

Cultivating Bodhicitta through Equalizing and Exchanging Self and Others: An Overview

(lightly edited transcript)

by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 26 Jul 93

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To develop the motivation of altruism, we think about the benefits of bodhicitta. It is very important to spend time doing this so that we develop some enthusiasm for it. If we don't see the benefits of bodhicitta, then we'll just say, "Oh, well, bodhicitta, yes, it sounds great. Love and compassion, altruism – sound great. I guess I *should* be more loving and compassionate. It sounds really good. I *should* be kinder." The development of bodhicitta, then, becomes another 'should' for us.

This is why in all these teachings they so often talk about the advantages of a particular practice beforehand, so that it doesn't become a 'should', it becomes an 'I want to'. That's why it's important to consider the advantages and the benefits of bodhicitta in our meditation session, so that we really know it and then the mind becomes naturally enthusiastic.

To develop bodhicitta, there are two methods: there is the seven points of cause and effect, which I described previously, and then there is the second method of equalizing and exchanging self and others.

1) Equalizing self and others

I personally like this method of equalizing and exchanging self and others because to me, it takes democracy into the Dharma. The real meaning of democracy, the real meaning of equality is, we all equally want happiness and we all equally want freedom from pain and affliction. Our own personal traumas are no more severe, no more important than anybody else's. Our own personal wish for happiness is also no more important than that of anybody else's.

To me, this strikes very much at what we cultivate a lot in this country – our individualism, our egoism and our thinking of *me, me, me*, "Me first! Me first! Got to stick out for myself! Got to go out and get what I want!" We're all the children of people who immigrated to this country because they didn't fit in where they used to belong and they came here to get what they wanted. [laughter] In a way, we have inherited this "me first" attitude. This attitude is part of our culture, I think, as well as it being just a general distinction of sentient beings, that we cherish ourselves first and everybody else comes afterwards.

This meditation on equalizing and exchanging self and others really hits at the point that we cherish ourselves first only out of habit, that that is the only reason why we do so: out of habit. In other words, when we look for any kind of logical reason why we are more important, why our happiness is more essential, why our pain is more harmful than anybody else's, we can't find any particular reason except that "It's *mine!*" Besides saying, "It's mine," there is no other reason. But then when we say, "It's mine," what does 'mine' mean? For me, 'mine' means *here*, and for you, 'mine' means *there*. So 'mine' for each of us is a very relative thing. There is no objective thing which is 'mine' or 'me' or 'I.' What we call 'I' is something that we have merely labeled on top of our body and mind. Then because of so much habituation of identifying 'I', 'I', 'I', and because of the mind solidifying this 'I' and cherishing this 'I', we've convinced ourselves very well that somehow we're more important than anybody else.

But when we come to see just how relative the label 'I' is, that it is as relative as *this* side of the room and *that* side of the room (because it could easily change, and *this* side of the room becomes *that* side of the room), we come to see that 'self' and 'others' can very easily change. It just depends on where you're looking at it from, how you habituate yourself. And to me, this is really jarring. When I stop and think about

the fact that the whole reason that everything that happens in my life seems so incredibly important, is simply because I'm in the habit of thinking that way, it's like things start to shake a little bit. It's like an earthquake on a sandy beach – everything's shaking, because the whole foundation of all my reasons why I'm so important begins to crumble.

Especially because we associate so strongly with this body; we identify this body either as 'I', or sometimes we grasp onto it as 'mine,' with this incredible attachment. But then we begin to see that there is no inherent 'I' or 'mine' affiliated with this body; we see it this way completely due to habit. It is completely due to that concept that our concentration is so entrenched on what happens to this body. If we look at it, this body actually came from our parents; the genetic makeup came from our parents. Aside from the genetic makeup, it's an accumulation of broccoli, cauliflower, bananas, and whatever else we happen to eat since we were born. Besides that, there is nothing about this body that I can own. What's 'mine' in this body? It's an accumulation of food that was grown by other beings, or maybe even the bodies of other beings, and my parents' genes. Is there anything about it that is 'me'? How come everything that happens to this body is so incredibly important? It's just habit.

What we're trying to do in this meditation of equalizing and exchanging self and others is not to say "I become 'you' and you become 'me'." But rather, the object that we cherish so much gets equalized and then exchanged. Right now, the object that we cherish is *here* and everything else is *there*. When we equalize self and others, we begin to see that others, just as much as we, want happiness and don't want pain. Then we even begin to exchange it. We see we could actually label 'I' on everything else and call this one here [Ven. Chodron indicates herself], 'other'.

In Shantideva's text, "Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life", there is a whole meditation in which you practice labeling 'I' on all the other sentient beings, and labeling 'other' on this one [i.e., oneself]. It's quite interesting. You could see that it's really quite arbitrary. This gives us the possibility of exchanging self and others in terms of developing a very deep-seated concern for others' welfare that isn't put on, but rather, it is something that can come with as much intensity as we now cherish this one here.

(2) & (3) Disadvantages of self-centeredness and Advantages of cherishing others

Then as we go on and think more and more of the disadvantages of just simply cherishing ourselves and the advantages of cherishing others, this bolsters the meditation. When we begin to examine this idea on a much deeper level, we see that this cherishing of the self - which we usually associate with bringing happiness - actually brings much more suffering.

Disadvantages of self-centeredness

Self-cherishing exaggerates our problems and causes hyper-sensitivity

It's just so interesting. When your friends come and tell you all their problems, you can just look at it and see how they're exaggerating. You can see that it's really not that serious and, actually, they could let it go or they could look at it in a different way. It seems real obvious when we hear our friends' problems. Or when you talk to your family, everything that's bothering your parents and your siblings, you can look at it and say, "What's everybody getting so uptight about, making all this fuss about?" But on the other hand, when it happens to us, *we're* not making a fuss. *We're* not exaggerating. *We're* not getting stuck in our ego. We think *we're* really seeing things absolutely as they exist and it's really a major thing that's happening!

So you see, just by how *we're* looking at something, somehow when it's related to the 'I' it becomes a much bigger deal than when it's related to anybody else. Automatically through that process, then, we begin to exaggerate the importance of a lot of things that happen. We make a lot more problems for ourselves. The more we cherish ourselves, the more we become so exceedingly sensitive that almost any little thing is apt to offend us. Because *we're* so constantly vigilant about protecting the 'I' – protecting our body, protecting our reputation, protecting the part of us that likes to be praised and approved of – that it's like we have this incredible, sensitive radar device scanning for anything that could possibly get in the way of this 'I'. We become so easily offended, so touchy, so sensitive, and that in itself just makes more and more problems for us. Because then people who very often didn't mean to offend us, we interpret what they say as offensive. Then we come back with, "Why did you say this?" And we start attacking each other, and we really get into it.

Sometimes, then, this super-sensitivity picks up things that are there; sometimes it picks up things that

aren't there. But in any case, it makes everything very, very important. Now, I'm not saying when there is conflict, you should just gloss over it, like if somebody is mad at you, you might just pretend they aren't. If somebody is mad at you, it's something to address. Somebody is in pain. They're miserable if they're mad at us. It's good if we go and talk to them, and figure out what's happening. Because maybe we did do something unintentionally. So it's not a sense of just whitewashing everything. Rather, it's getting over this thing of, "How's everybody looking at me? What are they saying to *me* and what are they thinking about *me*? How am *I* doing?" Because it just creates so much pain inside of us.

Self-cherishing causes jealousy, competitiveness and arrogance

Then the self-cherishing mind gets us into this trilogy of jealousy for the people who do better than us, competitiveness with the people who are equal to us, and arrogance over the people whom we consider inferior. Again, by this strong emphasis on the self, we're always ranking ourselves. Whenever we meet somebody, we always have to rank, "Am I above, equal or less?" As soon as we do that, we get jealous, proud or competitive. And none of those three emotions or tactics seems to bring us much happiness. Again, that all comes from the self-cherishing mind, the whole reason why we aren't yet Buddhas!

Some people say, "Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment. How come I'm still here? I keep practicing but my mind is still stuck in this rut!" Well, the basic reason why we aren't Buddhas yet is because there is the self-centered mind. It has kind of run the show up until now. It's one of the main things that makes difficulty in our spiritual practice. Why weren't we born Rinpoches and Tulkus? Why weren't we born on the path of seeing having spontaneous bodhicitta? Well, basically because we didn't cultivate it in the past! Why didn't we cultivate it in the past? For the same reason we have so much difficulty cultivating it now! Because our mind thinks of ten million other things to do. And what is that mind that is making us perpetually distracted, that thinks of the ten million other things to do? It's the self-centered mind. It's the self-centered mind that's always looking for some little bit of pleasure somewhere and distracting ourselves from the basic opportunity to tap into the Buddha potential that we have.

[Audience: inaudible]

Well, I think self-cherishing has been very constant, but in some ways, it seems like we've really developed it. Like gourmet chefs. It's like tsampa compared to chocolate cake. [laughter]

I think that part of it (I speak about this often) is due to the way kids are raised. Kids are asked from the time they are two years old, "What do you like? Orange juice or apple juice?" "Do you want to ride your bicycle or do you want to go swimming?" "Do you want to watch this TV program or that TV program?" In our effort to make children happy, we give them so much choice that they get confused. They then have to turn so much attention to figuring out "What is going to give me the most pleasure at this time? Orange juice or apple juice?"

That perpetuates as adults, so that we have incredible difficulty making decisions, because we're trying to eke out every single little bit of pleasure that we can possibly get out of every circumstance. We think happiness means having as many choices as we can have, and we get totally confused because we can't figure out what's going to make us the happiest. We are always wondering, all this mulling over in our mind, "What do I really want?" Somehow, we get real, real stuck on ourselves.

[Audience:] What you just said is really confusing for me, because my parents made choices for me all the time and when it came time for me to make decisions myself, I was lost. So now, with my own kids, I allow them to make choices so that they will be more self-confident.

I think it's what kind of choices we're teaching kids to make, because I agree with you that it's important to teach kids how to make choices. But it's important to make them sensitive to what are important choices and what are not-so-important choices. Because we often get stuck on the unimportant choices. When kids get stuck about, "Do I want to play with the pink ball or the green ball?" I think we could teach them to make other kinds of choices that are more important, instead of focusing on real small things that cause them to constantly turn inwards, "What's going to make me the happiest – pink or green?" But rather, other kinds of decisions that are more important, like "It's cold outside today. What clothes do you think you could put on so that you will be comfortable?" So they learn to think like that, rather than orange juice and apple juice.

So often in our life, when we look at a lot of the difficulties that are going on at any particular moment – the difficulties we have in this life, the difficulties in our spiritual life, and the difficulties that are getting created for future lives – so much of it traces back to this over-emphasis on self. It's always "me, me, me". And

sometimes it even comes into our spiritual practice, like, “My meditation session!” “My altar! I have such a nice altar.” “It’s *my* turn to drive the Dalai Lama somewhere.” [laughter] The self-cherishing moves right in along with everything else.

It is very interesting to reflect on and recognize where, in our attempt to be happy, we actually create the cause for our own unhappiness. When we can see that very clearly in our own life – that we really want to be happy, but because of our own ignorance, because of our own self-cherishing, we often basically just create the cause for more confusion now and in the future – then we can begin to have compassion for ourselves. When we can see that in our own life and make clear examples of it, then we can begin to develop this compassion for ourselves. We realize that we do wish ourselves well, but because of this mind that is so habituated with the self-grasping and the self-cherishing, we keep on doing counter-productive things. We begin to develop some genuine compassion and patience for ourselves. From that, then we can spread that compassion to others. We can realize that other beings, too, want happiness, but they are stuck with the same ignorance and the same self-cherishing that we are. They, too, are making more and more difficulties for themselves in spite of their wish to be happy. That kind of evokes a feeling of tolerance and compassion for others. Then that becomes a much deeper kind of compassion and acceptance of what we are and what others are. It’s not just painting on some kind of plastic acceptance, plastic compassion.

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

Advantages of cherishing others

...We remember the disadvantages of cherishing ourselves, we remember the benefits of cherishing others, and the benefits that accrue both to others and to ourselves. And the fact that when we cherish others, they feel good. Just as we feel good when other people take care of us, other people feel good when we take care of them. This attitude of cherishing others becomes the real source for happiness in the world.

When you see how much delight His Holiness can bring to a room full of people even though he doesn’t greet each of them individually, you can see that there is some value to just this mind that cherishes others. If we can develop that mind, that automatically, quite directly brings happiness to others. Plus, if we then act based on this mind of cherishing others then we can make a real positive contribution to others, both in a societal way and social issues, and especially to others’ spiritual practice so that they can learn the methods to free themselves.

Also, when we take care of others, when our concern turns towards others, we cease making mountains out of molehills regarding our own problems. Again, this doesn’t mean denying or negating whatever our problems are, but it just means seeing them in a balanced way, without this exaggerated viewpoint. By seeing our problems in a balanced way, we can then see them more realistically and deal with them. We can also recognize that our own problems occur within this whole panorama of everything else that’s going on in the world today, and generate the feeling of being inter-related to and cherishing others.

Then, of course, the more we cherish others, the more we create positive potential and the more we purify our own negative karma, so the quicker we’ll be able to gain spiritual realizations. The less hindrances we have on the path, the better able we are to die and have a good rebirth, the quicker we can actually understand reality, and so on.

Since so many benefits accrue from cherishing others - things that help us, things that help others - it really makes a lot of sense to do that.

(4) Exchanging self and others

[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]

(5) Giving your own happiness and taking the suffering of others

Then to enhance that feeling of really wishing others well and wishing them to be free of pain, we do the taking and giving meditation, the *tonglen* meditation. This is the meditation where we imagine others around us and we imagine taking their suffering and the cause of their suffering in the form of smoke that we

inhale. The smoke then becomes a thunderbolt which strikes at the lump of the anger, selfishness and contortion at our own heart, destroys that, and we dwell in this open space without any concepts of our self, the space of emptiness. Then from that space, there is a light that appears, and we emanate that light and we imagine multiplying and transforming our body, our possessions and our positive potential, it becomes whatever others need and others are being satisfied by that.

When we do this meditation, we can start out with ourselves, thinking of ourselves in the future and taking on our own future problems and sending happiness to ourselves. Then we gradually extend it to friends, to strangers, to people we don't like. We can think of specific groups of people. It's an excellent meditation to do when you are watching the news. It's an excellent meditation to do when you are in the middle of an argument. Or you are at a family dinner and everybody is yelling at each other. Or you are in a movie and you are feeling afraid because of what you are seeing on the screen. Or you are in the middle of childbirth. Really, it's a good meditation. [laughter]

This meditation develops our love and it develops our compassion. It also gives us a way to relate to every situation, because there is something we can do in every situation. Of course, if we can say or do something directly in a situation to alleviate harm, we should do that. In the situations where we can't, then at least we do this meditation so that somehow, there is still some inter-relatedness between others and us. We are developing at least the wish to be able to actually do something in the future.

This meditation is also very good to do when you are unhappy, when you are sick, when you are in pain. Of course, we can see so clearly: when we are unhappy, we are sick and we are in pain, what is the first thing that we think about? *Me!* "I'm so miserable!" What's the last thing we think about? *Others.* Isn't it? Except to think about others and how nasty they were and what they did to us. [laughter] But we're usually just really stuck in ourselves.

This meditation is so valuable to do when you are unhappy or when you are sick. Because you just say, "Okay, as long as I'm unhappy for whatever reason, may it suffice for all the unhappiness of all other beings." "I'm being criticized. The pain that comes from that, may it suffice for all the other people who are getting criticized." "My stomach hurts. May it suffice for all the people who have stomach aches today." You imagine taking on the suffering and cause of suffering of others, and then sending out your body, possessions and positive potential, giving to others all the things that are going to make them happy. When you do this, it totally transforms your own experience.

This is one of the ways of transforming adverse conditions into the path. Since we live in a world that is full of conditions that are counter-productive to developing the spiritual path, this is an excellent meditation to transform all of those conditions so that instead of taking us further away from enlightenment, they become the actual path. I think this is one of the real beauties of the Dharma and the real beauty of the thought training techniques, that any situation we find ourselves in can be transformed into a practice that makes us closer to enlightenment. It doesn't matter where you are. It doesn't matter who you're with, what's going on around you. This practice gives us the ability to completely transform anything. So it's quite powerful.

[Audience: inaudible]

The important thing is to transform how we *think* about the stomachache. The stomachache may not go away. But if we transform how we think about the stomachache, then the stomachache is going to be a totally different experience for us. We're not trying to get rid of the suffering here. Rather, we are trying to get rid of the mind that *dislikes* the suffering, because it's the mind that dislikes the suffering that creates more suffering.

[Audience: inaudible]

Exactly. It's the fear of the suffering, and the mind that just completely tightens around it. The more we meditate and look at our own experience, the more we see how the fear of the suffering is sometimes so much more painful than the suffering itself.

Just take as an example remembering when you were a little kid going to the dentist office. The whole trip was traumatic. Even before the dentist touched you. And it's all our own mind. You can see so many examples of times where the raw, actual experience may not be so bad, but it's all the fear leading up to it, and it's all the projections and interpretations that occur after it.

I remember one situation that was real clear for me. One time, I got a letter from somebody saying that there were all these people who were talking about me. And it was all people I cared a great deal about. At first when I read the letter, I thought it was really funny. It was like, "What a silly kind of thing! It's really funny, what people are saying." So at the very moment of reading the letter, it was like there was no problem here. Then about a day later, after I had spent time thinking, it was, "They're saying this. And then they're saying that. After all I've done! Oh!" One day. Two days. The more time passed, the more miserable I was. Whereas the actual thing of learning the news didn't give me much problem at all.

[Audience: inaudible]

I think this is a real good point, your saying that this technique only works when you're not angry. Because I think you're right. When we're still angry at our own suffering and we try and do this technique, the anger is so prominent that the technique just becomes like raindrops falling off. Nothing sticks on it. Then I think what is helpful to do is to say, "May I take on the anger of all other beings," and work with the anger instead of the suffering. "All the other beings who are angry, may I take on their anger and all the pain from their anger."

[Audience: inaudible]

I think what happens is, when you're completely accepting of the pain, and you are doing this technique not with the wish that the pain goes away but you're just doing it, then the pain probably goes away. But when you do this meditation because you want the pain to go away, it doesn't work.

[Audience:] When I see a movie and somebody is taking another's heart out or something like that, I have to tell myself, "This isn't happening." I don't know how to make the transition to saying, "This pain is not the pain. It's my fear."

You can see that it's very clearly not the pain, because everything is happening on the movie screen and there is no real heart that is getting taken out. There is not even a violent situation really taking place. It's a movie screen.

[Audience: inaudible]

But this is the thing. We have to keep going over and over these techniques because we do forget. That's why I think it's very effective to practice even in situations where we're watching movies, because then we can be really convinced there actually is no pain out there. This really is my mind.

[Audience: inaudible]

I know. I've sat through movies where I trembled. I just sit there and shake. Very clearly, there is nothing happening. So then it's like, "Okay. I'm going to do the *tonglen* meditation."

[Audience: inaudible]

A good situation where I find this technique very useful is when I'm in a room and there is a real negative energy in the room. For some reason or another, the energy is just negative. A distracted energy. Something just isn't right. Then I'll do this meditation, and it really helps. Especially if I have to go give a Dharma talk and I'm in a place where it feels really weird, and it's real hard to give a Dharma talk, I do this meditation beforehand. [laughter]

[Audience:] What exactly do you imagine?

I say, "Okay. If there is negative energy in this room, instead of feeling I want to get away from it, I take it. I'm not rejecting this negative energy. May I take it all upon myself. May it just be used to smash this own self-cherishing and this own ignorance." And then I just imagine taking it all up. I just inhale it all, and then use it to smash the lump at the heart.

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>