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The Buddha Nature in the Context of the Three Dharmachakras

I would like to extend my greetings and my appreciation to all of you for having taken the time to receive these instructions. I have been asked to present an introduction to Buddhism, the Buddhadharmā, “the teachings of Lord Buddha.” What I wish to talk about is a very important topic from the final cycle of the teachings which Buddha Shakyamuni gave to us. The principal theme of this cycle of teachings is the Buddha nature. Before I begin discussing this subject, though, I wish to remind you that we need to be free of the three faults while listening to the holy Dharma. The three faults are compared with a vessel or cup. The first fault is being inattentive, compared with a cup turned upside down that cannot hold what is poured into it. The second fault is being inconsiderate of the contents, compared with a cup with holes in the bottom. The third fault is being distracted by disturbing emotions while receiving the teachings, compared with a cup filled with poison that contaminates anything poured into it. We need to be free of all three faults and generate the pure motivation to attain enlightenment for the welfare of all living beings without exception. We listen to the holy Dharma for this purpose and aspire to integrate the teachings in our lives accordingly.

Generally, the teachings that have come down to us from Buddha Shakyamuni are extremely vast and profound. The reason for this spread of both profundity and extent is basically the very different motivations, propensities, and capabilities of individual people. Some of the teachings that the Buddha presented were directed towards people who were very much in the midst of their daily obligations. Others were provisional teachings intended to lead a person into a deeper appreciation. And some of the teachings were about how things actually are, what we call “the definitive” or “certain section of teachings.” The vast body of instructions is generally known these days as “the three cycles” or “the three Dharmachakras.” The first cycle, which was the initial formulation of the Buddha’s experience, is concerned with the Four Noble Truths. The second cycle is known as “the teachings of no characteristics,” and the third cycle - which will be our principal theme here - is known alternatively as “complete differentiation,” “perfect delineation” or, probably more familiarly, “the teachings of the Buddha nature.”

The First Dharmachakra

The first cycle of teachings is known as the teachings on the Four Noble Truths. The First Noble Truth is basically concerned with an exposition of the suffering and frustration we experience in our lives; it grants a very clear understanding of the dismay and unsatisfactory nature of ordinary experiences in conditioned existence. In the Second Truth, Lord Buddha explained at great length the source or cause of this dissatisfaction, which fundamentally is the emotional concerns - which arise in all of us - and the process by which those motivations turn into suffering. This comes to a delineation of the workings of *karma*, how an action becomes a seed and produces a certain result.

From that he demonstrated a way of life or path that will lead one to become free of suffering, how to live in a way that will dissolve the dissatisfaction of existence, the Third Truth, which is the path. He showed very clearly how this path would lead to the dissolution of suffering, the Fourth Truth, which has come to be known as *nirvana*, the “transcendence of misery.” You see from the above that the principal focus of the three cycles of teachings was on suffering – its causes, its manifestation, and its cessation. Because the context is suffering, the natural inclination and main message of the teachings is how we can become free of suffering itself.

How do we actually make use of that perspective? What do we have to do in order to clear away suffering, frustration, and the unsatisfactory nature of our lives? Lord Buddha was very careful to distinguish between the experiences we have of the world around us and the suffering – the frustration, the lack of satisfaction – in our lives, which comes from the way we interpret those experiences. It isn’t simply the world and what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch that are the actual cause for the lack of satisfaction in our lives. It is much more the way we approach and interact with our experiences that cause a lack of satisfaction. This lack of satisfaction comes from the supposition that drives us to see ourselves always as someone who is experiencing something – we see ourselves to exist as someone in opposition to the world. From this perspective, the presence of the sense of ourselves in discordance with the world is the basis for an unhappy experience of life. So, Lord Buddha, in the First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma, or the first cycle of teachings, elaborated that sense we have of ourselves as existing in opposition to the world.

When we look at it, we see that experiences can arise without any need of a sense of the self. So, through calming the mind, through morality, by acting ethically in body and speech, through training the mind – learning how to restrain the mind so it doesn’t react emotionally – and through developing a calmness which allows for a development of insight into how the mind is and how we react, we come to appreciate that the sense of self, that we feel strongly to be, is actually false. However, an intellectual understanding of this is not by itself sufficient, rather insight needs to develop and grow in us until it becomes a functional and operative understanding. This is essentially the method by which one comes to be free of suffering according to the first cycle of teachings.

Generally speaking, most people have the impression that a religious life – in our context Buddhism – and a worldly or an ordinary life are contradictory, that both don’t have very much in common nor relate to each other at all. Furthermore, there is the erroneous supposition that Buddhism teaches a way to stop all experiences so that we can cease experiencing the world, so that we are free to block everything out. Both assumptions are quite wrong and show very mistaken impressions of Buddhism. In fact, the very opposite is much more so the case. Buddhism is solely concerned with how to live in a way in which we do not experience life as unsatisfactory, as meaningless. Buddhism is really focused on how we live, not about getting away from life. As I mentioned, the first of the Four Noble Truths is the truth of suffering, that life is unsatisfactory, that

we do experience frustration and pain. This is valid for all of us and isn't a teaching on how to get away from things; on the contrary, it is a teaching on how to pay attention to just what our life is made up of and how it is usually experienced. Rather than thinking up ways to escape from suffering, the approach in Buddhism is much more to understand suffering and what it means to be discontent. When we really understand what it means to be unhappy and how pain arises, then we know what to focus our attention on, namely on removing the source of dissatisfaction from our experience. And the source of dissatisfaction, according to the Buddha's teachings, is the negative emotions we feel.

One of the principal ways we remove the negative emotions is through developing a very clear, a very ethical approach to life. We take the workings of karma into account, i.e., we appreciate that all our actions are seeds, that only and alone our actions condition us to experience specific results. If the actions are negative, the results we will inevitably experience will be painful. Therefore, far from teaching us to flee from life or to try to escape from suffering, Buddhism is actually concerned with leading us to understand what our life consists of, what suffering means, how it arises, and what we can actually do about it. The first cycle of teachings is really concerned with helping us understand the nature of dissatisfaction in our lives and shows us how to resolve that.

The Second Dharmachakra

The second cycle of teachings Lord Buddha presented is known as "being without signs," "being without characteristics." It deals with what our experiences are actually made of, what all the things we experience are, how they really are.

When we look at how experiences are, we see that the way they are is fundamentally different from the way we perceive and conceive of them as being. If we look at any particular phenomenon we experience - even the smallest and most insignificant object or event - we see it is made up of many, many factors which have come together to make that particular object a possibility of experience. This statement strongly suggests that there is no object present, whereas objects do exist as a coming together of many conditions. However, we do not see objects as the product of many conditions - we simply see things as independent objects. We are particularly predisposed to seeing things as independent objects, because we feel we ourselves have substantial existence. This is what is known as "clinging to a sense of an individual self." We see ourselves in opposition to the world and consequently turn ourselves into an "own thing." We then proceed to turn everything that makes up the world into "other things," what is known as "the self of phenomena," "the self we impute on all experiences." However, when we look at what we actually experience, we see that we simply experience the coming together of many, many different factors, many different conditions, and that nothing has any existence in its own right. This is the essence of the second cycle of the teachings.

We have to be very careful here because many misconceptions can arise at this point. One might feel that saying there is no actual object present means that nothing exists. This would be quite a serious mistake. These teachings do not say that nothing exists nor do they imply that something exists. In Buddhism, we call the view believing nothing exists “nihilism” and the view believing something exists “eternalism,” the notion that things exist forever while they don’t. The view according to the Second Turning of the Wheel of Dharma or cycle of teachings does not adhere to eternalistic nor nihilistic ideas. We feel that something really exists, but when we look, we see that all experiences are simply the product of many different factors, so it can’t be the case that something really exists. On the other hand, when we say nothing exists, we are immediately confronted with our personal experience that something is going on, so we can’t say nothing exists. The point is to come to an understanding that the designations “existent” and “non-existent” are not accurate descriptions of the world, which is the reason why the second cycle of teachings is termed “the great middle way” - the great middle way goes beyond all philosophical postulates and extremes.

The way we practice the great middle way is to generate and develop what is known in Buddhism as “awakening mind,” awakening to our relationship to the world and awakening to the way the world is. Awakening to the way the world is means awakening to emptiness and awakening to our relationship to the world means awakening to compassion. So, we have the principles of loving kindness, compassion, and the awakening mind as the key principles in the second cycle of teachings. Many of you may have heard the term “emptiness” and wonder what it means. It is a key principle that needs to be understood exactly in how it works and its role in the cycle of teachings.

We cannot understand a concept such as emptiness merely through intellectual reasoning or study in any way. No matter how much we may reason philosophically, no matter what logic we may be able to come up with, the way we see and experience the world will still be in terms of existents, and just this contradicts the way the world actually is. On the other hand, we may feel emptiness refers to nothing, there being nothing, like the emptiness in a box - for instance, there is no “thing” in the box. We feel emptiness means there is nothing going on and we try to understand the world that way, which would be an even greater mistake, because it directly contradicts our own experiences in every instant.

Emptiness refers to “a middle way” and doesn’t simply mean absence or nothing, because there is a very wonderful capability or quality that arises in conjunction with the understanding of emptiness. This is what we know as *Bodhichitta* or, to translate it, as “awakening mind” or “awakening heart.” *Bodhichitta* is the natural manifestation of compassion and concern for others, which comes with the appreciation of the ineffable nature of all phenomena. So, the main theme of the second cycle of teachings is not that nothing exists or that something exists, it is that our experience is beyond any conceptualization. When we actually begin to experience the world and ourselves from that angle, then we find ourselves awakening to a very rich and wonderful engagement in the world, one that is

characterized by compassion and gentleness.

In the first cycle of teachings it was taught that life is unsatisfactory. The Four Noble Truths help us understand the nature of this dissatisfaction and how to resolve it. In the second cycle of teachings it was taught that our experiences cannot be characterized, they are free of the extremes of eternalism and nihilism. The third cycle speaks about the Buddha nature.

The Third Dharmachakra

We find a very important and very wonderful teaching being presented in the Third Dharmachakra, namely that every sentient being is not fundamentally different from an awakened Buddha, that every living being has what we term “the Buddha nature.” This does not mean that there is some “thing” inside each of us that can be pointed to as “the Buddha nature,” that could grow into a Buddha. The idea that there might be something inside us of this kind is eliminative according to the teachings of the second cycle. However, the Buddha nature is nothing other than what we always and already are.

As it is, we live our lives in great confusion, and the teachings on the Buddha nature suggest this confusion. All disturbing emotions, the pain and distortions that we consider and define as “our experiences” are but incidental impurities and are not fundamentally what we in truth are. The Buddha nature is ever-present and manifests when all the confusion of ordinary experiences is cleared away; it is the empty, clear or radiant, and open mind. It is no “thing” in itself. And the empty, clear or radiant and open mind is never different from the mind of a Buddha, a Fully Awakened Being, i.e., we ourselves are not different from a Buddha, except for the presence of incidental impurities. According to these teachings, there is really no difference between the Buddha nature as taught in the third cycle and with awakening mind, which was mentioned in association with the second cycle of teachings. Awakening mind is “awakening to how the world is,” and Buddha nature is “the potential for awakening” - they are not two different things but are intricately entwined since one of the principles of awakening mind is a compassionate attitude towards ourselves and others.

You will notice that some people are naturally compassionate. It doesn't matter who approaches them, everyone likes them, feels comfortable with and trusts them. That kind of spontaneous trust, inspiration, calm, and ease indicate the presence of the Buddha nature in that person. Some people seem to be naturally angry, aggressive, short-tempered, and so forth. The teachings say that anger isn't the fundamental nature of an individual; the disturbing emotions are incidental impurities, adventitious stains that can be cleared away.

According to the third cycle of teachings, everybody has the Buddha nature - everybody has the potential to awaken. As individuals, there is no fundamental distinction, there is no difference

between anyone, there is no basis for prejudice or discrimination present in any of us. There is also no justification to privilege one person against another, since we all fundamentally have the same nature. The only difference between us is the extent to which that nature is actually manifest or not. The more impurities or confusion we have, the less that nature manifests. The less impurities, the more that nature manifests. So, the task then becomes one of enabling the Buddha nature to manifest purely and fully in our lives. We do this by going back to the first cycle of teachings, which discusses karma, how we act, what we do on a day-to-day basis, the ethical actions of learning restraint, of learning how to perform virtue, and how to avoid non-virtue. These practices allow the Buddha nature to manifest. We can also look at the second cycle of teachings, which is principally concerned with the development of love, compassion, and the two aspects of awakening mind, awakening to our relationship to the world and awakening to how the world is. It is through the practice of these instructions that we can clear away our own confusion so that our true nature - the adamant ground - manifests purely and fully.

Questions

Question: If Buddha nature is the fundamental reality, then why do impurities exist?

His Eminence: The point here is not an explanation of why there are the incidental impurities but on how we experience things now. In answer to your question, the incidental impurities we were discussing are an experience of ignorance, of not knowing. What does ignorance or not knowing refer to? The lack of experiential, direct understanding of how we are. That lack of understanding is present and overwhelms us, so we do not perceive ourselves or the world correctly. While our mind or essential nature is empty and clear - that is one way it is described - misunderstanding causes us to perceive emptiness as a "thing," which we take to be a self. That assumption causes us to perceive and conceive the clarity that arises in the mind as "something else" or "other." Both the notion of "self" and "other" are duality. It is ignorance or the misunderstanding and the propensity for duality that are the cause for incidental impurities.

Question: How do we gain experience of emptiness or an understanding of what emptiness is?

Rinpoche: By studying and reflecting the teachings one will come to some understanding. A direct understanding arises when there is no longer an experience of something being understood - understanding is not separate from what is understood. That's when the understanding of emptiness really arises.

The entire topic of emptiness needs to be approached with a great deal of caution, because there are so many misunderstandings here. People take emptiness and make it into a thing, which is one form of misunderstanding; they conceptualize it and try to load it on everything they encounter - a major deviation. So, the topic really requires heedful analysis and training. What is very important here is that you have access to and rely on instructions from an authentic teacher who can guide you in this area.

Question: What happens to the Buddha nature at the time of death?

Rinpoche: At the time of death, when the structures of consciousness disintegrate, we experience what we truly are, which is the Buddha nature; this occurs in the first intermediate state following the death process. If an individual has trained during life and has some experience, then at that time a practitioner becomes completely free by realizing his or her own nature.

Question: Experiencing what we are, what is that which experiences?

Rinpoche: To answer your question directly as it was posed, one would say the mind is what understands how we are. But, to be more precise, we would rather say at that point there is no differentiation between what is understood and the understanding.

Student: So, are we in a certain sense a center of awareness?

Rinpoche: In a sense.

Question: What is the most efficient method of clearing away obscurations?

Rinpoche: Generally speaking, to be present with mindfulness and awareness in every moment and every area of our lives. On the basis of that mindfulness and awareness, to do what is virtuous and to avoid what is non-virtuous. Put another way, with the basis of mindfulness and awareness, to always be motivated with the wish to be helpful to others. That will naturally lead us to engage in virtue and to avoid what is non-virtuous. More particularly, there are specific practices within the tradition, such as the preliminary practices that are very effective ways of clearing away obscurations.

Question: It seems that in order to realize the Buddha nature, it takes a great deal of practice, it is very difficult, and takes a great deal of commitment. Is the only way to do this to become a monk or nun?

Rinpoche: There isn't a single path we could say is the path everybody should follow, because we are all very different. Some persons have greater obscurations than others, some have more abilities than others, so there isn't a single course everyone should follow. It's an individual matter, but it may be helpful for you to become a nun.

Thank you very much.

<http://www.rinpoche.com/teachings/jkrnature.htm>