

The Eighteen Root Bodhisattva Vows: Nos. 1 to 4 (lightly edited transcript)
by Ven. Thubten Chodron ©, at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle, 9 Jun 93

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You can trace the bodhisattva vows back to the sutras. They are not in nice neat little lists in the sutras, but they are all there. The root bodhisattva vows are called "root" because these ones are the basis of the practice and if you transgress any one of them completely (that is, with all four factors complete), you lose the bodhisattva ordination; whereas if you transgress the secondary vows, you don't lose the bodhisattva ordination. If you transgress the root vows completely, that is, with all the factors intact, not only do you create the negative karma of doing that, but also you lose the whole bodhisattva ordination. So these are the ones to be really aware of.

I should explain why all the vows are in the negative, that is, to avoid doing this and that action. This is because to know what you should practice, you also have to know what to abandon. For example, the first vow is to abandon praising oneself and belittling others. What we're really supposed to do is be modest about our own attainments and recognize the good qualities of others. To do that, we have to stop praising ourselves and belittling them. The second vow is about not giving material aid or the Dharma to those in need. What we're really supposed to practice is to be generous. We're supposed to practice being generous materially and to be generous with the Dharma. To be generous, we have to know clearly what not being generous is. So in all of these, although it's described in the negative, we should also remember that what we're supposed to practice is the exact opposite of that.

Root Vow 1. To Abandon:

- a) Praising oneself or**
- b) belittling others because of attachment to receiving material offerings, praise and respect.**

The first vow has two parts. If you do either of these, you transgress the vow. The first part is praising oneself and the second part, belittling others. It is a transgression if they are done out of attachment to receiving material offerings, praise, fame and respect.

I should also say that the first time I heard some of the bodhisattva vows, they didn't make any sense to me. But let me tell you, as you get more and more involved in the Dharma, you watch yourself come real, real close to doing all these things, and then you realize why Buddha made the precept.

This first vow is referring specifically to people in the position of teaching Dharma, although it certainly can apply to other situations where we're trying to build ourselves up. "I am such a great teacher. I know this text. I know that text, blah blah blah blah blah." Praising one's ability. Why? Because you want to have more disciples, have more offerings, have everybody talk about you, have everybody think that you're wonderful and have a big reputation. So you praise yourself in that way and also belittle, put down other Dharma teachers, "That one doesn't know what he is talking about." "That one's not really teaching because he's attached to praise and reputation and money."

This vow is really in the context of being a teacher, but we can also think of it in the context of our own life. There were times when we put ourselves up on a pedestal because we want more money, recognition and praise. We belittle the other people we work with in order to make ourselves seem better. As somebody brought up the last time: "Why do we get such a kick out of putting other people down?" Is it because if we put other people down, we are going to look good, then we will get all this good stuff? This is what it's coming to here.

Motivation is a critical factor in determining whether we transgress this vow. Here it's the motivation of attachment to material things, praise and respect. There might be situations where we praise ourselves and belittle others out of anger. That happens to be the transgression of a secondary bodhisattva vow. Or there might be situations where with a very good motivation, we let our own qualities be known and criticize somebody else. Let's say somebody is doing something very harmful and unethical, and with a good heart you criticize that behavior. You point it out. You say either to the person or to the other people around him, "This is bad behavior and this should not be done." You're doing it out of an attempt to help that person correct his or her own actions. Just pretending somebody isn't doing something negative doesn't help him or her. So sometimes we actually have to speak out and say something. If we do it out of a good motivation, it is not transgressing this precept.

Similarly, if you go for a job application interview and you try to make yourself look good simply for your own personal gain, that could be praising oneself out of attachment to material things. It's different if you're just trying to give clear information about your talents and abilities. It is very helpful to let other people know what these talents and abilities are because they may need somebody who can do that kind of work. So if you tell people what you are able to do, your qualifications and your good points for that reason, then that is a very different ball game. These two motivations are very different – praising yourself and belittling others out of attachment verses letting your qualities be known so that other people know what you can offer in a job situation. It is also not a transgression if you criticize somebody who is acting negatively in an attempt to help that person correct their behavior, or if you criticize in order to prevent other people from being harmed by that person..

[In response to audience:] Well, I think rolling your eyes is definitely different from saying something. Rolling your eyes when nobody else is around is very different from saying something when lots of people are around. It's a matter of degree, but we should also recognize that one could definitely lead to the other.

[Audience:] What if our motivation for going to the job interview is out of attachment?

Well the thing is, I think, to try and change your motivation before you go for the job interview.

[In response to audience:] When I finish going through the eighteen vows, I will talk about the four criteria that determine if a complete transgression is committed, such as not recognizing what you are doing as something negative, not wishing to refrain from doing it again, thinking what you did is super fantastic and not feeling any sense of self-respect or consideration for others in terms of what you did. There are different levels of infraction and to break it completely, you have to have all of them.

With the job interviews, if you know that you are going to be tempted to sing your own praises, then before you go, really try to generate this artificial bodhicitta, effortful bodhicitta; effortfully change your motivation for going to the interview and think of how you are going to approach it. Even if you can get your mind to the point where your motivation is mixed – "I really want this job, but yeah, I do want to offer service to other people too. I don't want to live my whole life doing a job just for the money. I do want to offer some service." – that already is some progress.

[Audience:] Why is it that the motivation of attachment makes it a root transgression?

I think the reason is because this motivation can be so dangerous if you're teaching the Dharma. Really selling yourself and doing things in an insincere way out of attachment to worldly things is such a corrupt motivation and potentially very harmful to the students.

Root Vow 2. To Abandon:

a) Not giving material aid or

b) not teaching the Dharma to those who are suffering and without a protector, because of miserliness.

The second one is also made up of two parts. Here, this is referring specifically to the motivation of miserliness.

This is a tricky one for me. Especially if you live in India, people are coming door to door for money. Even before the class tonight, somebody came asking for money. These situations make you look very, very closely at your motivation.

If somebody asks you for material help, money or donation, and you don't give out of miserliness – "I want to keep it for myself; I want to have this" – then you break this vow. If for example, some guy sitting on the street asks you for some money and you don't give because you are afraid that he is going to buy booze with it, that's not out of miserliness and you don't break this vow.

If there is some other motivation involved – if you have something more important to do, and you don't have the time to stop and give at that particular moment, or you don't have the right things to give, or you haven't checked up the situation completely yet to see if it is a good situation to give – then it's not a transgression. It's a transgression only if it is done out of miserliness.

Similarly, with the second part of not teaching the Dharma; somebody comes and asks you to teach or answer a question or explain something related to the Dharma. They are asking with a sincere motivation, but out of miserliness, you refuse. Then you break this vow. You might say, "Well, how can somebody be miserly about the Dharma?" Well, sometimes the mind can get very competitive, "I don't want to tell you about this teaching because then you might know as much as I do." The competitive mind that doesn't want to share Dharma information, that wants to keep it to yourself out of miserliness – this is what this vow is talking about.

If somebody comes and asks you a question, and you are not sure if their question is sincere, or they are asking something that is far too difficult for them to understand, or you are not confident with your own understanding, or you have something really crucial that needs to be done at that moment – if for any of these reasons, you don't answer their question, that is a different ball game. You can see how, at times, it is quite valid to have reservations about giving material things or giving Dharma. You have to understand the situation. It becomes a transgression only if it's done with miserliness.

Checking up how much we really need

[In response to audience:] Yes, there can be times when you really don't have the extra money, so you can't give. But we have to check, "Is this something I really need and so therefore I can't give? Or is it something that actually I could give, and it's just that my mind is clinging on." So we have to look at the situation.

[In response to audience:] I think it's good because it makes us ask what we need. Like if you have a job in the city, you might need certain kinds of clothes and you might need transportation, but do you need five kinds of clothes or do you need seven kinds of clothes? Settling for five might be perfectly okay, but the mind says, "Well no. If I give, then I can't have my tenth dress." [Laughter] So we have to see if miserliness is at work in these kinds of situations.

Being solicited for funds

In terms of being on the mailing list, and being constantly solicited, yes, that happens to me too. Every time I get something or somebody comes to the door, it brings up this whole issue and it makes me think about it. Sometimes I feel, "Well, let's just give a little bit, even one or two dollars, I am giving something. One or two dollars isn't going to break me." Or, some groups send out letters four times a year, and so with those, what I feel is I will send something in once a year, instead of four little checks. Then some things may not seem so important compared to other charities, they don't seem so worthwhile, so maybe I won't give to these in an attempt to steer the limited resources towards something that I consider more worthwhile. So it's kind of weighing all these different alternatives.

[Audience:] What's the difference between attachment and miserliness ?

Attachment is that mind that wants, wants, wants, wants, and miserliness is the mind where once you have something, you don't want to give it away. Miserliness is a type of attachment. Attachment is "I want many more glasses"; miserliness is: "This one, I am not going to give to you."

[In response to audience:] What you brought up about the miserly mind or the mind of attachment is a very good point because this does permeate so much of our existence – that mind that clings to things. There is a difference between liking something and wanting it. There's a difference between wanting something and clinging with attachment to it. This is the mind that is never satisfied, that always wants more. To counteract this, I think it's not just a thing of saying, "I shouldn't have that because that is a negative mind," but to really look and recognize that when that attitude is present, it causes me problems. So it is not a question of saying, "I shouldn't be miserly," but to look at our mind when we are miserly and recognize how that mental state makes us unhappy and how it keeps us in the cycle of samsara with all of its attendant problems.

Feeling guilty is not useful

Our Western psychology makes us feel, "If I feel guilty for it, it is not quite so bad, because I am making myself suffer. I atone somehow through my suffering." From the Buddhist perspective, that doesn't work. A mind of regret is something else, if you look at your own miserliness and say, "I really regret I am so miserly." But guilt as a way of atoning doesn't work.

It's not just a thing of guilt saying, "I am bad because I have this", but taking the time to see the disadvantages of that attitude. What we tend to do mostly, is just feel guilty without looking at the disadvantages. But the guilt doesn't make us change. The guilt makes us get stuck. If we look at the disadvantages of that mental state, we can see the disadvantages very clearly. Since we want to be happy and we see how that mental state makes us unhappy, that gives us some impetus to change it. So then it's acting not based on guilt but on care for ourselves and others.

Root Vow 3. To abandon:

- a) Not listening although another declares his/her offence or**
- b) with anger blaming him/her and retaliating.**

The bodhisattva vows definitely push buttons. You ready for the third one? [Laughter] The third one again has two parts. Maybe you've been kind to somebody, you've done something for somebody, and then they just act really nasty towards you. They're harmful and obnoxious. They drive you completely nuts. After a while they begin to see what they have done and feel some regret and they come and apologize to you. What do we do? Either we do the first part; we don't accept the apology. We refuse to forgive them. We don't even listen. The minute somebody starts apologizing, we say "Get out of here, I don't want to hear it!" Or we may not be doing anything but in our heart, we're really angry. We are not forgiving at all. This will be fulfilling the first part of "not listening although another declares his/her offence".

And then fulfilling the second part is, not only do we not forgive and hold on to the grudge and the anger, we retaliate. We blame them. We criticize them. When somebody comes to apologize, we say, "Oh, it is good you are apologizing. You've been a real idiot. You've done this, and you've done that, you should really feel sorry for yourself!" We are so angry and our anger is so pent up. We want revenge. Now that they are here to apologize, we can make them feel really bad. We can retaliate. We really dish it out. [Laughter]

Root Vow 4. To Abandon:

- a) Abandoning the Mahayana by saying that Mahayana texts are not the words of Buddha or**
- b) teaching what appears to be the Dharma but is not.**

The fourth one again has two parts. The Mahayana teachings are the teachings of the Buddha that emphasize the development of altruism and the cultivation of the six perfections. It emphasizes the

attainment of enlightenment rather than nirvana and freedom from cyclic existence.

[Audience:] What's the difference between liberation from cyclic existence (nirvana) and enlightenment?

When you are liberated from cyclic existence, you've removed your own afflictions [Note: 'afflictions' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitudes'] and the karma that causes cyclic existence, but you still have these subtle stains on the mind, and your mind may not be completely compassionate and loving and altruistic. You're satisfied with liberating yourself. Whereas when you want to attain enlightenment, you develop the altruism in which you want to liberate others as well, so you want to develop your mind fully to do that.

Historical background

I want to give you a little bit of historical background on this vow. The appearance of the Theravada tradition and the Mahayana tradition happened at different times historically in a very public way. The earlier scriptures that were written down became the Pali cannon and that is what is practiced in the Theravada tradition. That tradition was really strong and still thrives to this date.

Around the first century B.C., you have the beginning of the arising of the Mahayana tradition, where the Mahayana sutras became more publicly known. What has happened is that some people say the Mahayana sutras aren't the real teachings of the Buddha. They say that the Mahayana sutras were written afterwards by other people and passed off as Buddha's sutras. The position of the Mahayana is that the Buddha actually taught these scriptures, but because people's minds were not ready for them, they were not passed on in a big way publicly. They were passed from a few teachers to disciples in a very quiet, private way. It was only around the first century B.C. and after that, that they began to be written down, expanded on and distributed more publicly.

Another explanation is that those scriptures were taken to the Land of the Nagas. A naga is a kind of animal that lives in the water. The nagas protected the scriptures until a time when the people in our world had the openness and the good karma to be able to appreciate them. Then Nagarjuna, the very famous Indian sage (that's how he got his name) went to the land of the nagas and brought these Prajnaparamita sutras back to this world.

That's how the Mahayana explains it.

Interpreting historical evidence

[In response to audience:] The scholars may have done this historical analysis on the linguistic style, etc and they may say, "Well, these (Mahayana) sutras are in a different language or style and blah, blah, blah. It indicates that they were written in the second century A.D." Well, that's okay. We don't have any proof that the Mahayana sutras were present in the world in the early century of the Buddha's doctrine. You could say that historically it looks like that was what happened. But that's quite different from saying that the sutras were made up, that they are not the Buddha's words. The scholars could say, "I don't know, maybe they came from another way." Or we could say, "Well, they were protected in the Land of the Nagas", although I don't think you'd write that in the Western...

[Teachings lost because of change of tape]

Why this vow is so important

...This is my interpretation of why this vow is so important. I think for many people, they want to know what the Buddha's word is, and if something was not said by Buddha Shakyamuni, they are not going to practice that. They think, "Well, it might be completely wonderful advice anyway, but if I can't prove that the Buddha said it, I am not going to practice it." So it is to prevent against that kind of throwing-the-Buddha-out-with-the-bath-water mentality.

[Audience:] How can we be sure that the scriptures as they are today are exactly the words that came out of the Buddha's mouth?

Right, I understand what you are saying. I remember I asked one lama about this. I said, "Is it possible

that maybe somebody didn't remember them correctly, because for 500 years they were being passed down orally. Is it possible that maybe somebody, when they were being passed down orally, made a mistake or added something in? Is it possible that when they were being translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan, somebody didn't do a completely accurate translation? Isn't it possible that somebody added a few extra words because he thought it would be helpful to explain what the Buddha said? This lama's reply was, yes, that is completely possible. But the thing is, we are not exactly sure which sutra that pertains to.

Also when you look at the sutras, you'll see that there's so much repetition in them. They'll have a list of something, and the list will get repeated over and over again in the course of the sutra. Now, whether the Buddha repeated this list over and over again when he was actually speaking, I don't know. It might have been that in the early years, repeating a thing over and over again was a way to ensure that the people who recited the sutras remembered them very well. This is my personal opinion. So I don't think that the repetitions we see in the sutras necessarily mean that when the Buddha spoke, he did the repetitions. Or maybe he did, as his way of helping people to remember, reciting it again and again.

The point here is, or the reason why it is harmful for us if we denigrate the Mahayana is as follows. For example we say, "The Buddha didn't teach the altruistic intention (or the far-reaching attitude of wisdom, or the far-reaching attitude of patience), therefore I am not going to practice it." If people get that kind of idea, that's harmful to their own practice. This is the point. It's not a thing of, "Let's hold on to the Mahayana so that nobody attacks it." It is that if we start criticizing the different practices in these texts, we're throwing out the basis for our spiritual practice.

Tengyur: the commentaries on the Buddha's teachings

[In response to audience:] People definitely did amplify the Buddha's word, and a lot of that can be found in what we call the tengyur or the commentaries. From the beginning, people were definitely expanding on and amplifying the Buddha's word. They wrote commentaries, and we're studying many of them. Even though the Buddha didn't write "Bodhichayavatara" (Shantideva did), everything Shantideva said is taken from the Buddha's teachings. He just took out different things, arranged them in a different way, and amplified and explained them. It's definitely something that we should practice.

[Audience: inaudible]

My own personal take on this vow (and I haven't checked this with any of my teachers) is that this is reflective of earlier historical arguments between different schools of Buddhism. Some of the schools said the Mahayana sutras are "state-certified". Some said "No, they aren't". This vow was perhaps indicative of some of the debates that were going on in ancient India. That's one way to look at it. But what I am getting to is, whether that is true or not, the whole point of the vow is to not throw out virtuous practices.

[Audience:] Why is it so important to trace the source of a teaching to the Buddha?

I think one of the reasons why we're always saying, "The Buddha said", and tracing things back to the Buddha, is because sometimes we might believe something is very wise when it isn't. We can look back on our life and many, many times, there were things that we vigorously believed in and defended, that we were sure were completely true, at which we look back now and say, "How could I have ever believed that?" This is the reason why we are always trying to make sure that what we are doing has the source in the Buddha's teachings. There is some reason for wanting it "state certified".

[Audience:] Because we have faith in the name?

Yes. And in his attainments and in his realizations.

[Audience:] But we still have to apply it and see if it's true, don't we?

Definitely. We definitely have to apply it and see if it is true, and not get hung up on state certification. But when we are trying to decide what to apply and what not to apply, then we do look at what's been certified, and what hasn't been.

[In response to audience:] Yes, on those kinds of things, you could say, "Well, this might be one of those scriptures that that lama was talking about, where somebody added something else afterwards. Or we can also look at it and say the Buddha taught according to the culture of that time and according to his audience, and if you understand ancient Indian culture, it was very sexist. It is still very sexist now. Most societies are very sexist.

[In response to audience:] One way to look at it is you can say, "Well, Buddha said this because he rocked the boat a lot, but if he turned it completely over, nobody would believe anything he said at all. So he had to say a few things that are ...[Audience speaks] Right. Exactly.

[Audience:] Are we buying into a dogma by this vow?

[In response to audience:] What you are saying is, you don't want to buy into a dogma and feel that you have to believe in this dogma because somebody else said so, and that you are not a good Buddhist if you don't believe it. And that you are going to hell because you are breaking your vows.

The rationalizing mind

I don't think that that is really what is meant by this vow. I don't think we are committing ourselves to buy into a dogma, come hell or high water. The Buddha's whole approach was question, research – try it out. What I think we are doing is saying, "I am going to keep an open mind about these Buddhist scriptures. If I read something in the Mahayana that doesn't suit my temperament, I'm not going to say 'Pooh! I'm not going to shove it out simply because it doesn't agree with what I want to believe in today.'" I think what it is saying is we are going to question it, debate it, research it, and we are going to try it out and see if it works.

[In response to audience:] Let me read you what Kirti Tsenshap Rinpoche said: "...that is, after a practitioner without the right capacity has come into contact with the Mahayana teachings and has taken the bodhisattva vow, they might think that the bodhisattva teachings and the paths are unsuitable and not realistic. The bodhisattva practices being very vast, that person might think that that practice is not realistic, that the six far-reaching attitudes cannot really be practiced and that therefore they cannot have been taught by the Buddha." They think, "The bodhisattva practice is just too vast. It's too complicated. How can I ever do that? It's impossible for me to do it, therefore the Buddha didn't really teach it."

[In response to audience:] Yeah, right! You're rationalizing it. When something doesn't jive with your own ego, you say it is not "state-certified", that the Buddha didn't really say it.

[In response to audience:] Yes, if you have complete and accurate historical evidence that the Buddha didn't say certain things, then it's a totally different ball game from just this mind that's rationalizing and excusing. It's like "I have been trying to practice bodhicitta for so long, and it is so difficult. My mind is so out of control and there's so much self-cherishing. The Buddha really couldn't have meant that we're supposed to cherish others more than ourselves. He really didn't mean that, because I have been trying to do that and it is impossible. I am not even going to try anymore because he really didn't say that." It sounds good, doesn't it? [Laughter] This is exactly how the mind works.

[Audience:] Is there anything in the two sets of sutras that are contradictory?

Here, we get into the whole subject of the definitive sutras and the interpretable sutras. What we are getting at is, if you only look at the sutras literally, you might find some things that are contradictory. For example, at one time the Buddha said, "There is a self", and at other time, he said, "There isn't a self." If you take a fundamentalist, literal interpretation, then you will say he is contradicting himself. But he is not contradicting himself. The Buddha taught people according to their mentality, and the teaching needs to be interpreted further. To the people who had a higher capacity to understand, he said it the way it actually is. So with all the Buddha's scriptures, there is a whole lot of interpretation that can go on to get at what the Buddha really meant.

As you study the different philosophical traditions that arose out of the Buddha's teachings, you will see that the teachings have been interpreted in different ways. Some schools will say, "Buddha said this and it is literal." Other schools say "No, it is not, it has to be interpreted." So interpretation is allowed. It is good that there is interpretation. If you have a vast mind and you really understand the Buddha's intent

very well, then you will be able to recognize what needs to be interpreted and what doesn't need to be interpreted.

Reason for having debates

[In response to audience:] Well, the reason for debating isn't just to settle on what the public doctrine is going to be. The reason for debating is to increase our own wisdom and intelligence and our own clarity of mind. The purpose of the debate is not so much to arrive at the correct answer, as it is to really sharpen your mind and help you to see an issue from many different angles and perspectives.

Teaching what appears to be the Dharma but is not

Let me finish the second part of that, which is teaching what you're passing off as the Mahayana and as the Dharma, but really isn't. With Buddhism coming to the West, this one is so easy to do. You mix a little psychology in, you mix a little this in, and a little that in, and you call it Buddhism. But it is not. It's like you have a hard time with what the Buddha really meant, so you say, "Well, he didn't really mean that. He really meant this, and this happens to be what I believe." [Laughter] Yeah? "What he meant just happens to be what I believe and that is what I am teaching you." So you're passing off your own beliefs in the mistaken notion that they are what the Buddha taught. You're passing them off to other people as the Dharma, and that's really harmful.

[In response to audience:] Depends on who you ask this question to. [Laughter] So if you're sexist yourself, and you pass it off like the Buddha is sexist, and you validate it by saying, "But look, he said this." [Audience speaks] If you ask somebody who is sexist that question, they'll tell you, "Well, that's okay". If you ask me that question, I am going to tell you that that person doesn't have a deep understanding of the Dharma. That person doesn't understand how harmful that language is and how defeating it is of the real purpose of the Buddha, which was for everybody to practice the Dharma and attain enlightenment. That's how I would answer that question.

Keeping the link with our Asian teachers

[In response to audience:] That's why we always have to think ourselves. This is one of the reasons why I like to go back to India every year and see my teachers, to let them know what I am doing, because I am bringing the Dharma from an Asian culture to an American culture, so the language I give the teachings in and the examples that I use are very different from the way I was taught. So I want to go back and check with my teachers and see if everything I am saying is okay.

I think what is really important as we bring Buddhism from the East, is that we keep the link with the Asian teachers very strong, and not have this real proud, American attitude of, "Well, now that we understand Buddhism, we are going to make that all ours. Those Asian teachers don't understand anything." You see some people having that attitude, maybe not as grossly as that, but there is that attitude. That's why I think it's important that we keep thinking and questioning our own understandings, and never assume that we have understood things exactly or think we can never refine our understanding. What I'm finding over the years is that I think I understand things, and I even know the words and I can repeat them, but a few years later, I realize that I really didn't understand it at all.

Always refining our understanding

[In response to audience:] Yes. I think that's why it's good that you teach according to a text, and that you keep coming back to the text. That's why you find some lamas, when they teach, they keep quoting the scripture, or they keep quoting the Indian pundits. (I am not very good at memorizing quotations, so I don't do that.) We may think we understand a teaching when we listen to it, but we should also realize there is a lot more to understand than just the superficial meaning of the words. The whole idea is to always recognize we need to keep growing in our understanding. When you hear teachings from teachers, think about them. That's the whole thing. Think about them, get other sources, ask questions, and get other opinions, so that our own understanding can keep getting refined.

I was just thinking also that we should remember that there are different levels of interpretation of things. When we first hear the teachings, we might understand one level of the interpretation and then, as we understand more and more, the level of interpretation gets deeper and deeper. In terms of abandoning the Mahayana, it's saying, "I don't even want to deal with this issue. I want to just toss it aside because I don't like it and it doesn't make sense to me." We want to cultivate the attitude of, "I am going to sit here

and wrestle with this. Right now, I am interpreting it this way. What did the Buddha really mean? Is my present interpretation correct? Am I understanding things right?" Really wrestle with things and dig in. That's completely all right because you are engaging, debating, and questioning. People might have different interpretations and you argue with them. You look at your own interpretation from one year to the next and you see it can be very different. To me none of these would be abandoning the Mahayana. To me, it would be abandoning the Mahayana if we say, "I don't want to engage in that whole thing to start with. The whole thing just looks too difficult. I don't understand it, so I am going to say Buddha didn't say it."

[From 28 Jul 93 teaching]

[Audience: Inaudible]

If you take Dharma principles and apply them to your secular work, great. But when you're teaching a secular view point and saying they are the Dharma... See, the difficulty here is teaching things which aren't the Dharma but saying that the Buddha taught it.

At the teacher's conference with His Holiness, we had a discussion about psychology. We talked about how visualization techniques can be useful for people in therapy. Another idea that came up was, if people have some affinity for Christianity, for example, you could teach them to do a visualization with Jesus. Or they could do the four opponent powers and then Jesus sends light to them and to others. His Holiness said doing this kind of thing is great. It is good. It helps people. But we should not call it a Buddhist practice. It is a thing of keeping clear what is a Buddhist practice and what is taking things from Buddhism that are beneficial for people and teaching them in other circumstances, where they become mixed up with other faiths and practices.

You are right. Basic Buddhist ethics and many things in Buddhism are helpful for people. You don't need to be a Buddhist to practice many of the thought training techniques or thought transformation. They're very helpful and I think therapists could use a lot of this. It is completely all right to do that.

Let's say you go down to Cloud Mountain [Retreat Center] to lead a Buddhist retreat. You are portrayed as a Buddhist teacher. But besides teaching Buddhism, you are also teaching Shamanism and Sufi dancing. If you tell the retreat participants, "I'm teaching Shamanism, Sufi dancing and Buddhism," this is fine. Completely clear. But if you don't do that and you say, "These are all Buddha's teachings. I'm a Buddhist teacher. Yes, we can do the Shamanistic practices. Yes, we can do the Sufi dancing. It's all Buddhism anyway. It's all one! (That famous statement that drives me nuts!)" [laughter] – then it becomes real dangerous.

Or if you go in as a Buddhist teacher and say, "Oh, the Buddha said that we have 84,000 defilements, so everybody who is a meditator needs to have therapy." [laughter] Passing things over as Dharma that aren't Dharma. I'm making extreme examples but there are interesting things going on out there. This is our challenge: What's the true essence of the Dharma?

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>