

What Makes You Not a Buddhist Class 7: Wrap it Up!

This is the last class in this module. We are reading the book *What Makes You Not a Buddhist* by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche. We have now studied all of the Four Seals.

- All compounded things are impermanent.
- All emotions are pain.
- All things have no inherent existence.
- Nirvana is beyond concepts.

The reading for tonight is the Conclusion. There are three topics that I find important to discuss tonight:

1. Nirvana is Beyond Space and Time
2. Not causing harm to Sentient Beings
3. Renunciation: Back to Square One

The first of these belongs with the fourth seal, Nirvana is Beyond Concepts, and the last two are discussed in the conclusion. Then we need a brief final summary. So there is a lot to cover.

1. Nirvana is Beyond Space and Time:

Well, Nirvana is Beyond Concepts, and Space and Time are Concepts. But just saying that isn't going to be of much help. We need to go a bit deeper and ask why we study the four seals at all. And the answer can only be that we study them because they point to bedrock reality. Ultimately they are a summary, using words, images and stories, of what is real in our experience, what is authentic in our being. The four seals are not useful as something to be believed. They are only useful to the extent that we can fully embody and live them, to be them. Being real, being authentic, is liberating, whereas dwelling in delusion or ignorance is imprisoning. It is very important to understand that when we speak of *ignorance*, the word is used to mean that we are ignoring the reality of our own experience. It does not mean that we are missing some sort of information or have not been educated properly. It is a fundamental premise of the Buddhist path that ignorance is never bliss, it only leads to imprisonment, and that wisdom, or waking up from ignorance is liberating. This is advice for following the path to liberation that we have received from all the teachers whom we trust. Ignorance is never bliss, it only leads to imprisonment, and wisdom, or waking up from ignorance is liberating.

The key word here is *imprisonment*. Not being fully realized, we experience time as a prison. (Recall that we started out discussing that Nirvana is beyond space and time.) When we experience time as a prison, this makes us resentful, anxious, depressed, withdrawn, exhausted, dull, etc. This is called samsara. It is the state of ignorance in which we habitually dwell. So instead of trying to grasp time as beyond concept, which cannot be done with conceptual mind, relax for the moment, and consider how we do experience time conceptually. This is easy to do. We all experience being dragged remorselessly through time against our will. We may not like this and choose to ignore it, or we may get depressed or panicked. But it is always there in the background coloring our thoughts and moods. Women in their thirties who have not had children

and wish to do so hear the ticking of the biological clock. They fear weight gain and wrinkles, giving rise to a major industry in the wealthier countries of the world. Men fear getting a paunch and losing their sexual power as they age. We all fear declining energy, heart attacks, cancer and senility. If we could have our wish, it would be that we could stop the clock now. We want more time. Some people react with self-destructive rage. But even if we avoid that and appear to others to be composed and accepting, we have not truly resolved the inner conflict.

So how does experience beyond space and time dawn on us? As we practice, we may get glimpses of being fully awake, of a life of intense colorful and emotional experience but without any self to own the experience. But we are not able to rest there for more than an instant. So there are many practices that we have been given to move us along the path. They start with shamatha meditation to stabilize the mind and help us to hold our seat. We have been taught ways to work with our emotions, including tonglen and slogan practice which are quite advanced and powerful. They help us to gradually purify our mind. If we detect subtle resentments, we can drive all blames into one and be grateful to everyone. When we see how much of the time we are dwelling on our self concerns, we can recall that all dharma agrees at one point, to diminish the sense of self. And whether we get the outcome we want or not in any life situation, whichever of the two occurs, be patient.

Trungpa Rinpoche was fond of saying that enlightenment is the death of the ego, but ego is very clever and finds many ways to imitate enlightenment so it can attend its own funeral. This is impossible. From ego's viewpoint, enlightenment is death. As we approach realization beyond space and time, we may encounter a wall of fear. How we handle fear, whether we give in to it or work with it is always our choice.

This is the end of the discussion of the fourth seal, Nirvana is Beyond Concepts.

Not Causing Harm to Sentient Beings

In the Conclusion, Khyentse Rinpoche discusses (p. 110) that Buddha advised his followers not to eat meat. This is a specific instance of a very important precept which is not to cause harm to sentient beings. But when we try to practice not causing harm to sentient beings, we find out that it is very difficult to accomplish. Certainly, refraining from eating meat is a valid practice because it causes fewer animals to be slaughtered. But if we carefully examine all the things that we do that cause harm to others, it seems impossible to keep to this vow completely. We do harm other beings in many ways through passion, aggression and ignorance. Violence is one way that we cause harm to others, and Khyentse Rinpoche says (p.113) "The fundamental cause of violence is when one is fixated on an extreme idea, such as justice or morality... One's inflexible self-righteousness takes up all the space that would allow empathy for others."

Ignorance is also a root cause of bringing harm to others, and often combines with passion and aggression. It is helpful to keep in mind that we are part of a vast interconnected world, and that whatever we do or do not do affects other sentient beings in more ways than we can ever know. We can practice being mindful of those who we have harmed and ask for their forgiveness, to forgive those who have harmed us, and to strive to cause less suffering to sentient beings.

Here are some specific issues to ponder as we make our choices:

- Is it worse to cause suffering through hatred or indifference?
- Is causing the death of a being worse than causing that being great suffering in life?
- Specifically, contemplate the suffering of torturing calves for the purpose of producing white veal, the torture of fattening pigs in a feedlot so crowded and filthy that they go crazy and gore each other, or the torture of raising hens in crowded cages to lower the cost of egg production, even if we eat only the eggs and not the hens.
- If we sustain ourselves with quinoa because it is a healthy vegetable source of protein, contemplate the great increase in the cost of quinoa which we have caused, when it is the only source of nourishment for poor peasants in the Andes who can no longer afford it. Which causes more suffering, eating meat or eating quinoa?
- If we consume products containing palm oil, we encourage the destruction of tropical rain forests, which are tilled and shredded to grow short-lived palm trees. All the living beings in the forest are uprooted and killed, the ecological system is destroyed and vast quantities of carbon dioxide and methane are released into the atmosphere. Contemplate how the destruction of tropical rainforests contributes to rising sea levels causing suffering to people living on low pacific islands and Bangladesh who will be driven into exile, live in extreme poverty or simply die. Consider how the decimation of coral reefs due to ocean acidification leads to the death of entire species of fish.
- Consider the environmental consequences of driving cars when we could be creative enough to find alternatives either individually or collectively.

How we treat the physical world, food, transportation, environment etc. is only one way in which we cause harm to others. We also cause harm with our speech and our mind. We harm others through disparaging, insulting or belittling people, confronting them aggressively, and through mindless gossip.

We hurt people when we do not offer our friendship or love to them, and sometimes we must refuse them because it is inappropriate to meet their demands. But we also harm people when we force our love or friendship on them when they would prefer to avoid us.

We cannot live without causing suffering to others, but we can be mindful of how to reduce the suffering we cause, we can ask for forgiveness from those we harm, we can express gratitude to those who nourish us, and we can be willing to forgive anyone or anything that causes us to suffer. We can also be compassionate to ourselves when we realize how much harm we are causing.

Renunciation: Back to Square One

On page 115, Khyentse Rinpoche speaks of richness within renunciation. We do not have to practice renunciation by imitating what Buddha did in his lifetime, leaving his family, practicing great austerity, etc. The best opportunity to train in renunciation occurs on our meditation seat if we take the opportunity to practice correctly. And the most important thing to renounce is

samsara. Samsara is the willingness to dwell in confused or ego mind, to dwell in ignorance, rather than to be present and real right now.

When meditating, the number of thoughts we have, or how many times we wander and forget the instruction is not the main point, so it is ok to relax and not be so judgmental with ourselves. What is important is that when awareness does come to us, that we return simply to the practice, and not indulge in the temptation to finish some juicy samsaric thought. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche calls this “back to square one.”

Awareness is the body of meditation as is taught.
Whatever arises is fresh – the essence of realization.
To this meditator who rests simply without altering it
Grant your blessing so that my meditation is free from conception.

Willingness to be present in great simplicity is the ultimate renunciation. Nothing else is needed.

This ends the discussion of two important topics in the conclusion, although there are more if you read it carefully.

This is the conclusion of Module VII, and our reading of *What Makes You Not a Buddhist*. The topic of the book is the four seals:

- All compounded things are impermanent.
- All emotions are pain.
- All things have no inherent existence.
- Nirvana is beyond concepts.

They are not ideas or beliefs. They are the basic reality that we inevitably discover when we go beyond our personal, societal and religious beliefs. If we followed Zen rather than Tibetan Buddhism, the four seals would still be there, we might arrive at the same place, but the language and specific techniques would be different.

No other organized religion seems to have a view quite like this. There are a few people, usually called “mystics”, within the Christian and Muslim traditions who did not stop within the comfort of their conventional belief system and arrived at a view beyond concept, such as Rumi, Meister Eckhart, and Thomas Merton. They were often regarded as heretics in their own time. Only Buddhism has a view that progressively dismantles its own beliefs while still providing a structured path.

Ignorance is never bliss. Ignorance makes us a prisoner and never leads to bliss; realization liberates us.