

Practicing the Good Heart

GATSAL

TEACHING

by Jetsunma
Tenzin Palmo

Many years ago His Holiness the Dalai Lama was in the Lahoul Valley where I was living. At that time, he was giving a number of empowerments and talks. He was there for about one week. After one of his talks which had lasted for several hours, I asked one of the Lahouli women, “Do you know what the Dalai Lama was talking about?” And she said, “Well, I didn’t catch much, but what I understood was that if we have a good heart, that’s nice.” Well, basically, that’s it. What more is there to say? If we have a good heart, that’s nice, isn’t it? So what do we mean by a good heart?

Our society is very concerned with the development of the individual. We are very concerned with realizing our own unique potential yet at the same time, conforming very much with the society in which we were born. It’s like a paradox, because on the one hand, we are encouraged to be individualistic, but on the other hand, even within the alternative society itself, everybody’s being alternative in more or less the same way. Have you noticed this?

Traditionally society was based on the family. When I was a child, we played games together as a family. We played monopoly or we played cards or we played other games together. It was a family thing. The mother was at home: she cooked and she took care of the children. One identified oneself with being a part of a family framework. Then beyond that, we identified ourselves with a particular class, caste or society and still further with one’s particular region, country, race and so on.

The point is that in a traditional society, each person knew who they were in relation to everyone else around them. They had their allotted position and within that position-- be it high or low (or high to some and low to others)-- one knew how to act and what was expected; there were also duties and responsibilities which were a part of being in a group, of being part of a family, of being part of this small society in which one lived. I remember that although I was brought up in London, if anyone in our neighborhood was sick, all the neighbors were there. There was this sense that being a neighbor gave you the responsibility of caring for one another.

During the time when I was brought up, this sense of being part of a whole network of interconnections was still very strong. But nowadays, as the call to be an individual becomes stronger and stronger, it seems that society is becoming more and more alienated. So, this sense of being able to communicate with others gets less. No longer are we brought up with the sense of respect, duty and responsibility, but more with the sense of asserting “my rights” and doing “my thing”.

We would think that this should lead us to being able to express ourselves, being able to get exactly what we want and being able to do whatever appeals to us. The idea is that this individualization will make us very satisfied; that this will help us discover who we really are, so that we will feel a great sense of fulfillment. This is the idea, isn’t it? That if we act exactly how we want to act, say exactly what we want to say and think about what we want, this will somehow make us happy, satisfied and fulfilled because we are getting just what we want. So how does this go so very wrong?

We can see this clearly in a place like Australia: outwardly, Australia looks like a paradise, does it not? I mean, coming from Delhi, let me assure you that Australia looks like a paradise! It’s so

clean, it’s so well organized: traffic goes into the right lanes, there are no cows wandering across the roads (the cows are in the pastures not in the streets). There is no overt poverty; there are no lepers and beggars on the streets. When you look at it, it really it looks like something out of a picture book. So why is it that Australia has one of the highest suicide rates in the world? What’s gone wrong?

This is a deep and troubling question. I’m not a sociologist and I’m not a psychiatrist, so I am not going to go into this in too much detail. But behind that question, lies this darkness because our society, the media and the education system are trying to encourage people to think that success is what counts; and that being beautiful and popular, having lots of money and beautiful clothes is going to bring eternal happiness. And clearly, this is not true. If it were true, you wouldn’t be here tonight. Because if it were really true, then that would be enough. We would not have a need to go beyond that.

Nowadays, the East—especially third-world countries-- are beginning to absorb this consumer consciousness. They are starting to plug into this ethic that says “more is better”, and that life without a television, a car or fancy clothes or whatever is deprivation. Therefore, to be happy, we have to have these things. But most people don’t have these things; there is a rising middle class, but the majority still does not have much above the bare essentials. But they see these fancy consumer goods on the television and so they think “if we only had these things, we would be eternally happy.” They see these American programmes dubbed in Hindi showing incredible American homes, and so they imagine, “Now, if we had a home like that, this would be nirvana”. But because they don’t have it, it has a distant glitter. But in the West, we have these things. Most people have been brought up in homes which have all these things already.

I remember a German friend who lived in our Tibetan camp. She was going to buy a vacuum cleaner and she was so excited about it! For weeks, she went around looking at the various makes that were on offer and she finally got one. So she cleaned up her whole house and was so happy. Can you imagine being ecstatic over a vacuum cleaner?

But if we don’t have these things, there is the very strong idea that if we could have them, they would really bring long-lasting satisfaction. Of course, she was German, and although she was excited, she also knew this was very silly. But if we have never had these things, we could be lulled into this false sense that here is the answer ...if only we could have these things.

Now in the West, because we do have so many of these material goods -- and if we have any intelligence at all, -- we would have realized that these are not the answer. Because the emptiness is still inside, and however much we try to fill it up with things, that inner sense of lack is still there. This is not to say that we shouldn’t have a television, a car or a vacuum cleaner. The problem is not to do with the external object or how much or how little we have. The question is whether we believe these things will really bring us deep-seated satisfaction. So this is the advantage for the West: that if we can get over a sense of wonder with material possessions, one is at a stage where one starts to think that there must be something beyond these.

We hold what we think are very contemporary values but they are usually only the superficial values which have been spoon-fed

to us by the media, by our environment and by our society. In ten or twenty years, we will look back and think, “Good Gracious, did I really wear that?” “Did I really think that?” Because thoughts and opinions, judgements and biases can quickly become as outmoded as the clothes we wear. Sometimes when we look back at something that was so revolutionary a few years ago, it has already become obsolete.

In our society, we are taught to think about ourselves; we are trained to develop ourselves in order to succeed. We are taught that it's very necessary to get on in life-- in whatever is our particular sphere -- and prove to everyone else how well we are achieving so that everyone else will envy us. As a result, our society builds more and more a culture of alienated beings. This of course is aided by the age of the computer where people can relate more easily to their computer than they can with members of their family. Typically the husband and wife go out and work their heads off. They come home and what do they do? They carry home some take-away food-- nobody cooks anymore-- and collapse in front of the television. The kids come home and off they go to their own rooms to watch their own programmes. Everybody's plugged in to the Internet, or they're answering their e-mails. Where is the communication with each other?

So we have this society of adolescents who are growing up unable to communicate with one another. Even when they see each other, they're often logged into their own entertainment. We see people walking along the road listening to music through earphones or chatting on their mobiles. In other words, they're walking to their own beat. They're completely enclosed in their own world-- not the world outside them-- but the world blasting in their heads. So, we become more and more alienated, and as we become more and more alone with others, we become more and more depressed. It's so ironic.

So why do Westerners often experience alienation, this deep dislike of themselves, and a sense of disconnection with other people? The cause seems to be a deep sense of alienation from within, and not just from the others outside. People are not happy with themselves, they are not at peace with themselves. They don't like themselves. Now, if we don't like ourselves, then the fact is, we are always going to have problems with others.

2500 years ago, when the Buddha talked about the practice of loving-kindness, he said there were two ways in which one radiated loving-kindness to all beings everywhere. Firstly, we could send out thoughts of love in all directions-- the north, the south, the east and the west up, down and everywhere. We just radiate loving-kindness to all the beings in the world. Or we could start with people we like-- our family or our partners, our children-- and then extend that to people we feel indifferent towards, and then to people we dislike and finally out further to all beings everywhere.

But before we start doing all that, the Buddha said that we begin by radiating loving-kindness to ourselves. We start by thinking, “May I be well and happy. May I be peaceful and at my ease.” Do you understand? If we do not first feel that sense of kindness towards ourselves, how are we ever really going to be kind to others? We have to feel love and compassion for all sentient beings: humans, animals, insects, fish, birds—beings both seen or unseen, beings in the higher realms, beings in the lower realms, beings throughout the universe. All sentient beings are the object of our love and our compassion. So how is it that we omit the being right here? The one who's supposed to be feeling this endless love? It's like we're radiating so much light but yet we are standing in the dark. And that's not right-- we first have to extend our kindness towards the being who's also in need of our kindness at this moment - that is our own self. This has to do with developing a good heart.

Ironically, in our society, it is traditionally considered that one

should think of all the bad things one has ever done and feel deep regret and guilt-- lots and lots of guilt; because we are sinners, we should feel bad. A low self-esteem is a good thing because we are meaningless worms unless we are saved by someone else.

But that is not the Buddhist view. The Buddhist view says that since the very beginning, we are all utterly pure and utterly perfect. Our original mind is like the sky -- it is vast, it has no center and no limits. The Mind is infinitely vast. It is not “me” and it is not “mine”. It is what interconnects us with all beings-- this is our true nature. Unfortunately, right now our genuine nature has got a little bit obscured by very thick clouds and we are identifying with the clouds; we are not identifying with the deep, blue, eternal sky. And because we are identifying with the clouds, we have very limited ideas of who we and others really are. If we take the point of view that from the very beginning, we have always been utterly perfect but somehow confusion arose and covered up our true nature, then there is no question of being unworthy. The potential is always there, if only we can see it. Every single one of us possesses that potential, that Buddha potential, that potential for enlightenment. So where is the question of it being a meaningless world? Once we understand that the inner potential is always there as the very basis and ground of our being, then this question of having a good heart makes sense. Because what we are doing is reflecting our essential nature through kindness, through compassion and through understanding. It's not that we are trying to develop something we don't already have.

To change the metaphor, it is like we are coming back to a pure spring. Inside, we have a spring of everlasting love, wisdom, compassion and understanding which is our true nature. It's always there, but it has got blocked up, so we feel dry inside. We look and all we see is dry earth. Or we see this huge garbage heap. And we think, “I'm this garbage heap. I don't have a pure spring of wisdom and love. I'm just a big heap of garbage. I'm just junk!” And this is a terribly false identification. We're identifying with the junk heap, we're not identifying with what's underneath. Underneath all that junk-- and it doesn't matter if it's a huge mountain of garbage -- the spring is always there. It can never, never, never stop. What we have to do is uncover the spring and there it is leaping up as a fountain! So it's very important to know that since the very beginning, our essential nature is good. It may have got a bit covered up, but it's always there.

Now, of course there are various ways to begin to remove the junk. The six paramitas or six perfections are the path which the Buddha laid down for attaining enlightenment. These include not only exotic things like meditation and wisdom, but they start with very basic practical factors like generosity, patience and tolerance, ethical conduct based on harmlessness and having the enthusiasm to transform our lives. All these qualities are very important for our inner transformation because we cannot alter the outer world until we change ourselves. The outer world is the reflection of the minds of the beings who inhabit that society. We have the society that we deserve. Our society is just a multiplication of the minds of the humans in that society. We cannot just blame the politicians and the businessmen. Who gave them the power? Who elected them? Who buys their products? If everyone tomorrow refused to buy these products, the economy would collapse. Then they would have to think of something else. But we do buy them and so the businesses prosper. Our society is us. Until we transform our minds, society isn't really going to change very much. We have responsibility. Society isn't just a big conglomerate out there. Society means the family, lots and lots of families, lots and lots of relationships, businesses and shops. This is what society is. If one person knows how to transform his/ her own mind, that will change the dynamics of the relationship of his/ her family, of the place where s(he) works, of the people that s(he) meets during the day. Each of us is responsible for transforming ourselves

from within.

So, we start in a small way. When we talk about loving-kindness, there are specific meditations for developing this quality. In different traditions, it is practised slightly differently. But if one is not careful the meditation becomes very abstract. We sit there radiating our loving-kindness in all directions to all beings everywhere. We are sitting there and the whole universe is full of loving-kindness but then our kid comes in and says “Hey! I want to put the television on!”, and we say “Go away!! Don’t disturb me! I’m doing my loving-kindness meditation”!

Loving-kindness starts from just where we are. It’s obvious. First, it starts with ourselves. Coming to terms with ourselves and then coming to terms with all those around us. If we cannot even have kindness and understanding towards ourselves, it means that we have a low self-image, and this is not something good spiritually. Some people think that because Buddhism goes on a lot against self-cherishing, if we feel at ease with ourselves, it means that somehow we are a bad person and that it is just ego. But that is a big misunderstanding.

Shantideva, the seven century Indian philosopher, points out in his Bodhicharyavatara that there is a big difference between pride and arrogance-- that self-cherishing of “me” and “mine” and the “I’m so wonderful” feeling - and self-assurance, which is that sense of being friends and at ease with oneself, so that one has the confidence to go forward. In the West, we so often undercut ourselves the whole time because we don’t believe in ourselves. The first time I met His Holiness the 16th Karmapa, in Calcutta back in 1965, he said to me within the first ten minutes, “Your problem is that you have no confidence. You don’t believe in yourself. If you don’t believe in yourself, who will believe in you?” And that is so true.

We have to be friends with and kind towards ourselves. If we tend to be the kind of person who zeroes in on all our own faults, we can acknowledge that we have faults-- of course, everyone has faults-- but we also have to acknowledge and encourage the good within us. Because if we ignore it, it will wither, like a plant that has no sunlight. We can think: “Well, I’m really an angry person but on the other hand I’m also quite generous.” Now, if we just say “I’m an angry person” or “I’m angry and I get jealous” and leave it at that, then we just think of all the bad in ourselves. But even the worst person has good qualities and these good things need to be encouraged, they need to be acknowledged.

The Buddha said that there were four powers. First of all, the power of getting rid of those negative qualities which have arisen and seeing that other negative qualities do not arise in the future. The second was acknowledging the good qualities which we have and encouraging more of these to arise. So, we have to acknowledge what is good as well as what is negative in us. And that goes for other people too-- even people we dislike must have some good qualities.

Everybody wants to be happy. We may define happiness in many different ways-- we all have our own ideas of wherein happiness resides and some people have very peculiar ideas of what happiness is-- but nonetheless, we all basically want happiness and a sense of fulfillment. Very few people wake up in the morning and think “How can I be really miserable today and make this day as miserable as possible for everybody else?” Most people, if given a choice, would prefer to be happy. So, when we meet somebody, we should remember that “This person wants to be happy”. Basically, that’s all they want. However mistaken their ideas of where happiness lies, they basically just want to be happy. And most people would appreciate a frown much less than they would appreciate a smile; most people don’t really want to be spoken to rudely; most people would appreciate some politeness.

So during the day, with every person we meet --whether it’s someone very close to us – our partner, our parents, our children, our

siblings or our colleagues at work or strangers we meet in a shop, or anybody we meet in the passing—think, “They all want to be happy” and “How, in this moment can I do something to help establish a little pleasure or joy in their life?” With every being we meet, with goodwill we can reflect using words or without words “May you be well and happy” It doesn’t matter whether we like that person or not, or whether that person is beautiful or ugly, old or young. We feel from our heart: “May you be well and happy”.

A Bodhisattva takes on the suffering of the world, but Bodhisattvas are always shown smiling. This is because their compassion is conjoined with understanding. It’s very important to appreciate that however outwardly prosperous and successful some of us might seem, we might be very sensitive sentient beings inside. Underneath that mask which everyone is wearing, is something very tender and delicate. The pain, the insecurity and the fear are there. And we feel great kindness and compassion for that.

A genuinely good heart is based on understanding the situation as it really is; it’s not sentimental. Nor is it just going around in a kind of euphoria of fake love, denying suffering and saying that everything is all bliss and joy. It’s not like that. A genuine good heart is a heart which is really open and listening to the sorrows of the world but with understanding too. It is a paradox that the more we are centred on our own suffering, the more we suffer but the more we think about the suffering of others, the more we come to feel an inner sense of fulfillment and a kind of joy. I don’t mean that we rejoice in the suffering of others, obviously, but we can get off our own backs when we think of others.

People who have a mental illness are usually obsessed with themselves. They talk and think about themselves all the time. If someone tries to introduce a more general topic, they bring it back to themselves, because that’s all that interests them. They’re obsessed with themselves-- their sufferings, their life, their memories. It’s like they’re completely locked in on themselves. And they suffer. People who are completely sane and inwardly well-balanced think of others. They take care of themselves, but their main concern is for the happiness and well-being of others. And in thinking of the happiness and the well-being of all the others, and not primarily of their own happiness and well-being, they become well and happy!

So our society is wrong in thinking that happiness depends on just fulfilling our own wants and desires. That’s why our society is so miserable. We’re a society of individuals, all obsessed with trying to obtain our own happiness. Therefore, we are cut off from this sense of interconnection with others; we are cut off from reality. Because in reality, we’re all interconnected.

As long as our hearts are closed, and we think only of ourselves-- even if we are only thinking of how horrible, stupid and worthless we are and how we’re always going to be failures-- it is a closed heart. And that closed heart is going to cause both ourselves and others a lot of pain. If we have a mind which is only thinking of how to get our own gratification—“what pleases me is good for the rest of the world because it pleases me. And that’s all I care about and to hell with everybody else. They can do their own thing, I’m going to do my thing” --that’s also a very pained mind. It is not a happy mind. It might be frenetic and it might get euphoric sometimes, especially when it’s high on substances but it’s not a happy, centred or contented mind. It’s only when we learn how to open up our hearts to include in a genuine way the well-being of others, that we find that this inner space, this inner sense of lack and emptiness can be filled.

So we start from where we are and who we are. It’s no good wanting to be somebody else; it’s no good fantasizing about what it would be like if we could be like this or if we weren’t that or whatever. We have to start from here and now, with who we are and where we are, in the situation we are in, right now. And we have to deal with

that-- we have to deal with who we live with, who we work with and the people that we are meeting. That is the challenge. Sometimes we avoid our present circumstances, thinking that over the years we are sure to meet with the perfect situation somewhere, but there is never going to be that ideal time and place because we are taking the same mind with us everywhere. The problem isn't out there-- the problem is usually within us. So what we need is to cultivate this inner transformation. Once we have developed our inner change, it's all the same wherever we are; we can deal with whatever happens.

What does love mean? In the West, we mistake the meaning of love; we bandy the word around all the time, from "I love ice-cream" to "I love God". But we mistake love for desire, for greed, for lust, and for attachment. We think that to love something or someone means to hold on very tightly and to think of it as "mine". And because of this grasping mind, we suffer very much. We suffer from the fear that we will lose what we desire, and we suffer from grief when we do lose. Think about that. We usually mistake attachment for love. But attachment is not love. Attachment is grasping, attachment is clinging. And this is the root cause of our being in this state of suffering.

The Buddha said that there is a truth of suffering and that there is a cause of suffering. The cause of suffering is grasping. We hold things so tightly because we don't know how to hold things lightly. But everything is impermanent. Everything is flowing-- it's not static or solid. We cannot hold on to anything. As long as we try to hold on to the flow of the river, we either end up with nothing-- because we can't grasp water in a tight fist. Or else, we dam up the flow and end up with something very stagnant, smelly and stale. The actuality is movement. If we try to hold on tightly, we kill it. And that causes so much pain; it causes so much fear in our lives. That's not love. Love is a tremendous opening of the heart. It's a heart which thinks "May you be well and happy" and not "May you make me well and happy".

In order to cultivate that kind of heart which wishes for the happiness of others, we can start first by opening with our family. This means by trying to make them happy and being open towards them. But not clinging or grasping-- just being there for them. Showing them love, showing them affection, because they are the first people who need our love and affection. But it's not a tight grasping affection.

When I was 19, I decided to go to find a Lama, and I said to my mother "I'm going to India" and she said, "Oh yes, when are you leaving?" She didn't say "What do you mean you are going to India? How could you leave your poor old mother?" She said, "Oh yes, when are you leaving?" not because she didn't love me, but because she did love me. She loved me and she wanted me to fulfill my own potential and be happy. She was not thinking "Oh, but if you're going to leave me, I'm going to be lonely. I'm going to be miserable. How can you abandon me?" So, because of her non-attachment, she rejoiced in my happiness. Even while I was away, though I am sure she missed me very much, but she rejoiced in all the things I did, the places I went and the people I met. She came to India for a year and stayed with me. But then she went back. All the time that I was there, she never once wrote and said "Ok, now come back. I'm getting old and it's your duty as my daughter to come back and take care of me." The most she'd write was "Well, I know you really belong in India, but you've been away for 10 years. So, if I sent you a return ticket, would you come back for a month?"

That's love. And that heart of warmth is not something impossible. It's something we can all develop. That joy in making others happy, in thinking how we can give a little happiness, a little joy to others that we meet, through a kind word, through a smile, through a gift or whatever. Not always thinking "Oh, but they never gave me anything, so why should I give them anything?", or "They never smile at me, so I'm not going to smile at them." That's such a

petty, small mind. Think about a society in which everyone is at least nice to each other. That would be heaven, would it not? And yet it doesn't take that much to be pleasant, even to people who are not pleasant in return. If we were affable to everybody, then on the whole, people would be agreeable in response.

Because it's really true that we get out of life what we put into it. And if we are always radiating negative thoughts and feelings -- anger, resentment or just self-absorption--then that's what we'll get back. If we think it's a horrible world and that everybody is rotten, then we'll be totally miserable. Well, that's our freedom-- we can do that. But if we give out genuine good thoughts; if our attitude towards people is wishing that they should be happy-- and that as much as we can, we contribute to that in some way, with a kind word or a smile (and with our family, we can contribute in big ways)-- then eventually, what we'll get back is what we put out. On the whole, people will be nice to us; on the whole, people will like us. If our feelings are genuine, we will get a genuine response.

We project our own world. Our mind is like a big projector so that two people in the same place can experience completely different versions of what is going on. And once we realize that, we understand that we have the freedom to change. We are not computers who are just programmed in one way. We can all change. But no one can do it for us. It's up to us. We have to change ourselves. We have to make the decision.

We have this lifetime. This lifetime is going to be full of challenges. We are not just in this world to be happy and comfortable. Animals want to be comfortable. What do animals want? They want shelter, they want food, maybe they want sex, (if they're given the opportunity not to be sterilized when they are too young to protest). They want affection. They want warmth and comfort. So do we. But if this is all we want from life, we are no better than animals. But we are humans and we have the chance to really develop our inner qualities--our intelligence, our spiritual impulses-- which make us specifically human. Because, if we spend our lives just trying to be comfortable, just trying to have a nice life, and trying to avoid anything painful and only going after what is pleasant, then not only are we going to be disappointed, we're also not going to learn anything.

Somebody said that this life was like the gymnasium of the soul. This is true. This world is where we train, this is where we learn, this is where we develop our muscles. We can sit curled up in a chair and get flabby. That's up to us. But we can also say "Look, here I am. This is my situation, this is the kind of person I think I am. I have this kind of upbringing, I accept it all. Now what?" And all those things which are negative, which cause pain to ourselves and others, can be transformed, or used, can be acknowledged and then released. And those qualities which we need to develop can be developed. The only reason why we don't do it is that we are lazy. We think: "Oh no, other people can do these things, but I can't". But all of us can.

So it's up to us. We create this world as we project it from our mind. We can make this world into something meaningful. We can make some genuine contribution to our environment. Even just within our own circle, by helping others to feel better, we can have a life that has some purpose. So that at the end of our life, we can look back and say, "well, at least I did what I could." Or we could waste it-- we can go through life grumbling, and moaning and complaining and blaming other people in the family, an unhappy childhood and one's parents or the government and society.

Whether we go up or whether we go down or whether we stand still, is up to us. And if we want to be miserable, we can be absolutely miserable. We have full permission. But if we don't want to be miserable, that is also up to us. Things can change. Things are changing moment to moment. We can change. And if we change ourselves, everything changes. Everything changes.