Bodhisattva Path: Plus Rigpa & Nibbāna

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:03:34

I wanted to talk about two topics tonight: the bodhisattva path and the question of rigpa and nirvana. In discussing the bodhisattva path, I want to speak from my own experience.

For twenty years I was involved exclusively in Theravada practice, where the ideal constantly emphasized is the arhat—the model of working for one's own liberation as quickly as possible. Part of the subtext often attached to this motivation is escaping this dreadful wheel of samsara as swiftly as we can. The arhat model, if taken slightly off course, has built into it an aversion to existence that can color one's approach to both practice and life.

Then I became interested in the Mahayana view of the path and picked up Shantideva's Bodhicaryavatara, which was first translated into English by Stephen Batchelor as "A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life." Reading through it, I found it quite inspiring, though it wasn't easy going. It's rather dense and contains considerable hellfire and brimstone, making it challenging. While I found it inspiring, I must admit it didn't touch me deeply at first.

The main impact was that it changed my marriage. Here I was practicing these grandiose visions of saving all beings, then returning to my relationship and having the same selfish arguments I'd been having for fifteen years. It suddenly dawned on me: if I'm trying to free all beings from suffering, why do I continue inflicting suffering on the being closest to me? I began examining my self-centered desires in this context, which helped purify some of them.

Then I attended several retreats with Rinpoche in the early to mid-nineties. Something about being in retreat space with a quiet mind, doing chants several times daily—especially the bodhicitta chant and dedication of merit we've been doing—began shifting something in me. As you know, it ends: "May we liberate migrators from the ocean of existence with its stormy waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death." Hearing this repeatedly as an important motivation within the retreat context started creating change.

During that same retreat, I began connecting more deeply with rigpa as my deepest nature of mind, realizing that this combination of emptiness and cognizance is not personal. It's not particularly Guy's deepest nature or Justine's deepest nature—this is the deepest nature of all sentient beings. I don't imagine the way it expresses in this mind-body system differs much from how it expresses in others.

I started seeing that the game of spiritual practice wasn't just about clearing obscurations from this particular parcel of awareness—it was about clearing obscurations from awareness wherever it was

manifesting. Through the concept of Buddha nature, I had tapped into the common thread joining us all, or rather, that we are all expressions of. Seeing Buddha nature at this level broke down the distinction between self and other that I had maintained throughout my practice career.

This was a beautiful opening. I came to feel that the aspiration of bodhicitta was really the manifestation—or practice—of understanding egolessness. The teachings on anatta or not-self are basic to Theravada and are explored repeatedly. But this was a way of understanding their implications for practice and motivation. If there truly is no separate self, then each person's liberation is as important as anyone else's. This is one of the themes Shantideva emphasizes repeatedly: the equalizing of oneself with others.

This understanding began coming through meaningfully and started shifting my practice motivation. However, I've noticed that when I don't maintain that intention and reinforce it through conscious reflection, the bodhicitta aspiration falls away. I often find the arhat path looking very attractive again—just the concept of reaching the end as soon as possible.

This deeper connection revealed through Buddha nature insights reminded me of a poem by Rumi's teacher, Shams of Tabriz. While Rumi left hundreds, perhaps thousands of poems, his teacher didn't leave many behind. Coleman Barks says his teacher left at least this one poem: "I, you, he, she, we. In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions."

I think the teaching on Buddha nature points to the fact that in the garden of clear seeing, these are not true distinctions either. In some ways, the bodhicitta aspiration emerges from understanding the underlying unity we all share and is simply the manifestation of that insight.

Having opened to the bodhicitta aspiration through these teachings, we should recall that there are two aspects of bodhicitta: relative and ultimate. Ultimate bodhicitta is Buddha nature—something to be realized. Relative bodhicitta is the somewhat fabricated or conceptual aspiration we practice to develop over time.

something along the lines of practicing for our own realization in order to help all beings.

This has caused me some dilemmas along the way because there are two pieces to this relative bodhicitta: practicing for our own enlightenment, and helping all beings. Which comes first? Which is more important? In our life, we make choices, and different people make different choices. If we look at the Tibetan tradition, we can see different choices being made by leading teaching figures.

There's a stanza toward the end of Shantideva's Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life that the Dalai Lama is very fond of. He associates with it and quotes it again and again. I think it is his guiding principle: "For as long as space endures and as long as living beings remain, may I too abide to dispel the misery of this world." To me, this is an aspiration of the kind of bodhisattva who will postpone their own liberation in order to stay and serve those who are not yet enlightened. This is one beautiful model—the notion that

one stays behind until all sentient beings have become enlightened first.

But that's not the only model you find in the Tibetan tradition. One of the greatest Tibetan practitioners of all time is considered to be Milarepa, who attained Buddhahood in one lifetime. Milarepa went up into the mountains, meditated very arduously, and came to that ultimate liberation within one lifetime. He clearly did not postpone his own awakening.

As you play with the bodhisattva model, I think it's helpful to understand that there's no one right way to do it. The combination of your altruistic intention and your drive toward realization may play out differently than your neighbor's. Some people's altruistic intention is so strong they want to go into the inner city and do direct service work—and that can come out of a bodhisattva aspiration. Others may feel their bodhisattva intention falls more on the practice side, and they may go into retreat for twenty years, thirty years, or the rest of their life. That can be their expression.

Someone working in the inner city serving those in real need may look at the one in the cave and say, "Wow, that's really selfish. They really should be doing more to help the world because it's in such a dreadful state." Meanwhile, the one up in the cave meditating may look at the person doing direct service and say, "How can they really hope to help others when their own mind stream isn't purified yet? There are still obscurations and they'll just be spreading them because they're not purified. How can we help another until we've really gotten to the root of our own suffering?"

In these two attitudes, there could be judgment. What I want to say about that is I don't think any of us can judge another person's path. The Buddha said something similar when there was gossip going on between different monks about judging the practice of other monks. The Buddha came along and said, "How do you know?" How do you know where they're at in their attainment, what their motivation is, what their karma is, what their purification is? Only if you know that can you judge. He said, "I know that, so I can judge. But you don't know that, so you can't judge."

So really just a plea that as we look at the inclusion of bodhicitta in our practice, we be open to the fact that it manifests in many different ways. There is no one right model for it. The person practicing in the cave can be doing it out of very strong altruistic intention, and the person practicing in service may have a lot of ego around it. This is a plea for understanding and non-judgment, and also a message that each person's path unfolds differently. Don't take any model as the way you should be living. We will each be called to make choices between outer work and inner work, and to hold them both with this ultimate aspiration.

This leads nicely into the next question: What is the nature of realization? Another way to frame it is: What is the nature of the enlightened mind? I want to talk about it from the viewpoint of rigpa and the viewpoint of nirvana.

I'll start with a quote from a classic Dzogchen text called Self-Liberation:

"The self-originated primordial awareness has not been created by anything. Amazing. It does not experience birth, nor does there exist a cause for its death. Amazing."

In most of the Buddhist tradition, if something is uncreated, unborn, and undying, there's only one thing it can be—and that's nirvana.

So the question is: Is this basic awareness that we talked about last night the same as nirvana or not? Another way to frame this is: Is awareness an intrinsic part of the unconditioned or not?

As we explore this tonight, it may sound like an intellectual or philosophical pursuit, and I'll certainly quote some texts along the way. But what happens is that when your practice gets close to this territory, these questions take on real urgency and real meaning for practitioners. In this group, there are a number of people whose practice is in this ballpark, currently or has been. For some of us, these questions carry real urgency.

So I ask you to listen with an open mind. If it seems too philosophical right now, let it go. But for some people, these are questions of pressing importance.

One reason this matters is that in the Pali suttas, it's said that once one has realized the unconditioned and touched it directly, one has at most seven more lifetimes before full enlightenment. Basically, full enlightenment is guaranteed in at most seven more lifetimes. That's quite an insurance policy.

You can see why there might be ego clinging around this: "Wow, I had the ultimate experience where I wasn't there. I had it." There can be considerable ownership around these moments because of their promise and potential.

In this talk, I want to make a distinction that's somewhat technical but helpful for this group. As I understand it, when nirvana is used in Mahayana and Vajrayana teachings, it points to the end of the path—meaning Buddhahood. Connected with nirvana is the quality of omniscience. In Mahayana or Vajrayana, one doesn't speak of nirvana without associating it with the attainment of Buddhahood and omniscience.

In Theravadan teachings, we often use nirvana as a synonym for the unconditioned. Any realization of it by a practitioner at any stage along the journey is considered a realization of nirvana or the unconditioned. We use the terms synonymously. It doesn't just refer to the culmination of the path—it can be experienced along the way multiple times.

Tonight I want to use it primarily in this second sense, as a synonym for the unconditioned, which can be touched and encountered by practitioners at any stage of the journey.

Used in this sense, there are at least four different ways that nirvana is understood in the Buddhist tradition.

The first is that it has no reality in the realm of being. There's no state as such that we can touch called nirvana. Nirvana is simply understood as the cessation of greed, aversion, and delusion—the complete and total absence of the three poisons. Any moment in which those three are totally absent is considered a moment of nirvana, not a separate destination. It could happen eyes open or eyes closed. More to the point, there is no separate destination called nirvana. It's only a description of a state in which greed, aversion, and delusion are completely absent.

So it's a very purified state of mind, but it has no kind of being whatsoever. In philosophy, they say it has no ontological reality—ontology being the study of being. In this view, the ontological reality of nirvana is denied.

As I understand it, this is essentially the view of the Madhyamakas, the followers of Nagarjuna. Because they cut and cut and cut repeatedly, they also cut out any beingness around nirvana. It's also close to some Theravadan views, though I don't know any individuals who hold it personally. But I've heard it exists in the Theravadan schools.

Let me give an example to illustrate why this could be a reasonable point of view. As we've been introduced to the practice of Dzogchen, we've encountered something characterized by empty essence and natural cognizance. The shorthand for this is "empty knowing"—a descriptive phrase for the practice we've been doing: rest in empty knowing.

We talk about it as "empty knowing"—it's a verb, an activity. But what happens when we give the name Rigpa to that activity? When we make it a noun, the mind tends to take it as a thing.

Just by turning a verb into a noun, we tend to unconsciously ascribe an ontological reality to it. Similarly with nibbana—it could simply be the exhausting of greed, hatred, and delusion, but once we assign a noun to it, it can take on ontological reality. This represents the viewpoint of the first school on nibbana.

The second definition or understanding accords nibbana some ontological reality. It's considered neither to exist nor to not exist—beyond both existence and non-existence. Yet because its existence is not denied, it has some meaning in the realm of being. It's proper to call it a noun. The Buddha called it a dhamma, usually translated as "a thing."

In this view, nibbana is understood to be a state of cessation where the four mental aggregates cease. When one realizes nibbana, there is no feeling, no perception, no mental formations, and no consciousness. The body remains—the yogi's body does not disappear when they enter nibbana. But because consciousness is not there, there is no experience of the body. The form is still present, yet the key characteristic is a state with no sense data and no consciousness, no awareness functioning.

This is the view of a number of schools in Burma and Sri Lanka, particularly those that take their direction from the Abhidhamma and the Visuddhimagga. While I don't know that this is explicitly claimed in the Abhidhamma, I believe it is pointed to in the Visuddhimagga. These two often go together—the

Abhidhamma and Visuddhimagga people tend to hang out together.

There is the admission that there's some kind of dimension here that can be realized, that can be touched. But it's entirely separate from ordinary sense reality. The understanding is that if you have your eyes open and you're experiencing sense data, you can't touch this thing. It's somewhere else—a transcendent dimension that can't coexist with sense consciousness. When it is touched, all sense contact goes away and even consciousness goes away.

How does the yogi describe or experience or realize it? Basically, as one emerges from this temporary realization, some little trace of memory might carry over. In some way, one has a feeling of what happened the moment before, just some lingering aroma. That's as close as one can come to a description.

This is very much an altered state, and because it's such an empty state, words really can't come close to it. Words fail when we try to describe this state. It's often talked about as a state of cessation. When you hear the word "cessation" in Visuddhimagga terms, this is usually what's being pointed to, because the four mental aggregates have stopped.

The third understanding or description of nirvana becomes a little more liberal—each of these gets progressively more liberal. In this view, feeling, perception, and formations cease. These three mental aggregates are absent, and the five senses cease. There's no sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch present. But some consciousness may continue—some awareness may continue.

This is the way that enlightenment is commonly described in the Thai forest tradition. What is that awareness aware of? Different people describe it differently. Some say it's just aware of itself. Some say that there's just awareness. Some say that it's aware of the unconditioned. But they're all pointing to a state where basically the only element present is some kind of knowing and something unconditioned.

Ajahn Mahabua has been quite explicit about his experience of this. He's a Thai forest master who's still living, though quite old now. He was a student of Ajahn Man, one of the great Thai forest masters of the last hundred years. He ordained as a monk when he was relatively young, and he said that when he reached his tenth rains retreat—the three-month period where the monks don't go out, usually an intensified period of meditation—

He started to sit up all night. Every night during the rains retreat, he would sit all night long without moving. That's strong motivation. And he said that it was so painful, what he went through, his body was just wracked by pain going through this practice, that he lost his fear of death. Because he felt that nothing could ever again be as painful as what he had gone through, sitting up all night, every night.

And then he said that when he finished this practice, his mind was like a rock. That he had become so concentrated through his determination, his mind was absolutely immovable. Concentration was just steady, like a rock. And he said then he enjoyed that so much, the peace of it, he was stuck there for five years. Imagine if he'd had the pointing out instructions. But no Dzogchen masters.

So he said he started to realize after a while, his teacher helped him realize that he was stuck in that concentration. And then he turned to mindfulness and wisdom. He calls them a pair, *satipanya*—mindfuln ess, wisdom. And he said, at that point, things went easily because my concentration was fully prepared. Very prepared.

He said what he turned to was investigating four elements: desire and non-desire, suffering and ease. And he saw that these four states kept cycling. Desire, absence of desire. Suffering, ease. It just kept circling. So that he saw that none of them was it. Because they were all changing. So none of them was what he was looking for. And he said he was interested in those because he was ignorant of the mind's own nature.

That's a pointing out. I was ignorant of the mind's own nature.

So he said he let go of everything but mindfulness and wisdom. This is, in Thai Forest terms, this is a looking back at the mind's own nature—mindfulness and wisdom. And then he said that the mind's own nature became impartial and impassive, not tending to anything.

Isn't this an interesting pointing? When we turn to nature of mind, the instruction is don't fasten on any phenomena. It's another way of saying don't tend to anything. Stay in the mind's own nature. So that's what Mahabua did.

And he said, at that moment, the cosmos in the mind over which ignorance held sway trembled and quaked. Ignorance was thrown down from its throne on the heart. In its place, the pure mind appeared at the same moment that ignorance was toppled and eradicated through the power of mindfulness and wisdom.

When a Thai forest monk says that ignorance was eradicated, this is a declaration of arhantship. The uprooting of ignorance is the end of suffering, the attainment of arhantship. So he said the attainment of arhantship came when the pure mind appeared through the power of mindfulness and wisdom.

So this is typical of the Thai forest tradition—the quality of awareness being central to the enlightenment process.

Then the fourth description, I would say, is basically the description we've been getting over these days of the unchanging nature of mind, as I read in that opening quote: "The self-originated primordial awareness that has not been created by anything, does not experience birth, and does not die."

One of the nice things about this view is that we can experience some aspect of this reality with eyes open, some aspect of this reality without a huge amount of concentration, some aspect of this reality with all the senses open and functioning and going about our daily life. But we understand that this nature is the deathless. So this is the fourth view.

So I got really interested in the disagreements between these schools and to see if I could reconcile them or come to my own understanding. And the answer I came up with is that I don't know. So that's the main

opinion I hold at this point. I don't know. And I would love someday for a teacher to come along who's practiced in all these four ways in depth and can tell us from direct experience. So far I haven't met that person, so I don't know.

But I still got interested in the investigation. So another way to say it is: if awareness is an intrinsic part of the mind, then when an enlightened being dies, that awareness should somehow continue. If the awareness ends at death, then that's saying it's somehow not intrinsic. Or it doesn't fit this description of being beyond birth and death.

This would somehow arise with the body and die with the body. But if awareness is intrinsic, it should exist after death.

So I took a look at the texts that I have the most trust in, which are the Pali suttas, to see if I could find any clues, any guidance from them. And it's very interesting because the Buddha was often asked this question: what happens to the enlightened being after death? Does that person exist? The Buddha said, "You can't say that." And they said, "Well, does the person not exist?" He said, "You can't say that. Do they both exist and not exist? You can't say that. Do they neither exist nor not exist? You can't say that." So he would not say in any of those four cases what happened.

But there are some other interesting clues. Clearly the physical aggregate is gone. Then what about consciousness? At one point in the text, he pretty much says that after an arhat dies, there's no consciousness. Well, that seems to seal the argument for at least description number one or two: no consciousness after death, therefore it's not an intrinsic part.

But that's not the end of the story, because in other passages, he says something different. There's a case where a bhikkhu was practicing very seriously during the Buddha's lifetime and attained what's called temporary liberation of mind. There are many ways to do that. It's a state where the mind is really released from the defilements temporarily. But every time he would touch it, he would also fall out of it. Touch it, be delivered, fall out of it, back to defilements. Touch it, fall out of it, back to defilements. And he got so discouraged by this that he said, "I can't do it. I'm going to take my life." And in the jargon of the suttas, it said that bhikkhu used the knife.

So the bhikkhu took his own life. And then the Buddha was talking with a group of other practitioners and said, "Bhikkhus, do you see that dark swirling cloud in the distance? That smoky mass that's moving through the air? That is Mara, searching for the consciousness of the bhikkhu who took his life, the bhikkhu Godika. But Mara is not going to find that consciousness, because that bhikkhu's consciousness is unestablished. The reason is that before he used the knife, the bhikkhu attained final liberation, and his consciousness is now unestablished."

This is very interesting terminology because the Buddha did not say the consciousness is gone. He said his consciousness is now unestablished. Then what does that mean?

There's another sutta where the Buddha describes what it means that a consciousness is unestablished, and this part I'd like to read to you from the text. This is an analogy for the consciousness that is unestablished:

"Suppose, bhikkhus, there was a house with a peaked roof, with windows on the northern, southern, and eastern sides. When the sun rises and a beam of light enters through a window, where would it become established?"

And a bhikkhu replies, "On the western wall, venerable sir."

So sun rises in the east, comes through the window. Where does that sunlight become established? On the western wall.

And the Buddha says, "If there were no western wall, where would it become established?"

The bhikkhu says, "On the earth, venerable sir."

"And if there were no earth, where would it become established?"

"On the water, venerable sir."

If there were no water, where would it become established?

"It would not become established anywhere, venerable sir."

"So too, bhikkhus, if there is no nutriment for consciousness, consciousness does not become established there and come to growth. Where consciousness does not become established and come to growth, I say, that is without sorrow, anguish, and despair."

Does this analogy sound familiar? Sunlight not falling anywhere? You remembered—Samyutta Nikaya, Nidana 12, Sutta 64.

The analogy I shared last night about sunlight falling on a meteorite, sunlight pervading empty space and then encountering an object, actually came to me before I'd heard of this sutta. So there's the Buddha, and then there's Guy Armstrong. That's a joke. But I found it fascinating that unestablished consciousness, which describes the arhat after death, is compared to sunlight that doesn't land anywhere.

To me, not having found any passage more authoritative, this suggests the suttas support views three and four. That's basically my reading of the Pali Canon now—I'm more inclined to believe they support positions three and four rather than one and two.

This is why I mentioned in our first or second evening that although Buddhism has seen many splits over the centuries and millennia, I feel the original Pali texts are not in conflict with any of the schools—not with any of them. From a Dzogchen point of view, one can rely on these texts. From a Theravadan

perspective, one can rely on these texts. From a Mahayana standpoint, one can rely on these texts.

The conflicts arise when later commentators, philosophers, and practitioners try to impose more interpretation than the Buddha apparently offered at that time. I found this very encouraging. This is the personal opinion I hold now. Everyone will probably form some opinion—this is the conclusion I've reached.

Someone asked me before tonight's talk if I'd ever simply asked Rinpoche about the relationship between rigpa and nirvana, and I did. I asked him in a retreat several years ago if they were the same thing.

Here the distinction becomes important. In Tibetan terminology, nirvana describes someone who has reached Buddhahood. Rinpoche took his amber mala and separated two beads to show me the string. "This little bit of string is like seeing rigpa," he said. "When all the beads are cleared off, you see the whole string—that's like seeing nirvana."

So nirvana is much greater. I think this refers to the factor of omniscience. "But the essence of nirvana and the essence of rigpa are the same," he continued. "Same string, but you're just not seeing the whole thing."

That is, as I understand it, the Dzogchen understanding. He went on to say, "We don't talk about nirvana for practitioners like here. We only talk about nirvana for Dzogchen yogis in mountain retreat, stabilized in rigpa night and day." It's a high standard.

I want to add something from personal experience and reflection. I believe—and I haven't verified this with Rinpoche, though it would be interesting to ask—that as our rigpa practice deepens and clarifies, as the view becomes purified and developed, at some point it's possible to touch that nirvanic nature so directly that you absolutely know you've encountered the unconditioned. No doubt remains: Is this conditioned? Unconditioned? Is awareness intrinsic or not? One knows one has touched something unconditioned and whether awareness is part of that.

This is my understanding, though I don't know with certainty. It's my intuition.

Once we recognize this connection between the pure state of awareness—call it rigpa or empty knowing—relatively free from the three poisons, we see it becomes the path. In Dzogchen terminology, they're very clear about ground, path, and fruition all being the same thing. I thought this was radical when I first heard it.

Then I discovered this line from the Samyutta Nikaya: "The Eightfold Path has the deathless as its ground and goal." It's the same statement.

The path is based on the ground and fruition. It's the same statement. And that ground is the deathless. The path has the deathless as its ground and goal.

So essentially what I understand we're doing as we're practicing the nature of mind is that we are putting

ourselves in the unconditioned as best we're able. As close as each of us knows what the unconditioned nature is, we put our mind there over and over again and let it stay there as long as it will stay. And when it slips out, we put it there again as best we can.

So the whole path becomes essentially the imitation of nirvana, as best we can imitate it. We imitate nirvana in each new moment. And so however big or little a piece of nirvana is apparent to us, that's the nirvana we have for right now.

This is pointed to by a pamphlet from one of my teachers in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhadasa, who wrote a little pamphlet called "Nibbana for Everyone." His whole purpose was to take it out of the abstract realm where it was only going to be accessible to one-tenth of one percent of all meditators, and make it really available for anyone who had the sincere interest through this process of looking into the nature, of knowing when the three poisons are weak, and the purity of the emptiness and the knowing together.

So that's pretty much what I wanted to talk about tonight. Are there any questions?

Ajahn Buddhadasa is also in the Thai forest tradition. It's very clear. He makes it absolutely explicit. He has a beautiful little book called "Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree," where he says that the real truth of things is emptiness, but because it has knowing, we call it satipaññā. So the equation of emptiness with satipaññā is very explicit for him.

And you'll find this throughout the Thai forest tradition. You can find it in Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Mahabua, Ajahn Buddhadasa, and Ajahn Jumnian. Ajahn Jumnian is coming here, I think, at the end of this month. He's a living Thai forest master. And we were talking with him. He said the best way to practice mahasati, great awareness, great mindfulness, is to rest in the pure space of knowing.

And then somebody asked him, "Oh, but isn't that conditioned? Because it's consciousness. Isn't consciousness conditioned, impermanent?" And he said, "Well, consciousness actually has two aspects, one conditioned, one unconditioned." That's a nice way to see it too—that consciousness is kind of what links to the unconditioned, or awareness is the link between ordinary reality and the unconditioned. So he said it very explicitly, and you'll find that again and again in the Thai forest teachers.

I think it's the Burmese tradition that kind of pulls it out of this framework. The Burmese tradition holds the opposite view, and that's true. And again, influenced strongly by Abhidhamma and Visuddhimagga.

It could be a factor of what kind of practice people have done, whether they've done jhāna or not, might lead to different experiences. Certainly a possibility could be the instruction they've been given and what their teachers told them to expect. It's interesting because I think the spiritual model we've given, to some extent, will shape our experience. In other words, meditators will experience what teachers tell them to look for. And so it could be that effect also.

Now, one modern teacher had a really interesting interpretation of these different levels. Let's say

Dzogchen practice is kind of realizing nirvana with eyes open. Thai forest tradition is realizing it with eyes closed, just pure awareness. And the Burmese style is experiencing it with no consciousness, but just the emptiness of it.

And he compared it to nirmāṇakāya, saṃbhogakāya, dharmakāya. Nirmāṇakāya being the realm of the manifest; Saṃbhogakāya being the luminous, immaterial nature, which is connected with cognizance; and Dharmakāya being the realm of the empty aspect of reality.

In reality, all three kāyas are united. But we can look at different aspects of reality through one or the other of these descriptions. So he was saying that the different traditions were touching nirvana through its three aspects of the three kāyas. That's an interesting way to look at it. Natural clarity either way.

The first approach I mentioned describes nirvana as a state where there's no particular being who has attained it—simply the absence of greed, hatred, and delusion.

The question concerns the use of the term *samadhi*, which seems to be employed in different ways across traditions. My understanding is that the meaning remains quite similar between Theravada and Tibetan systems. *Samadhi* is usually translated as concentration and represents one of the factors of the path. I believe it's also one of the *paramis* in the Mahayana list of perfections. It refers to that quality of mind capable of achieving single-pointedness, and through this, gaining stability and strength.

Samadhi is often closely associated with *shamatha* practice. The cultivation of *shamatha* develops the mental factor of *samadhi*. In the Theravada tradition, we often develop this quality to the refined levels called absorptions or *jhana*. But this represents just one end of the spectrum of *samadhi*.

When the Buddha summarized the Eightfold Path, he spoke of three essential components: *sila*, *samadhi*, and *paññā*—ethical conduct, meditation, and wisdom. It's particularly interesting that when referring to the meditation portion, the word he chose was *samadhi*. In this context, *samadhi* becomes almost synonymous with meditation itself throughout the Buddhist tradition.

Regarding the rainbow body and its relationship to Dzogchen practice—I must speak from what I've read rather than direct experience. The teaching states that when a great Dzogchen practitioner reaches the culmination of practice, at the time of death their entire physical form dissolves into what's called rainbow body, a completely insubstantial form. Only their hair and fingernails remain behind. This is considered the definitive sign that a practitioner has reached the absolute pinnacle of what the practice offers.

Rinpoche mentioned today the story of the king who initiated the tantras—that king and his five hundred queens all attained rainbow body. The texts present this as the ultimate culmination of practice. Many stories attest to this achievement throughout history. Namkhai Norbu relates visiting the room of a great master who had passed away and finding only fingernails and hair remaining. This attainment is considered achievable today, with people still reaching this level. We should aim very high indeed.

When I described the second and third types of nirvana where consciousnesses are absent, you might wonder how a person could function if the senses aren't working. In both the Burmese and Thai traditions, the understanding is that the meditator enters this state for only a limited period, making direct contact with the unconditioned. This brief contact proves sufficient to uproot the defilements completely. The defilements leave the mind, then contact with the unconditioned ceases, consciousness and all senses return, and the practitioner continues functioning in the world—but now without any defilements remaining in the mind. Thankfully so!

An excellent point emerges about rainbow body still being part of the bodhisattva path, since a being can continue benefiting others from that *sambhogakaya* level. This is absolutely true and represents part of the magic, mystery, and wonder of Tibetan Buddhism.

Furthermore, as I understand it, once someone attains Buddhahood and the physical body dies, the imprint of that enlightened consciousness remains in the *dharmakaya* realm. From there, it becomes possible for what has been established in the *dharmakaya* to send forth emanations—rebirths in human or other forms that can continue benefiting beings in countless ways.

So even a fully enlightened Buddha can still, if you like, reappear to benefit beings. Great mysteries. I mean, it's mind-boggling.

A participant inquired about the bhikkhu who used the knife, asking whether consciousness was being used synonymously with awareness in that description. In the Pali texts, there's no word that gets translated as awareness—there's just consciousness. But it is usually associated with objects. So I think the pointing here is that something continues, but because there are no objects to pick up on, it is unestablished. So we could use it as synonymous with awareness.

The question touches on whether the fourth foundation of mindfulness points to awareness. There's certainly a pointing to consciousness in the fourth foundation through the five aggregates. I can't remember how the six sense bases are worded exactly, but consciousness is one of the five aggregates pointed to. So mindfulness of consciousness is included in classical Theravadan teachings.

Another question came up about samadhi and its translation. At previous retreats, I've mentioned that there isn't really an accurate English translation of this word. The translation as "concentration" can be misleading because when we use concentration in English, we usually mean narrowing the attention down. "I want to concentrate on my reading. Don't distract me with that television noise." But samadhi doesn't have that exclusive connotation at all.

The sense is that the mind is concentrated in the sense of coming together. The mind's stuff is concentrated. The mind energy is concentrated by letting go of distraction. Distraction is what robs the mind of energy. When we let go of distraction, the mind regains its original strength and energy and stability. So it's concentrated in the sense of being unified, being joined. Unification of mind is the best

translation I can think of.

Another way it's sometimes talked about is one-pointed. But again, you don't want to think of it as necessarily one-pointed in a narrow way. I like the way Ajahn Sumedho describes it. He's a Theravadan monk. He says that it's the one point that includes everything. That lends very well to our practice here. What's the one point that includes everything? The present moment. Empty knowing. So samadhi goes very well with that sense of empty knowing.

Just as a postscript: the more you develop the quality of samadhi through whatever practice you do—whether it develops through rigpa practice as you let go of distractions, where samadhi develops in a very natural and unforced way, or whether you do it through shamatha with single-pointed exclusive focus—you will find great benefit when you turn to mind essence. The stability that you've developed through the shamatha practice will be there when you touch the nature of mind, and it will sustain the rigpa longer.

Rinpoche has been expressing something very similar regarding both shamatha and Rigpa practice.

Let me take one final question. Bonnie?

"In the Dzogchen tradition, are shamatha and vipassana considered preliminary practices?"

I think shamatha is strongly encouraged. Traditionally, it was an absolute requirement to complete the formal preliminary practices of Tibetan Buddhism before receiving Dzogchen instruction. Students were also encouraged to develop proficiency in different styles of shamatha practice.

My understanding is that Dzogchen represents just one approach to vipassana—there are other methodologies for developing insight as well. Traditionally, meditators were expected to gain experience with a number of these approaches before being granted access to the quite secret teachings of Dzogchen.

This seems like a good place to conclude our exploration today. The integration of shamatha and Dzogchen practice offers a profound path for developing both the stability of mind and the recognition of our true nature. Whether we approach this through the gradual cultivation of single-pointed concentration or through the direct pointing-out instructions of Dzogchen, both methods support each other in revealing the luminous awareness that is always already present.

The key insight remains that stability of mind—however it develops—serves to sustain our recognition of Rigpa. When we touch the nature of mind with a foundation of shamatha, that recognition can endure with greater ease and naturalness. This is the beautiful marriage of method and wisdom, of concentration and awareness, that characterizes the most skillful approaches to awakening.

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