Bodhicitta

Brian Lesage · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 47:41

Good evening, everyone.

I wanted to begin by letting you know that I'll be leaving tomorrow morning. First of all, it's really been wonderful to meet a number of you, for those who signed up for interviews with me. I also want to give a big thank you to many of you whose interviews I sat in on—it was a fantastic opportunity for me. Most importantly, though, I want to thank you for your effort and your practice. I don't think you could see it as I was sitting over there, but the entire time I've been here, I've been riding on your momentum in practice. So thank you very much for your effort. It inspires my practice, and it's what I'll be bringing home with me.

Tonight I wanted to begin by sharing a dream I had a couple of years ago. I was teaching a teacher residency in Santa Fe, New Mexico, spending about a month there working on a particular theme that fits with what I'll be speaking about tonight.

It was a very interesting dream. I found myself in this huge room with all these people milling around. In one corner—and actually this has happened in a few of my dreams—was the Zen master I practiced with when I was a Zen monk. He was simply sitting in the corner of this huge room, gazing upon the whole event.

Toward the front of the room, there was this orange flame, just moving about. It had this feeling sense that it represented the dilemma all of us face: the dilemma of birth and death, the dilemma of suffering. There it was, flickering and moving. People would go up in front of it and do something—sometimes the weirdest things: dance, or perform some kind of mantra or chanting—all in an attempt to become free of this thing, to become free of the dilemma of birth and death, to become free of suffering.

But it never worked. Someone would go up, and then they would disappear, as if the flame engulfed them. This was just casually going on—all these people there, the Zen master in the back overlooking everything.

The other thing in the dream that was a little disturbing was this palpable feeling that the name of the game in that room was that all of us were going to have to come face to face with this flame sooner or later. That was the deal. You'd see people summon their courage and come up to the flame and try their thing—always unsuccessfully.

When I was faced with knowing I'd have to come face to face with this, I thought to myself, "I want to go to the beach." As they say, why do today what you can put off till tomorrow? So that's what I started to do—I tried to figure out how to get out of the room and gather what I needed for going to the beach. I didn't

want to face it.

As I was milling around, going in and out of the room, I eventually came back in. I think I needed to get my swimsuit. I'd found it, so I was ready to go to the beach. And as I went back into the room, I saw the most striking thing.

What appeared before me was this archetypal image of people holding hands. Just this image of people holding hands. And when it came face to face with the red flame, the flame disappeared, and there was a feeling that finally all of us were free.

For me it was a powerful dream, in the sense that so often we conceptualize or imagine awakening to be something in the context of "I wake up." It's me who wakes up. Awakening is about me and my life. And yet this dream was telling me something different—that maybe something closer to what's going on is that we actually all wake up, or we wake up together. There's a value in having this broader sense underneath our practice here.

There are a number of discourses—about four or five in the Pali Canon—that have the same construction, where the Buddha talks about four kinds of people found in the world. The first is a person who practices neither for their own benefit nor for the benefit of others. The second practices for their own benefit but not for the benefit of others. The third does not practice for their own benefit but practices for the benefit of others. And the fourth is the practitioner who practices both for the benefit of oneself and others. Of course, what the Buddha is really emphasizing is the importance of this fourth way.

The most refined practitioner is one who practices for the benefit of both others and oneself. This is what I'd like to speak about tonight—this quality of practice.

Later in Buddhism, this flowers into the idea of bodhicitta. Literally, *bodhi* means enlightenment or awakening, and *citta* can be translated as heart or heart-mind. There are two aspects to bodhicitta: relative bodhicitta and absolute bodhicitta.

Relative bodhicitta is what I was just mentioning—this altruistic intention. It means having the aspiration to awaken, but having that aspiration for the benefit of all beings, so that all beings may be free. This relative bodhicitta is intertwined with absolute bodhicitta, which is the realization of emptiness. You could say it's the wisdom that sees through the illusion of a separate, fixed sense of self, or the insight into the fundamental nature of things.

Tonight I'll be sharing some reflections on practicing for the benefit of ourselves as well as for others—on cultivating this bodhicitta. I offer it so that you can decide if this is something that fits into your own practice. In particular, I'll probably spend more time speaking about relative bodhicitta, but if time allows, I'd like to explore how this insight or realization of emptiness fits in, how it's intertwined with relative bodhicitta, and how we can understand it in a way that connects with the practice you're doing on this retreat.

In terms of the practicality of how we bring this quality of bodhicitta into our practice, I want to remind you of the instructions that Carol gave a few mornings ago, where she invited us to check in with our motivation. It could be before a sitting meditation, or before each sitting and walking, or simply in the morning—placing this motivation: "May my practice go to the benefit of all beings." Then, as she was clear to point out, setting that aside so that we simply begin our practice. The third point was sharing the merit of our practice after a sitting or walking meditation.

It's a very small addition to our practice. But for me, it really makes a huge difference within my spiritual path. As a way of beginning, I want to say a few things about how this has been an essential part of my practice and how it's been helpful both for those sunny days we have on retreat, as well as those stormy days.

On those sunny days, where things feel like they're unfolding smoothly, it reminds me not to take ownership for the unfolding of this path. It undermines this idea of "me" or "I"—of "here I am waking up" or "this is mine." It gives me a sense of this being something that's happening on a much broader level than this confined world of me.

And on the dark days, the stormy days, it's been incredibly helpful as well. I remember this when I was a Zen monk. There was a period of time that was actually probably the darkest time of my life. I hesitate telling you this because I feel like all the stories I'm sharing about my life as a Zen monk are quite dark. It actually might be true, but let's move on from there.

I remember there was a period, really the darkest time of my life. Some of you have probably experienced this—where you have this feeling of going through the motions of living, but it lacks the feeling of really being alive. You're moving around, but you feel dead on the inside. That kind of darkness. Maybe some of you have experienced that. It's rough. It's even rougher practicing through that, just having the sense of keeping your head above water.

I remember there was something so important, and it was just around simple things—going to the zendo, the meditation hall. Even in the midst of feeling like my practice was worth nothing, that huge doubt I spoke about a few talks ago, somehow when it was for the benefit of others, there was a space around that darkness that allowed me to navigate it. It gave me a space around how confining this self-centric world can be. And it was just about having this sense that this practice is for the benefit of all beings.

So I feel like it's important. It can be something that really gives life to the practice you're doing here on this retreat. And it's not only that—I feel like it brings our hearts into touch with a beautiful quality of mind. What are we talking about here? We're talking about compassion, and having it interfused, intertwined with our entire day and night of practice.

I'd like to give an example of compassion. There are so many examples out there, and this is one I come back to again and again. Maybe it's because of its simplicity, and in that simplicity, there's something

profound about it. It's the story of a man named Lorenzo Perrone. Some of you may have heard of him.

He was an Italian bricklayer during World War II, and he was actually working at Auschwitz. A number of bricklayers had been brought over to build more buildings around the camp. Lorenzo was the man instrumental in helping the writer and chemist Primo Levi survive Auschwitz. Primo Levi lived there for a year. Most people in Auschwitz did not live longer than three months.

I'd like to share with you some words from a book by Primo Levi about Lorenzo Perrone. He says, "An Italian civilian worker brought me a piece of bread and the remainder of his ration every day for six months." This is Lorenzo Perrone he's talking about. "He gave me a vest of his, full of patches. He wrote a postcard on my behalf to Italy and brought me the reply. For all this, he neither asked nor accepted any reward—because he was good and simple and did not think that one did good for a reward."

And then he goes on. He says, "I believe that it was really due to Lorenzo that I'm alive today." And this is the striking part. He says, "And not so much for his material aid—more so for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still existed a just world outside our own. Lorenzo was a human being. His humanity was pure and uncontaminated. He was outside this world of negation. Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a human being."

To me, that's such a striking and beautiful expression of compassion. Such a simple act—bread and clothing. And more important, what did he say? He said it was Lorenzo's presence that actually allowed him to continue.

Shantideva, an eighth-century Indian practitioner known as the author of a text called the *Bodhicharyavat ara*, usually translated as *The Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, offers some beautiful words around this intention—this intention of awakening for the benefit of all beings, of practicing for the benefit of oneself and for others. It's actually one of the most beloved texts in Tibetan Buddhism. I think the Dalai Lama says this is his favorite text.

I'd like to share with you a little from Shantideva talking about this intention and the words he brings to it. And remember, this is an Indian text, so it's a little over the top—but I like a little over the top.

He says:

May I be a protector for those who are without protectors, a guide for travelers, and a boat, a bridge, and a ship for those who wish to cross over. May I be a lamp for those who seek light, a bed for those who seek rest, and may I be a servant for all beings who desire a servant. To all sentient beings, may I be a wish-fulfilling gem, a vase of good fortune, an efficacious mantra, a great medication, a wish-fulfilling tree, and a wish-granting cow. Just as Earth and other elements are useful in various ways to innumerable sentient beings dwelling throughout infinite space, so may I be in various ways a source of life for the sentient beings present throughout space until they are all liberated.

And then towards the end of this text, the *Bodhicharyavatara*, he gives a word to this quite profound vow or dedication. He says, "As long as space and time endure, and for as long as beings remain, until then may I too endure to dispel the misery of the world."

It's a beautiful movement of the heart. What a beautiful thing to have underlie our practice while we're here.

You might have noticed this—I feel this is so important—because maybe you've seen how our minds are so confined by this self-centric world that runs counter to this intention. Have you noticed that yet? I appreciated Sally's talk, I think it was a couple of talks ago, where she was talking about the nature of thought and noticing that so many of our thoughts center around these three questions: Am I okay? Was I okay? Will I be okay? What a perfect description of a self-centric world where that's all the mind can think about.

It's even around our meditation practice. So much this self-centric world. I come here. Who comes to IMS? *I* come to IMS. *I* practice. *I'm* mindful. Maybe *I* will gain insight.

I will be kinder. Maybe I will be more free. Maybe I'll be more intelligent. Maybe my life will be better, or my circumstances will be better.

Have you noticed such thoughts? And I want to point out there's nothing inherently bad about these thoughts. They can actually be wholesome aspirations, and of course quite useful when speaking with others. The problem happens when you deeply believe in that, deeply live by that—when you're only living in a self-centric world. So again, there's nothing wrong necessarily with this conceptualization. The problem is getting lost in it, being confined by that.

John Ruskin once said, "When a person is wrapped up in themselves, they make a pretty small package."

I'm sure many of you are here because you've tasted the suffering and stress that comes from living in a narrow, self-centric world. But you're also probably here because you've tasted how this practice can begin to allow you to break out of that confinement.

So what I want to spend some time with right now is this question: How can we understand practicing for the benefit of oneself and others when on a long retreat? How do we understand this?

In order to elucidate this point, I'd like to share with you a discourse from the Buddha—the Sedaka Sutta, the story of the Buddha telling a tale about acrobats.

The Buddha begins by addressing the monastics and tells this story about two bamboo acrobats. These acrobats have a stunt they perform to make money. They have a bamboo pole, and the lead acrobat climbs up and balances on top of the pole. Then his assistant, Medakathālika, this woman, climbs up the bamboo pole and then climbs over him onto his shoulders. It's quite a feat. Once they balance up there, they get off and collect their fees for the show.

The lead acrobat says to his assistant, "Listen, this is what's going to work. If you look after me and I look after you, then this is going to go just fantastic. We'll get off the bamboo safely and we'll collect our fees."

And the assistant, Medakathālika, says to him, "No, it doesn't work that way. The way it works is: if I look after myself and you look after yourself, then we'll be able to get off the bamboo pole and collect our fees."

Then the Buddha continues and says, "Ah yes, just like the assistant said, just like Medakathālika said to her master." And he goes on: "Just with this sense of 'I will look after myself,' so should you practitioners practice the establishment of mindfulness. You should also practice the establishment of mindfulness by saying, 'I will look after others.' Looking after oneself, one looks after others. Looking after others, one looks after oneself. And how does one look after others by looking after oneself? By practicing mindfulness, by developing it, by doing it a lot. And how does one look after oneself by looking after others? By patience, by non-harming, by loving-kindness, by caring for others. Thus, looking after oneself, one looks after others, and looking after others, one looks after oneself."

It's very clear, right? When we take care of ourselves, when we engage in mindfulness, we're taking care of others. There's this quality of taking care of others by doing this practice. And when we're cultivating a skillful way of taking care of others, cultivating these wholesome states of mind such as loving-kindness and compassion, we're actually taking care of ourselves.

What I want to point out about this is that this quality of practicing for oneself and for others is actually already happening when you're on retreat. It's actually impossible for it not to happen. And I think it's important to reflect that just being here is affecting so many other people. Sally mentioned this, I think on the first night—how as you're sitting here on this retreat, people who have been on this three-month retreat previously know that you're here and they're inspired. Or friends that you have in your sangha or just in your community, some of them are probably quite inspired. I know for many of the staff here, there's a whole different vibe, a whole different quality when this retreat goes on. Simply your willingness to be here has a huge impact on others. And I feel it's important to remember that, so your practice can start to break out of the confinement of the self-centric world.

I find it a striking image—just the image of balance on this bamboo pole.

And what allows things to remain in balance is paying attention. That's where all of us who are involved don't get harmed. When we pay attention in this particular way with mindfulness, we don't get harmed in this world. There's less harm.

I find the image quite striking too, because if you think of being on top of that bamboo pole, it gives me the sense of this quality that we're all intertwined with one another. This is the situation that we find ourselves in. We find ourselves on top of a bamboo pole with all of the other beings in this universe—which I think really points to this interdependent quality of the world that we live in.

There is a sutra that came out later in Buddhism called the Avatamsaka Sutra, usually translated as the

Flower Garland Sutra. The last chapter tells the story of a young boy, Sudhana, who ventures on a spiritual journey. And out of this journey, one of the images presented is Indra's net, which some of you might be familiar with. Indra's net is a net that expands infinitely outward in all directions. And in each node of the net, there is a jewel. If you were to look into one of those jewels, you would see reflected within it all of the other jewels in the net. One jewel, and you see all the other jewels—the infinite number of jewels within one jewel. This interdependent quality is the reality that we live in.

I want to bring this up because I want to spend a little more time on this idea that this practice reaches much farther than your own lives. I want to give an example on the healing level, which I find striking. Because not only is this about awakening, but for many of us, this is about healing as well.

There's a story I heard of a woman who had been in many abusive relationships. She would get into a relationship, and it would become violent. She would exit that relationship, eventually, with difficulty, only to find herself yet again in another relationship that was abusive and violent like the previous one. But then she really started to truly heal, to deeply heal from this dynamic. And it was interesting how she conceptualized it. What she realized was that she was healing from a dynamic that felt like it stretched back for generations in her family.

When she started to understand this, it was an incredible journey for her. She began to have this feeling that she was stopping a dynamic that went well beyond her life. From her cultural worldview, she started having dreams and a sense that her ancestors, especially the women in her family, were supporting her. And not only supporting her—it was as if they were being healed as well from what she was doing.

It was a beautiful description. There's something really powerful about it: she wasn't the only one healing. Generations that had come before her were healing too, and of course generations coming after her wouldn't have to experience that pattern.

You might have a different worldview, but I want to point out that the same kind of thing is going on here on retreat. Isn't that a cool thing just to consider? That you're putting an end to old habitual patterns that, in this framework, have probably been going on for generations within your family. What a remarkable thing that they finally begin to stop. They might course through our minds again and again, but gradually, they cease to have that stranglehold on this system. Generations of habitual patterns stopping because of this retreat. And of course, in terms of Buddhist cosmology, it's endless lifetimes that have been built up.

Do you see how this fits with the image of Indra's net? What you're doing here on this retreat is all intertwined. When you sit here, it's going to reverberate. There's no way it can't. There's no way this can happen in a vacuum. And maybe at times in your practice, you have this worry about being so self-centered, sitting here, struggling with your stuff. But the fact is, it actually isn't your stuff. It goes well beyond you. For better and for worse, it's what you've inherited.

So that's the amazing thing about this practice. It's actually impossible to be completely self-centered when

we begin to really sink into it. It's virtually impossible.

Perhaps you might try it sometime—see if you can make your practice completely self-centered, have it be only about you. Maybe take those cosmic scissors and see if you can cut out some of the jewels from Indra's net. But it doesn't work that way. It's impossible.

The other benefit of having this sense—and this is really important, as I mentioned—is truly understanding that all of the things that arise really have nothing to do with you. It's the activity of this mind that's been conditioned by all these patterns that come before us. So what a noble thing to do, to actually sit down with them, to allow for something new or something freeing to arise in this world.

I want to reiterate—I'm sure you can see now—this is not about doing something different while you're here. Of course, we do the small things that Carol mentioned and I repeated at the beginning of the talk. But it's more about allowing this practice to have a broader sense to it, to allow it not to be confined by this self-centric world. It's about letting go of this fixed sense of self that runs so deep.

I want to spend some time now speaking about how this altruistic intention—this intention for awakening, for liberation, for the benefit of all beings—is intertwined with absolute bodhicitta, this wisdom about emptiness. What is all this emptiness stuff about? How does it fit with vipassana, and more importantly, with compassion?

I want to simplify it, so this is not going to be a talk about the sixteen kinds of emptiness, or the eighteen kinds, or the twenty kinds, for those of you familiar with Tibetan Buddhism. Rather, let's see if we can situate it within the practice all of us are doing here.

Simply put, emptiness refers to the fact that all phenomena lack an inherent, fixed existence or essence. You find this in the early discourses. Ananda was spending time with the Buddha and asked, "Venerable One, what does it mean that the world is empty?" The Buddha basically replied that what is meant by the world being empty is that the world is empty of anything pertaining to a self. It's empty of a self. There's this quality of not-self or non-self within experience. And of course, later in Buddhism, this expands to really seeing that there's no kind of fixed, inherent existence with anything found within this universe.

How do we relate this to our practice here? The way I understand it is that this definition of emptiness, this simpler way of understanding it, basically means that what we're experiencing is not as real as we usually make it out to be.

Guy gave that example of walking in the forest and feeling like there's a snake there—the fear arises, but actually it's just a rope. The process of seeing, "Oh, this is not as real as I thought it was"—that's the quality of emptiness. The mind is placing much more there than is really there. Joseph shared with us the quote from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche about how our thoughts are like a rainbow. These thoughts that course through our minds create this whole reality that feels so solid, but it's more like a rainbow. When you really see it, it's not completely there. It's not as real as we think it is.

Let me give some examples, just to be crystal clear. I want to give a big, gross example, and then get more refined in terms of our meditation.

To me, the best example is this: Have you ever sent off an email, maybe one where you had to think carefully about what you were writing? There's a lot involved in the email. You send it off, click send. A day goes by. Two days go by. Then thoughts start to creep up: Why aren't they writing me? I think they're really upset with me. I know why they're not writing—it's because of those sentences I put in the email. And it's because of when I saw them the other day at the market where I didn't say hello to them.

Then maybe a few days go by, you get an email, and you find out they were just sick. There's the realization: I created this whole world that doesn't exist, that's not real. That's noticing the empty nature of this thought world—it's empty.

And of course, that's what's happening on this retreat. I'm sure you've seen all the stories about ourselves and others, and how huge they can start to feel. The practice is to see that this is just a thought that arises and passes away. Have you noticed, when the mind really sees that clearly, how powerful it is, how freeing it can be? Just that—just to be able to note with clarity: thinking, or wandering, or planning. It's seeing that it's not as real as you once thought it was.

And of course, there are deeper levels to that.

There could be even deeper seeing—noticing the empty nature of this thought that "I am here" and "all of you are out there," or "I am here" and "the world is out there." Sometimes it feels like awareness has some kind of location to it. And with practice, a lot of times that gets undermined. So empty in that sense.

This kind of emptiness is actually embedded in the practice that you're doing. It undermines the belief in this constructed reality that the mind has created. When that happens, what's occurring? That's basically dismantling this self-centric world. Because that self-centric world is a created world that's not real.

And you might notice that once this begins to dismantle, a natural quality of compassion arises. You might want to do an experiment around this. I find it quite fascinating to notice that when the mind is not so lost in conceptualizing about the world, sometimes what I notice is there's much more of this quality of intimacy—this kind of spiritual intimacy with the world around me. Notice if that's true or not. For me, that's where compassion truly arises: through that intimacy.

I want to point out also what emptiness is *not*. This is really important. Because a lot of times there can be this thought that emptiness means "everything is empty, none of this matters." And actually, even the phrase "everything is empty" or "none of it matters"—what is that? That's a thought. So it's not like we're trying to latch onto a thought and say, "This is emptiness." It's more the process of seeing that things are not as real as we believe them to be. Not about nothing existing, or that all of it's meaningless.

I'd like to share with you a description, a view, that I think can be confused with emptiness. You might

know this quote. I hope some of you do:

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

If you might remember, these are the words of Macbeth in the play that Shakespeare wrote. To remind you, he says these words when his world is falling apart. He's done some pretty heinous crimes, and everyone's leaving him. His wife has just died. His life and his rule are falling apart. And for him, nothing matters. His wife's death signifies nothing. His actions signify nothing. And life, which is this "poor player," means nothing.

Emptiness is not about "my life is meaningless" or that nothing matters. It's important to remember that the Buddha was teaching in a specific context—that of suffering and the end of suffering. And actually, he encourages us to take up really important "stories," such as the story that our actions have consequences, and the importance of ethical behavior that results from that understanding.

How do we allow this practice of emptiness to unfold, or this realization of emptiness to unfold that I'm speaking about? As I was mentioning in my last talk, it's really easy. It's simply engaging in the practice that you're doing. Your job description is super simple: aware. Simply being aware with this quality of intelligence or kindness that's been mentioned again and again. Relying on mindfulness. Insight and realization actually aren't in our job description. We don't have to worry about that, which is such a wonderful thing. Just sticking with the job description so that these realizations can start to move through our practice.

So again, this altruistic intention—having a practice that's for the benefit of all beings. And again, just those simple instructions that Carol gave us. You might at the beginning of each sit, or each walking, or in the morning, just place that intention really clearly. And then at the end of sits, and maybe even a walking meditation, share the merit. It's not something you have to think about throughout the day.

I'd like to end with a dedication connected with Red Tara that I feel really speaks to both the absolute and relative quality of bodhicitta. It goes like this:

Throughout my many lives and until this moment, whatever virtue I have accomplished, including the merit generated by this practice and all that I will ever attain...

This I offer for the welfare of sentient beings. May sickness, war, famine, and suffering be decreased for every living being, while their wisdom and compassion increase in this and every future life. May I clearly perceive all experiences to be as insubstantial as the dream fabric of the night, and instantly awaken to perceive the pure wisdom display in the arising of every phenomenon. May I quickly attain enlightenment in order to work ceaselessly for the liberation of all sentient beings.

Let us sit together for a few moments in silence.

Bodhicitta

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