

The Development of Ego

Talk One Introduction

The Four Dharmas of Gampopa

Grant your blessings so that my mind may be one with the dharma.
Grant your blessings so that dharma may progress along the path.
Grant your blessings so that the path may clarify confusion.
Grant your blessings so that confusion may dawn as wisdom.

Gampopa (1079 – 1153) CE

Introduction

The Buddhist path is designed to engage us in a journey from confusion to wisdom, so that our lives can be joyful and uplifted, free from fear and anxiety, and so that we may radiate that joy to everyone that we encounter. Overall, the path has three important components which need to come together. These are (1) the practice of meditation, (2) the study of the buddhadharma or teachings, and (3) bringing the dharma into our life. In our tradition, the practice of meditation is started as soon as we arrive and present ourselves at a practice center, because shamatha meditation is an excellent way to quiet our mind and draw it to the path of dharma so that we will be able to hear the teachings. However, to make progress along the path, it is necessary to work on all three components. That is, the practice of meditation needs some guidance and attentive study so that it does not become either dull and habitual or too wild with fantasy; the study of dharma requires listening and contemplating with an inquisitive and energetic mind; and the application of dharma to how we live our life requires a willingness to bring dharma into all the hidden corners of our thoughts, beliefs, habits and activities.

This talk is actually an orientation for this module and the next one. As your teachers wrestled with what we wanted to teach, it became clear that the material that needed to be presented required a more spacious approach and fell naturally into two parts. So the present module is called *The Development of Ego* and the next one is called *Karma*. They are both foundational and have their origin in a very ancient source called *Abhidharma*. These teachings are more basic than many of the topics we have taught here such as Lojong and Tonglen. So this is an opportunity to go back to the beginning.

Both of these topics, how ego is born in every moment and how karma operates over time fall within the general category of *samsara*, from which we would all like to be free. We start with the wish that we could be free from *samsara*, and as we broaden our perspective we wish the same for everyone else. The definition of *samsara* is that it is an endless recycling of suffering. We would like to be free from suffering. This is actually quite possible. We all have the potential to have this happen. However it cannot be done by wishing it were so or trying to take one great leap and leave *samsara* behind forever. The world we live in is not a fantasy world and it just

doesn't go away that easily. The only workable way to begin is to master samsara, to understand it thoroughly from the depths of our intellect and meditation.

We begin by quieting our minds. Once we do this, two questions arise: The first is what is happening right now? The second is how did we get here and where are we going? You should be curious about both of these questions and work energetically to *grok* them. *The Development of Ego* addresses the question of what is happening right now in this present moment, and *Karma* addresses the question of how we arrived at where we are now and where are we going from here. The first is an analysis of what happens in an instant. An instant is the time it takes to make a high speed photograph, too fast to be experienced as a sequence of steps. The second is about time, and how things unfold over time with timespans ranging from the time it takes for one thought to be followed by another, to events that unfold over a life time, to those that unfold over many life times, perhaps over geological eras.

These two questions are not unique to Buddhism. For example, Dante begins the *Divina Comedia* when he awakens to find himself in a dark forest and has to deal first with the immediate landscape which is frightening to him and then his ongoing journey. However, the Buddhist journey differs from the Christian one, in fact from any religious journey, in that there is no theology. No God, no gods, no first cause, no historical explanation, no creation myth, and no fixed system of belief. We are on our own, and the only thing to work on is mind.

Before we discuss each of the two topics separately, we should pause and review what has just been presented, using the *Four Dharmas of Gampopa* as an outline. The Four Dharmas can be understood on many levels, and this is just the first level. The linked words provide a sequence to guide the discussion:

Mind → Dharma → Path → Confusion → Wisdom

But note the helping words:

one with ... progress along ... clarify ... dawn as

The Development of Ego

When we study the development of ego, we are delving into the most basic of Buddhist teachings which is *non-self*. We have been told many times that our sense of self, our basic “me-ness” is a delusion and the root of our unhappiness. We have also been told that when we understand things properly, that we cannot find any self. This seems paradoxical because no matter how many times we hear this said, our basic instinct is to believe “Well, here I am and lots of things are happening to me.” This seems so completely obvious that we do not even question it. The Buddhist approach to this is to point out that yes indeed, lots of experiences are happening, but when we examine these experiences, we cannot find a self that is the owner of the experiences, no matter how hard we try. A vast chaotic range of experiences are happening: things, people, feelings, perceptions, ideas, emotions and beliefs. The only thing missing is an owner of all these experiences.

Lists have always been an important part of Buddhist teachings, and when we study the development of ego, we make use of a list which is found in the Abhidharma, and has been around for more than two thousand years. This is the list of the five *skandas*. They are:

1. Form
2. Feeling
3. Perception/Impulse
4. Formation (sometimes Concept or Intellect)
5. Consciousness

The word “skanda” translates as “heap.” The idea is that this list covers everything that can be experienced. The five skandas are always listed in this order. Although this teaching is very ancient and can be found in every school of Buddhism, we are approaching the skandas as we learned them from our teacher, Chögyam Trungpa which is a very tantric way of looking at them. The five skandas are heaped on top of each other. That is, they happen sequentially. That sequence happens very fast, it takes only an instant. An instant is a time period too short for our mind to break it into smaller parts. There are many instants in one second. The entire process of five stages or skandas resulting in an experience of self happens in an instant. It has no perceivable duration. Then in the next instant the mind has to invent another self.

A useful metaphor for this is that it is like a motion picture, a cinema. A motion picture or video consists of a sequence of images happening so fast that it creates an illusion of continuous motion. But there is no continuous motion, just still images happening faster than our perception is able to resolve them into separate events.

Why is this investigation important? We are looking for a self that is the owner of everything that we experience. To be of any use, this self would need to persist. Maybe it isn't immortal, but it would need to stay around at least for a while. But if it doesn't stay around for a day, not even for a few minutes, not even for a few seconds while we are paying close attention, what use is it? Why do we have regrets about the past if we are not the same self that had these past experiences? Why are we anxious or fearful about the future, if the self of the present moment is not the same as the self of some imagined future?

What we might find is that having to reinvent ourselves repeatedly every instant is an exhausting and unnecessary endeavor that saps our energy and spontaneity and keeps us enslaved, and unable to experience the present moment fully and joyfully. Our automatic and unexamined belief that the flickering process of the skandas is really “me” turns out to be a delusion. The delusion is that we believe we are experiencing “reality”, but that turns out to be a highly biased and distorted story about “me” and something else which is other than me, a constantly changing story that is always about what I want, or don’t want, or desire, or hate or envy or fear.

The reward for this effort is that as we start to free ourselves from the constant compulsion to reinvent ourselves every instant, we develop equanimity which is relaxed, energized, joyful and compassionate.

We could have a short discussion, and then a few words about karma.

Possible question:

“I spend many years seeing a psychologist, who helped me develop my sense of self so that I could function in the world. Will practicing non-self make me dysfunctional?”

When we begin to look beyond duality, we see that it is not just empty and nonexistent. We begin to realize that beyond egohood, there is still tremendous aliveness, vitality, strength, and energy. This aliveness and energy is luminous and bright, and it contains tremendous wisdom.

– Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche –

Karma

There are two common ways we think about karma. On the one hand, we may see everything that has happened to us and what will happen to us as purely random and without any useful pattern. This is a western materialistic view of life, and leaves us adrift and wandering around in a meaningless world. The other extreme is a religious preoccupation with past and future lives which makes us fixated on what we did wrong in the past, and anxious about what will happen after we die. Neither of these is helpful.

In the next module, we will study another list known as the twelve *nidanas*. We will not list them right now, but what is important is that this is a very different kind of list from the five skandas. Rather than being a linear sequence, they form a cycle with no particular starting point. In the *thangka* or painting known as the wheel of life, they are depicted on the outer rim of an enormous circle. When the cycle is traversed clockwise, this depicts going forward in time, round and round without end. If we traverse the cycle counterclockwise, this depicts going backward in time. So it works exactly like a clock.

In contrast to the skandas, which is a description of how the self is born in an instant, the cycle of time, the *nidanas*, is about a process that is for the most part beyond our perception or memory. The contemplation of the skandas call our attention to what the mind is doing right now, which is knowable if we work on it. The *nidanas* should leave us with a deep appreciating of the vastness of causes and effects which lie outside our personal experience. Nevertheless, there *are* contemplative exercises that we can do now that help us to understand and work with karma.

The reward for this effort is that we can live without complaint or regret about the past and without anxiety about the future. Living free from complaint, we appreciate the world as sacred.

