

working with the western mind

While on a three-year retreat, LAMA PALDEN DROLMA began to see that psychological methods could be helpful for Western Dharma practitioners. Some years later, she became a licensed psychotherapist. She speaks to JAFFA ELIAS about integrating her work with her experience of teaching, studying and practicing Dharma.



Through Dharma study and practice, the path to complete liberation, we begin by realizing that we are never going to be satisfied through dependence on phenomena – other people, our homes, jobs,

body, etc. – as they are impermanent and not ultimately capable of giving us refuge. It is only the Three Jewels that are capable of giving us refuge.

As practitioners we often come up against our own negative habitual patterns. Many varieties of Dharma practice are designed to help us purify and release these patterns. At the same time, the psychological practice of direct inquiry into our conflicting emotions could also be helpful. Some people have the good karma to work with obscurations purely from a Dharma perspective, but many of us need to look at these things psychologically, find out what's going on and try to unravel it. If our emotional turmoil and/or behaviors are not getting transformed through our practice, it means that there's some kind of big knot around which some psychological work may be needed.

Through lifetimes of practice these habitual patterns are going to get cleared up. If we're talking expediency, however – and as Vajrayana practitioners we want to clear our own issues out of the way so that we can use the practices more fully and completely – then a psychological approach may be helpful.

Psychology can help develop a healthy sense of self-structure. Dharma eventually has us realize that our dualistic sense of self and

other is an illusion. However, in order to really progress on the path, we need confidence, trust, faith and courage. We also need loving kindness. These are qualities of a healthy self that in their deeper manifestations are aspects of our true nature, or Buddha-

nature. Sometimes our spiritual unfolding can be hindered by the lack of these basic qualities, and psychological methods can help us to heal past trauma and develop these qualities.

All people throughout the world, regardless of culture, have the same five poisons: pride, hatred, ignorance, jealousy and desire. In the West, however, the concept of original sin has profoundly influenced our sense of who we are. Even for those of us not taught that we are sinful from birth and that we need to be baptized in order to be purified and able to enter God's kingdom, our psyche carries the feeling and idea that something is

“... Our psyche carries the idea that something is wrong with us; that we are fundamentally flawed. This is very different from the Buddhist notion that we are primordially pure beings whose core is basic goodness ...”

wrong with us; that we are fundamentally flawed. This is very different from the Buddhist notion that we are primordially pure beings whose core is basic goodness. The philosophy of original sin has permeated our collective unconscious in the West to a profound degree and undermines our ability to connect with our basic goodness and purity.

Some of our concepts of self run psychologically so deep that we don't even know they're there. We think, “I'm no good, I'm never going to equal-up to other people,” “I can't get enlightened,” “I can't experience pure nature because I'm too screwed up,” etc. There's some belief from childhood that the person really is screwed up in such a deep way that the Dharma



"Drops of Life" © Nicholas Roerich Museum, used by permission.

is not going to be able to penetrate, or that the world is fundamentally hostile and there's a real strong psychological mechanism of protecting the self in place. From the Buddhist point of view, of course, there's no self to protect but that requires realization in order to really know that.

Vajrayana tries to transform us into having pure view and pure perception and seeing phenomena as the deities, mandalas, and guru appearing, but if you have a very deeply-held unconscious belief that the world outside of the self is actually hostile, that mechanism of protecting and defending the self remains firmly entrenched and it is hard to actually move into the true experience of seeing oneself, others, and the world as primordially pure. Working psychologically can help us become conscious of our fears, projections and erroneous beliefs. Then, with continued Vajrayana practice, the stream of our being may be able to assimilate our meditation and the blessings of the lineage more fully.

Dharma can be used to satisfy certain psychological needs, such as the need for love, to belong, to be supported. But that's not really its purpose. Its purpose is to fully and completely awaken us to who we really are. Its task is to liberate us from the illusion of the separate self. So when we try to use the Dharma for ego purposes, it eventually backfires on us, which is really the blessing of the truth emerging.

In three-year retreat, I found that desire was my main obscuration. I channeled a lot of that into longing for realization, praying to my gurus, and into guru yoga. Yet I missed a close human relationship-type contact. We need to look objectively at what our longing is really about by examining what's going on with us. Ultimately, wanting something outside ourselves is masking that fact that we are not in touch with our true nature.

The way I do psychological inquiry for myself or a client is to become present with the sensations of the body and emotions in order to experience directly what is there on the level of relative reality. Then one follows the thread, so to speak, of the sensations and emotions to get to the underlying thought or belief that is holding the physical and emotional pattern in place. Many habitual patterns are adaptive defense or survival strategies that are no longer applicable to the current situation. And as adults and practitioners, we have many more options available to us, as well as a much more sophisticated philosophical understanding that can be integrated into the less conscious layers of the psyche.

We can practice for a long time without facing what we don't want to look at. There's a lot of self-hatred, low self-esteem, and internal self-criticism anyway, so the last thing

we want to do is look at our faults – it's too painful. We need to come to a place where we can be more self-loving and self-accepting because if we can't, it's almost impossible to look at our shadow side, being too unconsciously defended against it.

Through actively watching the mind and hearing when we are criticizing ourselves and/or others, this is brought into consciousness. Sometimes that inner critic will actually be trying to help us, protect us, or keep us out of trouble – it's just going about it in the wrong way, a bit like bad parenting. You beat the kids so they don't go outside instead of explaining to them that it is dangerous to go outside. Sometimes we beat ourselves up instead of explaining to that part of ourselves that it is OK. We can be loving with ourselves and still progress.

In doing this, we also need a teacher. We need to ask them to point out our blind spots, and we need to be willing to not get defensive and to actually work with it. We need to continue to check in with our teachers and examine carefully any feedback we are getting from them, as well as from people we are close to in our lives, and our Sangha brothers and sisters. Otherwise, it is easy for the ego to usurp a part or all of the spiritual path and use meditation as a way of escaping those issues and feelings that really need to be acknowledged and faced. This has been called "the spiritual bypass." The signs of this are when we are not actually feeling and living the truths of the Dharma, such as loving kindness and generosity.

Our lives too have a way of pointing things out to us. Things happen in our lives, through other people, relationships, family or jobs that give us teachings if we are open. One of the primary methods or understandings in tantra is that the whole universe, the whole phenomenal world, is our guru. So either people will say something directly to us, or we'll just run into different difficulties in our lives. This is an incredibly beautiful way that the universe teaches us – but we have to be willing to look.

On a footnote – the way Buddhist practice is talked about needs to be more precisely articulated for our culture. As Westerners we want to understand how other people did it, what their process was, as we learn through hearing it. Easterners don't talk much at all about process, so for us there's a big gap there. Of course, a lot of lamas do talk from their own experience, but getting down to the nitty-gritty, like how did you deal



with that in your body, in your mind, a kind of slowing things down and talking about the actual process? Not really. A lot of times Tibetans will say, "OK, this is the process; just do it." And then if you have a problem, they say, "Let go. Keep your mind

focused on Buddha, Dharma and Sangha." That's really nice, but it may not help people who are confused and stuck.

There is nothing more profound than the teachings and practices of the Buddhadharma and many of us have been extremely fortunate to receive the Vajrayana teachings and transmissions. The more Westerners that are able to study with authentic teachers and do these practices, the more benefit will ensue. As sincere Western practitioners come to understand the Vajrayana teachings, at times they are able

"Dharma can be used to satisfy certain psychological needs, such as the need for love, to belong, to be supported. But that's not really its purpose. Its purpose is to fully and completely awaken us to who we really are."

to explain the meaning of such in a language that is more easily comprehended conceptually by the Western mind. However, it will be some time before the transmission and realization of these teachings in the West is complete.

My own teacher, Ven. Kalu Rinpoche, was very encouraging and empowering to Westerners. While I was studying with him in Darjeeling, he told us many times that we would have to figure it out how to further implement the Dharma in our own culture. The essence of Dharma, Rinpoche said, would remain unchanged, but many outer aspects of the Dharma may change, and ways of explaining the Dharma, too. This is the skillful means aspect. The actual essence and truths of the Dharma are unchanging, no matter what culture they move into. ☸

Authorized as a lama in 1986 by her root teacher, H.E. Kalu Rinpoche, Lama Palden Drolma has been a student and practitioner of Buddhism for over 25 years. She is the founding teacher of Sukhasiddhi Foundation in Marin County, CA, USA. A licensed therapist, she is engaged in facilitating psycho-spiritual integration and development through bringing together understandings and methods from Buddhism and the Diamond work.



Photo Annik Brunet