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What Is the Heart of the Buddha?

“Fundamentally speaking, ladies and gentlemen, here is the really good news, if we may call it that: We are intrinsically buddha and we are intrinsically good. Without exception and without the need for analytical studies, we can say that we automatically have buddha within us. That is known as buddha nature, or bodhi-chitta, the heart of the buddha.”

IN BUDDHISM, THERE are three codes of discipline, known as shila, samadhi, and prajna. Shila is discipline or conduct, a certain meditative way of behaving. Samadhi is the practice of mindfulness/awareness: the totality of your state of mind can be experienced without distraction. And prajna, or discriminating awareness, is the state of clarity in which you are able to distinguish different states of mind; you are no longer excited or depressed by particular states of mind. These three disciplines bring us to the next stage—of finally transcending the deception of ego, which is the experience of egolessness.

Egohood is the state of mind in which you are either repelled by or attracted to the phenomenal world. What you would like to see depends on your mentality, on what you think is desirable in order to maintain your “I am-ness,” your “me-ness.” We are talking about transcending “I am-ness,” “me-ness,” which is called egolessness.

Egolessness doesn’t mean that you are going to be completely

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dissolved into nothingness. In Western literature, Buddhism is often accused of saying this, especially in early Victorian Christian literature, as well as in various high school courses on Buddhism. They say Buddhists believe in nothingness, which is certainly not the case.

Egolessness means less “maniac-ness,” in some sense—free from being an egomaniac. Ego mania has several levels of subtlety. Ordinarily people think of an egomaniac as an obvious maniac, but if we study enough and look enough, we will see that there are subtleties of egomania. The dictators of the world could be seen as egomaniacal people, obviously, because they perform their functions in that way. But more ordinary people also function in that way, including ourselves in some sense. We would like to possess our world, and so we act in such a way that whatever we see around us is completely in order, according to our desire to maintain the security of “me,” “myself”—which is egohood.

Inspired by means of shila, samadhi, and prajna—discipline, meditation, and discriminating awareness—we have freedom from egomaniac-ness, freedom from egohood. Beyond that, seeing through our own egomaniac-ness, we give birth to, or awaken, our innate greater existence, which is known as bodhichitta in Sanskrit.

Bodhi, which is related to *buddha*, literally means “awake.” *Buddha* is a noun; *bodhi* is an epithet or an adjective for awakened ones, or for those who are in the process of awakening. *Chitta* is a Sanskrit word meaning “heart” or, occasionally, “essence.” So bodhichitta is the essence of the buddha, the essence of the awakened ones.

We cannot give birth to the essence of the awakened ones unless we train, to begin with, in meditation practice: the shamatha discipline of mindfulness and the vipashyana discipline of awareness. Beyond that, it is necessary to fulfill the three disciplines of shila, samadhi, and prajna. That is, we know what to do and what not to do.

When we practice shila, samadhi, and prajna, we begin to be aware of the buddha in us. It is not that those principles *produce* buddhalike awareness particularly; we have that essence in us already. But shila, samadhi, and prajna bring us into the actual realization of who we are, what we are, finally.

According to the Buddhist tradition, we don’t get *new* wisdom, nor does any foreign element come into our state of mind at all. Rather, it is a question of waking up and shedding our covers. We have those goodies in us already; we only have to uncover them.

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The logic here is, if we have to transplant foreign goodie-ness into our system, it does not belong to us; it remains foreign. Because it is not part of us, it is likely to cease to exist at some point. Sooner or later, our basic nature is bound to reject that foreign transplant in our system. (Maybe this logic doesn't apply to heart transplants. These days they say if you have a foreign heart transplanted in you, you might live; you might survive.)

But here we are talking about awakening what we haven't already awakened. It is as if we have been kept in captivity and haven't been able to exercise our faculties properly; our activities have been controlled by circumstances. Giving birth to bodhichitta in one's heart, buddha in one's heart, brings extra freedom. That is the notion of *freedom* in Buddhism, altogether. Of course, when we talk about freedom, we are not talking about overthrowing the head of the state or anything like that: we are talking about freedom from the constriction of our own capabilities.

It is as if we were extraordinary children, possessing all sorts of genius, and we were being undermined by the society around us, which was dying to make us normal people. Whenever we would show any mark of genius, our parents would get embarrassed. They would try to put the lid on our pot, saying, "Charles, don't say those things. Just be like an ordinary person." That is what actually happens to us, with or without our parents.

I don't particularly want to blame our parents alone; we have also been doing this to ourselves. When we see something extraordinary, we are afraid to say so; we are afraid to express ourselves or to relate to such situations. So we put lids on ourselves—on our potential, our capabilities. But in Buddhism we are liberated from that kind of conventionality.

According to Buddhist terminology, *conventionality* refers to belief in habitual patterns. Conventional realities are synonymous with habitual patterns; and the authors of habitual patterns are ignorance and desire. Ignorance and desire go against shila discipline; they go against samadhi mindfulness, because they prevent us from keeping our minds on the point; and they go against prajna, because they develop dullness rather than discriminating sharpness.

Fundamentally speaking, ladies and gentlemen, here is the really good news, if we may call it that: We are intrinsically buddha and we are intrinsically good. Without exception, and without the need for analytical studies, we can say that we automatically have buddha within

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us. That is known as buddha nature, or bodhichitta, the heart of the buddha.

We might ask ourselves, “What is the heart of the buddha like? Does it think the way we do? Does it want to have fish and chips or is it just a pious heart that does nothing but religious things alone? Would that heart be the most holy heart of all, from a Christian point of view?” The answer is no. That heart is not necessarily pious.

The heart of the buddha is a very open heart. That heart would like to explore the phenomenal world; it is open to relating with others. That heart contains tremendous strength and confidence in itself, which is called fearlessness. That heart is also extremely inquisitive, which at this point is synonymous with prajna. It is expansive and sees in all directions. And that heart contains certain basic qualities, which we could call our true *basic genes*—our buddha-genes. We all possess those particular buddha-genes. Isn't it strange to say that the mind has genes? But it turns out to be true.

These buddha-genes have two characteristics. First, they are able to see through, as well as not be afraid of, the reality of the phenomenal world. We might come up with obstacles and difficulties of all kinds, but those particular genes are not afraid to deal with them. We just shed the coverings of such possibilities as we go along. Second, these genes also contain gentleness; they are ever so loving, which goes beyond just being kind. They are extremely tender and capable of reflecting themselves, even to those who don't want to relate with them. And they are absolutely free from any form of aggression. They are so soft and kind.

The buddha-genes are also full of a sense of humor and delight, which is referred to as *great joy*. When you are able to experience that such genes exist within you, you begin to feel cheerful and smile and have a sense of humor.

There are two different kinds of humor. One kind of humor comes from not taking the world seriously: you come up with all sorts of jokes about other people's problems. The other kind is a general sense of joy. Nothing is regarded as downgrading; everything is uplifted, constantly. Here we are talking about the second kind of humor.

From the practitioner's point of view, we have all sorts of disciplines to awaken our enlightened genes. The main discipline is known as exchanging oneself for other. That is to say, we completely identify with others' pain; and we project out, or give away, pleasure altogether. In

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that way, we begin to see through, and actually expose, the clumsiness of how we hold on to ourselves.

Let us have a short discussion.

Student: Rinpoche, I was wondering about the second characteristic of the buddha-genes. Is this tender loving quality present all the time or just at certain moments?

Trungpa Rinpoche: That's an interesting question. Can I ask you a question back? Does a fire have the potential of blazing when it's at the level of a spark? What would you say?

S: I guess it depends on the circumstances.

TR: What kind of circumstances would they be?

S: Well, if you were in a garage with gas fumes, or if you were out in an open field—

TR: Sure, sure. But, intrinsically speaking, in itself does it have that potential?

S: I will agree that it could blaze up.

TR: It could blaze up and blow up our garage, right? I am talking about exactly the same thing. In itself, the buddha-gene is capable of the whole thing.

Student: Sir, what is the difference between meditation-in-action and sitting meditation? I have the impression that when I am working on a sculpture in my studio, lots of insight is given to me. That seems as important to me as straight sitting. Is there anything wrong with that?

Trungpa Rinpoche: Well, it's an interesting point, you see. We were just talking about fire. Somebody first has to make the fire; then it blazes. In the same way, you might have the intuition that you don't have to do sitting practice. You might feel you have the experience of that already, which I don't doubt. Probably a lot of people do. Nonetheless, we do need some kind of field training. We have to know how to relate with reality, and we also have to know how to develop discipline. If we sit and practice shamatha-vipashyana meditation, probably nothing will happen for a long period of time. And the idea isn't that anything *should* happen to us. We are just silent.

At the end of the letter you sent me, you signed off *paix*, "peace." Real peace is nonaction; that is the source of all action. We have to learn how to be a rock in order to be a tree or a flower or wind or lightning

or a typhoon. We have to be still, then we go beyond that. Therefore sitting practice is very important.

We are not particularly training ourselves to destroy or conquer the world. We are trying to relate to the world in the same way that we relate to the birth of our first child or, for that matter, to our own orgasm—which happens, I hope, when we make love. Anything active that happens has some relationship to that very stillness. That stillness is not vacant or dead; it is full of energy, automatically.

So that is the difference between postmeditation and meditation itself. Meditation prepares us for action, and sometimes action prepares us for nonaction. It is like breathing in and out: when you breathe out, it's action; but in order to breathe out you have to breathe in again. It goes on that way. So it is important to have a very strict discipline of being still and solid. Out of that comes a lot of energy and a lot of wisdom. Meditation and postmeditation are equally valid in our lives—just as breathing in and breathing out are both important.

S: Merci beaucoup.

Student: Rinpoche, could you say a little bit about vipashyana meditation? You mentioned it in your talk, but I'm not really sure what it is.

Trungpa Rinpoche: *Vipashyana* is a Sanskrit word which literally means "seeing clearly." In Tibetan we use the word *lhakthong*. *Lhak* means "superior" and *thong* means "seeing." So *lhakthong* means "clear seeing," "superior seeing."

Vipashyana begins once we have developed substantial shamatha discipline of being precise and mindful, on the spot, all the time. In shamatha, sound, smell, feeling, thought process, and everything else are looked at, but with such precision that they are nothing other than stillness. They don't produce further bubbles, or further percolation, of any kind at all.

You might say, "Ah, I thought of my father telling me no." At that moment, both your father and the idea of him saying "No, don't do that" are divided into now, now, now, all the time. Everything is chopped into that level of precision, into a grain of sand. That is shamatha.

Usually, memory is predominant in everything you experience. If you are sitting in a meditation hall and the smell of food comes from the kitchen, you think about what kind of dinner they are cooking for you. Or else, you feel the ache in your buttocks and back and you want to

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shift around. Shamatha means that everything is simply looked at. It is sliced up, but not aggressively; it is just looked at—look, look, look.

Through shamatha you are capable of looking at these experiences as individual entities, without referring to the past and without thinking about where they are going, or what they are going to do to you. Everything is without beginning and without end, just on the spot. If you think of onion soup and how you would like to go out and *get* onion soup, it is only on the level of thought. So you chop your thoughts—now, now, now.

Out of that comes vipashyana. On the level of vipashyana, you chop thoughts because of your training in shamatha, but at the same time you bring them along. The world is a panoramic view, but at the same time things really don't hang together the way they ordinarily used to.

Things are made out of pieces of simple realities, primitive realities. Even if you smell onions for a long time—for half an hour—those smells are chopped into pieces: you smell them, then you don't smell them, you smell them, then you don't smell them. Otherwise, if there were no gap, you couldn't smell at all.

Experiences are not continuous at the ego level. We think they are all together, in cahoots, but it doesn't really happen that way. Everything is made out of dots. When experiences are chopped into small pieces, some realization of the unity of the display could come out of that. That is vipashyana.

You begin to feel good when, for instance, you touch a rock, because you feel that the rock is not a continuous rock, but the rock of the moment. When you hold your fan, it is the fan of the moment; when you blink, your blink is of the moment; when you meet your friends, they are friends of the moment. Nothing is expected and nothing is demanded any more. Everything is seen clearly.

Clear seeing: that is the definition of vipashyana, which is the result of shamatha. Things could be seen as a great display, as a Disney world, or whatever you want to call it. You realize that things are not all that together. But because they are not together, they are fantastically colorful. The more you see the mark of discontinuity, the more you see things as colorful. In order to see color you have to take a rest; then you see color again. So you see, you rest, and then you see brilliance again. That is the precision of how to perceive the phenomenal world.

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Student: Rinpoche, you said to an earlier questioner that you hoped he would have pleasure experiencing his orgasm. In my experience, I have some confusion about whether pleasure is pleasurable. Since I haven't gotten over aggression and passion, how can I relate to things at all—if pleasure isn't pleasurable and pain isn't particularly painful, and I'm still caught in that way?

Trungpa Rinpoche: Well, the point is that there is no such thing as pleasure per se. In other words, different people experience so-called pleasure entirely differently, depending on their state of mind, where they are coming from, and how they are going to proceed after the pleasure. Pleasure is not a solid thing.

Sometimes people get very angry and discouraged when they go back to a restaurant where they had great pleasure before, and they find that the food is lousy and the service is not so good. So they complain to the manager.

One doesn't get the expected services or expected situations *any* time. I am not the same Trungpa you saw a few days ago. I am a fresh, new Trungpa—right now! And I will always be that way. I will be dead and gone tonight, and right now, this very moment, I am dying and being born. So the next time I give a talk, I will be entirely different.

You can't rely on one particular reference point. In some sense that is extraordinarily fresh and feels good, but on the other hand it may be sad, because you want to hang onto the past, constantly. Until there's enough familiarity with the mentality of shamatha and vipashyana, you won't understand this. And that practice of shamatha/vipashyana goes on, up to the level of vajrayana discipline, as well.

When you see a fantastic display, it is chopped into little pieces. This allows you to breathe, because there's a gap between the pieces; therefore you begin to appreciate those pieces altogether. I don't think I can say it more vividly than that. You actually have to do it. "Seeing is believing," as they say in the English language.

S: Thank you very much.

TR: You're more than welcome.

Student: Sir, earlier tonight you were talking about how we put a lid on ourselves, and how it is the nature of one's heart to be inquisitive. And yet within Buddhism there is a notion of ethics. There are certain ways to do things and certain ways not to do things.

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In my own personal experience, when I feel inquisitive sometimes I flash back on Buddhist ethics, as a reference point for whether I am doing the proper thing. But I sometimes wonder how much I should stick to the scriptures and how much I should just go ahead and be inquisitive. My question is, how does one know when to put a lid on oneself and when to go forward?

Trungpa Rinpoche: It's purely up to you. That is to say, you have to have enough training, or at least understanding of the momentariness of your mind. Your mind doesn't continue, therefore you appreciate the world. Then you can go on to explore further.

There is no particular dogma that goes with that; there's no particular guideline either, apart from having erect posture and imitating the Buddha. You can do that. You will never be referred to as being presumptuous.

S: So, I should just keep on practicing.

TR: Keep on practicing, yes.