

Taking Refuge – Part 4 of 10: Qualities of a Buddha’s Mind
(lightly edited transcript)
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We have been talking about taking refuge and trying to understand why we take refuge. We have also been talking about what the objects of refuge are and their qualities. There is a real wealth of information in this section and the more we learn, the more we will understand the path we are following. When we talk about the qualities of the Dharma we will learn more about what exactly the Dharma does. So when we say, “I practice Dharma,” we will know what we are trying to do. When we talk about the qualities of the Sangha, we will have an idea of the stages and paths that we slowly progress through as we practice. When we talk about the qualities of the Buddha, we will get an idea of where we are going and of our own potential.

In talking about the qualities of the Buddha, we are talking about what we can become. This gives us an idea of our own potential, which we usually do not even know exists. That is why when we hear about the qualities, we go, “How do I believe that?” In learning the qualities of the Buddha, we are learning something about the person who is guiding us, the founder of our teachings, what he taught twenty-five hundred years ago and what all the other Buddhas who continue to appear will continue to teach, what their qualities are and why they are reliable.

Qualities of a Buddha’s Mind

Last time we talked about the qualities of the Buddha’s body and the qualities of the Buddha’s speech. Tonight we are going to go into more detail about the qualities of the Buddha’s mind.

The Two Basic Qualities of a Buddha’s Mind: Wisdom and Compassion

If we talk about the qualities of the Buddha’s mind in an abbreviated way, we come up with two basic qualities: Buddha’s wisdom and Buddha’s compassion. You will hear about these two things, wisdom and compassion, over and over again because these are the two principal things we want to develop.

The Method and Wisdom Aspects of the Path

You will also hear about the method aspect of the path and the wisdom aspect of the path. These two are in correlation. The method aspect of the path is talking about the determination to be free, compassion, the altruistic intention of bodhicitta and the different actions such as generosity, ethics and patience that are done with this altruistic intention. By doing the method aspect of the path based on compassion, we have what is called the collection of merit, or the collection of positive potential. The chief result that the collection of positive potential brings about is a Buddha's body.

The other aspect of the path, the wisdom aspect, is talking about the meditation on emptiness and the lack of inherent existence. By meditating on that, we have the accumulation of wisdom and the chief result that brings about is a Buddha's mind.

These two inter-cause each other, but here we are just talking about the principal results that they bring.

Tantric Symbolism

In tantric symbolism when you see a male and female in union, the male is symbolizing the method aspect of the path and the female is symbolizing the wisdom aspect of the path. The two of them in union is showing that we need to unify both the method and wisdom, the compassion and the wisdom, within our own consciousness to become a fully enlightened Buddha. They say that for a bird to fly, it needs two wings. So to go to enlightenment, we need both sides: the wisdom and the compassion. We get lopsided if we go to just one or the other.

The Buddha's Wisdom: the Ability to See the Two Truths Simultaneously

When we talk about the qualities of the Buddha's wisdom, we are referring to the ability to see the two truths – the ultimate truth and the relative or conventional truth – simultaneously. Conventional truth refers to all the things as they appear to us, all the things that function within our daily life. All the functioning things, all the things that appear to us, your watch, whoever you live with, your boss and everybody else are all conventional truths.

Ultimate truth is the way things really exist beyond the appearances. Conventional truths – tables and chairs and popcorn – all appear to us as truly existent, but they really are not that way. On the appearance or conventional level, all these things appear as truly existent, solid and concrete to us ordinary beings. However, on the ultimate level, the ultimate truths of those objects is that they lack any inherent, essential nature that exists independent of other phenomena.

The Perception of an Arya Being

When you get to high levels on the path and do deep meditation on the wisdom that perceives the emptiness of inherent existence, at the time of that deep meditation none of these phenomena appear to your consciousness. All a high practitioner perceives is the emptiness of inherent existence. Then when they come out of meditation, all the appearances of phenomena still appear inherently existent to them because their mind still has some stains on it. But because they have realized emptiness, they know that things may look solid, but really are not solidly independent.

It is like when we watch a movie, it looks like there is a real person on the screen. But when we stop to think about it, we know it is not a real person; it is just a movie. In the same way, a highly realized being, an arya, has discordance between their meditation time and their time after meditation. In meditation they see emptiness directly with no appearance of chairs, rugs and things like this. But then when they come out of meditation and are walking down the street, they cannot perceive the emptiness of things and all these things again appear truly existent. They cannot directly perceive the emptiness at that time, but they know these things are empty so they can say, "Oh! This is like an illusion. It looks truly existent, but it really is not." So they flip-flop between meditation and post-meditation perception.

The Perception of a Buddha

Now the special quality of a Buddha is that a Buddha can see both levels of truth simultaneously. This is something a Buddha can do that all the other arya beings, highly realized beings, cannot do. The latter go back and forth between the two perceptions. A Buddha can perceive both at the same time. In addition, when the Buddha perceives conventional phenomena, these things do not appear to a Buddha as truly existent or inherently existent anymore. They appear as completely dependent arising. This is

because the Buddha has totally removed that last veil, that last stain in the mind which causes the discordant appearance.

So when we talk about the Buddha's wisdom, we are talking about this incredible ability to perceive how things really exist on a conventional level, dependent on causes and conditions, parts and consciousness, terms and labels. At the same time, Buddhas perceive the deeper level at which all phenomena exist, that all phenomena do not have any inherent existence whatsoever. This is a very special achievement.

The Significance of Lama Tsong Khapa's Hand Mudras

Sometimes you will see pictures of Lama Tsong Khapa that show him sitting with one hand in the teaching position and the other hand in his lap in the meditative position. The hand in the meditation position is showing that he is in deep meditation on emptiness and at the same time, he can teach. In other words, he is able to deal on a conventional level and at the same time he perceives emptiness. That is symbolically showing, through the hand gestures, the qualities of a fully enlightened one.

The Buddha's Compassion

When we talk about a Buddha's compassion, we are talking about the loving-kindness that a Buddha has for all living beings. We have already discussed how a Buddha's compassion is impartial and goes equally towards everybody no matter how that person feels towards the Buddha, whether they like the Buddhas or not, whether they make offerings or not, or whether they have faith or not. They also say that a Buddha's compassion for us is much stronger than our own compassion for ourselves and that a Buddha cares more about us than we care for ourselves.

That does not seem possible. How can anybody care about me more than I care about myself? Even though we care a lot about ourselves, to the point of being very self-cherishing, in another way we do not really care about ourselves. For instance, we will eat all kinds of junk food that is not good for us even though we know it is not good for us. When we are doing this, we really do not have much compassion for ourselves because we are eating in a way that is harmful to ourselves.

If we look at our lives, even though we care about ourselves, we do certain things that wind up being harmful to ourselves. We get into accidents. We also beat up on ourselves emotionally; nobody needs to do that for us. But a Buddha with loving-kindness and compassion will never deliberately harm us. Their compassion is so great that they will never harbor any ill intention or do any action that harms others.

Questions and Doubts

Now the question comes up: if the Buddha does not want to harm me and the Buddha is always benefiting me, how come I am so miserable? How is it that when I am trying to practice the Dharma, sometimes things get even worse? If the Buddha taught the Dharma to benefit and I am practicing the Dharma but my mind is completely bananas and my life is falling apart, then what good is the Dharma? What do you mean the Buddha is being compassionate towards me? He is teaching me all these things that are making me stressed out!

We have to understand that from the Buddha's side, there is no intention to harm us; there is only the intention to benefit. From our side, sometimes we do not understand how to practice properly so we go overboard in one direction or another, or we go under board. We get off-balance, but it is not because the Buddha lacks compassion. It is more because we are not familiar with how to practice so we get off-balance sometimes. Also, sometimes when you are practicing, things get worse before they get better. It is like Ayurvedic medicine, you take it and you get sicker, but it eventually cures you. Whereas with Western medicine, you take it and it cures you right away, but afterwards you get the side effects.

Sometimes when we are practicing, it really does seem like things are getting worse. We practice and it seems like we are more selfish than before, or we are less concentrated than before. We might feel just completely nervous (what we call "lung") and stressed out. We are doing all this Dharma and it seems we cannot hold our life together. So, sometimes things do get worse before they get better. We are taking big doses of strong Dharma medicine and sometimes we do not know how to put it into context with our lives and we get off-balance.

But getting off-balance is OK because everything we learn about ourselves is more information. We have our laboratory with us and we are doing research on the nature of mind, so we learn more about

ourselves, about the mind. We learn more about how other people are too, because other people are exactly like us. So the more we can understand our own difficulties, problems and imbalances, when other people come to us for aid we will better understand what they are talking about. So when you have difficulties in your practice, do not blame the Buddha, do not blame yourself. Just recognize that these things happen and we can slowly get ourselves more balanced and keep going. Just recognize that we can learn a lot from having gone through these things.

The Ten Powers of a Buddha

So that is just a brief look at the qualities of the Buddha's wisdom and compassion and talking about the Buddha's mind in a brief way. When they talk about these things in the expanded way, they talk about the four fearlessnesses, ten powers, eighteen unshared qualities, twenty-one categories of uncontaminated wisdom and all these things. We will not go through all these lists right now, but I picked one of the sets, which is called the ten powers, to go through because this might give you some idea of a Buddha's qualities.

How the Theravada school describes the Buddha's qualities and how the Mahayana does, is different. We can go back and forth between the two according to what is useful to us at that time. But when we are talking about the ten powers, we are talking through the Mahayana vision, which is a much more exalted and vast vision of what a Buddha is capable of doing.

We have to remember that when we are talking about the qualities of the Buddha, we cannot directly perceive them. We can look at a flower with our eyes. That is something perceivable by our mind. But the Buddha's qualities are not things that we can see with our eyes and our mind is too obscured right now to directly see these qualities. We are getting some kind of intellectual idea about what the Buddha's qualities could be and then as we practice the path and purify our own mind, we will start to realize that we can attain these same qualities. We will see the little sprouts growing in our mind and infer by these little sprouts growing in our mind, that there is a fully grown tree in somebody else's mind, even though we cannot directly see that full-grown tree.

So that is why I say, I have not seen these powers directly, but I believe them because somebody else told me so. I cannot make you believe them and I do not even understand them, so what am I doing here [laughter]? I think it can be helpful, nevertheless, to think about these in order to help you get some kind of idea of them.

1. The Buddha knows the appropriate and inappropriate relations between various actions and their results.

In other words, he knows that if there is happiness, what was the appropriate cause for happiness. We say in Buddhism, virtuous or positive actions are defined in terms of the result they bring. So the Buddha is able to see that if there is wealth it came from generosity, which is an appropriate cause for wealth. If there is a precious human life, that came from keeping good ethics, which is the appropriate cause. He can also see inappropriate causes. In other words, if somebody has an upper rebirth, it is not because they hoarded away all their possessions and shouted at their neighbors, that is an inappropriate cause for that result.

The Buddha knows what the constructive actions are and the destructive actions, because a Buddha can know what results come from all those different kinds of actions. That is very useful information and the more we can make this grow in our own minds, the less confusion we will have. We would be able to discriminate between constructive actions that are appropriate causes for happiness and destructive actions that are inappropriate causes for happiness. The Buddha knows these already because of having purified all the ignorance, anger, attachment, and stains on the mind. This kind of information is readily available to the Buddha because of being able to see ultimate and conventional truths at the same time. It is like somebody who has computer screens on all the time, all the information is there.

2. The Buddha knows the distinctive ripenings, or the distinctive results, of all individual karmas.

The first power was talking about general principles that the Buddha knows. What general things cause happiness and what general things cause suffering. The second power is that he knows specific actions.

For example, we are all sitting in this room tonight. We can in a general way say this is because we had good ethical conduct in previous lives. We were generous in previous lives so we have enough material wherewithal to be here and we are not starving. It is because we made some kind of prayers in our

previous lives to meet the Dharma that we are here. So we can say in a general way that because we have heard what the Buddha said about appropriate and inappropriate causes, we can surmise the kind of things we must have done in our previous lives to be here.

But only a Buddha could look at any particular individual in this room and say, "Ah! Twelve eons ago you were born in such and such a country. You were named such and such. You did such-and-such and that was the specific karma that led you to have this aspect of what you are experiencing in this room tonight. So all the little details, the exact specific ripenings of karma, only a Buddha has the clairvoyance to see all of those without any mistakes.

The Buddha can see all the different destructive karmas, constructive ones and neutral, or unspecified, ones. He can see the ones that are contaminated by ignorance and the ones that the aryas create that are uncontaminated by ignorance. So all these kinds of things the Buddha can know. Again, this is very useful information. If we could know those kinds of things, it would be much easier to help others.

3. The Buddha knows the various aspirations or inclinations of all sentient beings.

A Buddha would know what their aspirations are from this life. Buddha would be able to tell what they aspire for in terms of future lives, what they aspire for in terms of the path, whether they want to follow a hearer path, or a solitary realizer path (both of which lead one to become an arhat), or whether they want to follow a bodhisattva path which will lead them to become a fully enlightened Buddha. So the Buddha knows the different aspirations or inclinations of different people, what they are inclined to do and what they aspire to do. Again, if you know these things it is so much easier to help other people.

4. The Buddha not only knows the aspirations and the inclinations of all sentient beings, but he also knows their actual dispositions.

I asked my teacher what the difference was between an inclination and a disposition? He said, "Well, somebody might be inclined to do something, but it might not be their nature to be able to do it." So with the third power the Buddha would know their aspirations, what they want to do and what they are inclined to do. The fourth power means that a Buddha would know if it is in their nature, character and disposition to be able to carry out their aspirations.

Imagine when bringing up your children, if you are able to know both their aspirations and their dispositions, you can help them so much more. But if you know only the aspirations but not the dispositions of a person (or vice versa), the ability to benefit them is not as great. The Buddha knows the different dispositions of all of us. He knows all the different factors in each person that can lead to their enlightenment and all the different qualities that are predominant in them that can be easily cultivated. He knows all the different right conceptions we have and also what are our misunderstandings. This enables a Buddha to correct us when we have gone off-balance and also to bring out our own good qualities.

5. The Buddha knows different people's faculties.

There are various ways to describe faculties. One way is to talk about people's abilities. Sometimes these are translated as dull and sharp faculties, but I do not like the terms dull and sharp. I think it is better to say moderate faculties and keen faculties, or something like that. But the idea being spoken about is that people have different faculties. What they often describe here is that people with moderate faculties, like when they hear the qualities of the Buddha, they believe in those qualities and they instantly have faith. We might think, "That must be a high faculty, because I don't feel that" [laughter]. But it is not, the people with high faculties want to understand why before they have the faith. So a person of keen faculties will do research into the Buddha's qualities, what it means to perceive emptiness and so forth.

People have different levels of faculties and are satisfied with different levels of answers. That is precisely why the Buddha said different things to different people, because they had different abilities to understand and different ways that they would be satisfied with teachings. A Buddha is able to perceive all those different faculties and that gives a Buddha the ability to guide others very skillfully and in a way that is appropriate. He will not teach things that are too difficult nor too easy and that prevents people from getting complacent or discouraged.

6. The Buddhas perceive all the different paths leading to every type of goal.

The Buddha knows all the paths and the different things to do to take rebirth in any of the six realms in cyclic existence. He knows the different consciousnesses to generate if we want to become a hearer arhat, a solitary realizer arhat, or a fully enlightened Buddha. These three vehicles come up quite often – the hearer, solitary realizer and bodhisattva vehicle – so let me just detour a minute to explain this a little because it is coming up in this point we are discussing. The Buddha knows the different paths of each of the three vehicles.

The Three Vehicles

Hearer

The first vehicle is the hearer vehicle, as in somebody who hears teachings. These people develop the determination to be free. They basically collect a small amount of positive potential, realize emptiness directly and become an arhat, freeing themselves from cyclic existence.

Solitary Realizer

A solitary realizer is so called because often, they live alone. In their last rebirth many solitary realizers were born at a time when there was not a Buddha appearing on Earth. So they were solitary and became realized in that lifetime. They too generate the determination to be free. They collect a moderate amount of positive potential, gain the insight of emptiness, and then become an arhat and liberate themselves from suffering and cyclic existence.

Bodhisattva

The third vehicle is the bodhisattva vehicle. These people generate not just the determination to be free of cyclic existence themselves, but more importantly, the altruistic intention to become a Buddha in order to benefit others and lead them to lasting happiness. With that bodhicitta motivation they realize emptiness and clear their mind completely of all stains to become a fully enlightened Buddha.

So there are these three levels of aspiration according to the three vehicles – hearer, solitary realizer and bodhisattva. Even though the hearer and the solitary realizer have the same goal of arhatship, the kind of arhatship they attain is slightly different. The solitary realizers can do more things because they have collected more positive potential on the path.

The Buddha knows not only who has the inclination to follow which vehicle, he also knows whether they have the disposition and capability to do it. Also with this power he knows the past and how to lead everybody on each stage of each of these three different vehicles. For example, to get downtown, some people feel comfortable taking the bus, but freak out about driving on the highway. Other people are going to feel comfortable driving and do not want to take the bus. If you know all the different ways to get down town, then you are going to be very skillful in leading people to where they want to go. Whereas, if you only know one route to downtown and you only know one vehicle to use to get there, then you are much more limited.

7. A Buddha knows how to help those who are in deep meditative states.

Here we will talk about what is sometimes translated as different meditative absorptions, or meditative trances. I do not particularly like the word “trances”. I prefer different levels of deep concentration that one can attain along the path because it is not like you just get one level of concentration and that is it. There are many different levels of concentration, but we do not even understand just one of them! The Buddha is skilful, because the Buddha knows all the different levels and can give advice to people about which kind of meditative states to cultivate and which ones not to get too hung up in because they are so blissful that you can just get totally distracted by the bliss and never realize emptiness.

So the Buddha knows which ones to cultivate, which ones to be cautious of, how to cultivate them and how to keep people from getting stuck, or complacent, in their meditative concentration. That is very skilful. We may think, “I don’t have any concentration at all,” but some time we will have concentration and it is nice to know that the Buddha knows all these different levels and can help us cultivate the valuable ones and not get stuck in the others.

8. A Buddha has awareness of their own and others’ previous rebirths.

Buddhas know who was born as who, when they were born and what kind of rebirths people have had. In that way, they also know all the different karmas people have brought into this life and they also know

what appropriate relationships to make with people in this life. For example, Ananda was suitable to be Buddha's attendant, whereas Shariputra was better off doing something else – these are two of the Buddha's disciples at the time he lived. By knowing people's previous rebirths and the kind of relationships he had with them, the Buddha was able to know what kind of relationship to form with them in this lifetime.

I think this is a very useful ability to have. We can see in our own lives that sometimes we do not know what kind of relationships to make with other people. We may want to have a certain kind of relationship with somebody and we may try and try to make it work, but sometimes it just does not happen. If we had awareness of previous karma, different karmic connections we have had with different people and different tendencies we have created together, then we might not get into forcing relationships when there is no cause for them to be something other than what they are already.

On the other hand, if we had the awareness of past relationships with other people, we would know in what way to cultivate beneficial relationships with them in this lifetime. Sometimes we lose a lot of opportunity with people because we do not know this kind of thing. Maybe there are some people with whom we have the opportunity and karma to have incredibly good relationships, but because we are completely oblivious to the potential there, we do not know how to make that happen. So, it is a really good quality of the Buddha to know people's previous rebirths, the kinds of relationships that have been there and to be able to guide one's relationships with them in this lifetime in a constructive way.

9. The Buddha knows the death, the intermediate states and all the future rebirths of everybody, up until their enlightenment and where they will manifest afterwards.

Does this mean that the Buddha knows all our future rebirths and that everything is predestined? Does that mean everything is fated if the Buddha knows our rebirth?

No, it does not mean everything is fated and predestined. Lama Yeshe explained it to us by saying, "You might know a person really, really well. You might know that because they have a certain habit, the chances are that this time a particular thing is going to happen in a certain situation. It is like you know they are going to be late for dinner because they are so often late for dinner and even though they say they are going to be on time, you know they are going to be late for dinner. Your knowing that they are going to be late for dinner, does that mean that the person has no choice about whether to be late or not? No, it does not mean that. That person still has a choice. They still have free will. They can still do what they want and they might even prove you wrong. But because of your knowledge of that person and their previous habits, you can get a feeling of the kinds of things they are going to do."

I think it works with the Buddha in that way. It is not that everything is pre-planned, destined and we just have to do it. If that were the case, then there would be no use doing anything. It is more that the Buddha has the ability, through seeing the kinds of habits that we get into, to predict what is likely to happen.

We could get into the whole argument of asking if this means that the Buddha knows absolutely everything that is going to happen? I do not know, some people might say "Yes" and some people might say "No". His Holiness the Dalai Lama said that you never know anything exactly until it happens. I think it is good to remember that things are always dependent-arising and that things are always changing. Different factors influence something. Some small thing can completely change a result. But at the same time, we cannot operate totally outside of cause and effect. Also, our free will is limited, isn't it? I do not have the free will to flap my arms and fly in the sky, but I do have the free will to go and take an airplane.

So when we talk about free will and pre-determination, I have a feeling that somehow we are not even framing the question right. It may not need to be looked at in our Western way. It may be best to just realize that things are dependent-arising. Because things arise depending on other issues and because you understand cause and effect, you can have an idea and predict certain things that are going to happen based on present information. Does that make some sense to you?

10. The Buddha knows the degree of depletions of contaminations on each being's mindstream.

This means that a Buddha knows how worn away is your anger or how worn away is your attachment. The Buddha will know who has been able to abandon what level of obscurations on the path and who has still yet to abandon those different levels of obscuration...

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

You might think, “Well, that is fine, but the Buddha lived 2,500 years ago and I did not meet him so how do all these qualities affect me? There are a few different ways to think about this. One way to think about it is that there may be Buddhas you do know, but do not realize they are Buddhas. They still have the ability to guide you. Second of all, Shakyamuni Buddha gave the teachings on how to develop all of those things. He gave the information on how to develop those qualities and he acted out all those qualities. So all that information is there and we can learn it and put it into practice. Even though we did not meet the Buddha directly, we still have the whole lineage of the teachings which was motivated and acted out by these qualities and teaches us the way to develop these qualities ourselves.

Questions and Answers

[Audience:] There are beginningless rebirths, how can anyone know them all, because there are always more rebirths to be known, are there not?

Maybe we need to develop the idea of the infinite ability to know things as well, so you have the parallel railroad tracks – one is the rebirth and the other one is the consciousness that knows that. I think this kind of thing points out how we get stuck when we think about things that are infinite. It is as if we have this idea that we have to learn things just one at a time. Whereas if you have an infinite mirror, it reflects all of infinite space all at the same time, something does not have to keep growing inch, by inch, by inch to be infinite. Yet something that is infinite has no boundaries, so we cannot pinpoint it.

The Buddha Guides Us

[In response to audience:] Being able to have a personal relationship with the Buddhas who actually have the ability to take care of us, if we have that kind of confidence, it changes our attitude. We feel very safe, not like we are out in the middle of empty space [laughter], but we feel that there is help somewhere in the universe. Somebody is intending to help us. [Laughter]

I think what this points out to me and what I see in my own mind, is that I really have to overcome my ideas of how I think the Buddhas should manifest to help me. Sometimes we think, “If there is really a Buddha, this is what a Buddha should do so that I will believe that there is a Buddha. And this is how the Buddha should help me because this is how I think I need to be helped.” But I have very fixed rigid ideas about this and then I have to ask myself, “Do I know the best ways to help myself? Do I really know that? Maybe the Buddha, from the Buddha’s side, is trying to help me and maybe I am walking away from things because of my own stubbornness.”

Or maybe the Buddhas are trying to help me and I am indeed receiving their help. But it looks to me like the world is falling apart around me because things are getting worse instead of better. I often think the Buddha should make everything better real quick instead of me being in situations that are quite difficult. But these situations are real opportunities to grow, so I really have to work on my ideas of thinking, “Buddha, look, if you really exist then I need this and this and this.” In those cases I am treating the Buddha like Santa Claus and asking for what I think I need to make me happy.

If you raise kids, your kid may think one thing is good for him or her, but you have wisdom and a broader view and you know another thing is better for him so you put your kid in that situation even though he, or she, may not like it. I remember when I was little, I did not like to go to places where I did not know anybody. My parents said, “Look, you go and you will meet people and you will have a good time.” I did not want to go, but they made me go. I think they were very wise, because they were right. I usually went and had a good time. But before I went, I was really obstinate and I did not want to go. So somehow, through parents having a bigger vision, they can lead the child in a wise way even though the kid might be throwing tantrums all the way to the place. I think sometimes it works that way too with the Buddhas trying to guide us.

[Audience:] Some of these qualities of the Buddha sound very much like qualities of God, and I've just decided that I don't believe in any kind of being who is like that.

The Buddha is Not A Creator God

No, Buddha is not God. There are a few big differences. One difference is that the Buddha did not create the world. Buddha did not invent samsara and did not invent cyclic existence. Buddha did not invent karma. Buddha is not making us suffer. Buddha did not invent all the different rebirths. Buddha did not create anything. This is a big difference.

The Buddha is Not Omnipotent

Another big difference is that a Buddha is not omnipotent. There is a difference between being omniscient and omnipotent. With omniscience, which is a quality a Buddha has, a Buddha can perceive everything that exists in the universe. Omnipotent is the ability to make anything happen that you want to happen. The Buddha is not omnipotent. The Buddha cannot pull out our karma so that we do not have any problems anymore. From a Buddhist viewpoint, we would say there is nobody who is omnipotent because if somebody were fully compassionate and omnipotent and could change the world with a snap of fingers when they want to, then a Buddha certainly would have done that already, because there is no reason at all to make cyclic existence go on longer if you can stop it.

There is no idea in Buddhism of Buddha looking over, watching us suffer so that we will learn something. There is none of that. If the Buddha could stop suffering, Buddha would. But Buddha is not omnipotent in the sense of they have great powers and abilities. From their own side, they are unobscured, but because things are dependent arising, they interact with the rest of the world and cannot make everything turn out any way they want it to. So those are two big differences.

Are there some other things that you want to bring up here about the qualities that made you feel uncomfortable?

Buddha Does Not Judge Us

[In response to audience:] Goodness, that means somebody is sitting there with a checklist, "Have you been good? Have you been naughty?" [Laughter.] Somebody is spying on me and is going to mark down the black points and the white points? Again, the idea in Buddhism is very, very different. Buddha is not spying on us to see if we have been good or bad. The Buddha's mind is like a mirror. It can perceive everything, but because the mind is fully compassionate, any information the Buddha gets is processed through that compassion.

A Buddha is not sitting there judging us. But, if a Buddha sees us lose our temper, they are able to have compassion for us. And wouldn't it be nice if that person was not pushed by their uncontrolled emotions to do that? Wouldn't it be wonderful to help that person so that they can stop that habit? So the whole way the Buddha is looking at us is very different from the way many of us were brought up as children, thinking of God looking down at us. Does that make some sense?

As you think about these things, if you feel uncomfortable about them, please bring them up. I think when we come to Buddhist teachings, each of us comes with our own backpack of past experiences. Rather than be limited by or fight against our backpack, it is good if we just set it down, take it out and look at what is inside and see if we still need those ideas or not.

[Audience:] How does meditation on emptiness purify the mind and enable somebody to become omniscient?

I think it is helpful to first understand the different kinds of obscurations on the mind. This will come up later, but it is good to go over it more than once. We often talk of two levels of obscurations: one is the afflicted obscurations [['Afflicted obscurations' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'deluded obscurations'.](#)] and the other one is the cognitive obscurations. [['Cognitive obscurations' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'Obscurations to omniscience'.](#)]

Afflicted obscurations[#]

The afflicted obscurations[#] are the afflictions [['Afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'.](#)] and their seeds that include ignorance, anger and attachment and all the contaminated karmas that make us take rebirth in cyclic existence. Once that level of obscurations is

removed, then one is an arhat and the mirror of one's mind is greatly cleaned because you no longer have ignorance, anger, attachment and other afflictions. Simply because so much of your energy is not used in going into these wrong perceptions and it is not obscured by all the imprints of the karma that you have from having gone in all those goofy ways, then the mind just automatically can perceive so much more. That is why an arhat has great clairvoyant abilities.

Cognitive obscurations*

But there are still some subtle stains in the mind of the arhat in the sense that they have not removed the appearance of true existence that occurs in the post-meditation time. Even though they can see the emptiness of true, or inherent, existence during meditation, when an arhat gets up from meditation, everything still looks truly existent even though they know it is not. So there is still some kind of veil on the mind. When you have removed that, then the mind is like an infinite mirror that no longer has any dirt on it.

What abilities people have depends on how much garbage they have been able to remove from the mind, just as a mirror's ability to reflect has to do with how much dirt has been cleansed from it. An arhat knows a lot of the things that a Buddha knows. An arhat knows a lot of people's past lives and karma and things like that, but they do not know everything exactly, completely, totally, as does a Buddha. An arhat can still maybe goof up sometimes because the mind, the mirror, is very clean, but there is still some dirt on it.

[Audience:] How much is the Buddha intervening in our world?

I have no idea, maybe 47.8% [laughter]? I think that probably depends a lot on an individual being's karma.

[Audience:] Why would our karma affect how they intervene in our world?

Say we have created the karma to meet the Dharma, practice it and to be open to the influence of the Dharma. Then the Buddhas, whose whole reason for becoming fully enlightened was to help us, help us spontaneously and effortlessly without having to think about it. It is as if our radio is turned on and the radio waves just get picked up. Whereas, if somebody does not have the karma to be helped and their minds are not open, why would the Buddhas hang around? Buddhas are not going to sit and knock their heads against the wall trying to help where help cannot be received. But they are not selective. They are not going to say, "Oh, this guy has a lot of faith, so I'll help him, but this other guy is a jerk and doesn't believe in me, so I won't help him."

Buddhas Help Everyone, But Not All Receive That Help

The Buddhas do give out their help, but if people cannot perceive that help and accept it, then why would they put it out there? It is like the Buddhas are holding out hooks, but sometimes we do not hold out a ring to put onto the hook. The Buddha is still going to have a hook out there because of compassion, and he might even alter the hook or make another kind of hook for us because our ring is so tiny. So, somehow they will change the way they help, it is not that the Buddha is going to completely abandon us because we are negative. But if our own minds are closed, then the amount that they can help us is reduced, because we are holding out this very tiny little ring and we are not really giving them a chance to give us anything.

How much the Buddha can intervene in each of our lives is going to be quite different for each of us. We may not even know when they intervene in our lives. We may not even pick up on it when they do and yet they may be constantly intervening.

His Holiness The Dalai Lama

For example, think of the Kalachakra a few months ago in New York when we took the bodhisattva vows at Medicine Square Garden. For me this was an incredible experience with 3,500 people saying that they wanted to become Buddhas for the benefit of all sentient beings. I was thinking, "What an incredible thing to do!" His Holiness was really acting like a Buddha in presenting to people the idea of aspiring to cherish others more than themselves and aspiring to become a fully enlightened Buddha to benefit others. He was offering this incredible alternative to New York drudgery. It was a very remarkable thing that happened when he gave the vows.

Yet, how much each person in that auditorium was benefited by that ceremony must have varied. The benefit probably ranged completely from A to Z because some people were probably already bodhisattvas. They probably had a tremendous experience listening to everything His Holiness said and also when taking the bodhisattva vows. Then there are probably some people sitting in the audience saying, "This is interesting. I get to sit and watch this guy from Tibet who won the Nobel Peace Prize. Gee, he has a nice smile. He is talking about compassion – that is a real nice thing. It's kind of hot in here and so I hope it ends soon because I'm going to go out to have dinner with my friends tonight."

Both these people are sitting in the same auditorium and yet look how different the help that His Holiness is giving is being perceived by each of them. From His Holiness' side, he is giving help to everybody, but people perceive it in their own way. They take what they are capable of taking and that is good. People will get some kind of benefit.

Benefit Varies Depending On Our Mental State

How much we benefit from things depends very greatly on our mental state and on our karma. Like I said, we may not even be aware of how much we are benefiting and how much the Buddha is affecting us in our life. Some of you who were there in New York, you might have thought at the time, "Gee this is great. This is wonderful." Then ten or twenty years from now you might look back on that event and go, "Wow! I can't believe it!" All of a sudden it becomes clear to you exactly how much His Holiness was benefiting you. But at that time, you did not understand. So many things happen like that in our lives, don't they? We think we know what's going on, then years later we figure out that something else was transpiring.

How Perceptions Differ

[In response to audience:] When you study about the bee's eye, you will see that they have these very complex eyes with multiple lenses. How a bee perceives something and how we perceive that same thing are completely different. In the same way, dogs can hear things that we cannot hear. Also, a dog can smell so many things and know so many things through smell that they have a whole avenue of information that is totally closed off to us. Yet, we cannot say that the dogs' perception is wrong just because we do not hear or smell those things. In the same way, we cannot say that other perceptions, besides our own, cannot exist, because it is clear, even now, that they do.

Perceptions Of The Pure Land

This is also the whole idea behind the pure land. When we talk of pure lands – those places that Buddhas create for practitioners to go to – it depends on your level of mind whether you can perceive the pure land or not, because the pure land does not necessarily have to be another place. If our mind is very pure, this here is a pure land. If our mind is overwhelmed by karma, this is like a hell realm. So, you can see again how three or four people can have three or four different attitudes, or reactions, to the same situation. It is not that something exists objectively out there, but rather it is how each person experiences and perceives something, it is due to their own mental state how something appears to them.

So we might look at this room and say this is a good neutral place, but a hell being might come in here and say this is a hot burning hell. Then a Buddha might come in here and see that this place is a pure land. We usually come in here and we vacillate in our perceptions [Laughter].

Let us spend a few moments absorbing everything.

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>

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