

## 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 6

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The root text. Verses 1—3: The analogy of peacocks thriving on poison. Verses 4—6: Utilising the afflictions as aids on the path or as the path. Essential preliminaries to training in the practices of the person of great capacity. The bodhisattvas' disenchantment with samsara. How bodhisattvas work with their afflictions.

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#### THE ANALOGY OF PEACOCKS THRIVING ON POISON

##### Verse 1

When the peacocks roam the jungle of virulent poison, the flocks take no delight in gardens of medicinal plants, no matter how beautiful they may be, for peacocks thrive on the essence of virulent poison.

##### Verse 2

Similarly, when the heroes roam the jungle of cyclic existence, they do not become attached to the garden of happiness and prosperity, no matter how beautiful it may be, for heroes thrive in the jungle of suffering.

It is said that peacocks are not interested in the fruits and beautiful flowers that can be found in a garden. Rather, they look for poisonous plants and take delight in them, extracting their poison and thriving on them. It is said that when peacocks ingest poison, the poison helps them to look even more beautiful with an even more splendid body. The point is that peacocks are able to thrive on poison because they can use it as the condition for them to become more beautiful and more attractive. Because they know how to do this, therefore, they ingest poison voluntarily and happily.

“The heroes” are those who work for the happiness of sentient beings and for the welfare of others. In the context here, the heroes are the bodhisattvas.

“The jungle” is analogous of the three poisons— ignorance, anger and attachment. It is very dark in a jungle and one can't see anything. Likewise, “the jungle of cyclic existence” is enveloped by the darkness of the three poisons.

When the bodhisattvas roam the jungle of cyclic existence, they are never attached to samsaric perfections, no matter how beautiful or appealing they appear to be because they know fully the faults and disadvantages of cyclic existence. They also know what suffering is and how samsaric suffering arises. They are like the peacocks that are not interested in beautiful gardens. The bodhisattvas are not interested in the garden of happiness and prosperity of cyclic existence.

It is said that the bodhisattvas voluntarily accept the suffering and difficulties that they face while abiding in samsara. They are able to do so because they know how to use those difficulties and suffering to enhance their practice of the bodhisattva deeds, just as the peacocks know how to thrive on poison to enhance their looks.

### Verse 3

Therefore, it is due to cowardice that persons avidly pursue their own happiness and so come to suffer; and it is due to heroism that bodhisattvas, willingly taking the suffering of others onto themselves, are always happy.

If one does not voluntarily accept the suffering of samsara but follow one's self-cherishing attitude instead—being unhappy due to some small difficulties or easily excited by some meagre samsaric pleasure—then one will face many problems. People who follow their self-cherishing attitude and run after the happiness of this life bring great suffering to themselves in this life. Not only that. They will also experience suffering in all their future lives to come.

The heroes or the bodhisattvas on the other hand cherish others and voluntarily accept and take onto themselves their suffering. It is said that in this way, they will be happy in this life and also in all of their future lives.

## UTILISING THE AFFLICTIONS AS AIDS ON THE PATH OR AS THE PATH

### Verse 4

Now here, desire is like a jungle of virulent poison: the hero, like the peacock, masters it; the coward, like the crow, perishes.

We are talking here about the practice of a person of great capacity who is able to utilise the challenges presented by difficult situations and the afflictions as aids along their path to enlightenment. They are able to bring these challenges into the path, so to speak.

The teachings state very clearly that one must train one's mind well in the practices of a person of small and medium capacity before one is qualified to start training one's mind in the practices mentioned here, i.e., utilising challenges and the afflictions by bringing them onto the path:

- In the Mahayana Paramitayana (or Perfection Vehicle), the bodhisattva superiors are allowed to use some afflictions as aids to benefit sentient beings.
- In Mahayana tantra, these practitioners can then take the afflictions *as* the path to enlightenment, i.e., not only are the afflictions taken as aids to benefit sentient beings but rather, one takes the afflictions as the path. In Verse 4, the "desire" that

is specifically mentioned is a kind of sensual desire, a clinging mind or attachment. In Mahayana tantra, afflictions such as desire can be taken as the path.

Desire arises so easily in everybody's mind, yet it is very difficult to recognise even that there is desire in the mind. Although it rises so easily, it is difficult to really know that desire is manifesting very strongly in the mind. We can be attached to almost anything, even something that is fairly insignificant like a cup of tea. So many types of attachment can arise with regard simply to a cup of tea. For the same cup of tea, there can be an attachment to the taste of the tea. There can also be an attachment to the smell of the tea and even perhaps to the appearance of the tea. So even for a simple cup of tea, there are so many different forms of desire grasping at that cup of tea.

The object of desire or attachment can be a person or an inanimate object. Whatever the object of desire may be, the point is that desire can arise so easily.

What do you think about the example of the cup of tea? There are five sense objects. A cup of tea possesses these five qualities—form, taste, smell, touch and sound. So I guess we can be attached to how the tea looks, how it tastes, how it smells and how it feels, i.e. whether the texture of the tealeaves is soft or hard. Then what about the sound?

*Khen Rinpoche: Is there any sound? You say there is sound in teh tarik?<sup>1</sup> I don't know anybody who is attached to the sound of teh tarik. It is not really the sound that you attached to. You are attached to the sight of the skill used in the pulling of the tea, not to the sound.*

*When I was on a trip to Tibet, I noticed when we were in China that there was a tea shop selling 20, 30 different types of tea. They would say that this is a good tea and they would teach us how to drink the tea in a small cup. Each time they drank a type of tea, they would make a different noise in their mouth. They said you must drink this tea with this kind of sound. Then you would get a better taste. So you have to make all these different noises (smacks his lips). It is interesting how they would sell the tea in this way.*

So desire can arise very easily and it is also very difficult to really know what desire is. Here, desire is likened to poison. There may be some poisons that grow very easily. Here, desire is likened to “a jungle of virulent poison” that arises easily and strongly in many forms.

The heroes are like the peacocks that master these poisons. Among bodhisattvas, it is mainly the bodhisattva superiors who can use desire as the path. If you are speaking from the tantric perspective, these great heroes are the ones who can use desire as the path whereas from the perspective of Mahayana sutra, the bodhisattva superiors use desire as an aid to benefit sentient beings.

Only such heroes or great bodhisattvas who have completely forsaken themselves in working for others and who are totally immersed in cherishing others are able to use

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<sup>1</sup> Local colloquialism for milk tea.

desire as an aid to benefit sentient beings. If people who are only concerned with their own welfare, who have not forsaken themselves and who do not cherish others completely were to try to use desire in the same way as the bodhisattvas, then they will ruin their chances of their own liberation from samsara. Not only that. They will fall into the lower realms. So such ordinary people who want to use desire in the path are like the crows that perish when they eat poison unlike the peacocks, which are able to thrive on the poison that makes them even more beautiful and splendid. That is why the following verse says:

Verse 5

How can persons concerned only with their own desires master this poison? If they involve themselves in the other afflictions as well, it will cost them their chance for emancipation, just like the crow.

Verse 6

Thus the bodhisattva roams like the peacock in the forest of cyclic existence, converting the afflictions, which are like a jungle of virulent poisons, into an elixir. Willingly embracing the afflictions, the hero shall conquer the poison.

The great beings, the mahasattvas, are like peacocks in their being in samsara whilst at the same time utilising their afflictions, such as desire, as aids for their path to enlightenment. They can also utilise their afflictions as the path.

When we encounter samsaric enjoyments such as great wealth, many possessions or a luxurious home, our usual reaction is to generate attachment immediately. But the bodhisattvas are not attached in this way no matter how wonderful the samsaric perfections they encounter may be

Even if they were to generate some attachment to these samsaric enjoyments, because of who they are, they are able to use all these opportunities as means for benefitting sentient beings and to achieve enlightenment. Their attitude is this, “I must achieve enlightenment for sentient beings and therefore, I am going to utilise these enjoyments.” As such, they are able to transform their enjoyments into conditions for enlightenment. It is in this way that these great beings are said to willingly embrace their afflictions and conquer poison.

### **ESSENTIAL PRELIMINARIES TO TRAINING IN THE PRACTICES OF THE PERSON OF GREAT CAPACITY**

We also need to understand the reason why it is an absolute necessity to train the mind in the practices of the person of small capacity and medium capacity prior to training in the practices of the person of great capacity, i.e., prior to attempting any form of Mahayana practice.

In the practices of the person of medium capacity, the focus is on developing renunciation, the determination to be free. In order to generate renunciation, one

must know thoroughly in detail the four noble truths, starting with true sufferings and true origins.

When we say that we want to generate renunciation and be free, what do we need to give up? We need to give up true origins. We need to know comprehensively what exactly true sufferings and true origins are. It is only on this basis that we can develop the wish to abandon and distance ourselves from them. Only then will we come to develop the wish to achieve the peace, i.e., nirvana, that is the pacification of true sufferings and the true origins of suffering.

Generating renunciation or the determination to be free from true sufferings and true origins is strongly emphasised in the teachings. We need very strong renunciation before we can move on to do any other practice. It is mentioned in the lam-rim that our level of renunciation should be even stronger than someone who is desperate to escape from a house that is completely engulfed in flames. At the very least, our level of renunciation, should be stronger than a prisoner who detests being imprisoned and who just wants to get out of prison. Until we are able to develop this level of renunciation, then we need to think about it over and over again.

First, we must be disgusted with true sufferings and true origins. That disgust must be so strong that we don't want to have anything to do with true sufferings and true origins. When such strong disgust and dislike for true sufferings and true origins are absent, then we will not have any real interest in being free of them. If we do not mind being in the middle of a burning house or being in prison, then we can never truly develop the wish to be free from these situations.

When we don't have a good understanding of true sufferings and true origins, our disgust and dislike for true sufferings and true origins will be weak. Then our wish to achieve freedom and liberation from them will also be weak. Since our wish for liberation is very weak, then our so-called practice to achieve liberation from samsara will likewise be at the level of mere words.

If we do not have a real wish to free ourselves from true sufferings and true origins and we do even exert the effort to achieve this goal for ourselves, then how is it possible for us to develop genuine compassion for others who are suffering in samsara?

If there is no real renunciation on our part, there is no room for real compassion, especially great compassion, to arise. If genuine great compassion does not arise, then it is impossible to develop bodhicitta, that uncontrived, spontaneous desire to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of sentient beings. It is impossible for such a thought to ever arise.

From this, you can see why it is absolutely necessary first to train the mind in the practices of a person of medium capacity even before attempting any Mahayana practice. If the mind is not well-trained in the practices of a person of medium capacity, if there is no renunciation, then there is no way we can generate real compassion, especially great compassion. Without developing great compassion, there is no hope whatsoever of developing uncontrived bodhicitta. Without this

actual realisation of uncontrived bodhicitta, we cannot enter the ranks of the Mahayana. We cannot even be considered a Mahayanist. From this, we can see that it is absolutely necessary to train the mind in the practices of a person of medium capacity that is essentially developing the realisation of renunciation.

### **THE BODHISATTVAS' DISENCHANTMENT WITH SAMBARA**

Bodhisattvas do not like samsara at all. The bodhisattvas' disenchantment with samsara is greater than such disenchantment in the minds of people on the Hinayana path. We must understand that the bodhisattvas' disenchantment with samsara and their wish to be free from samsara is much greater than that of the hearers and solitary realisers.

There is a qualm related to this issue in the *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment*, (*Lam-rim Chen-mo*) by Lama Tsongkhapa.

*Qualm:* Although it is appropriate in the Hinayana to cultivate disenchantment with cyclic existence, it is inappropriate for bodhisattvas, for, if bodhisattvas were to cultivate intense disgust and disenchantment with cyclic existence, they would be like the sravakas and fall into an extreme of peace, having become displeased with their involvement in cyclic existence.<sup>2</sup>

So if the bodhisattvas were to generate disenchantment with cyclic existence, they will not take rebirth in cyclic existence to benefit sentient beings. This actually becomes an obstacle for bodhisattvas and therefore, they should not meditate on renunciation and generate disenchantment.

The answer to this qualm is that it is not that the bodhisattvas do not renounce taking rebirth in samsara due to karma and afflictions. In fact, they have great fear of taking rebirth in cyclic existence due to karma and afflictions and they do want to renounce that.

Bodhisattvas do take rebirth in cyclic existence. Here, we are referring primarily to the bodhisattva superiors who take rebirth in cyclic existence willingly. It is the choice that they made out of compassion. They take rebirth due to the power of their prayers, not due to their karma and afflictions. They take rebirth in samsara due to the power of their compassion and their prayers.

Bodhisattva superiors are completely disenchanted with taking rebirth in samsara due to karma and afflictions. This is certain but they still take rebirth in samsara. They have a choice because they have control. They do so due to their compassion and their prayers. They are definitely disenchanted with taking rebirth in samsara due to karma and afflictions because if it is a rebirth due to karma and afflictions, it is definitely suffering.

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<sup>2</sup> *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment (Lam-rim Chen-mo)*, vol. 1, pg. 328.

How can one be of real benefit to others when one is suffering? If one takes rebirth in samsara due to karma and afflictions, one will suffer and will not even achieve one's own goal. If one cannot even achieve one's own purpose and goal, how can one be of any real benefit to others? So bodhisattva superiors understand that a rebirth in samsara due to karma and afflictions is an impediment to helping others.

It is essential to understand that bodhisattvas *are* disenchanted with taking rebirth in samsara due to karma and afflictions.

### **HOW BODHISATTVAS WORK WITH THEIR AFFLICTIONS**

It is said that bodhisattva superiors can utilise afflictions such as desire as aids to benefit sentient beings. Bodhisattva superiors of definite lineage do not focus so much on abandoning afflictions like desire. They do not see that as the primary goal of their life, "My main practice is to abandon desire." They don't look at desire in that way.

It is mentioned in the sutras that those who have generated bodhicitta and are engaged in benefitting sentient beings do not abandon all their afflictions. I am stating the scriptural authority for this statement—that desire is not the main object of abandonment of the bodhisattva superiors of definite lineage. There are scriptural citations and also in Arya Vimuktisena's explanation of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutra in Twenty Thousand Verses* that the bodhisattvas' main object of abandonment is the apprehension of true existence.

These bodhisattvas are primarily interested in benefitting sentient beings in samsara. As such, they do *not* abandon the desire of the three realms, i.e., the desire, form and formless realms. Desire is not their main object of abandonment. They do not focus so much on abandoning the desire of the desire realms and the desire of the form realms because these forms of attachment can be utilised by these great beings to benefit others. It is mentioned in the teachings that such great beings can utilise their desire and take rebirth as a universal monarch or wheel-turning king who has control over a particular world system and can father many children to benefit sentient beings.

If you add something medicinal to poison, this can make the poison less deadly and it even could be beneficial. So the desire in the continua of the bodhisattvas is something like that.

*Khen Rinpoche: The idea is this. In most medicines, some kind of poison is added in the mix. If you eat the poison directly, it doesn't cure your sickness but when it is mixed with something, the poison becomes less powerful. This is how it is done in a lot of Tibetan medicine. Some poisonous parts are mixed in and at the same time, they add many other different medicinal plants. When combined together and you take the medicine, it is able to cure your sickness. The poison doesn't harm you.*

The arhats have abandoned the afflictions. Because they don't have afflictions, they can never be harmed by them. Bodhisattva superiors have a similar experience. Many bodhisattva superiors still have afflictions in their mind but their afflictions do

not harm them. It is as if they did not have the afflictions. Bodhisattva superiors cannot be harmed by their afflictions even though some of them still possess afflictions. Because the bodhisattva superiors cannot be harmed by their afflictions such as desire, they are able to use those afflictions as an aid to benefit sentient beings.

Ordinary beings are not able to do this, in particular, those who still have self-cherishing. Those who focus on their own welfare alone are never able to use their afflictions to benefit others. Ordinary beings are beings that take rebirth in cyclic existence due to karma and afflictions. As long as one has not abandoned self-cherishing, as long as there is still self-cherishing in the mind, one will never be in a position to use one's afflictions as an aid to benefit sentient beings. This is the reason why the main practice of hearers and solitary realisers is to abandon the afflictions for as long as there is self-cherishing, the afflictions can harm us.

Bodhisattvas on the other hand have no self-cherishing. They have abandoned self-cherishing. Not only that. The bodhisattvas regard all afflictions as faults but some bodhisattvas can use afflictions such as desire as an aid to benefit sentient beings. Because they don't have self-cherishing, the potential harm that they may receive from their own afflictions is much lower.

In particular, when we talk about the bodhisattva superiors, they cannot be harmed by their afflictions. Some bodhisattvas still have afflictions. They have not fully abandoned them but nevertheless, their afflictions cannot harm them. As such, you will find it mentioned in the teachings that the bodhisattva superiors happily enter samsara in order to accomplish the welfare of others. They do it happily, willingly and by choice for the benefit of sentient beings. As such, these bodhisattva superiors are said not to fear samsara.

There are different ways that one takes rebirth in samsara depending on who one is.

- Ordinary beings take rebirth in cyclic existence due to the power of their karma and afflictions.
- Bodhisattva superiors take rebirth in cyclic existence due to the power of their compassion and prayers.
- It is said that ordinary bodhisattvas in the pure land also take rebirth in samsara due to the power of their prayers.
- The bodhisattvas abiding on the pure grounds—the eighth, ninth and tenth grounds—take rebirth in samsara due to their levels of the predisposition of ignorance and their uncontaminated karma.

Verses 1 to 6 are general explanations. The actual body and the main subject of the text starts from Verse 7.

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*Question:* How can persons of small and medium capacities use their afflictions to develop renunciation while at the same time, the teachings are telling us to train the mind to abandon afflictions? Is fear an affliction?



*Answer:* Fear in this context is not an affliction. Disenchantment is not an affliction.

*Question:* Can you explain how in one context, fear is an affliction and in a different context, it is not an affliction?

*Answer:* Let's say we are talking about the fear of suffering in cyclic existence. The bodhisattvas have this fear, as do the solitary realisers.

*Question:* The contradiction has to do with ordinary sentient beings. On the one hand, we are supposed to abandon afflictions and on the other, we are supposed to use our fear.

*Answer:* First, you must understand what the fear of taking rebirth in samsara due to karma and afflictions is. That kind of fear is possessed by hearers, solitary realisers, and bodhisattvas. When you hear statements like bodhisattvas are not afraid of taking rebirth in cyclic existence, this means that they take rebirth in cyclic existence motivated by compassion. They do it willingly by choice due to the power of prayers.

That statement does not mean that the bodhisattvas are not afraid of taking rebirth in cyclic existence due to karma and afflictions. In fact, they are. Definitely all bodhisattvas are afraid of taking rebirth in cyclic existence due to karma and afflictions.

It is not that we purposely cultivate fear, making ourselves afraid. That is not the point. We do cultivate fear of samsara and the fear of lower realms' suffering. But it is not as if that is the practice, i.e., developing fear. Fear has to be abandoned one day. But the point here is "What do we fear?" Or is there a point or purpose in cultivating that fear? It is not that we are purposely focusing on cultivating such fear. You must know what the fear is and what the problem is.

*Question:* Can ordinary bodhisattvas take rebirth in samsara and are they harmed by afflictions?

*Khen Rinpoche:* I think so.

Ordinary bodhisattvas are bodhisattvas who are ordinary beings. Ordinary beings are those who take rebirth in cyclic existence due to the force of karma and afflictions. As such ordinary bodhisattvas can take rebirth in cyclic existence due to karma and afflictions.

*Student:* As they do not have self-cherishing, they shouldn't be harmed by the afflictions.

*Khen Rinpoche:* I will answer this next time.

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