

All the Buddha's dharma converges on a single point.

The first instruction is that all dharma, all the teachings of the Hinayana and Mahayana, have one common purpose: to reduce or eliminate the clinging to a self. Whatever dharma we practice, whatever mind training we meditate on, the purpose is to diminish that clinging. If our clinging doesn't diminish, then our practice isn't working properly. If we notice that the continual thought of ourselves as important is decreasing, it is one sign that mind training is working.

If we want to know whether our dharma practice is working or not, we have to examine it by asking, "Do I still consider myself to be important? Am I still clinging to my self as something precious?" For instance, if we had a piece of gold and wanted to know how much we had, we could not know this just by looking at it. We would have to put it on a scale and weigh it. Similarly, measuring our clinging to self is a way of telling if our dharma practice is working. Is our clinging to the self diminishing or increasing?

It is said there are 84,000 kinds of dharma, which are too numerous to understand and practice fully. For instance, if practitioners in the main vehicles of the Hinayana, the Mahayana, and the Vajrayana do not have a thorough understanding, they may have the impression that the Hinayana or Shrivakayana is very different from Mahayana and even more different from the Vajrayana. This is not a correct view because all of the Buddha's teachings agree.

Let's look at the first turning of the wheel of dharma that emphasizes the four noble truths. The first noble truth is the most important one with the other three being additional truths. The first noble truth is the truth of suffering; the others are the truth of the origin, the truth of the path, and the truth of cessation. It is said that we should understand the truth of suffering, which has four aspects. These are impermanence, suffering, interdependent origination, and egolessness of person. In other words, the main intent of the first turning is the understanding that the personal identity of a self is non-existent, and that the main practice is to develop realization of egolessness. In this way, the main intent of the first turning is cultivating the knowledge that realizes egolessness, which is the direct remedy against ego-clinging.

In the second turning, there are many sutras, namely, the Prajnaparamita sutras which focus on egolessness. We know the condensed form of the Prajnaparamita sutras, the Heart Sutra, states, "There is no eye, no ear, no tongue," and so forth, to show that all phenomena are empty and devoid of having a self-entity. The purpose of the egolessness of phenomena and the main aim of a bodhisattva in this second turning is to develop relative and absolute bodhichitta, as well as training in the six perfections, to realize emptiness. Why? Because understanding emptiness is the direct remedy for clinging to a self. In this way, there is a direct relationship between the first turning of the Shrivakas and the Second Turning in the vehicle of Mahayana.

In the Vajrayana, the main practices are called the creation stage and the completion stage of the yidam deity. In the creation stage, rather than having the ordinary concept of oneself as being just "me," with an ordinary body that is impure and a mind that is influenced by disturbing emotions and ego-clinging, we train in the mandala of the yidam deity, which is completely pure. We identify

ourselves as pure, totally free of ego- clinging and negative emotions, a nonsamsaric state. That is the direct remedy against ordinary clinging to self. Our environment is not samsaric but a pure Buddha-field; our dwelling place is not an ordinary house but the mandala of the deity; our body is not an ordinary body but the pure enlightened form of the deity; our voice is the enlightened speech, and our state of mind is the deity's awakened mind. This is a training that is the direct remedy for the ordinary way of clinging to oneself as being an impure, ordinary, samsaric being. In the completion stage, we dissolve everything into emptiness and remain with our mind resting in the nature of mind, the nature of all phenomena. This is the direct remedy for ego-clinging, believing there is a solid personal identity.

In this way, there is complete agreement between the first, second, and third turnings of the wheel of dharma. The text says that all levels of teachings, or "all dharmas agree on the one point," with the one point being a direct remedy for ego-clinging.

In this special context of mind training, we are presented with methods for diminishing and eradicating the tendency of ego-clinging. First we learn how to develop absolute bodhichitta, which is the understanding of emptiness that directly realizes that the personal identity is empty. Some kind of method is required when we resolve to achieve enlightenment. According to the advice Atisha received from Jowo Serlingpa, "Planting the seed of bodhichitta does not grow well if the soil is too clean. It grows much better in soil that is dirty and fertilized." This means that if we are considering whether there is an ego or not, we can say that the impure way of thinking that there is a self can be more conducive for giving rise to bodhichitta than the thought that there is no personal self. Therefore, in the mind training of relative bodhichitta, the main part of the practice here, we accept that there is a personal self. The reason we do that is to make it easier to give up self-cherishing and to regard others as more important than ourselves. Also in sending and taking practice we assume there is a self and there is another we are sending and taking to. The purpose of sending and taking is to reduce self-cherishing and to increase cherishing others. In this way, whether we are training in absolute or relative bodhichitta, the purpose is to decrease ego-clinging. So all three vehicles agree with one another at one point.

In the context of this training, "The Buddha's dharma converges on a single point," our evaluation of whether we are improving in our practice or not are the questions: "Is our level of self-cherishing decreasing? Is treasuring others over ourselves increasing? Is there any progress there?" This is how we keep track of progress in our practice.