with myself, the bridge won't hold. So we need to make sure our basis is solid. One thing that I have found throughout the mind training literature,

and also recently came across in some teachings that came from Milarepa and had commentary by the 2nd Shamarpa, all this genre of practice which is called *lam Khyer* in Tibetan, which means “bring to the path;” for me it is so crucial for our time, and who we are as people right now in this time and space. We need to consolidate. We don’t have the leisure to split things, to say, “This is my years of work, this is my years of practice, this is my years with the family,” and so on. You need to consolidate all of this, with what I call the meta project. The meta project is like what I expressed with the refuge, we are on the bodhi path, and I’m not talking about the center here, I am talking about the path to awakening, the bodhi path. And everything can be consolidated in this central project.

So that’s the question we should ask ourselves. Am I, right now at this point, am I willing to find strategies to consolidate everything into the bodhi path? Without excluding any aspect of my life; it’s not my years of work versus my years of meditation versus my years of dedication to my family versus my years of dedication to my fellowship or community or whatever. This is not in this position, it’s *‘cher,*’ bring together. So if we are in this perspective, then we can see where all of this overlaps. And for that we need a clear definition of what the bodhi path is. The clear definition of the bodhi path was given by Shamar Rinpoche. “Mind training is the backbone of the bodhi path.” Mind training, with one aspect of relative bodhicitta, which is developing benevolence, and gratitude, and working to alleviate the suffering of everybody and resolve the problems in us that prevent us from doing so. And on the other hand, cultivate the path of mahamudra. Come to realize progressively through calm abiding and insight the true nature of our mind, and eventually these two rivers will merge, and that leads us to enlightenment.

So, for me, I am so grateful. Gendun Rinpoche had already begun to give me this direction. Shamar Rinpoche just crossed the t’s and dotted the i’s. Just like, “That’s it, do that!” And that’s what I’m saying now, that’s the only thing I’m talking about. I’m not interested in talking about what divides the moments of your lives. I’m only interested in talking about what brings all the moments of your life into a coherent bodhi path. And they’re not exclusive, one to another. Like you can make money; you need to pay the rent, you need to raise your kids, of course...we know. We all know. We all have bills, so it’s not a dirty secret, you know? We all share that. When I go to Kroger to buy, or the Farmer’s Market, they don’t say, “Oh, you’re a holy man, it’s free.” ;~) No, you have to pay. And that’s okay. But the essential, what you need...how much does it cost, and translated into hours, how many hours does it take? Okay. Minimalize, deflate, simplify. That’s the rule on that. Don’t be excessive. Be middle way.

Now, when you are doing this, when you are making the money that you need, don’t oppose this to the necessity of practice, saying like, “Oh, I’m wasting my time, I should be practicing.” Because then you’re not practicing, and you’re not efficient at making money; because you’re just feeling bad about not doing one, or being forced to do the other. When you’re making your money, you’ve got a playground for generosity and ethics and patience and perseverance and discernment. You’ve got a playground for the cultivation of the 6 paramitas. What’s the problem? That’s practice; same. Same.

When you see it and you meditate and you're bored to death, and you're thinking, "Oh, I've got this big project to finalize, I need to make a call...I've got..."

When people come for retreat, I'm not a warden, like, "Give me your phones." I know everybody is tap tap tapping on their phones when they're in retreat. In a way it's not my problem, it's your time, you're a grownup, so you do what you want. But to unplug, really unplug, have a "me time" means you are with yourself, and you look at yourself...that's invaluable. And you should know that when you do that, you are not a sort of freeloader, or sort of lazy, or whatever. Why? Because you are not "working" and "making money." No! You are working on the clarification of your mind, the exploration of your qualities and resources, that when you are out of the retreat it will be so helpful when you're back to work life, family life, social life. Okay? Same with social life, same with family life, all of them are a playground to cultivate the 6 paramitas. So it's Dharma, it's *lam cher*, you're bringing it to the path.

This text that Shamar Rinpoche mentioned in the Bodhi Path Centers curriculum, the 6 Cycles, or the 6 Opportunities to Cultivate One Taste, [??? in Tibetan], it's precisely doing this. It's bringing concepts, bringing adversity, sickness, bringing affliction, it's bringing death...to the path. So there's not a moment in your life that is not connected with the bodhi path. If you begin to see this, that's really great. Now, after that, it will take time to implement, because you will not divide and oppose the moments of your life. You will not regret not doing this because you're doing that, because how can you find the motivation to do it when you're despising what you're doing because you're not doing what you should be doing? That's the point. It's the point of integration, consolidation, one mind, bodhi path. And after that, one step, one step, one step. Don't think ahead. Don't think, like, "When is it going to finish? When will I reach enlightenment? Am I quick enough?" You're quick, because you are walking at your pace. You can't go faster than that.

You see it already, it's there, it's taking shape. You need to put the pieces of the puzzle together, but coming closer to the integration process. It's all part of the bodhi path. Even working at the BOdhi Path, at the center, like coming early, setting up the shrine, cleaning, bringing flowers; the fellowship coming to take care of the place. It's our house. We take care; this is the bodhi path too. It's service, and you're not doing this for that reason, but tremendous merit, positive energy, a driving force that you generate. You just do it because you know it's what has to be done. I forgot it's so simple;~}

Q: You mentioned, "Don't cut side-deals," when you were discussing refuge. Can you expound on that, please? It sounds a little exclusive.

A: Thank you for that question, and you're right. It reeks of exclusivity a bit. Like, don't cut side-deals, we're all you need, just stay with us and you're gonna be fine kinda thing. But, if you dare digress and go here and there, you're in trouble. And that's not at all the intention here, there is not an idea of exclusivity, like, the Buddhist "church" will be the only one that has a direct connection with the ultimate truth. It's a good idea, but there's no idea of exclusivity.

If you have interest in other religions, the question you should ask yourself, and I would answer to this in this view that I just expressed of consolidation, do you get this inspiration that consolidates your view from other sources? Or when your path becomes demanding do you escape into something else? And that's the problem. The problem is when you are a butterfly; you fly from one thing to another and then actually your path is what I call the myayana. Okay? It's the path of "me." Myayana. A little bit of this, a little bit of that, like how we make sandwiches here in America. The first time I came to this country I was in the airport and was hungry, and went to a sandwich shop, and I said, "Can I have a sandwich?" And in France when you have a sandwich it's bread and saucisson, bread and pate, or bread and ham. Same bread. Maybe butter if you ask, or cornichon. That's very simple. Here it's like, white, sourdough, rye, wholewheat...and that's just the bread. Five types of cheese to choose from, so many choices of protein, lettuce or no lettuce, onion or no onion, pickles, relish, and I was shocked! You remember the joke about, "Make me one with everything, right?"

It seems it is a time of consumption, a time of choices. You can choose whatever you want. So when you apply this to spirituality, and your church says, "Hey, it's coffee and bagels today." And you say, "Yeah, but I want a croissant and a cappuccino." So you go next door to the next shop. And then of course everybody is friendly, and before you come to the commitment moment in this tradition you've got a lot of perks you can enjoy. And then comes the commitment, and you're like, "But deeply at heart, I'm Buddhist."

So that's a problem, when you're like a butterfly. That's what I mean by cutting side-deals. When it comes to the grind, when you're really going to have to work on what has to be worked on, every tradition will bring you there. Every single tradition will bring you there. Okay, so it's not about that. But when you come to that point, keep grinding, even if it hurts, keep working with it. And do not dodge what has to be done by pretending that you're open-minded and you need to see what other people think about it. That's the problem.

For the rest, I am very inspired, for example, by St. Francis, because that's the name my parents gave me, Francis, but it's a great inspiration. And frankly, I went to Assisi, and I had a tremendous blessing (maybe more than in Bodhgaya;~} just to be by his tomb, and seeing the Monastery of St. Clare and so on. It was so powerful. So I am not betraying Buddha, and Buddha is not pouting in heaven because I'm inspired by St. Francis. St. Francis is not pouting because I am mainly Buddhist.

Lately I was reading about Dogen, and again, Dogen is so inspiring, he's like Milerepa. It's like, give up your body and mind and jump into Dharma, throw yourself into Dharma; like there's no alternative, throw yourself into it. That's what I mean by not cutting side-deals. So I can get a lot of inspiration, and maybe it's my way of seeing things, the way I have been guided and taught by my teachers. Consolidate! There is one path! The Buddha taught one thing, and it's not a sort of exclusivity, but as they say, if you want to find water better to drill one deep hole than ten shallow

holes. Drill just one when you know that the water is there. Drill. And don't waver when it's difficult. That's the idea of taking refuge in the Buddha. Because you can have tremendous inspiration by Jesus' compassion and generosity and love, I mean inspiration comes from all sources. It's not restricted. Beware of the butterfly effect, that's all.