

An Introduction to Buddhism
Public Talk on by Bardor Tulku Rinpoche
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At the invitation of Karma Thegsum Chöling of Albany I have had the opportunity to spend the weekend here and to present a Buddhist teaching and instruction Friday night, yesterday, and this morning, along with an empowerment ceremony. And now it seems it's time for me to give a public talk, the topic of which is as I understand it is "An Introduction to Buddhism." Well I'd like to begin by welcoming all of you who have come here to listen to this.

Buddhism is not entirely homogeneous. There is a great deal of variety within it. When we talk about the Buddhist view, meditation and conduct, we have to remember that there are different views, different forms of meditation, and different styles of conduct all presented under the aegis of Buddhism. For example if you focus on the issue of behavior or moral discipline alone there are different ways this is presented in the Buddhist tradition such as the outer morality of individual liberation, the inner morality of the bodhisattva, and the innermost morality of vajrayana. All of this makes addressing a topic such as introduction to Buddhism rather tricky.

But to start with fundamentals, each and every one of us who was born in this world has a body, speech and a mind. And these faculties that we possess as human beings are tremendously powerful. The human body, speech, and mind that we possess are such that if we make good use of them we can not only help ourselves but can be in a position to help others tremendously as well. Ultimately making use of the human body, speech, and mind we can achieve buddhahood, and we can achieve this simply because we each and every one of us has within us the indwelling potential for perfect awakening or buddhahood. On the other hand, the very power of the human body, speech, and mind equally means that if we make an improper use of these faculties we can do ourselves and others a tremendous amount of harm. We have been experiencing rebirth in samsara throughout beginningless time. Especially within our human body we have the power to make our continued suffering of rebirth potentially endless. We have the power through improper use of our faculties to more or less cut off the potential for liberation.

In fact the potential to achieve consummate good or bring about great harm is equally present innately within all beings. We human beings are not the only beings in the universe. There are all sorts of beings. There are humans, there are jealous gods and joyous gods, there are animals, there are pretas or hungry ghosts, and there are what we call hell beings. All of these beings equally possess the same innate potential for perfect awakening, and by the same token we all equally possess or are afflicted by the same fundamental problem. The distinctions we can make, however, among different species of beings are really based upon their degree of immediate access to these qualities. We can say that, because of their circumstances, human beings and devas or gods have a much greater immediate access to their innate potential than do animals and other forms of beings. Nevertheless the innate qualities possessed by all beings are equal, and the fundamental problem we all equally share is the same.

As for the solution of the problem of cyclic existence the Buddha said, "I have taught you the means of liberation but its actual achievement depends on your effort." The means of liberation that the Buddha taught, the Dharma taught by the Buddha, constitutes a map that we can follow to walk the path to liberation. But we have to use that map; we have to walk that path through our own effort. The map, the means of liberation is the Dharma taught by the Buddha. The Buddha taught this because in achieving buddhahood he achieved a state of consummate

fearlessness. He was free from any kind of fear because he had abandoned or transcended everything that was to be transcended; he had realized everything that was to be realized. And he was therefore equally free from fear in teaching, in presenting the path to liberation, and also in describing the obstacles that are overcome on that path. The Buddha in achieving awakening achieved two-fold wisdom, the wisdom that understands or knows the nature of all things and also the wisdom that knows the variety of attributes or character of each and every thing. So what the Buddha taught, what we call Dharma, constitutes our path.

The liberation that is the culmination of this path is not some temporary state of relief or freedom. We experience temporary freedom from time to time without the path. For example, presently as human beings we have been born in a relatively pleasant state, that is to say we are free from the particular sufferings of being an animal or being a hungry ghost or being a hell being. But at the same time we are not completely free; our temporary relief is not permanent and it is not complete. As human beings we may be free from the problems that animals face, but we still suffer. We suffer when we are born, we suffer through aging, we suffer through sickness, and we will all suffer through death. Not only are we not free from those four great rivers of suffering but as human beings we also suffer from being separated from those we love and what we love. We suffer from encountering what we fear and what we dislike. We suffer from not being able to acquire or achieve what we want. We suffer in all kinds of ways and the fact that human beings suffer in this way is really beyond argument. Whether you are spiritual or not, whether you believe in karma or not, you experience these sufferings. We all experience separation from friends and loved ones, and we all encounter enmity in some form in the world. This is particularly obvious to us in this country during the present days. So no one can deny these things; no one can say, "It's not true that you never get everything you want. I have absolutely everything I want." No one can say that. No one can say, "It's not true that everyone encounters something they dislike. I have never ever encountered anything I didn't want to encounter." In fact this experience of suffering follows us as a shadow follows our body. Just as from earliest childhood as soon as we had a body we had a shadow, and just as we will have this shadow until the day of our death when we leave the body, in the same way we are constantly shadowed by suffering.

The actual substance of Buddhist training consists of working constructively with these same three faculties of body, speech, and mind. Training one's own body, speech, and mind, working constructively with them, has two aspects. One aspect is relinquishment. Relinquishment means what you let go of. The reason for this is that the purpose of Buddhist training, physical, verbal, and mental, is to lessen our suffering. From the Buddhist point of view the problem is suffering, therefore we want to lessen suffering. We deal separately with physical suffering, suffering connected with speech, and mental suffering. Now physical suffering, which we all experience, is, according to Buddhism, a result of physical wrongdoing, so the first step, the necessary beginning of one's physical training, is to abandon or relinquish physical wrongdoing. Physical wrongdoing is all the things we know to be wrong: killing, stealing, adultery, and so forth. But at the same time we not only want to abandon the wrongdoing that is the cause of physical suffering, we want to replace physical wrongdoing with physical acts of virtue. So we engage in physical virtue through such actions as prostrations, circumambulations, and so forth. By doing these things, by using our bodies skillfully in many ways, we actually exhaust the basis of physical suffering. And the final result of this is that we eventually achieve what is called a pure wisdom body, a state of being that is actually beyond birth and death.

In order to lessen and finally eradicate our suffering of speech, we begin by abandoning or relinquishing unvirtuous use of speech: lying, slander, divisive speech and gossip, and we replace this with useful and positive virtuous acts of speech such as speaking carefully and truthfully, reciting mantras, and so on. And the final result of this training is that we achieve powerful wisdom speech. It is powerful because it is endowed with the power of the truth.

Our third faculty, the mind, is actually the most important of the three. If you think about the relationship between your body, your speech, and your mind, you will see that your body and speech are really nothing more than employees of your mind. Your mind is the boss, your mind is the motor that drives the entire vehicle of your being. So therefore we pay careful attention to the discipline or training of our minds. This starts with the cultivation of a state of tranquility through meditation practice. Through tranquility meditation we seek to purify our minds of the disturbing thoughts that normally afflict us. And we find in fact some form of tranquility meditation in every contemplatively oriented spiritual tradition. Finally we move from mere tranquility to the practice of what in our tradition is called mahamudra, or the great seal, which is the unique way in which one can actually come to a decisive recognition of what the mind really is. This is normally experienced by a practitioner as the unity of their mind and the mind of their guru or the unity of their mind and the mind of their chosen deity. In that way the practitioner achieves in that inseparability a state of powerful and boundless wisdom.

Now this method of the twofold training of body, speech, and mind is not something new, it is not something that has been recently invented and that we are experimenting with. It is not something that has to be studied using control groups and so on to see if it really works. It is something that has been proven again and again by many many individuals who have achieved its final result over many many centuries. In fact this form of training is the way that all Buddhist attained persons or siddhas have achieved their state of awakening throughout the many centuries of the past, are still achieving it right now, and will continue to achieve it in the future. In fact this method is so effective that our lineage, which is one of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism and is called the Kagyu, is often referred to as the ocean of siddhas, because so many individuals have employed these profound means and achieved siddhi.

Nevertheless what you do is up to you. As the Buddha said, we have a map, but no one can do it for us, we have to actually make the journey through our own effort. What this means is that even though we all have fundamentally equal potential to achieve this tremendous state of wisdom, if somebody makes no effort in that direction, has no faith, has no motivation to achieve that wisdom, they are not going to achieve it. It is not going to happen just by itself. On the other hand if somebody makes the effort it will happen because we all have the potential. For example imagine a fertile field with ideal conditions for growing crops, and imagine that fertile seeds are planted in that field. You are going to get crops, whether you believe you are going to get the crops or not, whether you think it's possible or not, whether you want the crops or not. You are going to get them because this is the way everything works. Everything works in this same way of the interdependence of causes and conditions. This is actually unarguable whether you are spiritually inclined or not, whether you believe in as a concept the results of actions or not. No matter what you believe, whether you are spiritual or nihilistic, whether you are capitalist or communist, it doesn't make any difference, the point is whatever you plant is what you are going to get. If you plant potatoes in a fertile field, you are going to get potatoes and not tomatoes, and if you plant tomatoes. you are going to get tomatoes and not potatoes.

In fact this is the key to understanding what Buddhists call emptiness; it is because everything is interdependent that everything is empty of inherent existence. Now we can call

things by different names; for example if you have a field in which rice is growing, every person who looks at it is going to see rice. A Tibetan will call it dre, and an English speaker will call it rice, an Indian will call it chawal, but they are seeing the same thing. We have similar enough karma that while we use different words for things, we see the same things and we experience the same things. Every country and every language has a different name for rice. (In the movie “My Big Fat Greek Wedding,” someone said that there are two ethnicities on this planet: Greek people and people who wish they were Greek people. That’s not really true.) So rice may have a hundred different names. So is rice what is printed? The name doesn’t grow from the rice. If the name grew from the rice, no matter whether we are from east, west, south or north, we would all have to say “rice.”

The infinite capacity of our mind is demonstrated by the different languages that we have come up with, the variety of words we can use to describe anything, and the variety of perceptions that different individuals can have of the same thing, or that even the same individuals have of the same thing on different occasions. It is because of the infinite capacity of our minds for this type of variety—because of this freedom of our mind to think anything, call anything anything we want and so on—that our minds are capable of so much good, and by the same token can cause so many problems. When the mind cultivates a state of goodness, that state of goodness produces an experience of goodness. When the mind cultivates a state of negativity that produces a corresponding experience of negativity. And when the mind is allowed to rest in its own nature, beyond good and bad, beyond pure and impure, in that nature that never changes, it will experience it, but because the mind is allowed to rest in that state it is capable of resting in that state. For these reasons from a Buddhist point of view everything comes down to one’s mind. With a pure mind one will see everything around one as equally pure. With an impure mind one will see everything around one as equally impure. Even the pure realms, such as Sukhavati spoken of in the Buddhist texts are nothing more than the perception of a pure mind. And the worst states of suffering spoken of in Buddhism, what we call hell, is nothing more than the perception or experience of a grossly impure mind. You cannot reach Sukhavati with a ladder or a spaceship, and you cannot find hell by digging under the ground, no matter how deep you dig. For this reason it was said by the third Gyalwang Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje. “The mind is not a mind; it is empty.”

As for the fact that all beings possess the potential for awakening, in the Uttaratantrashastra by Maitreya, which is usually translated as the superior continuum or stream of being, it is written, “Because the Sambuddhakaya is all pervasive, because thatness is undifferentiated, and because of the existence of dispositions, it is certain that all beings possess the Buddha nature, or sugatagarba.” The Sambuddhakaya refers to the Dharmakaya, the state of perfect awakening. That state itself, the resulting state of perfect awakening, is at the same time the ground of being, emptiness. It is therefore all-pervasive in the sense of being the nature of all things, and especially each and every being possesses this Dharmakaya as their fundamental nature or essence. Secondly, in our possession of this, there is no differentiation between one being and another; there is no being who possesses more buddha nature, more Dharmakaya than another, and no being who possesses less than another. No being’s buddha nature is better than that of another, and no being’s buddha nature is inferior to that of another. We can make a distinction between someone who has achieved realization of this and is therefore called a Buddha and sentient beings who have not achieved it, but that which is realized is equally innately present within an unrealized being and a buddha. For example, when we say the Buddha we normally are speaking of the historical Buddha, Buddha Shakyamuni, who appeared 2500

years ago. But in fact we don't regard him as utterly unique; we regard him as being the fourth in a series of 1002 Buddhas who will appear in this eon or kalpa. The first was called Destroyer of Cyclic Existence, the second was called Golden Sage, the third was called Kashapa or Guardian of Illumination and the fourth was Buddha Shakyamuni. This eon, because 1002 Buddhas will appear within, it is called excellent and the name of this period is called good fortune or excellence. It gained this name because there are devas inhabiting the realm of luminosity who have some degree of extra-sensory perception, and before this eon began they saw a thousand-petaled lotus appearing on the surface of a pool. They took this as a sign of the appearance of 1000 Buddhas in this present eon, and therefore they proclaimed it excellent. We therefore call it bhadra kalpa or the eon of excellence.

So the second reason that all beings possess the Buddha nature is that there is no differentiation, which to conclude it means that we do not lack anything that these buddhas such as the four buddhas that have so far appeared and the 998 that remain to appear in this kalpa and all the other buddha, we do not lack anything that they possess and they do not have anything that we don't have, so there is no difference between our Buddha nature and the actual state of those buddhas. We therefore have the potential to achieve the same buddhahood or awakening that they did. The third reason is because of the dispositions, and the dispositions refer to the tendencies that different beings have toward spirituality or awakening. There are in general said to be five of them: what are called the isolated disposition, the uncertain disposition, the listener or shravaka disposition, the pratyekabuddha or solitary sage disposition, and the mahayana or bodhisattva disposition. The disposition means the degree to which that being in a specific lifetime is disposed toward spirituality. And the reason why the existence of these different dispositions in different beings proves the existence of Buddha nature, is that even those with the least disposition toward spirituality, those with what is called the isolated disposition, have the innate potential that will eventually ripen as spirituality. Now what is a person with an isolated disposition? It is somebody who has no compassion whatsoever, who has no kindness, no decency, and no conscience, someone like Adolph Hitler or Mao Tse Tung. Such a person, as negative and harmful as they may be in that life, is at most only temporarily isolated or cut off from the excellence of their own nature. They are temporarily cut off from it by their actions but we assert that deep down they still possess the same potential for awakening as everyone else, and eventually that potential will somehow be brought out. The uncertain potential or uncertain disposition is what somebody who is easily influenced has. If they encounter a teacher of the shravaka vehicle they will become a shravaka, if they encounter a teacher of the pratyekabuddha vehicle they will become a pratyekabuddha, and if they encounter a teacher of the mahayana vehicle they will become a bodhisattva. Then there are the three certain dispositions, those who are naturally disposed toward practicing one of these three vehicles: the shravakayana, the pratyekayana, and the mahayana. So because all beings have at any time one of these five dispositions, it is also asserted that all beings possess buddha nature.

So in other words if we do the right thing we will all become buddhas.