

TEACHINGS AND ADVICE

Lama Yeshe's Wisdom

'You Cannot Say All Desire Is Negative'

By Lama Yeshe



Lama Yeshe, twelfth Kopan meditation course, Kopan Monastery, Nepal, 1979.

Photo by Peter Iseli.

There are teachings in the lam-rim that say we should be grateful for the eight worldly dharmas. Why is that? First of all, how can we gain liberation from samsara without transcending the eight worldly dharmas? Even Shakyamuni Buddha himself went through them on his way to enlightenment. It's part of our spiritual evolution. At some point, having gone through the eight worldly dharmas, we reach beyond them, attaining liberation or even enlightenment.

In his lam-rim teachings, Lama Tsongkhapa very clearly describes three types of eight worldly dharmas: black, mixed and white.¹ When we engage in worldly activity, one aspect of our action might be good, but as we're doing it a negative thought can arise so that the result will be sort of mixed. So philosophically, and this is also in the lam-rim, you can't say that all attachment is negative. Westerners can be oversensitive. They see in the lam-rim that attachment is our biggest problem and conclude that it must be completely negative. Lama Tsongkhapa says, "No!"

Logically we can see that, from the Buddhist point of view, all human life, including our body, comes from the positive mind.

You need to understand that attachment is a problem in everyday life because you have too many fixed ideas and unreasonable expectations. You can't give all that up overnight. Work it out slowly.

It's positive karma that produces this body that gives us the ability to enjoy things. But, as human beings, we have limitations. When the lam-rim teachings highlight certain aspects of our life as negative, we can jump to the conclusion that everything to do with attachment is negative: "I am completely negative; the world is completely negative." Then everything gets very dark, because that's the exaggerated way in which we project or interpret it.

I want you to understand clean clear that we distinguish two things: negative, or sinful, and positive. Attachment, or desire, can be negative and sinful, but it can also be positive. The positive aspect is that which produces pleasure: samsaric pleasure, human pleasure – the ability to enjoy the world, to see it as beautiful, to have whatever you find attractive.

So you cannot say that all desire is negative and produces only pain. Wrong. You should not think like that. Desire can produce pleasure – but only temporary pleasure. That's the distinction. It's temporary pleasure. And we don't say that temporal pleasure is always bad, that you should reject it. If you reject temporal pleasure, then what's left? You haven't attained eternal happiness yet, so all that's left is misery.

But you should not make the mistake of trying to actualize temporary pleasure [as an end in itself]. You can enjoy it while you have it, but you should not squeeze yourself striving for it. The problem is the mind that believes temporary pleasure to be

the best there is. That's a total delusion, an over-estimated conception. Like looking at a cloud in the sky and thinking, "What a beautiful cloud; I wish it would last forever." You're dreaming.

We should recognize all our human pleasures as similarly impermanent. They come; they go. They're limited, and we should *expect* them to be limited. That's their nature. Our expectations should always be in accord with the way things are. Therefore, we should not grasp at temporary pleasure as if it were eternal, everlasting happiness. That's deluded, a fantasy.

Of course, the lam-rim and Mahayana Buddhism in general talk about attachment and self-cherishing as incredibly big problems. And when you hear that, you might think, "I want to give them up today!" You can't. It's impossible; you're too ambitious. You need to understand that attachment is a problem in everyday life because you have too many fixed ideas and unreasonable expectations. You can't give all that up overnight. Work it out slowly: "I'm grateful to understand how attachment works, but it will take time to overcome it. There are certain things I can handle now, but I can't manage everything at once."

Remember what I said about the mixed eight worldly dharmas – actions that are a little bit white and a little bit black so that the results are mixed too; not totally negative. So you have to see where you fall in this and use your own judgment when deciding how to deal with your own attachment. Just don't look at all attachment as completely negative. It's not. There are degrees of attachment.

You've probably heard about the five paths and the ten bodhisattva levels (*bhumi*). For example, there are the paths of merit, preparation and seeing, at which point one attains the first *bhumi*. It's quite a long journey. From there up to the eighth *bhumi*, you can still have some attachment. As I said, it has degrees.

Knowing this, we beginners should be encouraged that it is only when we reach the incredibly high eighth bodhisattva *bhumi* that we are completely free of attachment. Starting from where we are, we first deal with its gross levels and slowly, slowly rid ourselves of it.

So don't be too idealistic: "How fantastic. Lama has told me all about attachment"; and then go home and tell your father, "Your problem is attachment"; your boyfriend, "Your problem is

¹ See Lama Zopa Rinpoche's *How to Practice Dharma: Teachings on the Eight Worldly Dharmas* (Boston: LYWA, 2012), pages 99-100.

TEACHINGS AND ADVICE

attachment.” Everything is attachment. Then people start telling you, “You know what? *Your* problem is attachment.”

Well, philosophically, we might understand attachment clear, but in practice we have to be reasonable and, as the lam-rim explains, have a realistic attitude towards attachment. So, if you see some benefit for yourself or others in doing something, even small, although it might be tinged by attachment, do it. Do what you can; that’s good enough.

When some Westerners first encounter the lam-rim teachings they get the impression that it’s all about suffering: “Buddhism says I’ve been suffering since forever! I *should* be suffering!” Since they’ve been brought up to believe that in fact they should *not* suffer and should always enjoy pleasure, they really don’t like this Eastern way of thinking and can’t reconcile the two. Have you felt like that? Anyway, it’s not true. Buddhism wants you and all other sentient beings to discover everlasting happiness and bliss; eternal peace. That’s the enlightenment experience; that’s the goal of the lam-rim teachings. Don’t think that small worldly pleasures are the only happiness there is; that if you just have this thing or that, you’ll be happy. That’s small, narrow-minded thinking. And that’s the problem.

Worldly happiness is OK, but judge it reasonably. Enjoy it without grasping at it as real, which only results in more pain. That’s all that Buddhism is talking about. You *should* have pleasure and not feel guilty when you do. What do I mean by pleasure? It’s a feeling that satisfies you for a moment and doesn’t disturb your mind. You get a little pleasure – that’s good enough. Accept it for what it is and don’t feel guilty. Be as happy as possible. If you’re irritated, how can you be peaceful within yourself or give happiness to those around you?

If I’m crying my eyes out and at the same time saying, “I want to give you happiness, I want to give you happiness,” you’re not going to know how to handle me. “He wants to give me happiness but he’s crying.” Soon you’re going to start crying too. All we do is make each other cry.

Therefore, if you’re experiencing pleasure, be reasonable; remain calm and clear, even if you notice that your grasping mind is there beneath it all. And if you have a feeling of loving kindness towards another, enjoy that too. Don’t feel guilty.

Lama Yeshe gave this teaching during the twelfth Kopan meditation course, November 1979. Edited from the Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive (www.lamayeshe.com) by Nicholas Ribush.



His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Maitripa President Yangsi Rinpoche, faculty, alumni, and the graduating class of 2013 at Maitripa, Portland, Oregon ~ photo by Marc Sakamoto

Join the growing MAITRIPA COLLEGE scholastic community!

- ❖ **Master of Arts in Buddhist Studies (MA):** A unique immersion in contemplative education integrating Tibetan scholar-practitioner training with a Western Religious Studies approach to Buddhism
- ❖ **Master of Divinity (MDiv):** A pioneering professional degree which is training a new generation of Buddhist chaplains, spiritual leaders, activists, and compassionate caregivers
- ❖ **Continuing Education Courses:** Courses for personal and professional development
- ❖ **Summer Classical Tibetan Intensive:** Beginning and advanced language training

~ Now Accepting Degree Program Applications for Fall 2014 ~
~ Register Now for Spring Courses ~ Semester Begins February 3, 2014 ~

www.maitripa.org ~ info@maitripa.org
scholarship . meditation . service