

Taking Refuge – Part 3 of 10 (lightly edited transcript)
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Review

So we've been talking about refuge. We've talked about the causes of refuge; we've talked about the objects of refuge; now we're on the third section called 'Measuring the Extent to which We've Taken Refuge', or in other words, 'How to Take Refuge'. One way to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha is by knowing their qualities, so we get into the whole subject of what their qualities are.

Now, this whole subject of refuge touches something very sensitive in us, because it touches on the whole thing of faith. We all come from different religious backgrounds. We all have different attitudes towards the subject of faith, or as I explained the last time, I prefer to call it 'confidence'. We all come with our own preconceptions or whatever, and people just within a small group have very different dispositions. Some people listening to all the teachings about refuge say, "Wow, this is incredible! My mind is so happy hearing this." Other people listen to it, and they get completely angry. So we have all come to teachings with different karma, with different dispositions, and we can hear things quite differently.

I remember one time when I was in Nepal (this was in the early years), a lama whom I had met came up to me and said, "When you go back to the West, you should tell everybody about the Buddha's qualities, and as soon as they hear of all these marvelous qualities, they'll surely become Buddhists." And I thought, "No way!" For the Tibetans who had grown up hearing the terms 'Buddha', 'Dharma' and 'Sangha' since they were children, when they hear these teachings about all the incredible, magnificent qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, they go "Wow! I never knew this before, this is wonderful!", whereas a lot of us are still wrestling with the question: "Does Buddha exist? Forget about Buddha's qualities – does Buddha exist? Let's get down to the basics here!"

Three Kinds of Confidence

So there's a lot that we have to hash through in working with this subject. And like I explained last time, there're different kinds of confidence that we can generate when we approach it. One is when we hear the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, we have a feeling of admiration. We have a confidence that is admirational in nature. We admire those qualities. Some people may hear the same qualities and be very skeptical – "How do I know that exists?" We're all different.

The second kind of faith is that of aspiration: when we hear the qualities, we think, "Wow! I'd like to become like that." And we have a feeling, "Hmm...it's possible to become like that. I'd like to do that." By contrast, other people listening to the whole thing may say, "I can't become like that. I'm just me."

Then there's another kind of confidence that's based on conviction, and this is when we've understood things. This is a confidence that arises from learning the teachings, and understanding them, and applying them. And in some way, I think this kind of confidence comes a little bit easier to us because we were brought up in the rational tradition. When we approach subjects, we want a logical understanding; and after we have understood them, we believe them. So we might go to teachings on the Four Noble Truths

and we think about it and we say, "That seems reasonable. I believe. I want to follow that because it makes sense." Or we might hear some other teachings, let's say, about how to deal with anger, and we put those into practice and we think about them and we see they do make some change in our life, and so we gain some confidence based on conviction through having looked at it, examined it and having some experience. And that kind of confidence is probably the most stable one because it comes from experience.

Now all these kinds of confidence or faith are not the 'on-and-off light-switch' thing, but rather, the 'dimmer-brighter' one. At the beginning, our confidence might be almost non-existent. As time goes on, we get more experienced, and we also do purification practice so we remove a lot of the karmic obstacles in our mind, then a lot of things may make sense, and the mind gets lighter and it's easier to have confidence and faith. So our level of confidence will change as time goes on. We might go one step back and two steps forward: this might happen from time to time as everything is impermanent in samsara, and so is our confidence. But the thing is that as we practice more and more, and get something grounded and get a deeper understanding, things will slowly start to become more stable.

How Different Traditions View Buddha and Buddhahood

You might be interested to know too, because we're now getting to the subject of the Buddha's qualities, that how the Buddha is viewed differs very much, let's say from the Theravada school to the Mahayana school.

Was the Buddha an Ordinary Being Before He Attained Enlightenment?

The Theravada Viewpoint

In the Theravada school, it's very much seen that the Buddha was an ordinary human being who was not enlightened when he was born as a prince in Kapilavastu twenty-five hundred years ago. He was just an ordinary being. He left his life of luxury, became a meditator, gained the realizations, became a Buddha, taught, and then passed away. And when he passed away, because he had attained nirvana and all the attachment, anger and ignorance on his mind stream had ceased, they say that once he left the gross contaminated body, his consciousness also just kind of ceased since there was no longer any attachment to push it on. From the Theravada viewpoint, the Buddha's consciousness went into extinction after he passed away, and that's called attaining parinirvana. So the Buddhas don't appear in the world anymore. Shakyamuni doesn't appear in the world anymore; all that remains is his teachings.

And they say that the next Buddha that comes will be Maitreya, and he will also be an ordinary being when he's first born, then gain the realizations of Buddhahood and teach, etc. The Theravada view is that the Buddha was ordinary like us and nothing extraordinary (before he attained enlightenment), and then he became a Buddha, and after he passed away, his consciousness went into extinction.

The Mahayana Viewpoint

In the Mahayana tradition, the Buddha is seen quite differently. Here, the Buddha is seen as an omniscient mind, and a mind that has completely removed all defilements, completely developed all the potentials, and then acts for the benefit of others out of compassion. Instead of just acting as Shakyamuni Buddha, the Buddha is seen in a more global way, with Shakyamuni being just one manifestation of that Buddha. So from the Mahayana viewpoint, they would say that Shakyamuni was enlightened a long time before he appeared as a prince in Kapilavastu. When he was born in Kapilavastu, he was already enlightened. He did this whole thing of leading a kingdom, following the path, meditating and all, as a way of skillfully demonstrating to us an example of the qualities that we need to develop in our own mind.

So you can see, just in looking at the historical Buddha, there's a big difference in the Theravada approach and the Mahayana approach. The Theravada view is that he was an ordinary being who became enlightened. The Mahayana view is he was already enlightened; this is an appearance, this is a manifestation.

Does Consciousness Cease After Nirvana/Enlightenment?

Also from the Mahayana viewpoint, when Shakyamuni passed away at the age of 81, his consciousness didn't just go into extinction. They say a Buddha's consciousness continues because all consciousnesses continue, but it continues in a purified state, and because of the Buddha's great compassion, he can

spontaneously manifest in many different forms in order to guide beings. Therefore the Mahayana talks about many different kinds of Buddhas, and talks about Buddhas appearing on our earth right now. That doesn't mean that somebody is going to appear in Seattle, or in Washington D.C. and go, "Dah, dah, dah, dah! [music]", because that wouldn't necessarily be the most skilful way! CIA would probably get on him real quick! But the idea is that a Buddha can appear in different forms according to a being's karma, and that Buddhas appear in skilful ways. They don't announce themselves. But they can act in very subtle ways to influence other people, so that those people begin to create good karma, they begin to get an idea of ethics, they begin to practice bodhicitta and so on. They say that a Buddha can appear as one of our friends, as a dog or as a cat, or in any other form, so long as they can help us. Once again, these aren't announced and they often come and go, so we don't even recognize them.

[Audience:] Are the Buddhas' manifestations temporary or do they last a lifetime?

I suppose it could be either. Take for example, His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Many people view him as a Buddha. He was born from his mother's womb and he left Tibet and so on. And so it appears as a whole lifetime. I think probably there're other circumstances where it's a more temporary manifestation. It's hard to say. But from the Mahayana viewpoint, then, there's very much the feeling of the Buddha being something very imminent, in other words, the Buddhas have omniscient mind, they're here, they know what's going on, they manifest when they have the opportunity. It's like they're really taking care of us and looking over us.

Buddha's Power and the Power of Our Karma

Now of course, a Buddha's power cannot over-ride our karma. They say that a Buddha's power and the power of our karma are about equal. So it's not that the Buddha can overpower our karma. It's not like when we're about to swear at somebody, the Buddha steps in and pushes some buttons, and then we don't swear. If we have that habit and that energy and it's going forward, what can the Buddha do? But the Buddhas have influence. They may influence us by making us think, "Oh, but do I really want to lash out at this person or not?" So it's a much more subtle way of doing things. And they also say that the Buddha's chief way of influencing us is by teaching, is by showing the path to enlightenment. Of course they may appear in other ways, but the chief way, the most beneficial way is by teaching us the Dharma. Like Amchog Rinpoche was saying last week, even if Shakyamuni walked in here, what is he going to do? He's just going to teach us the Dharma. Why? Because that's the best thing he can do for us. They can't crawl inside of our minds. No Buddha can crawl inside of our minds. But by influencing us through the teachings, we can do something with our own minds.

Possibility of Attaining Buddhahood

The Theravada Viewpoint

Also from the Mahayana viewpoint, there're many, many Buddhas. The Theravada too say that there are many Buddhas. But they say that in this one particular eon, there's going to be 1000 Buddhas. Because of the karma created by different beings, only a thousand people have the necessary karma to attain full Enlightenment in this eon. So from the Theravada viewpoint, not everybody can attain Enlightenment. Everybody else, except those thousand Buddhas, can become arhats. In other words, they can free their own minds from cyclic existence, but they don't reach the complete degree of purification. They don't have the same great love and great compassion of a fully enlightened Buddha.

The Mahayana Viewpoint

Now in the Mahayana tradition, it's different. They say everybody has the potential to become a Buddha. There're 1000 Buddhas in this eon who will appear and turn the Dharma wheel. In other words, they will appear and they will be recognized as Buddhas, and they will start the teachings in a world where previously, the teachings hadn't existed. You can see this with Shakyamuni Buddha, who's said to be the fourth of these 1000 in this particular eon: he appeared in India, where the Buddha's teachings hadn't existed there before, and he turned the Wheel of Dharma in the sense that he then started the whole doctrine of Buddhism on this particular earth. Of course, it had existed a long time before, but he started it on our earth. So they say, "Yes, there're 1000 Buddhas, but from the Mahayana viewpoint, there're a lot more Buddhas too..."

[Teachings lost due to change of tape]

...that even within this eon, there are many beings who will attain full enlightenment. It is said that

everyone has the potential to become a Buddha. There are many Buddhas around; many people since the time of Shakyamuni have attained enlightenment; these beings continue to manifest, and not only on our planet. We can't be so self-centered – there are ten million, zillion, trillion other places for Buddhas to manifest and help sentient beings!

Handling the Different Approaches

So that's just to give you a little bit of information that there are different ways to see the Buddha. You don't need to get into this thing of "Well, which way is correct? Was he enlightened when he was born, or wasn't he? I want to know the answer - there can only be one answer. And did his consciousness go into extinction, or didn't it? I want to know the answer!" I don't think we need to lock ourselves into that. I think what we can do instead is to take the approach that we can look at it either way, according to which way is going to be most inspiring for us.

Seeing the Buddha in the Theravada way

Sometimes we can look at Buddha in the Theravada way: that the Buddha was an ordinary being when he was born, but he managed to overcome all the obstacles. He overcame the pain in his knees, the pain in his back, all the mosquito bites... He was able to deal with difficulties. This gives us some confidence that since he was once an ordinary person like I am now, I can do it too. This way [of thinking] is very helpful; when we think about the Buddha this way, it really invigorates our practice.

Seeing the Buddha in the Mahayana way

At some other time in our practice, it might be helpful to think of the Buddha in a more global sense, and get this feeling of there being many beings who are Buddhas possessing omniscient minds, who are able to just appear and influence us quite directly. That can generate a feeling of confidence, hope and inspiration in the path because then we don't feel so far away from the Buddha. We don't feel deserted in the middle of samsara with no help, because we see that there is actually a lot of help available. It might come in subtle ways, and not in ways that are totally obvious to us, but it's there.

There is No Need to Insist on One Right Answer

So what I am getting at is that we don't need to get into this black and white mind of "which is it?" Instead, we can play with the different approaches; think about it in different ways and see how it affects our mind; and see what it does to our inner heart, so that we get more inspiration to practice.

In Malaysia, there are both Theravada and Mahayana teachers. The teachings of both traditions are basically the same, except for some differences. For example, in the Theravada tradition, it is said that as soon as a person leaves his body, he is reborn in the next moment; there is no intermediate state. The Mahayana tradition says, "No, there is an intermediate state of 49 days. A person is not a spirit then, but neither is he reborn in a gross body yet."

The Chinese are terribly concerned about death and spirits, and all these things. So I remember when the people in Malaysia heard these two teachings, they would sometimes get so upset: "What is it? Is there rebirth immediately after death, or not? There's got to be one answer! It can't be both!" I would try to explain that maybe the Buddha taught in different ways to different disciples because it is a skillful way of teaching. I would say, "I think those of you who have tried to teach know that it involves some skill, and you don't necessarily say everything all at once – you lead people." But when I said that, it made them even angrier: "Well OK, he taught two different ways to two different disciples, but which one's the right way?!" And I said, "Maybe the Buddha taught both ways to get us to think". "Oh no! You mean I have to think about something? I don't want to think. Just tell me which one is right!"

So really the teachings are not always that straightforward. It is not like going to college classes where you get a syllabus and a test and everything is supposed to make sense, even though it doesn't. The Buddha taught different things to different disciples because people have different inclinations. Also it gives us a chance to check, "Why would he teach this to one person, and that to another person? What's the real meaning behind these kinds of things? And how can expressing it this or that way affect somebody's mind? And which way? If I see it from different aspects, can both be true?" It opens up this whole field of creative thinking to us, instead of giving us black and white answers. I think a lot of times when we approach things like this, we have to approach it with that kind of attitude.

It may also be that after you practice and investigate, you'll find one way more correct than the other. But that does not mean that the first way is wrong, because the first way might be correct up to a certain extent, and it might be beneficial up to that extent as well. So we have to remember that the Buddha speaks in ways that are beneficial, and gives as much information as somebody can handle at a particular time.

Are the Stories We Hear to be Taken Literally?

Many things are there just to stretch our mind, to help us develop a softer approach to the teaching, like the many stories we hear in the teachings. When I started telling stories the last time, there might be people who listened to them and said, "I really like these." But there might be others who got quite upset listening to them. And so we have to ask ourselves, "Are the stories to be taken literally, or not?"

I remember Serkong Rinpoche told a student not to call them 'stories', but to call them 'accounts', because they are true; they happened. But then when we get into many of those stories about karma, they may be 'accounts', but it's not very skillful to say that to Westerners. When you talk about the lady who laid 32 eggs, and the elephant that had golden excrement, Westerners get totally upset!

I think the stories I told last time were a little bit milder. But some people might still have a lot of doubts about them. That's OK. But what you can do is to think, "Do I have to take these literally, or is there some other way of interpreting them?" In other words, what do these stories mean to me? There is the story about Little Path who had a very poor memory; but he remembered "Clean the dirt, clean the stain" as he swept the floor, and by doing that, he became an arhat. If you think about it, what really are they trying to get across with this story? Is this something literal, that that's all there is to it? Or is it trying to express something else? Like, perhaps, showing how ignorance can be gradually cleansed away? Or how things like sweeping the floor can be transformed into the path to enlightenment if we think in a certain way? There are many ways to look at these stories. I don't think we need to always get so tied up about it, like "Did this really happen? I want a historical account. What year was Little Path born in? Why did his parents name him 'Little Path'? Where's the birth certificate?" We're just chasing ourselves in circles if we do this.

<p>Measuring the Extent to which We Have Taken Refuge or How to Take Refuge: – Taking Refuge from Knowing Their Qualities and Skills: - The Good Qualities of a Buddha</p>

I want to talk a little bit tonight about the qualities of a Buddha. And again try and listen to this based on the faith that you already have. In other words, take whatever confidence you have in the Buddha's teachings, and what you know about the Buddha so far, and see this as extra information about the Buddha. Don't see it as "Here's all this stuff that's coming from the top that you have to believe is the way it is." Instead, take it from the point of view of where you are, what feels comfortable, and then use this as additional information that can help you expand your mind.

This section on the qualities of the Buddha is like getting information on someone whom you have met, and is impressed by, but whom you don't know very well. You are thinking of making a relationship with him, a business or romantic relationship, or whatever. You are impressed, but you want some more information about him. So you do some research and you call other people. And other people say "Oh yes, he's great, he's really good, he's honest, he's this and that ..." Hearing good reports from other people who know this person's qualities better enables us to have more confidence in him. In the same way, we know a little bit about the Buddha right now, but the great masters added all these other teachings explaining his qualities, so as to give us a little bit more information than we might normally have just from our own direct encounter with the teachings. So it's kind of like you might gossip about somebody to get more information. This is similar to that, OK?

When we talk about the Buddha's qualities, we are really talking about the qualities of Buddha's body, speech and mind. And when I say "Buddha", it might often sound like I am referring to Shakyamuni Buddha, and I might use the pronoun "his" because I am thinking of Shakyamuni Buddha, but actually what is being said applies to any Buddha. And Buddhas are quite beyond being male or female. Especially if you look at it from the Mahayana perspective where a Buddha's body is just a manifestation to guide others, it becomes very clear that the Buddhas are not male or female, but they manifest different bodies in order to show skillful means to sentient beings. The Buddha's mind is not male or female; and

the Buddha does not have any permanent concrete body. Try and pull yourself out of any kind of sexist way of looking at all of this.

Qualities and Skills of a Buddha's Body

Manifests infinite forms

One of the qualities of a Buddha's body is that he can manifest simultaneously an infinite number of forms. "What? Manifest simultaneously? How do you do it?" Well, follow the path and you'll find out. Then you'll be able to do it yourself. There's a cookbook recipe. If you want to know how to do it, follow the cookbook. Train yourself in the six perfections or far-reaching attitudes, then you can do it too. It is clearly stated how to do it.

When a mindstream is completely purified, when one gets rid of all of one's "garbage" totally, there is so much energy at one's disposal to use for the benefit of others. Right now, our energy gets totally bound up in "Who dented my car?" And "Why didn't this guy show up on time for the meeting?" Our energies just get stuck in these little bitty things. When you are completely enlightened, your energy doesn't get stuck. There is so much energy to use for the benefit of sentient beings. With this mental energy (as we say, "Mind over body"), your mind has the ability to effect different physical manifestations. It can affect the environment because it is no longer tied up in these little trivial things.

You can start to see this to some extent in your own life. For example, the energy that you had tied up with your vow to not speak to somebody for the rest of your life. If you start to release that, you're going to have a lot more energy to do other things. So similarly, a fully enlightened being has the kind of energy to make different manifestations simultaneously and also effortlessly. We have to sit and think about everything and generate a good motivation. Why? Because our energies are all tied up in our self-centeredness. When you're a Buddha, your energy isn't tied up in thinking "Poor me, poor me, how can I protect myself from this situation?"

So I think we can get some sense of how this can happen just by looking on a smaller scale at how we can do it in our own life, by releasing tied-up stuff.

Influences others positively

The qualities of the Buddha's body also show their inner mental state. One of the qualities of a Buddha's body is that it gives people energy. You look at a statue of the Buddha, and the Buddha's just sitting there so peacefully. Even the statue, even a piece of bronze made in the form of a Buddha, can make you very peaceful all of a sudden. Or sometimes you look at the paintings of the different Buddhas, and I don't know about you, but with me, I look at the long, narrow eyes and it's like "Wow! Those eyes seem to be saying something!" And that's just a picture. So somehow the physical forms of the Buddha reflect their inner mental states which can directly benefit others in a very positive way, just like our inner mental states now are shown on a physical level and that affects other people around us. If we're very angry inside, our face gets crunched up and red, and when other people see our face, it definitely affects them. It's the same thing with the way a Buddha's body can affect others except that that's in the other direction.

Buddha's body, speech and mind are one entity

All of the Buddha's body, speech and mind are one entity and they are cross-functional. The body is not something made of atoms but a reflection of the mental state. It may appear as a body made of atoms, but it's not really that. For that reason, they say that even the pores of the Buddha's body are omniscient. Why? Because they aren't made of atoms. Our pores don't have consciousness; they are made of atoms. But the Buddha's pores are not. That that can happen has to do with getting down to the subtlest energy levels of body and mind when they become inseparable.

Possesses 32 signs and 80 marks

They also talk about the different physical signs that you might see on the form of the Buddha, called the 'Supreme Emanation Body', for example, that of Shakyamuni Buddha. You'll also see these signs on some of the Buddhist deities if you look at the pictures. They are called the 32 signs and 80 marks.

I won't go through all 112 of them because you guys like lists, but not that much. I'll pull out a few of the more common ones.

Dharma wheel on his sole and palm

For example, on the sole of each foot and on the palm of each hand is the impression of a thousand-spoked Dharma wheel. You've probably seen this in pictures. They say that the Buddha's feet don't touch the ground, and so when he walks, he doesn't harm sentient beings on it but he does leave the imprint of a wheel. Now one way of thinking about it: "Wouldn't it be nice to walk on the ground and not squash sentient beings?" It'd be very nice. So when we get to the level of mind where we can do that, we can save many lives. And they say that each of the 32 signs has a specific cause. The cause of this particular one was greeting and escorting our spiritual teacher and also selflessly offering service to others.

Hair-curl between his eyebrows

There's another one that you'll see very often, which is the hair-curl in the center of his forehead. It is wound very tightly but when it is pulled, you can't measure how long it is. Don't ask me if this is literal or not. But it is a special sign (as with all the other physical signs) that comes through a great accumulation of positive potential. This particular one comes from serving all those who are more knowledgeable and superior to us with respect, in other words, serving our parents, teachers, elders and so forth, with respect. Having respect for them is one's crown jewel. Having an attitude like this towards them, helping them attain upper rebirths through e.g. showing them karma - this kind of action is one of the contributing causes to getting that kind of physical sign.

His food always tastes delicious

You'll like this one. Another of the physical signs of the Buddha is that whatever he eats tastes delicious. The cause for this is nursing the sick, the old and the infirm, and especially caring for those whom others find repulsive. It's interesting, isn't it? You know, when you hear of the causes, you can see how they relate to the physical sign and result. It's very interesting – the karmic causes of the 32 signs and how they are displayed in the body.

Crown protrusion

The other one that we see so often is the crown protrusion on top of the Buddha's head. It is said that it is made of radiant flesh; and at a distance, it seems to be four fingers' width high but upon close scrutiny, its height cannot be measured. The karmic cause of this is visualizing our spiritual mentor on the crown of our head, and also visiting temples and monasteries and practicing at those places.

Round, full cheeks and teeth of equal length

The Buddha's cheeks are round and full like those of a lion. Really round, full cheeks. The cause is completely abandoning idle gossip. Interesting, isn't it? There's another one about the teeth. All the Buddha's teeth are of equal length, not with different ones jutting out. And the reason for this is abandoning the five wrong livelihoods – in other words, earning one's livelihood honestly and not getting involved in flattery and bribery and hinting, and things like that. Being even-minded towards others results in one's teeth having even length.

Clear and distinct eyes

The black and white portions of a Buddha's eyes are clear and distinct. Here it might be blue and white, or brown and white. They say Buddha has black eyes. I suppose Buddhas can have blue eyes or green eyes, don't worry.. But they are clear and distinct; in other words, there's no redness or yellow discoloration in the eyes. And the cause of this is looking at others with compassionate eyes, and working for their welfare and generating equal concern for others, regardless of whether they have great suffering or minor suffering.

Qualities and Skills of a Buddha's Speech

The Buddha's speech has 60 qualities. I won't give all of them, but I really like reading up on them because I find it very inspiring. Just listening to the qualities is like a teaching to me on how I should try and train my speech.

Teaches everyone according to his capacity

For example with the Buddha's speech, everybody hears it according to his own capability. So a Buddha might say one sentence but it will become a different teaching for everyone. For example, the Buddha may say, "All things are impermanent," and some people might think, "Oh OK, then I can't get attached to my telephone because it's impermanent – it's going to break". Somebody else might think, "I'm going to die". Somebody else might think about subtle impermanence and the nature of change on a very subtle level. Some people might hear that same statement and realize emptiness. So the Buddha's speech has

this quality of being very flexible in its meaning, so that one thing said can communicate with many different beings according to how they hear it, according to their own level of mind. I think that's incredible.

Goes straight to our heart and mind

Another quality is that the Buddha's speech goes straight to the heart; it goes straight to the mind. It indicates how we can apprehend, know the two truths, how we can know how things exist. It is very forceful. Now that does not mean that every time each sentient being hears a teaching, it is going to go straight into her mind. Due to our own karma, we all have our veils and mazes that the Buddha's speech has to fight through, to get into our hearts. But what this is saying is that from the side of the Buddha's speech, it has the potential to go straight into the heart and make some very definite change in people's attitudes.

Sometimes when you listen to teachings, you really feel that. I remember a few years ago, His Holiness was teaching the Lamrim Chenmo. It was a most extraordinary teaching. I felt like I was in a pure land. The teachings just really went in. So it has something to do with our mind, with the circumstance; but from the side of the Buddha, his speech has that power to do that. We find when we listen to teachings that sometimes, one sentence cuts through so much junk. So this is the power of the Buddha's teachings, the power of the Buddha's speech.

Unstained

Buddha's speech is also unstained in the sense that it is spoken on the basis of having abandoned all of the afflictions [Note: 'afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'] and their imprints. Now imagine being able to speak from a mind that has no more anger, ignorance and attachment. When you hear that the Buddha's speech is unstained, this is the kind of thing to think about. What must that be like? And we can see that this is a quality that is possible to attain.

Sparkling clear

The Buddha's speech is sparkling clear. In other words he never uses words and expressions that aren't known to people. The Buddha never uses high faluting language to impress everybody with the thought, "Oh the Buddha must know what he's talking about because I can't understand it." It is not like those times when you go to these conventions and the speakers get up and speak but you can't understand anything! And they're supposed to be famous!

So the Buddha talks at a very ordinary level, using expressions and things that can get across to people. I think for us this is a reminder to speak in ways that other people can understand. If you are talking to a child, explain what you are explaining in a way that that child can understand. If you are talking to people from another culture, explain it in a way that the people from that culture can understand. So what it means is developing a sensitivity to whoever is hearing what we are saying, and remembering that communication isn't just getting it out of our mouth. Communication is the other person getting our meaning, so we have to be attentive how we say something, to help them get our meaning.

Ability to tame, pacify, subdue

The Buddha's voice has the ability to tame, pacify and subdue because it teaches us the antidotes to afflictions*, hence allowing us to tame them. Now imagine having the kind of voice and speech that can subdue other people's minds so that what you say, instead of inciting their anger, pacifies it; so that what you say, instead of inciting their jealousy, pacifies it. This again is something we can think about and apply in our life, and try and practice as well as we can because all these qualities are gotten by repetition, by training.

Gives happiness and bliss

The Buddha's speech gives rise to happiness and bliss. Why? Because he teaches the Four Noble Truths and shows the path to happiness and bliss. So again, the meaning the Buddha expresses by using his speech in that way is able to lead others to happiness and bliss. You look at some people: whatever they say makes everybody else uptight and a nervous wreck. And so you can see it's how they say it and what they say that matter. Again this is indicating to us to be attentive to what we say and how we say it so that we can try and lead others to states of happiness and bliss through what we say.

Never disappoints

Another quality is that the Buddha's speech never leaves one disappointed. When others hear it, contemplate and meditate on what was said, they achieve the beneficial results that are described. It does

not mean that the Buddha's speech never leaves us disappointed because every time I hear a teaching, I would get it and be happy. It doesn't mean that. It refers to the long-term effect of hearing the teachings and the sutras, of contemplating and meditating on them. We will never be disappointed because we can put it into practice and it becomes meaningful for us.

Clear

The Buddha's speech is always clear in all details. He doesn't speak in riddles. He doesn't hide stuff. He doesn't mix everything up and say there are three points but then only give two or four, or something like that. In other words it is clear and easy to follow.

Logical

His speech is logical. In other words it cannot be undermined by our direct perception. It doesn't contradict itself in its statement. Again, we can see how some people contradict themselves, how their speech is completely illogical, and how what they say happened is not what you experienced. A Buddha's speech is not like that. And again this indicates to us how to develop our qualities of speech.

Without redundancy

The Buddha's speech is free from needless redundancy: it does not go over something again and again, and get us bored. He just says what he has to say and then goes on.

Bellowing of an elephant

His speech is like the bellowing of a god's elephant. In other words, a Buddha does not hesitate to speak out. A Buddha doesn't sit there [wondering], "Oh, what are people going to think about me if I say this? And I don't know if I should do this ...". You know how we get tied up? A Buddha knows what it is, knows how to express it, and is not hesitant. So I guess this is the ultimate in assertiveness training!

Melodious

A Buddha's speech is like the melodious call of the ancient song sparrow. It continues from topic to topic without a break. And after it's ended, it leaves us wanting to hear it again. Wouldn't it be nice to have that kind of speech?

Without self-conceit

A Buddha's speech is also without self-conceit. A Buddha never gets proud if the other person comes up and say, "Oh, it's so great what you said". There is no conceit in his speech. And it's also without despair or despondency, so even if somebody else complains after a Buddha speaks, the Buddha does not get filled with self-doubt or regret and spiral downwards into depression.

Complete

A Buddha's speech never leaves anything incomplete because it constantly works for the benefit of others. So it's not on again, off again. It's not like "I'll talk nicely to you now because you're nice to me. And later on when you're nasty to me, I'm not going to talk nicely to you!" It completely works for others.

Without feelings of inadequacy

Buddha speaks without feelings of inadequacy, and never lacks self-confidence in what is said or to whom it's said.

Exhilarating

A Buddha's speech is exhilarating. In other words, the more a Buddha explains, the more we feel free of mental and physical fatigue and discomfort. It invigorates us.

Continuous

It is continuous, so it is not like the Buddha sits and fumbles for words and can't get the right word out. He speaks in a very continuous manner, and also teaches continuously, not, "Well I'll teach now because I feel like it, and I'm not going to teach later because I'm exhausted". There's just this speech that is able to teach continuously whenever the opportunity is available. That doesn't mean sitting down and saying, "There're Four Truths and Two Truths and Three Supreme Jewels and ...". It just means that everything can become a teaching; everything can become a guidance to others.

No nervousness

The Buddha never speaks with nervousness. He never makes up words and gets his grammar goofed up.

And the speech is not in a rush or a jumble. There's a nice even pace to it. Not nervous, not tense, and it can flow.

These qualities of the Buddha's body and the Buddha's speech, when we hear about them, can be very effective for our mind because it gives us some direction about how to train our body and speech, what kinds of things to try and develop. It can also give us some confidence that there are people who actually have developed these qualities. This isn't some kind of mythical thing. By reflecting on our own ability and seeing how it is possible to increase it, we can also infer that there are people who have done that and there are people who have completed it. And that therefore those people are reliable.

Questions and Answers

[Audience:] Wanting to attain Buddha's good qualities – is it a form of attachment?

There are different kinds of desire or aspiration or wanting. If it involves exaggerating something's good qualities, and having built up this false image, you want it and you're clinging on to it, that is attachment. But when you can see good qualities and you aren't exaggerating, and you can see that you can attain those and you want to attain them, that kind of desire to gain those qualities is quite reasonable. Now if you get to the mental state where you feel, "I've got to become a Buddha. I've got to become a Buddha because I want to have those qualities because I want to be best. So then everybody will offer me apples and oranges..." – then something's wrong there. But not all aspirations and desires are defiled ones.

Another example: if people start to say, "Well, the Buddhas have all these great qualities, therefore if I pray to the Buddha, he can completely change my life upside down, and give me a Mercedes Benz and everything else I want." That would be definitely an exaggerated view of the Buddha. And you can see in some Buddhist countries, people do have incorrect notions of what a Buddha is. Sometimes people pray to Buddha in the same way as other people pray to God.

[Audience:] Are the qualities of the Buddha separate from the qualities of the listener?

Things are interdependent. Everyone, even among us now, hears everything in a different way. Each of us definitely heard the teachings through our own filters. I think your point about the two parallel tracks of Theravada and Mahayana is really good because different people heard the same teaching by the Buddha, but logically it meant different things to them because of the way they think. And it completely made sense in their own way of thinking.

Are the qualities of the Buddha separate from the listeners? They're interdependent. Things don't happen as isolated events in the universe. Everything that's happening is happening in relationship to something else. So the Buddha's speech is clear because there's a listener who hears it clearly. That doesn't mean every person who hears it can hear it clearly. And is the Buddha's speech clear regardless of the listener? Now this is an interesting one. When radio waves are being emitted, there are radio waves but it definitely depends on somebody having turned the radio on for there to be sound. Now, just because the radio is not turned on, you can't say there're no radio waves or that there is no sound. There isn't any sound but there is the potential for sound.

Why do they even talk about the Buddha's body, speech and mind? It isn't because Buddha's body, speech and mind are three big categories, each with a big line around them. The reason why the qualities of the Buddhas are discussed in terms of body, speech and mind is because we have a body, speech and mind so we can relate to how it's getting expressed.

[Audience:] If the Buddha always manifests in ways that will benefit others, how come not everyone benefits?

When you look at Shakyamuni Buddha and his cousin Devadatta, you could ask how was Shakyamuni manifesting to benefit sentient beings, because his cousin went to the hell realms for many millions of eons for trying to kill Shakyamuni. Wasn't that very uncompassionate? He should not have manifested because he sent Devadatta to hell by that? That's quite logical in a way.

Another way of looking at it is, I don't think we can expect to get only good results whenever something

happens, because there is this whole thing of interdependence. The Buddha from his side is acting very purely, but while some people will benefit from it, others, like Devadatta, will create negative karma. So I guess the idea is that in all these manifestations, the Buddhas are able to do more benefit than harm. So maybe they can't directly help the person who has an inferiority complex so much, but because that person cooks them dinner one night, they were able to make some kind of karmic connection. Just within the Buddha's life, he had so many different relationships with so many different people, and you can really see how he was able to benefit people according to their capability to be benefited. And it was in very, very different ways. Some people he benefited by giving to them. Some people he benefited by letting them give to him.

The Buddha, from his side, does not set us up. We might be in a whole group of 100 people and the Buddha might be benefiting the 99 others, and it is only us who are not benefited. Buddha cannot control what we think. And it might be that initially things look good, but then at the end our mind goes bananas. But if that happens, it isn't that the Buddha sets us up.

Negative karma created in relation to the Buddha

[In response to audience:] There are two things here. First of all, in the prayer, "being displeased with the presence of the Buddha" means not liking there to be Buddhas on this earth, not liking there to be Buddha's teaching.

In general, they do say that if we are with a Buddha or a bodhisattva and we create negative karma by getting upset or making bad speech or whatever, the karma is heavier than doing the same thing to somebody else. Why? Because of who the other person is, because of their qualities. And you can see it is not that the Buddha is setting us up to create negativity. Rather, it is the obscurity we have in our mind that is getting us so ticked off. That obscurity is what's putting in the negative imprint.

So it is not like the Buddha's setting you up and because you are nasty to a Buddha, you create bad karma. But you can just see in your own mind that we obscure ourselves. We can see this sometimes even with ordinary people. For example, we grow up thinking, "Oh, my parents didn't do this; they did that; and they did that ...". And then you do this meditation on recognizing the kindness of our parents and it's like, "Wow! They benefited me so much. How come I couldn't see it before?" And then we begin to realize that our own blindness is what puts the imprints on the mind, not our parents.

It is said that it is better to meet a Buddha and create negative karma than not meet a Buddha at all. At least you are making karmic contact; there is some connection.

[Audience:] Will we recognize Buddha if he appears to us?

You don't expect the Buddha to kind of ride in on his elephant radiating golden light! You know the story of Asanga who was meditating so long to get a vision of Maitreya? Remember that? And Maitreya appeared as a dog? And it was only when Asanga purified his mind that he could recognize that it was really Maitreya the whole time? He put Maitreya on his shoulders and he went through the village saying, "I've seen Maitreya! I've seen Maitreya!" And everybody else just saw this dog and thought he was loony!

Maintaining open-mindedness along the path

[In response to audience:] You're asking what is the role of faith - what are you supposed to do with the things you hear, which don't make complete sense to you? You may be doing it even though it does not make complete sense to you. Why? Because there is something inside of you that feels that there is something here that you don't completely get, and so you are going to go along and do it with the hope that eventually you'll get it. It involves having that kind of open mind: "This all might not make complete sense to me. But recognizing my own limitations, I can't completely throw something out just because I can't put it in perfect order. I sense that there's something going on here although I can't express it in words and I can't say it logically. But if I keep going with this, maybe my mind will get clear to the point where I can perceive clearer and this can go more directly into my heart."

The Buddha did say, "Don't believe anything unless you have tried it and proven it by your own experience". But the Buddha did not say, "Just because you don't understand anything, throw it out of the window". What we are very bad with in the West, is gray areas. We should give ourselves some kind of

space to try it out. We feel something's going on here, so see what is going on, see where it takes us and learn more, and experience more as we go along. I know I certainly do that. Just personally speaking, sometimes my mind protests and then at other times, it's like, "Hold on. I don't understand but there's something going on here. There is definitely something going on here". It is very interesting.

At the Kalachakra teachings in October, they did the long life puja for His Holiness on the last day. There was one point where His Holiness put on his hat and the leaders of the different schools all had their hats on. And then they had all this brocade and dancing and this whole thing. And a part of my mind was going, "All this paraphernalia, and hats and brocade, what's all this junk?" And another part of my mind went, "Irrefutably there is something going on here that I don't understand, but I'm very glad I'm here. There is something very special going on that I just don't get". And those two things were going on simultaneously in my mind. So I think sometimes we have to listen to that other part. In this case, there might be some cultural thing and we might not need all these hats in the West, but there might also be a lot of other truth to that, that there is something special happening.

Seeing the Buddha with the understanding of emptiness

[In response to audience:] The question is that seeing Buddha as a personality, as a figure gives you a lot of difficulty. You like the idea of seeing the Buddha as something abstract but so much of the language seems to describe the Buddha as a personality.

I have come across the exact same thing. And I've come to my temporary conclusion that they use this kind of language because that is what most people are habituated in thinking. That is the kind of language that most people cue into. But other people may have to look at the same language and make it abstract. So instead of saying, "Here's the Buddha who has these qualities," we say, "There are all these qualities and on top of these, we label 'Buddha'. And beyond that, there's no Buddha there, folks." When we listen with ordinary ears, it sounds like there is a personality there that's the Buddha. But when we really understand emptiness, there's nobody there.

Buddha's nature

[In response to audience:] You can talk about Buddha's nature in so many different ways. But it's really emphasizing to us to not see the Buddha as God out there on his white cloud, that there is an unbridgeable gap between us. That does not mean there is no external Buddha. That would be an extreme. But to say there is an external Buddha, and that's all there is and he's sitting on a cloud, white beard and all ... that's also extreme. Seeing the Buddha's nature is very helpful to get us to see that. That is why last time I talked about causal refuge and resultant refuge. The resultant refuge is our own Buddha nature in its fully manifest form. So when we visualize the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha in front of us, we think of it as "That's my Buddha nature projected out there in its fully manifest form".

So we're going to have to close now. I really encourage you to talk about all this with each other. Because I think there is a lot to be gained from discussing these things, and thinking about them yourself. In the Tibetan tradition, they say, you get about 25% from your teacher and 75% from talking with your friends in terms of your understanding. That is why they do all this debate. I think it is really useful. We don't always have 25% teaching and 75% discussion, but the discussion doesn't have to be limited to this room. There can be other times, other places.

This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>

*'Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'.