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The Basic Principle of Bodhicitta

BY CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA RINPOCHE | MARCH 14, 2016

Relative bodhicitta is how we learn to love each other and ourselves, according to Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. The basic principle of ultimate bodhicitta is to rest in the fundamental state of consciousness, before it is divided into ‘I and ‘other.’

Generosity is self-existing openness, complete openness. The ultimate principle of the awakened heart is based on developing transcendent generosity. You are no longer subject to cultivating your own scheme or project. And the best way to open yourself up is to make friends with yourself and others.

Traditionally, there are three types of generosity. The first one is ordinary generosity, giving material goods or providing comfortable situations for others.

The second one is the gift of fearlessness. You reassure others and teach them that they don’t have to feel completely tormented and freaked out about their existence. You help them to see that there is basic goodness and spiritual practice. There is a way for them to sustain their lives.

The third type of generosity is the gift of the dharma. You show others that there is a path that consists of discipline, meditation, and intellect or knowledge. Through all three types of generosity, you can open up other people’s minds. In that way, their closedness, wretchedness, and small thinking can be turned into a larger vision.

That is the basic vision of Mahayana Buddhism: to let people think bigger, think greater. We can afford to open ourselves and join the rest of the world with a sense of tremendous generosity, goodness, and richness. The more we give, the more we gain—although what we might gain should not particularly be our reason for giving. Rather, the more we give, the more we are inspired to give constantly. And the gaining process happens naturally, automatically, always.

The opposite of generosity is stinginess, holding back—having a poverty mentality. The basic principle of the ultimate bodhicitta slogans is to rest in the eighth consciousness, or alaya, and not follow our discursive thoughts. Alaya is a Sanskrit word meaning “basis,” or sometimes “abode” or “home,” as in Himalaya, or “abode of snow.”

So alaya has that idea of a vast range. It is the fundamental state of consciousness, before it is divided into “I” and “other” or into the various emotions. It is the basic ground where things are processed, where things exist.

In order to rest in the nature of alaya, you need to go beyond your poverty attitude and realize that your alaya is as good as anybody else’s alaya. You have a sense of richness and self-sufficiency. You can do it, and you can afford to give out as well.

Compassion comes from the simple and basic experience of realizing that you can have a tender heart in any situation. From our basic training in meditation, we begin to realize our basic goodness and to let go with that. We begin to rest in the nature of alaya—not caring and being very naive and ordinary, even casual.

When we let ourselves go, we begin to have a feeling of good existence in ourselves. That could be regarded as the very ordinary and trivial concept of having a good time. Nonetheless, when we have good intentions toward ourselves, it is not because we are trying to achieve anything—we are just trying to be ourselves.

As they say, we could come as we are. At that point we have a natural sense that we can afford to give ourselves freedom. We can afford to relax. We can afford to treat ourselves better, trust ourselves more, and let ourselves feel good. The basic goodness of alaya is always there. It is that sense of healthiness and cheerfulness and naivete that brings us to the realization of relative bodhicitta.

Relative bodhicitta is related with how we start to learn to love each other and ourselves. That seems to be the basic point. It’s very difficult for us to learn to love. When we decide to love somebody, we usually expect that person to fulfill our desires and conform to our hero worship. If our expectations can be fulfilled, we can fall in love, ideally.

So in most of our love affairs, what usually happens is that our love is absolutely conditional. It is more of a business deal than actual love. We have no idea how to communicate a sense of warmth. When we do begin to communicate a sense of warmth to somebody, it makes us very uptight. And when our object of love tries to cheer us up, it becomes an insult.

That is a very aggression-oriented approach. In the Mahayana, particularly in the contemplative tradition, love and affection are largely based on free, open love which does not ask for anything in return. It is a mutual dance. Even if during the dance you step on each other’s toes, it is not regarded as problematic or an insult. We do not have to get on our high horse or be touchy about that.

To learn to love, to learn to open, is one of the hardest things of all for us. Yet we are conditioned by passion all the time. Since we are in the human realm, our main focus or characteristic is passion and lust. So what the Mahayana teachings are based on is the idea of communication, openness, and being without expectations.

When we begin to realize that the nature of phenomena is free from concept, empty by itself, that the chairs and tables and rugs and curtains and walls are no longer in the way, then we can expand our notion of love infinitely. We could fill the whole of space with a sense of affection—love without expectation, without demand, without possession. That is one of the most powerful things that Mahayana Buddhism has to contribute.

The relationship between mother and child is the foremost analogy used in developing compassion. According to the medieval Indian and Tibetan traditions, the traditional way of cultivating relative bodhicitta is to choose your mother as the first example of someone you feel soft toward.

Traditionally, you feel warm and kindly toward your mother. In modern society, there might be a problem with that. However, you could go back to the medieval idea of the mother principle. You could appreciate her way of sacrificing her own comfort for you. You could remember how she used to wake up in the middle of the night if you cried, how she used to feed you and change your diapers, and all the rest of it.

So in order to develop relative bodhicitta, relative wakeful gentleness, we use our mother as an example and as our pilot light. We think about her and realize how much she sacrificed for us. Her kindness is the perfect example of making others more important than yourself. You might be a completely frustrated person, but you could still reflect back on your childhood and think of how nice your mother was towards you. You could think of that, in spite of your aggression and your resentment. You could remember that there was a time when somebody sacrificed her life for your life, and brought you up to be the person you are now.

That kind of compassion is very literal and very straightforward. With that understanding, we can begin to extend our sense of non-aggression and nonfrustration and non-anger and nonresentment. Traditionally, we use our mother as an example, and then we extend beyond that to our friends and to other people generally. Finally, we even try to feel better toward our enemies, toward people we don't like. So we try to extend that sense of gentleness, softness, and gratitude.

The starting point is realizing that others could actually be more important than ourselves. Other people might provide us with constant problems, but we could still be kind to them. According to the logic of relative bodhicitta, we should feel that we are less important and others are more important—any others are more important! Doing so, we begin to feel as though a tremendous burden has been taken off our shoulders. Finally, we realize that there is room to give love and affection elsewhere, to more than just this thing called “me.” “I am this, I am that, I am hungry, I am tired, I am blah-blah- blah.” We could consider others.

Look at your basic mind, just simple awareness which is not divided into sections, the thinking process that exists within you. Just look at that, see that. Examining does not mean analyzing. It is just viewing things as they are, in the ordinary sense.

The reason our mind is known as unborn awareness is that we have no idea of its history. We have no idea where this mind, our crazy mind, began in the beginning. It has no shape, no color, no particular portrait or characteristics. It usually flickers on and off, off and on, all the time. Sometimes it is hibernating, sometimes it is all over the place. Look at your mind. Your mind fluctuates constantly, back and forth, forth and back. Look at that, just look at that!

You could get caught up in the fascination of regarding all dharmas as dreams [the previous slogan) and perpetuate unnecessary visions and fantasies of all kinds. Therefore it is very important to get to this slogan, “Examine the nature of unborn awareness.”

When you look beyond the perceptual level alone, when you look at your own mind (which you cannot actually do, but you pretend to do) you find that there is nothing there. You begin to realize that there is nothing to hold on to. The mind is unborn, but at the same time, it is awareness because you still perceive things. There is awareness and clarity. Therefore, you should contemplate that by seeing who is actually perceiving dharmas as dreams.

If you look further and further, at your mind’s root, its base, you will find that it has no color and no shape. Your mind is, basically speaking, somewhat blank. There is nothing to it. We are beginning to cultivate a kind of emptiness possibility; although in this case that possibility is quite primitive, in the sense of simplicity and workability. When we look at the root, when we try to find out why we see things, why we hear sounds, why we feel and why we smell—if we look beyond that and beyond that—we find a kind of blankness.

That blankness is connected with mindfulness. To begin with, you are mindful of something: you are mindful of yourself, you are mindful of your atmosphere, and you are mindful of your breath. But if you look at why you are mindful, beyond what you are mindful of, you begin to find, that there is no root. Everything begins to dissolve. That is the idea of examining the nature of unborn awareness.

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