

## Talk to the DC Sangha

It's refreshing to get away from the crowd in Baltimore I remember spending a wonderful weekend here several years ago. I hope the center is growing and prospering. Each year there should be a significant growth in dharma. In the East we spend time fundraising and building and so much energy goes into this. On an optimistic day this seems very good. But on a pessimistic day you wonder what you've gotten into. There is no time for study or practice and it doesn't seem very worthwhile. And it is the same in Western communities. We aspire to bring about sanity and basic goodness. But we do get involved in structures and the emphasis on inner understanding doesn't seem as valuable. Part of the path is form, but the important thing is mind and meditation that leads to transformation of its basic nature.

When I first began to travel the questions were about how much tradition there was. People asked give me the dharma without the trappings of Tibetan culture. And many teachers obliged them. But now I have noticed a change. Now Westerners are becoming theistic and culture centered. Being centered on a belief is not what Buddhism teaches. We should cut through our hindrances even if it means we have to cut through our own beliefs. Belief in emptiness could be so very solid that it could hinder a person's growth and that is theism. Theism is focussing on the form rather than seeing that the form is there to help us cut through those hindrances that do not allow the simplicity of mind to be as it is.

Why do we meditate? To be good Buddhists, to feel good about it? Once when flying I read Oprah's magazine. There was a article on meditation. The people participating in a weekend program reported felt they did not know what meditation was, but in the end they felt it was worth while. If you do something that you've spent some effort on, you will feel it was worth while. You persuade your mind to thinking there was something worth while about it. So that is part of it. The other part is hope. There is a feeling something can or should happen from practice. At other times people are quite honest and they feel a taste of quietness and tranquility and as a result one takes to meditation. From the beginning of meditation to its highest point these feelings are quite useful. But the basis of meditation is understanding our attitude. The form is the basis, but the form needs to generate awareness and mindfulness and the coming together of body and mind. When we talk about what changes from one year to the next we are talking about bringing about a change in the way we look at ourselves and others.

It's essential to meditate but to understand that meditation is working with ourselves. After the recent disaster people asked what practice can we do. But one thing comes up is how much we practice just for ourselves. Yes, we do weep, but our practice is so much just for ourselves. We need to put meditation into action, which is a genuinely transformed attitude. When we are in a peaceful environment, we don't see the need to help others, but when there is a tragedy, we see the need. We see the uselessness of anger and the interrelationships between all beings. Although we may generate good thoughts in tonglen, but it pacifies our own thoughts more than they help others. We see that until all beings gain enlightenment we cannot fulfil the wishes we express in the four immeasurables.

We seem more focussed on the form of meditation than its real meaning. We must live our lives in accordance with the teachings. How many teachings must we get to realize the uselessness of anger, greed, and ignorance. Our teachers used to say when we wished to go somewhere else and practice that it would be of no use even if Padmasambhava appeared to teach us. So it is important to realize the essence of the dharma. There is no end to the levels of practice you can engage in. Ultimately what will make a difference is your attitude. If we remain the same person with the same attitude and just memorize about compassion and tolerance, you will have to think Buddhists are the stupidest of all beings. Some who people have never heard of the dharma show great kindness and compassion. So you have to wonder if we have good karma in practicing the dharma or are just the stupidest of human beings in that we need to practice the dharma.

Karma is very simple. What we do affects others and what others do affects us. So we understand karma, but we never create the causes of happiness. We never bring it down to practice. If we look our speech, it is harsh, critical, and lying so it is not creating happiness. Body, speech and mind are continuously creating karma. Our hopeful wishes will not transform into good karma, our actions will. We don't seem to act with awareness. Who can enter Buddhism and not be aware of the importance of compassion.

All our waking moments are spent in search of happiness and trying to gain something. Mind is like a machine working non-stop, always working for self-benefit. All beings are like this and this is suffering, samsara. Suffering is never feeling settled or satisfied. There is always a tinge of a thought that this might go away. So mind never settles down and has a feeling of calmness. We go through a lifetime never having had a moment of genuine tranquility. Our thoughts are like being in a crowd at a baseball game and one would like to go to our car, but the crowd prevents us from doing so. No one wants to practice unkindness, it just arises from the force of habit. The mind doesn't really have any training.

When we think about the four reminders, which we should be meditating on always, how much does it actually penetrate our lives? If we understood how joyful our precious human existence is and how precarious our situation is due to impermanence, how different would our conduct be. If we still have an uncaring attitude it indicates we have meditated on the four reminders but not put them into practice. Each passing day as meditators, we see that we have studied the teachings but not put them into practice. So we are theistic Buddhists. Just doing the simple things, being kind to others. We rattle on about the teachings, but don't even hold open a door for others. You may receive many teachings but the genuine measure of practice is how we react when faced with death and if there is regret then in not having helped self and others. Compassion is keeping in mind what will be helpful to others. If we go into a situation with a predefined thought of compassion and force it on others, that lacks the flexibility needed. So carefully watch your actions of body and mind and see how flexible we are. When we need to be still we should be still. Watch your speech and be quiet when best and speak when genuinely helpful. Why go into cave and renounce the world, except to quiet things down? We need to unclutter our lives to see the real nature of mind, to free ourselves of the karmas which choke it. When we engage in activities, it should be natural kindness. If it requires you to go into a three year retreat and do all kinds of visualizations to realize compassion, you are welcome to do it. But if we can keep it simple, that is better. All the practices start by saying first generate great compassion. Then after that there are the multitude of complicated teachings. You must think the Buddhas hitting themselves in the head saying how much more complicated do we need to make the teachings, so that they can see the compassion. The fact that we are sitting here means we still have more work to do.

## **Talk to the Baltimore Sangha**

We can look at today's world, with all its progress in development and thinking, either pessimistically or optimistically. From a pessimistic point of view this is a degenerate age, where passion, aggression and ignorance increase, as seen in recent events. But optimistically, human beings act better in difficult situations. This is because of Buddha nature. In spite of the busyness in our lives, there is awareness of spirituality and what needs to be done. Today there is a lot of talking and thinking about spirituality. So from negativity, positive things arise. When we are able to be in touch with this feeling our practice is positive. There seems to be an awareness and curiosity about contemplation and meditation today. People are asking questions and examining it. If contemplation leads to examination of our mind, spiritual practice has served its purpose. But if it becomes a cocoon for our greed and entertainment, then it is not very good. And not just meditation, any other practice, such as study, for that matter.

It is essential to keep the intention that you had when you entered practice. When a teacher gives refuge vows to people, the teacher encourages you to not forget the day it happened. That is because

when people take refuge their minds are very honest and there is a fresh good intention, like a child's heart. But soon form becomes more important. We worry about the books we read and the type of practice we do. There are the 84,000 teachings of the dharma and the study of them is unending. But a basic good heart should always be there.

We often talk about wisdom, but it is nothing other than common sense combined with an awareness of the truth. It is there inherently in all beings. Outwardly there is attachment, but within there is always some common sense. Even in the midst of aggression, there is always goodness. Even not wanting to harm oneself is not just selfishness. It is common sense. Wanting happiness and not wanting pain comes from our basic nature. Our life is sustained by that basic good nature. So inside there is an enormous wish to accomplish something good, yet there is an inability to do so. If we get stuck in the form of practice, we lose touch with that basic nature. We take refuge out of genuine selflessness and with that inspiration we enter into Buddhist practice. But I always think when giving refuge, what a pity, they will lose that inspiration in a few weeks. A certain loss of touch with that freshness occurs. We must strengthen the understanding of what practice is for. If we go about focusing on adding another name or another practice we lose touch with it. Our understanding of what practice is becomes some kind of barter system. We try to become a good practitioner rather than to become ourselves. We need to make some time with ourselves to pause and think why we are practicing.

All of us know the same things, no matter what spiritual tradition we are from. It is not very complicated. But we are unwilling to practice compassion until we hear that it has a 2500 year tradition. It's a simple teaching. It's what we teach our children. We shouldn't hurt others but be kind to them. But somehow we are unable to keep it. We know everything but are unable to do anything. We hear about the ten precepts, but don't put them into practice unless we feel it is a tradition. The basis of ethics is not just the outward form but seeing how ethics enhances our ability to be mindful of our actions. To think that just as I don't want suffering, so others don't want suffering either. If a person analyzes in this way, they are able to be honest and put the teachings into action. Meditation is to give ourselves a break or a pause to see the journey we are on in life. If we are unable to join the teachings with the basic qualities of human nature, meditation becomes the mirror for seeing this. We usually lead life without reflecting on it, or working on it, no different from any other species. In short, ignorance is having the capacity to generate goodness, but not doing so. How does that happen? After analyzing, one sees this is because there is no gap between thought and action. Meditation and practice are just to allow us to pause before negative actions. Meditation and contemplation are the ground that allows us to think carefully. Meditation is where we give ourselves the clarity to think more clearly, not to be thoughtless. Shamatha allows us to pause, to settle down. On that basis, we can think carefully. On that basis all the teaching are expounded.

Hearing the dharma is necessary. When we allow ourselves to settle down, we need to use that settledness in a better way. Hearing is not just listening to the teacher, it is gathering information. It involves using all the six senses. We must consider very carefully what we perceive and understand how our senses function. After that we examine or contemplate. Examination means to think carefully and with logic. Then comes meditation. It is resting in the essence of what we have examined. The three wisdoms of hearing, examining, and meditating are the only things that allows us to bring practice to fruition.

Even if it is a simple teaching, if we take the time to examine it very carefully, confidence will arise in it. We have meditated for years without examining the teachings. But ultimately we have to think for ourselves, just as we have to eat for ourselves and others can't do it for us. Fruition will not happen until you begin to think on and understand the teachings. That recognition is the essence. Meditation is not just a ground, it is a path. We see what suffering is, it makes a deep impression, because it is what we have realized. You aren't mindful because you are asked to be mindful. It is like being in school, with rules and regulations. But it doesn't matter who gives you the teaching, what matters is the inner understanding. Just as the ground is always there, our confidence in the truth should be

unwavering. At that point, meditation becomes path, to remind us to remain with the understanding that we have gained. It is a road we walk upon that keeps aligned with what we understand. That can lead to fruition meditation. Fruition is when you are confident enough that you don't need support. With fruition being able to be kind and generous is not deliberate, but spontaneous. So within ourselves we find the whole path of meditation and see its beginning, middle and end.

We need to aspire, but we also need to be realistic. First we need to plant the seed before we can get the fruit. From the understanding that one person can affect one thousand we see the necessity of restraining body, speech, and mind. From that understanding of karma, we develop a sense of our responsibility. We see that it isn't so complicated, we only need to act to help others. But we see we are unable to put our principles into practice. So we investigate why this is so, and see it is ignorance. Ignorance is not about not knowing, it is about a sensible human being not being able to act sensibly. So we must examine that ignorance. If we create suffering from this ignorance, we should investigate it. We spend years investigating Buddhism to see if it suits us, but we never investigate ignorance. We should see ignorance and skillfully refrain from strengthening it.

We've all lost touch with the purpose of being spiritual. We should not talk so much about outward forms but try harder to develop some common sense and bring it into action. It need not be as complicated as we make it. Take time to reflect on your spiritual journey. It is not about who you become, it is about acting so you are not harmful to others. I often have a theistic belief in the dharma. When I first came to the West I was often asked about how to get beyond the externals of practice, but now I see Westerners are more attached to them than Tibetans. There is a belief that someday something will happen that will make it easy to be good. We think we are exempt from having to work hard. We think if we meditate several years fifteen minutes a day, we will be exempt from having to be compassionate. Ignorance is the stubborn belief that action doesn't matter. To cut through this stubborn belief we must work hard.