



**Mind Cultivation**  
**by**  
**Kyabgon Traleg Rinpoche**

The topic for tonight is entitled: "Mental Cultivation in Buddhist Spirituality." I suppose the reason why this topic was chosen is because in Buddhism the starting point of our spiritual quest starts with our mind. So in Buddhism, being a non-theistic religion, which is to say that it is neither theistic nor atheistic, we do not start with a belief in God or some other kind of supernatural or super-normal power, but we start with our own mind. In terms of Buddhist spirituality, if we do not discuss the mind, if we do not pay attention to our mind then we cannot really speak about Buddhist spirituality at all. The reason for this is because in Buddhism, as a Buddhist, what we try to do is to emulate and to follow the example of Gautama Buddha, the Bhagavan Shakyamuni Buddha, who lived in India roughly 2500 years ago. So therefore we try to realise what Buddha himself had realised, which was the state of enlightenment.

Now Buddha, far from being a divine incarnate of some sort, started on his spiritual journey as a normal human being just like you and me, with all the problems associated with being a human being. And it's precisely because of his humanness that drove him to seek enlightenment, so in that way Buddha was not in a unique position. It's not the case that Buddha was in a privileged position to have this kind of special link between himself and some kind of greater spiritual reality. What Buddha was able to connect with and realise in himself and around himself is something that we can all realise and attain. This is a state of enlightenment. Now when we talk about the attainment of enlightenment we should not think that the state of enlightenment is some kind of psychological state that we arrive at, this has to be made very clear. Even though we do say that in order to attain enlightenment, which is what Buddha himself attained, and this is what we ourselves are attempting to do, that does not mean that what Buddha attained was some kind of altered state of consciousness. When we talk about cultivation of the mind we have to understand it in a uniquely Buddhist way because otherwise there is a clear danger of things spiritual collapsing into things psychological. We have to maintain that distinction between what is psychological from what is spiritual. So the state of enlightenment is a form of spiritual awakening. It's not just a normal state of some kind of psychological state where certain psychological insights had risen, but true spiritual illumination had occurred within the Buddha.

So when we are seeking enlightenment as Buddhists, we are not simply looking for some kind of altered states of consciousness or some kind of psychological insight into certain aspects of the functioning or working of our ordinary consciousness, the so called ordinary consciousness. All though that is not discounted because we do have to pay attention to that as part of our practise in Buddhism, but that is not the goal, that is not the true goal. The true goal is to

transcend that normal state of consciousness and break into the state of enlightenment, to break into what we call the Buddha mind. We are the samsaric mind, what we call samsaric mind, which is our ordinary normal states of consciousness, which according to Buddhism is completely corrupted, tainted by various forms of mental defilements, and illusions. Mind is made, we are driven into a state of confusion because of relentless arousal of what we call conflicting emotions; excessive anger, excessive desire, excessive pride, egotism, self-centredness, bitterness, resentment, jealousy, envy, so on and so forth. Therefore our ordinary consciousness then is what we call "dimmed state of consciousness" which is hardly conscious at all.

When we talk about cultivation of the mind in Buddhism, what we are then learning to do is to deal with our ordinary states of consciousness in such a way that we would be able to go beyond that and realise what we call the Buddha mind, as I mentioned already. But realising the Buddha mind is not something that takes place as a result of having worked with our ordinary deluded consciousness, or the deluded mind. What I am trying to say is that it's not the case that we transcend our normal ordinary states of consciousness and then we attain something called Buddha mind as something new, but the Buddha mind is already present, the capacity to attain or to realise Buddha mind is already present, which is why the deluded states of mind can be overcome. This is why through spiritual cultivation, through practise, it is possible to be able to attain enlightenment. Because otherwise if all that we are, if all that our consciousness or our mind, is nothing other than just this deluded state filled with confusion, anxiety, frustration, mental agitation, conflicts of all sorts, and ignorance, then where would the impetus, the inspiration, the ability even to attain Buddhahood, to attain enlightenment come from. So according to Buddhism this comes from our innate spiritual nature, which is referred to as Buddhanature. So, I think quite possibly you can see that this cultivation of the mind that we speak about in the context of Buddhist spirituality is about working with our deluded states of mind so that our true spiritual nature will become evident, it will become manifest. So to become enlightened then is not something like becoming somebody else or about leaving what we are.

I am trying to point out that when we talk about mental cultivation we are not just only concerned with some kind of notion of our psychological health. In other words, when we talk about Buddhist mind training or Buddhism, when we talk about Buddhist mind training for example we are not talking about some kind of Buddhist psychotherapy. Buddhist meditation is not really like therapy that addresses certain neuroses that we have, that if we do Buddhist meditation then we will know, we will slowly find out why we eat so much, we will get to the root of the problem if we do that. Or if we do Buddhist meditation and Buddhist practise then we can get to the root of why we feel so anxious or if we look into our mind with Buddhist practise then we might be able to find out where all this self-hatred and self-loathing comes from. But that does not mean it will not happen. I mean, even in Buddhist meditation with an added sense of awareness, being present, becoming more conscious about ourselves, our own various conscious states, we may come to realise some certain things about ourselves along the way. But that is not enlightenment, that's what I'm trying to say. Just

because some of the neurotic symptoms have eased a bit we should not then conclude that now I am becoming more like the Buddha just because our neurotic tendencies have let up. But of course if we are following the spiritual path and we have our neurosis and if we are following the spiritual path properly and we are conducting our effort of mental cultivation properly I'm sure we will get some relief from our neurotic problems also because there might be a general sense of being at ease and our psychophysical sense of well being might also improve. But that then cannot then be equated with spiritual illumination, spiritual transformation.

When we speak about mental cultivation then we really are speaking about not just dealing with psychological problems but dealing with the more fundamental spiritual problems of defilements, delusions, illusions, and ignorance, states of ignorance. These are the things that we need to deal with. Because if we deal with these mental defilements, delusions, and if we are successful in our effort to purify the mind of these pollutants, for want of a better word, then we will receive spiritual illumination and we will then become more enlightened, not just more sane, less crazy, and get on with our friends and other fellow human beings better. But it's more. The transformation is more fundamental, that's what I am trying to say. And I'm emphasising this point because in my travels and in my conversations with other western spiritual practitioners and people who are into western forms of psychotherapy and so forth, sometimes I get the feeling that there's an underlying kind of tendency to conflate spiritual with psychological and we have to keep that distinction.

When we follow the Buddhist path, when we try to train our mind, and when we are trying to sort of purify the mind of the defilements through mental cultivation then we are doing something exceedingly fundamental, something very profound. And our transformations and our spiritual experiences have to be very deep and profound as well and very unexpected or very unusual, unique. According to Buddhism we have that capacity already. So it's not just a question of re-adjustment or doing something to fix our mind up so to speak, but to really bring a complete total revolution of the consciousness so that there is a complete turn around. So that whatever we experience either through the sensory modes or through the inner workings of the mind or through the various physical states, whatever that might be, we perceive and we experience these things with spiritual insight.

So from the Buddhist point of view there is another way of being ourselves which we are not at all familiar with in our normal states of consciousness because we only perceive and experience things from our very limited and myopic perspective, the egoistic perspective, how the deluded self perceives things. But through mental cultivation then we can rise above that and we can perceive things from a non-egoistic and from a non-delusory point of view. Which is not to say that when we cultivate our mind, when we are cultivating our mind in the context of Buddhist spirituality, when we talk about overcoming delusions and so forth, we are not talking about getting rid of emotions altogether, feelings and so forth. From the Buddhist perspective it's not the emotions themselves or the feelings that we have which contribute to the spiritual ignorance that we live in

but it is the ignorance itself. In other words, again in the west we may have this idea that if the spiritual state is so rarefied and so lofty then all the features of our normal states of consciousness, our normal states of mental functioning, we must leave them behind to be in this pure state of consciousness. According to Buddhism that is not true. Once the ignorance has been purified then all the capacities and functioning of the normal consciousness is enhanced. This is why the notion of purification is used, purify does not mean renunciation. It does not say in this kind of mental training that we have to renounce certain specific features of our functioning of the consciousness. What we have to renounce is the ignorance, which is behind all our deluded states of mind. But having done so then our capacity to feel things, to have experience of emotions, to perceive things, to even think, conceptualise, is enhanced.

And I know, again, often it is said that the enlightened state of mind is non-conceptual. Now this is true, but what that means is that our delusory states of mind have two sources, one is distorted forms of thinking, excessive conceptualisation and the other is the disturbing emotions. But disturbing thoughts are not the same as thinking per se, this also has to be pointed out because I am sure even the Buddha had thoughts about all kinds of things, I am sure. From simple things like "today, I will not eat lunch," to "I don't want my curry too hot," (laughter). I am sure he said to Shariputra on some occasions, "could you make the curry less hot next time." But what is meant by non-conceptual state of enlightenment simply means the excessive thinking that goes on in our mind subsides. But the thinking capacity is in fact enhanced, thinking clearly instead of thinking in a very confused fashion, because excessive discursive thoughts only lead to confusion. We know this to be true even in terms of our own normal day to day experience, the more we try to think about certain things that we think we need to find some answer to, the more we get caught up in it, then we start to go round and round in a circle, we can not find our way out of it, that is a fact. So when Buddhism counsels us in terms of mental cultivation that we have to learn to overcome conflicting emotions, learn to not allow ourselves to be abused by conflicting emotions so much or that we should not be so prone to thinking excessively it just simply means that we have to learn to express our emotions better. We can express our emotions in a very unhealthy self-destructive way or we can express our emotions in a healthy and constructive fashion. Similarly, we can think in a way that is self-destructive, in a confusing fashion that only reinforces our negative habits, which is also something that Buddhism emphasises. Because over indulgence in either of these two, either conflicting emotions or excessive distorted forms of thinking just simply goes towards reinforcing our old habits which then just solidifies our karmic tendencies, what we call karmic tendencies, even more.

So this is what then Buddhism says that we need to do in terms of mental cultivation. That we need to learn to gradually operate from the level of the Buddha mind and try to gradually extricate, pull ourselves away from the delusory habituated states of consciousness that we find ourselves in. So in our normal states of consciousness we are not free, even when we think we are choosing, even on a very simple level, when we think we are making choices about what we are going to do, how we are going to make certain decisions about

our lives, it's not free from a Buddhist point of view. And we will not be free as long as our habits are being reinforced continuously. In the Buddhist teachings it is said, continuously for twenty-four hours, day and night, even while we are sleeping, our karmic habits are being reinforced, even in our dreams. What a dreadful thought. So we are trapped, imprisoned in this state, which is what is called the samsaric bondage, this is called samsaric bondage and we need to extricate ourselves from that through our mental cultivation with Buddhist practices.

In Buddhism we have many different kinds of practices, but you find that they all emphasis just three things really, fundamentally speaking. In terms of meditation: one technique of meditation is designed for us to be able to get some kind of handle on how to deal with our conflicting emotions, this is called meditation of tranquillity; and then there is a type of meditation which is designed to help us, to aid us in our effort to overcome discursive thoughts, the proliferation of thoughts that we spoke about, which is dealt with by this practise called meditation of insight, Vipashyana meditation; and then our feelings and emotions, this is helped by this meditation called "four infinities," "four brahmavihara" sometimes it is referred to as such in the literatures, which consist of contemplation on love, contemplation on compassion, contemplation on joy and contemplation on equanimity. So as you can see with these kinds of practices, each specific practise addresses certain aspects of our consciousness and deals with that particular source problem or the source of our delusions, whether it is emotional or conceptual.

I don't think I expressed that very clearly actually. Meditation of tranquillity deals with not just emotions, but with the disturbed mind, which is about developing mindfulness and awareness. Now how do our habits become entrenched, how do we become habituated? Through lack of awareness, going about our business in a mindless fashion, without attentiveness, without being fully conscious of what we are doing, what we are thinking, so on and so forth. So we have to learn to get a handle on the distracted mind, mind which becomes scattered with the upsurge of conflicting emotions or the arousal of discursive thoughts. So then when our mind is made a little bit more tranquil then we do meditation of insight, which helps us with the discursive thoughts. And then we supplement those two practices with the meditation on the four infinities, that allow us to learn how to generate emotions in a way that will enhance our pursuit of self realisation and so that we become skilful in use of and expressions of our emotions. The expression "skilful means" is also a very important feature of Buddhist teachings. But, again it's not whether we have this or that emotion that matters, but how we express them, how we experience them, what do we do with them, that's what determines whether its harmful or its beneficial. So we become more skilled as we go along in how we utilise these various types of experiences that we have.

So in that way, as we deal with the deluded states of mind we then, for want of a better expression, we have to say the Buddha mind, but as with many different languages it's very difficult to translate one particular word in one language into another and so for want of a better expression we normally, this kind of mind or consciousness is referred to as Buddha mind and I'll just stay with that for now.

But it means a mental state that is either less given to delusory states or not given to delusory states at all. So in Buddhism we think of spiritual realisation as occurring over a period of time. We cannot sort of switch and make a quick transition from one state to the other. As we begin to work with our delusory states of mind, as they become lessened, through our effort in terms of mental cultivation, then we will gradually be able to operate from the level of the Buddha mind. And our delusions and illusions then will become completely eradicated at the end, which is what the goal of Buddhist spiritual practise is.

Before we finish I just want to re-emphasise that point that I have been making one more time, which is that when one becomes a Buddha one has become totally transfigured. Because Shakyamuni Buddha started as an ordinary human being that does not mean that after attaining enlightenment that Buddha Shakyamuni was just another human being. He was not just another human being, he was a human being totally transformed. So therefore when we follow the spiritual path we also have to think in terms of becoming an elevated being, rather than becoming too attached to our normal human characteristics. There is, there is an expression, something like de-emphasis, then you should use that expression. But no hell and broomsticks. If our excessive delusory states of mind are not kept under control then we are in hell according to Buddhism. And that is our punishment for allowing ourselves to become so mindlessly caught up in our own delusory states of mind and allow ourselves to get lost, to go astray as the teachings say. So we have to come back and find ourselves and if we do so then that is the true heaven, at least from a Buddhist point of view. In Buddhism, also we do talk about heaven and hell, but heaven and hell is determined by the mind also. In Buddhism it's not necessarily a place you go to, but it's a mental state. So if the mind is tormented then that is hell, if the mind is not tormented but is filled with wisdom, compassion, insight and ease of body and mind then that is heaven. So I would like to then say that to be in that state then is not just another psychological state that somebody arrives at at the end, but truly a state of transfiguration, total transformation, a truly rejuvenated human being and that is what we as Buddhists aspire to.

I would like to stop here and if you would like to ask any questions you are welcome. If you have any comments you want to make that's also fine.

### Questions

**Question:** Can I ask, do Buddhists pray at all, say to God, to ask for help to reach enlightenment?

Rinpoche: Yes, that's a very relevant question. Yes we do pray and in Buddhism also there is a devotional element to Buddhism. But we do not really pray to god, that's also not entirely true. Especially in Tibetan Buddhism we have many kinds of gods and goddesses but they are not real beings out there. They are more like personifications of various aspects of ourselves. But we do pray, but we pray mostly to other enlightened beings for their, what we call blessings. So we are asking for their help and we do that often. This is why I am saying that in

Buddhism truly enlightened beings are not seen as just another kind of human being but someone who is very exalted and very advanced, a spiritually realised being who can extend help to those who need it. So we pray to Buddhas, bodhisattvas and many others. Normally we both pray both for what we call temporary reasons as well as what we call ultimate reasons. We pray for temporary things like, we pray by saying that in this life may I not have sickness or other unpleasant things happening in my life so that I can devote my time to doing things that are constructive, both for myself and for others, which is also a very important part of Buddhist prayer. In Buddhism when we pray we do not just simply pray for ourselves alone, we include others. So we always pray for both myself and others, so myself and others have less, what we call obstacles and impediments in their lives and all that is auspicious, which is also a very Buddhist kind of expression, the obstacles and auspiciousness. In Buddhism they have specific meaning. So we pray for those reasons. Then ultimately for enlightenment, saying, "May I and others become enlightened in the future."

**Question:** Since in Buddhism you don't have a divine figure or any god, how does this relate to karma, when we reincarnate back into Earth in our next body.

**Rinpoche:** As I mentioned, Buddhism by and large is non-theistic rather atheistic. So as Buddhists we are not really saying that there is no god on the one hand but neither are we saying that there is a god. That probably will be settled as one gets to higher levels of consciousness or something. But as far as the aspect of karmic inheritance goes, well in Buddhism each subsequent reincarnation or rebirth inherits the karma of the previous, and some additional karmic stuff on the way, perhaps the state between the previous incarnation and the following one. But where it's recorded, it's recorded in what is called "stream of consciousness." In Buddhism you see, just like in our normal everyday experience of consciousness, our preceding states of consciousness influence the subsequent states of mind, or states of consciousness. So that influence is transferred from one state of consciousness to the next. And karma is transferred in exactly the same fashion. That is really karmic transference. This is why in Buddhist reasoning, this is why negative karma results from negative states of mind. Because negative states of mind will only leave negative imprints on the succeeding or subsequent mental states. So then it's perpetuated. And positive states of mind, which result in positive karma, the positive states of mind leave positive karmic imprints in the subsequent mental states. So then what follows also becomes positive. So this is the relationship of karmic cause and effect, in that way. We are not judged at all by a divine being. There is no notion of justification, or retribution, or punishment, redemption even, it's really very – the wisdom that we try to cultivate in our meditation practices comes from being able to see this and observe it in our own meditation also. Seeing that when a negative thought arises how that then influences the current mental state. So when anger arises then one is overcome by anger and so on and so forth. So also our association of certain objects with certain kinds of experiences then also becomes a cause of different mental reactions. As soon as we see someone then immediately that same response, our response comes just sort of spontaneously, instinctively almost, which according to Buddhism is karmic. So Buddhist practices are then about lessening that hold. Because as I was saying before,

that's why our actions, as long as we are under the influence of ignorance we can never be totally free. Although it's free on one level because we can decide not to do something, but still because the karmic tendencies are so strong it's very difficult, I mean it takes a great deal of effort on our part to resist. But again, this also is part of inculcating certain habits. So if we become used to restraint then it takes less and less effort, and time and energy. But if we are not used to that then it will always be overwhelmingly difficult. Also in that context I think as Buddhists we would have to say that if god or any kind of divine being had any hand in our experiences of happiness or suffering and so forth, then we have to start asking many other questions of why a divine being would allow anyone to suffer, and why redemption is available for some and not for others. I mean all kinds of other things. As Buddhist it's best not to bring god into it. Which is not to say that one has to think that there is no god.

**Question:** What is your interpretation of the soul then, or the mind?

**Rinpoche:** People who come to Buddhism should not start to think that when Buddhism talks about the mind they are simply talking about the same thing as what is being meant by mind in western psychology and so on and so forth. In Buddhism we do not think the concept of soul is all that helpful. So we stick with the mind. Because we avoid bringing the notion of soul into it then automatically we should not then assume that the mind just simply means this mind, this ordinary consciousness that we are familiar with. That is going too far. But on the other hand to postulate this sort of psychic substance called soul, from the Buddhist point of view, again, that is going too far in the other direction because soul is not something that we have experience of. At least that's the Buddhist reasoning. If we pay attention to what we are experiencing then we do not experience soul. So instead of teaching soul in Buddhism we talk about the soullessness. But again, I think, while being faithful to Buddhist teachings I think it would be quite legitimate to interpret this to mean that this is not again about existence of the soul or non-existence of the soul, which from the Buddhist point of view is again a non-issue, it's a distraction. So we go back to dealing with what we experience and leave this discussion of the soul to the side. From the Buddhist point of view, the thinking is that if we practice, and if we are really honest and genuine in our spiritual quest and we do it with total openness and dedication, openness of mind, then if there were things like the soul or god or whatever they would become evident as one goes along. And if they weren't then nothing is lost. You know what I mean. If we are really sincere and honest in our pursuit then of course we will become more in touch with what is real and we will gradually learn to move further and further away from what is unreal, illusory, and go towards what is real. And if god and soul and all of these things were real then obviously that individual will then come to realise that. But however we look at it, I think even from theistic point of view, mind which has been purified of spiritual defilements and ignorance would be the perfect organ for the realisation of this kind of reality.

**Question:** I wonder what the difference between neurosis and defilement is?

**Rinpoche:** Well that's a good point. I mean neurosis of course means many

things to many different kinds of people. I think, Freudian, all different kinds as you know, transactional analysis or whatever. But in any case I think neurosis is about two things, this is my own interpretation, but generally I think all forms of neurosis is based on two things: one is misinterpretation of certain facts and the second is the aspect of fixation on something. You misinterpret a particular fact and then you develop a fixation on that. In Buddhism neurosis is unlike delusions. Neurosis in a Buddhist sense is, generally speaking, tied to, as I said, certain specific instances and certain specific situations or experience. Delusions are more general. Everything that we experience, from the Buddhist point of view, even what we might regard as what we call a together kind of person, a person who has got it together kind of thing, even that person from the Buddhist point of view is deluded. So in that sense they are different. But I'm not knocking western psychology either or western psychotherapy. I mean I've been responsible for putting on the Buddhist and psychotherapy conference every other year for quite a while now, so I don't have any problems with western psychotherapy. All that I'm saying is that – psychotherapy can I think be complimentary to spiritual practice, no doubt. But all I'm saying is that we should make distinctions between psychotherapy and spirituality, that's all I am saying. Psychotherapy is not designed to uplift spiritual ignorance or delusions.

I think we can stop here. Thank you.

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