

Transcript of the oral commentary by Khen Rinpoche Geshe Chonyi on Dharmarakshita's *Wheel-Weapon Mind Training*

Root verses: Excerpt from *Peacock in the Poison Grove: Two Buddhist Texts on Training the Mind*, translation Geshe Lhundub Sopa with Michael Sweet and Leonard Zwilling. © Wisdom Publications with permission granted for use in the FPMT Basic Program by Wisdom Publications.

Lesson 1

30 June 2015

Transforming the mind. *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation*: Verses 1—2.

TRANSFORMING THE MIND

The subject matter for this module is *The Wheel of Sharp Weapons*.¹ I will talk a little about the *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation*² first. This may take two lessons and thereafter, we will proceed with the actual root text.

The Tibetan word, *lojong*, literally means, 'to train the mind.' This particular genre of teachings is called mind training (or thought transformation). It is not difficult to explain and it is not difficult to understand, but it is very difficult to practise these teachings.

When we talk about mind training in general, there are:

- the mind training of a person of small capacity,
- the mind training of a person of middling capacity
- the mind training of a person of great capacity

When we use the term, *lojong*, this particular genre of teachings refers primarily to the training of a person of great capacity. So the *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation* is a text that deals with the mind training of a person of great capacity.

Many of you probably are familiar with the origins of these teachings on mind training and bodhicitta.

- There is a lineage of Mahayana mind training passed down from Manjushri to Nagarjuna and Shantideva. This system of cultivating bodhicitta is called the instructions of exchanging self and others.
- There is another system of generating bodhicitta that came from Maitreya and was passed down to Asanga and so forth. That system of cultivating bodhicitta is called the sevenfold cause and effect instructions.

¹ Ven Gyurme: In Tibetan, the word "sharp" is not there. It is just called *Wheel-Weapon*.

² Pages 161—163, *Essential Buddhist Prayers* —A FPMT Prayer Book, Volume I. ©2008 FPMT Inc.

These instructions for cultivating bodhicitta were passed down in their respective lineages. I think it was during the time of Lama Serlingpa that these two lineages were combined. As many of you are aware, Lama Atisha travelled for 13 months by boat, going all the way to what is present day Sumatra in order to receive the instructions for cultivating bodhicitta from Lama Serlingpa. (Lama Serlingpa is also known as Dharmakirti of Suvarnavipa, Suvarnavipa referring to a place in Sumatra).

If you look at the life story of Lama Atisha, he spent 13 months travelling in a boat, putting up with dangers to his life and so forth in order to receive the instructions for cultivating bodhicitta. This shows how much hardship he was willing to endure in order to receive the teachings. If we look at the life stories of these great masters of the past, comparatively speaking, whatever inconveniences, discomforts or hardships that we may experience in learning and practising the Dharma is nothing. They pale in comparison.

This also shows that if we don't have a strong yearning to achieve a particular goal, we will never achieve it. Without that powerful yearning, that kind of devotion and faith, it is impossible to develop any experience or realisations of the Dharma.

If we look at the situation these days, the Dharma is readily available. We can listen to the Dharma at any time and at any place. There are so many materials available for us to consult and to read.

Khen Rinpoche: So now there is no need to travel 13 months by ship!

This happens to all of us. Having listened to the teachings, after some time, when we hear again the teachings on the practices of the person of small capacity, we have this attitude, thinking, "I have heard this before." Also, when we are learning Mahayana teachings such as the teachings on thought transformation, we think, "This is something I have heard before."

What are we thinking when we have this kind of view or we say such things? Basically, we are saying that such teachings are of no benefit to our mind. This is what we mean.

Khen Rinpoche: It is another way of saying that the teachings are boring. Maybe that is the right expression, "It is boring!"

Then when we encounter and study more challenging and difficult texts, because they are difficult, we may think, "This does not benefit me. It cannot benefit my practice. I don't need something so complicated." So again another complication arises in our mind. All these complications pile up in our mind, "These teachings are not working out for me. They are of no benefit to me. I don't need these teachings." We end up feeling that none of the teachings are effective for our mind.

The mind training teachings expose all our faults, showing us the faults we have one by one, just like a doctor who tells us about all our sicknesses and medical problems. The purpose of the exercise is for us to see the need to change ourselves.

It is mentioned very clearly at the beginning in the stages of the path to enlightenment (lam-rim) teachings that the purpose of listening to the teachings is to rectify our faults on the basis of recognising and acknowledging them. So the purpose of listening to and studying these mind training teachings is to recognise our faults for what they are and then to correct them.

The purpose is *not* to help us identify the faults of others. Therefore, it is important not to get the purpose and the motivation wrong from the very onset. It is said in the teachings that if our effort in listening to and learning the Dharma leads us to seek out the faults of others, then we are sorely mistaken. If that happens to us, i.e., we study the Dharma in order to identify the faults of others, then mind training becomes impossible.

It is emphasised very strongly in the teachings that from the onset, we must not get our purpose and motivation wrong for listening to the Dharma. So whenever we are listening to and learning these teachings, we should remind ourselves that the purpose is to identify and rectify our own faults.

Before we start each teaching session, we always recite the verses of going for refuge to the Three Jewels and generating the mind of enlightenment. The purpose of reciting those verses is to think about their meaning and to generate the thought thinking, “I am going to receive and listen to these teachings for the purpose of achieving enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.”

Generating the mind of enlightenment means developing the aspiration to achieve omniscience, i.e., full enlightenment, for the benefit of others. If we yearn for enlightenment in order to accomplish our own purposes, then it doesn't become bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment.

Many of us here have already received the bodhisattva vows and some have even received tantric vows. The essence of the bodhisattva vows is taking the vow to solely work for others and to achieve enlightenment for that purpose. Although we have taken these vows, in reality, they are nothing more than words, a mere promise only.

When we took the vows, supposedly with a bodhicitta attitude, of course, bodhicitta is something we do not have. After having taken the vows, then there is supposed to be the practice of cultivating and increasing our bodhicitta, which we have not done. So the promises we made are all empty ones. We all are like that.

If you were to ask, “What is the practice that should follow after generating the mind of enlightenment and taking the bodhisattva vows?” this practice is explained in a very condensed way in this short text called the *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation*. This practice is a combination of method and wisdom:

- The first seven verses of the text deal with the method aspect of the path.
- The last verse deals with the training in wisdom.

So if we want to know, “What should be the characteristics of real Dharma practice?” the hallmark has to be such mind training. This is the real Dharma practice.

Receiving initiations and reciting sadhanas will not change the mind. Taking the bodhisattva vows alone, without having trained the mind in this way, does not change the mind. Reciting mantras alone does not change the mind and studying the Dharma does not change the mind. It is very difficult for the mind to change simply by engaging in such activities.

If that is the case, then how can we change our mind for the better? There is only one way. The way to transform the mind is to change our way of thinking. There is no other way. We have to reflect and think about this.

If we are honest with ourselves, it is very clear when we look at our own lives—even for those of us who have been studying, who have been exposed to and in contact with the Dharma for a very long time, say, 20, 30 years—that we have nothing to show for it. There has been no progress whatsoever.

It doesn't matter how many mantras we may have recited or how many prostrations we have done if we have never ever sat down to work on changing our mind and our way of thinking. Since we never practised mind training, therefore, we find ourselves pretty much the same as we were when we started. There has been no real transformation. The fault lies in not having practised mind training.

Not only have we not improved. Perhaps we may have even degenerated over time. There is more anger, more afflictions, more disturbance in the mind and more discursive thoughts. If we look at ourselves honestly, this may be the case and it all boils down to not having really practised. When the teachings point out our faults, we really must look at our own mind and recognise and acknowledge those faults.

The way we learn the Dharma makes a difference in our attitude. If we have trust and faith in and respect for the teacher, then we will take those teachings and instructions to heart. We will actually look at ourselves and see whether we have this fault and that fault. If we don't know how to listen to the teachings, even though we may be physically present and hear him—"He is saying there is this fault and that fault. I have this fault and that fault."—but that's about it. We may have registered what was said but we will never look at ourselves and acknowledge that we have those problems.

This is the reason why the practice of correctly relying on the virtuous friend is taught right at the beginning in *The Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*. From the side of you as the listener, you have strong yearning for the Dharma. Then you seek out and listen to the Dharma from someone you can really devote yourself to, someone that you trust and believe in. He affects your mind in a very positive way. When these two conditions come together—strong yearning from your side and listening to the Dharma from someone you really have faith in—then even if you receive a very short teaching, that teaching will be very effective for your mind.

The Stages of the Path to Enlightenment mentions the defining characteristics of the student relying on the teacher. One of the defining characteristics is that a suitable receptacle for the teachings must have diligence, i.e., it must be someone who has strong yearning for the Dharma.

When these two conditions come together—strong yearning from your side and receiving teachings from someone in whom you have faith, trust and devotion—then those teachings will become very effective. You will experience the teachings, see a positive change and you will really want the Dharma.

When that happens, whether you call it receiving the blessings of the virtuous friend or receiving blessings of the Buddha, what matters is that there is transformation in the mind. Your mind is transformed when you receive such blessings and this means that you have been engaged by the Buddha's enlightened activities.

As said in Verse 27 of the *Tathagata Essence*, "A perfect Buddha's body is pervasive." This is the meaning: The mind of a person, who has been engaged by the enlightened activities of the Buddha, has changed.

In the section on correctly devoting to the virtuous friend, where we meditate on our own gurus to be buddhas, one of the reasons posited for asserting that the guru is a buddha is because he is the agent of all the Buddha's activities. It is only when the mind has transformed in a positive way—through learning and listening to the instructions of our own virtuous friend and having some experience of the Dharma after practising those teachings—that we can start truly to see the virtuous friend as the agent of all the Buddha's activities.

We must never lose the meaning of Dharma in whatever we do. Whether we are listening to the Dharma, learning the Dharma, reciting OM MANI PADME HUM, making prostrations and so forth, we must never ever forget the purpose behind and the meaning of those activities.

What are the essential purpose and meaning behind those activities? They are all ways of subduing and disciplining our mind. We must never ever forget this. This should be in the back of our mind all the time.

In *Engaging in the Bodhisattva's Deeds*, Shantideva said very clearly that if we engage in our Dharma activities with a distracted mind—be it doing prostrations, reciting mantras, reciting prayers, studying or listening to Dharma and so forth—then all these activities become meaningless and will not fulfil their purpose.³

Why do all these activities become meaningless if we do them with a distracted mind? If the mind hasn't changed for the better, they are meaningless because their purpose has not been fulfilled.

We hear all these points but somehow, our minds always remain very hard and very stubborn. Even as we continue to listen to the teachings, yet our mind still doesn't change.

³ "The Knower of Reality has said/ That even if recitation and physical hardships/ Are practiced for long periods of time,/ They will be meaningless if the mind is distracted elsewhere." (Verse 16, Chapter 5).

EIGHT VERSES OF THOUGHT TRANSFORMATION

Verse 1

Determined to obtain the greatest possible benefit from all sentient beings, who are more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel, I shall hold them most dear at all times.

The verse is saying that from our own side, we should view all sentient beings without exception as more precious than wish-fulfilling jewels. The first verse highlights the need to generate the mind that cherishes others. There are a few things that we need to think about.

There are some commentaries that explain that sentient beings are like wish-fulfilling jewels. If a wish-fulfilling jewel is covered with mud, it will not be of benefit to anyone. It is said that if one was to find a wish-fulfilling jewel, one should take it out of the mud, clean it well, anoint it with scented water and on the fifteenth day of the lunar calendar, place it on top of a victory banner. One should supplicate it. Then one's material needs or wishes will be granted.

Likewise, if our view of sentient beings do not change and we continue to look at them in the usual ordinary way, from the side of those sentient beings, they would not be able to give us the happiness of future lives, liberation and enlightenment.

However, we can change our way of looking at sentient beings by first recognising that they are the bases for our practice of generosity. They are the objects in relation to whom we can practise ethical discipline and likewise patience, joyous effort and the other perfections. Then by focussing on sentient beings and by practising generosity, cultivate ethical discipline, practise patience and so forth, these sentient beings can give us the happiness of this life, the happiness of liberation and the happiness of full enlightenment.

This is how we can understand that sentient beings are similar to the wish-fulfilling jewel. So this verse points out that if from our own side, we were to benefit and cherish others, those sentient beings will become the source of our happiness.

It is clear that the happiness we experience in this life is dependent on others. If we do not rely on others, there is no way we can achieve much of the happiness and pleasures of this life. Likewise, we can never achieve the bliss of liberation without relying on others and of course, enlightenment is impossible if we do not rely on others.

The point here is that if we cherish others, the happiness of this life will come, the happiness of liberation can be achieved, and likewise, the happiness of full enlightenment. If we do not cherish sentient beings, then none of this will happen.

Not only are sentient beings similar to a wish-fulfilling jewel, the verse is saying that sentient beings are *more* precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel. As I mentioned earlier, if we were to find a wish-fulfilling jewel and supplicate it, it will grant us all our material wishes. But the wish-fulfilling jewel can never grant us the happiness of

future lives, liberation and full enlightenment, unlike sentient beings in the example mentioned earlier. From our own side, if we train to cherish sentient beings, then in dependence on sentient beings, we can achieve the happiness of future lives, liberation and full enlightenment. As such, sentient beings are more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel.

The verse is saying that with the determination to achieve the highest goal—the happiness of future lives, liberation and enlightenment—these will happen if from our own side, we change our perspective with regard to sentient beings and cherish them instead. Then we will achieve all these goals. Because we, ourselves will achieve all these goals if we change our mind and cherish them, the conclusion is in the last line, “I shall hold them most dear at all times.”

The usual way these verses are phrased, they always end with, “May I do this ... May I do that ...” In this case, the last line will read as, “May I hold them most dear at all times.” But there are some versions in which the last line states, “I *shall* hold them most dear at all times.” This is more powerful.

In the usual version it is like a prayer or merely making a wish, “May I do such and such ...” But if we change it to, “I *shall* hold them most dear at all times,” it is more forceful in that one is making a commitment by telling oneself, “This is what I *must* do.” Then it becomes like a pledge or an oath.

In order for that pledge to be effective, first, you must understand why you are doing this. You must see what is in it for you. What are the benefits of cherishing others and of changing our world-view of others? As the verse says, “Determined to obtain the greatest possible benefit from all sentient beings.” So if you see the benefits and the advantages of cherishing others, then you would make such a pledge.

Shantideva said in his *Engaging in the Bodhisattva's Deeds*:

A Buddha's qualities are gained
From the sentient beings and the Conquerors alike,
So why do I not respect them
In the same way as I respect the Conquerors?

(Verse 13, Chapter 6)

In order to achieve enlightenment, we have no choice but to rely on the Buddha. Without relying on the Buddha, there is no way to achieve enlightenment. In the same way, in order to achieve enlightenment, we must rely and depend on sentient beings as well without which there is no enlightenment either. As such, sentient beings are equal to the buddhas as causes of enlightenment. This is another reason why from our own side, we have to change our way of thinking and cherish sentient beings. If we want enlightenment, this is what we have to do.

There is no way to achieve the state of full enlightenment without cherishing sentient beings. The whole point of generating the mind of enlightenment and then taking the bodhisattva vows is to pledge to achieve enlightenment for the purpose of benefiting others. As such, from our own side, if we do not cherish sentient beings, then how is

it possible to achieve enlightenment?

The very first step in mind training, in moving towards bodhicitta, is to cultivate this expansive world-view. This comes from understanding the different points and reasons mentioned and the purpose of doing so, “What is in it for me?” First, we have to cultivate this expansive world-view that encompasses all sentient beings and cherishes them.

After that, on a practical level, what must we do? Even if we do cultivate such an expansive mind, that is still at the level of a mere wish. It is just an attitude. If we only have that attitude alone, we will not be in a position to be of real benefit to all sentient beings. So how do we translate this into practice? How should we conduct ourselves? This is indicated in the second verse.

Verse 2

When in the company of others, I shall always consider myself the lowest of all, and from the depths of my heart hold others dear and supreme.

On the practical level, you apply this attitude in life. As the verse says, “When in the company of others, I shall always consider myself the lowest of all.” This means that when we interact with others, we should always consider ourselves the lowest of all.

This is an antidote to pride. Having very strong pride creates many problems and disturbances for ourselves. In our interactions with others, we either consider ourselves superior to the other person or we think that we are their equal or peer. But this kind of attitude—seeing ourselves as superior or equal to others—brings about many complications in our relationships with others. This is quite evident from our experiences in life.

In our interactions with others, when there are problems in the relationship, when there is disharmony or when relationships do not go well, these happen because of our attitude of either holding ourselves as superior—“I know better. I’m better than you”—or seeing ourselves as equal to the other party.

From our own side, if we take a lower position, seeing ourselves as lower, then it makes our interactions with others far smoother and easier. For example, if we really consider ourselves as lower than others, if someone were to say something bad about us or look down on us, seeing us as inferior, we can accept it from the very beginning, “OK. I am lower.” Then our mind will not be disturbed. This is quite obvious.

What is expressed in this verse is very clear. It is not something that is hidden or obscure. All of us have experienced it. It is very clear that our ego and our pride cause problems in our interactions with others and in our relationships. So this verse is telling us where our problems lie. It is saying that we must recognise and identify our ego and pride and do something about it. There is no other way to deal with pride other than to see ourselves as lower than others.

The verse continues, "... and from the depths of my heart hold others dear and supreme." "From the depths of my heart" means that we should not simply pay lip service, saying, "Oh, you are wonderful. You are so precious. You are so nice!" These sentiments should genuinely come from the depths of our heart.

So on the one hand, we have to lower ourselves to become the lowest of all. At the same time, we must sincerely feel that others are supreme. I guess it is natural that we may wonder, "How is it possible that I am the lowest of all? I may be lower than some but how is it possible that I am lower than everyone else? I am definitely richer than some. I am definitely more handsome or prettier than some. I am more intelligent than some." The list goes on. We may wonder, "How is this possible?"

Khen Rinpoche: Maybe the one thing we won't think is, "I am fatter than him!"

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