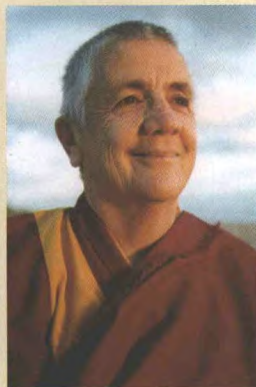


Winning gold



Ven. Tenzin Chonyi, a.k.a. Dr. Diana Taylor, an Australian-born Buddhist nun and psychologist, shows us how the spiritual path can easily get undermined by the ego if we constantly have "mixed motives".

As I write, the Beijing Olympic Games are in full swing. On my TV screen are ecstatic gold medallists. The silver or bronze winners may be only a few hundredths of a second behind, but it is the holder of the gold medal that gets most of the attention. Western society admires and rewards the "best".

I really enjoy watching the Olympic Games because I enjoy seeing what the human body can do, but I cringe at the jingoistic commentaries arriving in my lounge room. Why do nations need so desperately to measure themselves in this way, like siblings vying for the attention of Mom and Dad? Being best becomes an end in itself. The 25 gold medals won by Australian Olympians between 1980 and 1996 cost around \$37 million.¹

We can smile at this foolishness, but most of us are deeply affected by the demand to be best. Either we have some skills and try to be top at something, or we give up and fall into hopelessness and depression. Sometimes we swing between those two extremes and wonder why we are chronically dissatisfied. What is more, we bring this neurosis into Dharma practice. We want the gold medal of having the most attention from teacher, or sitting longer in meditation, or being the busiest student at our Dharma center.

It is pride that causes the problems. Pride is quite different from self-confidence. Pride inflates our fragile self-esteem. It becomes a source of disrespect, especially towards people with lesser qualities. It might pretend to be self-confidence, but self-confidence simply knows our strengths and limitations. It is neither puffed up nor deflated when it measures itself. It leaves us free to be

compassionate towards people we can help and to be clear in our Dharma practice.

Guru devotion is so easily twisted by pride. It turns into a competitive race to be the best Dharma student. The teachings on guru devotion tell us to do even more than our best, and there is a good reason for that: correct devotion is the root of the path. So how and why do we get caught up in pride? The self-serving ego desperately wants to be propped up, not annihilated. It needs to be proud of itself. It serves the teacher so it can be important. It wants the gold medal of best Dharma student. Then when someone else gets the attention that it wants, it becomes jealous and resentful. Whenever such feelings intrude into our Dharma practice we can be sure that our self-serving ego has taken over once again.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche says: "*Dharma practice offers the most exciting, highest happiness there is: following advice, finding no hardship at all in whatever advice the guru gives, even things that generally seem hard in the view of other people, even impossible. That itself is guru devotion. Then, seeing your guru as Buddha, without any question, is incredible, the peak, the highest enjoyment. Then, nothing is difficult to accept. But if the devotion is not strong, if it is wishy-washy, if there's no real devotion, only a little, and it's artificial, from the lips, but not in the heart, or it's very weak like when a fire has been burning a long time and there are only one or two sparks left, it can disappear very easily. Then it's very difficult to follow advice, even if the advice is simple, and not a great sacrifice. Even very small things become hard. The mind doesn't want to do it.*"²

Wishy-washy devotion, doubt, anger towards the Dharma – these are all signs that our motivation has become contaminated by an ego caught up in a grasping and muddled search for happiness. Remember, this ego goes to great lengths to avoid annihilation and yet the point of Buddhism is precisely that, to annihilate this ego. There is a big difference between doing our best with a quiet, ego-less self-confidence and being the one with the grossly puffed-up ego who wants to win a gold medal. How fortunate we are, then, in the midst of the worst excesses of our pride. It is this same inflated ego that we are trying to expose when we investigate emptiness. ☸

¹ Brett Hutchins, Sydney Morning Herald, 7 August 2008

² <http://www.lamayeshe.com/lamazopa/advicebook/lamrim/guru.shtmlhttp://www.lamayeshe.com/lamazopa/advicebook/lamrim/guru.shtml>