



OCEAN OF DHARMA

A yearlong series of teachings to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the death of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, founder of the *Shambhala Sun*.

Left: Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in his role as a Mahayana teacher, holding the traditional teaching staff of a Zen master. Vajradhatu Seminary, 1981.

Glimpses of Mahayana

“First there is warmth, then there is a sense of cutting neurosis, and finally, there is openness. It’s a three-part process but it’s very quick and abrupt. At that moment, there is an absence of struggle, a sense of warmth and freedom.”

THE MAHAYANA BUDDHIST PATH IS a way of expanding, and the Mahayana teacher, the spiritual friend, acts as the entrance to that journey. Having made a relationship with a spiritual friend, that encourages us to relate not only with that one friend alone, but with many friends.

In the language of the bodhisattva, the definition of *friend* is the idea of a guest. Many Mahayana scriptures speak of inviting all sentient beings as our guests. When we invite a guest, we have a sense of the importance of that relationship. Guests are usually fed specially cooked food and receive extra hospitality. The life of a bodhisattva is relating with *all* sentient beings as guests. The bodhisattva invites everyone as a guest, constantly offering a feast.

Inviting all sentient beings as our guests is the starting point of applying compassion in the Mahayana. By viewing sentient beings as guests, the bodhisattva has a constant sense of the impermanence of the relationship, because eventually all guests leave. So we view the time with our guests as precious. Our guests come. We entertain and relate with them. Afterwards the guests thank us, we say goodbye, and we go back to running our home. There is a sense of the preciousness and the impermanence of the relationship. Our guest may be our husband, our wife, or our child—everybody is the guest of everybody, constantly. On a day to day level, all relationships for a bodhisattva are based on relating with guests.

Of course, nobody lives up to these credentials or expectations ideally. Rather, it is a journey. Compassion is a combination of *maitri*, or loving-kindness, and generosity. It is a journey outward, a journey of communication. On one level, compassion is feeling friendly toward ourselves. On another level it is experiencing a sense of richness, that we can expand the warmth we feel toward ourselves to other sentient beings.

Compassion, from this point of view, is quite different from sympathy. Sympathy involves looking down on someone with the attitude that the other person needs to be helped: “You should be raised up to my level, helpless little person.” Unlike sympathy, compassion is the radiation of mutual warmth to ourselves and others.

It is said in the scriptures that as fish cannot live without water, compassion cannot develop without egolessness and without the experience of emptiness, or *shunyata*. It may seem that this view of compassion is somewhat abstract, but in fact it is the heart of the practice of meditation in action.

The presence of compassion is experienced as a sudden glimpse, a sense of clarity and warmth simultaneously. That glimpse is the notion of recollection, the awareness that we might experience after intense sitting meditation practice. During the sitting practice of meditation, we find that we are completely chaotic. All kinds of things are going on, and we try to swim through those overcrowded situations of this and that, subconscious mind, discursive thoughts, and so on. Physically, sitting meditation may appear quiet and simple, but psychologically, it is quite a nightmare. At the least, it is annoying and rather inconvenient. We may discover hidden corners, and when we try to solve all the problems that arise, that only creates further problems. All of that is a result of holding on to definite ideas and not having enough *maitri* and compassion, enough security and warmth. When we sit, we may feel that we are attacking and dealing with problems. We are struggling to get something out of the practice.

Adapted from the talks “Compassion” in The Complete Teachings of Mahayana, a seminar at Karme Choling, Vermont, March 1973, and “Sudden Glimpse” in Glimpses of Mahayana. Edited by Judy Lief and Carolyn Rose Gimian.

However, when the sitting meditation is completed, when the gong rings and we decide to stop, we find that we are experiencing better meditation! At that moment, all those struggles have gone and all the chaos is dissolved. There is a sense of relief. It is as if we were entering into nirvana by leaving the cushion—and our meditation was a samsaric act.

At that moment, there is an absence of struggle, a sense of warmth and freedom. If we deliberately try to create that, it is

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impossible. Instead, we come upon it by accident. The crescendo created by sitting meditation practice brings that kind of release and freedom. The nature of awareness—the real meaning of *sati-patthana*, the practice of recollection—is that feeling of presence, that feeling of relief. At that point, we could say that compassion and the *shunyata* experience are happening simultaneously.

In daily life we don’t have to try to create the experience of letting go, of being free, or anything like that at all. We can just acknowledge the freedom that is already there. Just by the memory or the idea of it, there is a quick glimpse. A sudden glimpse. That sudden glimpse of awareness that occurs in everyday life becomes the act of compassion. It is just a quick glimpse, which goes on always, a sense of experience without time to label anything, without time to feel good or bad or compassionate or empty or whatever. Just *that* happens constantly. We could create that situation right now, at this very moment—a quick glimpse—just to see that there is awareness that is not watched or confirmed. Just awareness. A quick glimpse.

The scriptures talk about bodhisattvas who develop compassion and awareness instantaneously. Even if they are about to go into the chaos of a samsaric situation where they may lose their awareness, they can correct themselves in the process. It’s like a person slipping on the ice, losing their balance. In the process of slipping, they can correct or regain their balance without falling. The force of the slipping is used as a way of rebalancing. It doesn’t require any mystical experience. It’s just one look, then let go.

According to the scriptures, that glimpse, if you analyze it, takes one-sixtieth of a second. It is so fast and so sharp. The sharpness is the intelligence of the compassion. Compassion also means being open and communicative. It contains warmth. We could split that glimpse of compassion, that one-sixtieth of a second, into several parts. First there is a sense of warmth, or *maitri*, in oneself. Then there is a sense of cutting neurosis, and finally, there is a sense of openness. It’s a three-part process but it’s very quick and abrupt.

This is highly powerful in the post-meditation experience, or meditation in action. When you are working with situations, there is no time to analyze, no time to hold on. At the same time,

there is a gap. There is no time to refer back to yourself as “I am doing this,” no time to relate with “me” or ego awareness at all.

We could create that situation at this very moment—a quick glimpse of awareness that is not watched or confirmed. Just awareness. A quick glimpse.

There is just simple awareness. That awareness is regarded as the heart of meditation in action. It is compassion.

A person might develop the patience to repeat that glimpse many times in a day. By doing so, that glimpse of compassion and emptiness cuts the chain reaction of karmic causal characteristics. At the same time, you are communicating fully and completely. When the penetrating is going on, when the puncturing is occurring, when you are cutting the chain, you are catching a quick glimpse of buddhanature at the same time.

So, first there is *maitri*, trusting in the heart. Second, there is a gap in which you experience the openness of *tathagatagarbha*, or buddhanature. Third, there is a sense of communication—having already woken up at that level, there is a sense of freedom to expand and to relate with your actions, whatever you are doing. That seems to be how to develop compassion.

A problem occurs if we begin to hold on to or try to analyze that experience. Then the analytical mind begins to pollute the freshness of that sudden glimpse. So from the point of view of avoiding that obstacle, we should understand that we don't have to develop compassion. We simply acknowledge what is already there. We are just seeing it, looking at it.

There is an applicable analogy here from the *Bodhicaryavatara*, Shantideva's great text on the path of the bodhisattva. The text says that if a person is in a state of rage and sees a picture of the Buddha painted on the wall, the merit of seeing that picture is not wasted. When you see an image of the Buddha it has all kinds of associations, such as evoking the idea of friendliness. Seeing that compassionate Buddha creates a sudden glimpse in your mind that cuts through rage and aggression. It might not cut through completely or ideally. You won't just flop like a punctured balloon—that would be expecting magic. However, just that glimpse of the image of the Buddha de-intensifies the pressure of neurotic speed.

Fundamentally, the pressure of ego's speed is what causes aggression and stupidity. You don't have a chance to examine anything when you are carried away by such great speed. As you drive yourself along through this speed, you collect all kinds of garbage, which is passion, grasping. A sudden flash of compassion cuts that speed, or at least slows it down. Somebody had to decide to puncture your car tire—which is *you!* As a result, you

collect less dust and less garbage on your woolly tail. The whole situation becomes more spacious and workable.

This applies not only to you personally, but it expands to working with other people as well. For instance, you may want to help somebody. You feel so excited about helping them that you become very ambitious about the project. You want to make a clean sweep, create a new person. However, your style is so ambitious, so speedy, that you fail to realize the details of what kind of help that person actually needs.

From the other person's point of view, you become a clown, pretending to help him or her. There is no respect. And from your point of view, there is no time. You want to make a clean sweep, but instead you only create a thicker skin for that person, who begins to see through you and your speed. Seemingly, you are acting in the name of compassion, but there is no room to be compassionate. In fact, your gesture is an uncompassionate act. There is no time taken and no patience. That kind of obstacle can be saved by a sudden glimpse. Such looking, such a compassionate glimpse, becomes extremely powerful and naturally workable.

Such an approach to compassion also brings a sense of genuine communication with other people. You are constantly relating with other people in everyday life situations, not only when there is a state of extreme emotional upheaval. That awareness flashing again and again produces friendliness. Behind your seeming vulnerability, subconsciously or consciously, you begin to develop a sense of confidence. You can afford to be openhearted. You can afford to invite all those guests into your territory and work with them, entertain them.

Compassion is not only the logical conclusion that you are going to be okay. It is almost a subconscious trick, you might call it, to deliberately create that sudden glimpse constantly. Looking back or looking forward, there is openness. Seemingly, such looking destroys the ground of ego—but surprisingly it doesn't become a state of loss or a state of shock from the point of view of ego. Instead, it becomes something fundamentally sane, fundamentally workable and smooth.

This type of compassion is what bodhisattvas practice, and it seems that we can get into it ourselves. We can do so very simply—as long as we don't try to recreate past experiences or future expectations of the glimpse, but just look. Look! Look! The idea of compassion is direct. The idea of becoming enlightened one day is not far away. It is very close, if we are not indeed enlightened already. Compassion becomes very real and direct. Enlightenment ceases to be a dream.

As that basic ground of compassion is set on the path, then almost magically there is a quality of openness, almost ambition. It is ambition in the positive sense, that you would like to extend an invitation to your guests all the time. ♦