

**The Far-reaching Attitude of Joyous Effort – Part 5 of 5:**  
**Four Aspects of Joyous Effort** (lightly edited transcript)  
*by Ven. Thubten Chodron© at Dharma Friendship Foundation, Seattle. 26 Jan 94*

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## 1. Aspiration

In the previous session, we started talking about the four different aspects that were important for joyous effort. Aspiration is one of them – the wish to practice because we see the advantages of the practice. Also, we understand karma, so we know what the result is if we don't practice, and what the result is if we do practice. That gives us a feeling of aspiration, wanting to practice, wanting to develop joyous effort.

## 2. Steadfastness

The second one is steadfastness or stability or consistency. This is the mind that is able to stick to it. In the last session, we had a whole discussion on self-confidence and how self-confidence is a cause for steadfastness in the practice and how important it is. Shantideva says that it is very important before you commit yourself to something, to first think about it, "Do I have the resources to do this? Is this what I want? Am I going to be able to complete it?" First you evaluate, and once you have committed yourself, then remain steadfast in the practice.

Shantideva was talking about this not only in terms of practice, but also in terms of things in daily life. Before promising friends that we are going to watch their kids or do something, or before getting married, to think about it well before hand, "Will I be able to complete this?" If we can see that we won't be able to, then put it off for the time being and let the other people know. If we see that we will be able to and we have the resources to overcome potential difficulties that may arise when we are doing it, then to remain stable and steadfast so that we can complete it. Because if we start and stop things, always starting and stopping, then we never get anywhere. In addition, it also creates the karma so that in future lives we are never able to complete our projects.

You can see sometimes people who just can't seem to carry anything through from beginning to end. You may work with a person like that. They said they were going to do something and they started it, and then they gave up. It's like everything they do, somehow, either from external causes or internal causes, they cannot bring it through to a conclusion. That is a karmic result of not being steadfast, of committing and then drawing back and committing and drawing back.

That is why it's suggested, in our practice, to really stick with things. And especially not to always jump around, doing this and that practice and this thing and that thing, because then it is very hard to make a lot of progress. We can see it with any kind of discipline. If you want to learn skating or you want to learn football, it requires perseverance. Dharma practice is no different from any other kind of practice in that respect. It needs to be done consistently and with the heart in it. But the difference between Dharma practice and football practice is that with one, you wind up with a broken this or that, and with the other

one, you wind up as a Buddha. It is a matter of sitting and thinking about what you want the result of the effort you put in to be.

Also if we are steadfast, it gives us much more confidence in ourselves because we can see that we are able to do something and complete it. And then the more confidence we have in ourselves, the more we become steadfast in what we do too, because we have that kind of buoyancy and confidence which give us the impetus to stick through things even when they are difficult. It is important to cultivate that kind of – His Holiness says – strong will power, not this kind of tight will power but a strong enthusiasm or wish to do something that is important to bring to fruition on the path. We can't become a Buddha otherwise.

### 3. Joy

The third factor is the factor of joy. This is having a happy mind that takes delight in the practice. One way to develop joy is to think of the joy that people take in doing things that are very worldly. People take tremendous joy in building up a big chain of used car dealers. They take tremendous joy in going on vacation and all the things that worldly people take joy in. But these bring very limited results. You will get some kind of result and then it is finished, except for the karma that you have created.

Whereas if we think about the result of the Dharma practice and the happiness that lasts, then that gives us much more joy in doing the practice. We know that it brings a good result, and in particular, once we reach the higher paths, we will never slide back down again. We generate a sense of joy in wanting to do the practice because we see the beneficial results that it will bring.

#### Having joy in our practice vs pushing ourselves

Here it's also important to note that there is a big difference between having joy in your practice and pushing yourself. There is a very big difference. Lama Yeshe used to talk a lot about that because he saw that we Westerners go into Dharma practice with our high achieving will power minds of, "All it needs is will power and I am going to do this and I'm going to get it right..."

#### [Audience: Inaudible]

Type "A" personalities, exactly! Neurotic type "A" products of high achieving families who feel that they have to do it right the first time! And then we get performance anxiety. This kind of attitude of pushing ourselves is the very opposite of joyous effort. Joyous effort has joy in it, whereas pushing has guilt, obligation, wanting to prove it to ourselves and others. It has all these other sorts of stuff in it. It's very important when we practice, to not push ourselves.

But the antidote to not pushing ourselves isn't to lie back and do nothing. This is where we flip flop. Either we push ourselves or we lie back and do nothing. The real antidote is this joy in the practice and we have the joy because we can see that the practice is going to bring a result that we want very much, and that makes us happy.

#### Thinking about the qualities of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas

To generate this joy, it is very helpful sometimes to think about the qualities of the bodhisattvas and the qualities of the Buddhas. We talked about the qualities of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas when we studied refuge previously. When we hear them, we think, "Wow! What would it be like to be a bodhisattva and when I heard somebody needed help, my mind was instantaneously happy?"

Wouldn't that be nice if instead of thinking, "Oh God," when somebody needs help, my mind is so well trained that when I hear somebody needs help, I think, "I want to do it." Wouldn't that be wonderful? That is how a bodhisattva feels spontaneously, so we think about that. "Now wouldn't it be nice to become a bodhisattva. I would like to feel like that spontaneously." That gives us that kind of joy to train our minds in the attitudes that the bodhisattvas have.

Or we think of another bodhisattva quality. When a bodhisattva walks into a room, the first thing they think of is, "Here are all these people who have been kind to me, and I wonder how I can help them." We usually walk into a room and think, "Here are all these people I don't know. Oh I feel kind of nervous and afraid. Who is going to like me and who is not going to like me and what are they going to think about me and what are they going to ask me to do? Am I going to fit in?" – all of our usual anxieties.

Wouldn't it be nice to be a bodhisattva and not have that anxiety and to be able to walk into a room full of strangers and feel, "Wow, all these people have been my closest friends before. I really understand them. These people have been very kind. I wonder what they need. I wonder how I can help. Wonder what they are thinking. I wonder what it would be like to be their friend." Wouldn't it be nice to be able to walk into a room and think like that? If we think that's how a bodhisattva is, then that gives us some kind of joy, "I want to practice because I want to train my mind so I can be like that too."

In this way we think of the different qualities of the bodhisattvas. We have been doing all this study about the far-reaching attitudes – generosity, ethics, patience, and so on. And so with any of them, when you review your notes, just think for a while, "Wow, what would it be like to have that? What would it be like to be like that, to feel that way spontaneously?" For a moment imagine that; imagine what it would be like and then think, "Oh yeah, that sounds wonderful. I think I am going to practice in that way." In that way we develop the joy that wants to practice, because we can see the benefit of it.

This way of thinking, this way of meditating is a very good way to review the far-reaching attitudes. At the same time you develop a sense of joyous effort in them, and it also enhances our refuge because the beings who are like this are the ones whom we are entrusting our spiritual guidance to. What I am trying to do is pull together a lot of different strands from different meditations so that you can see how they relate.

Implicit in this joy is the mind that can practice in a reasonable way; the mind that isn't tight and guilty, but the mind that is happy and relaxed and accepts ourselves at where we are. "I am not a bodhisattva yet, but I am practicing on that path. I don't have those abilities yet but that's okay because I know that I can train myself and develop them." Whereas the pushing mind is so self-critical, "Oh I don't have generosity yet. There are three kinds of generosity and I don't have this one and I don't have that one and oh God what a wreck I am!" Talk about non-acceptance and judgmentalism – that is what the pushing mind is. The joyous mind is totally opposite. The joyous mind says, "Oh I don't have those qualities but wouldn't it be wonderful to have those. Yeah I think I am going to try that." It's just a matter of the way we think, isn't it? So, developing this sense of joy.

#### 4. Rest

##### **Knowing when to take a break**

The fourth aspect of joyous effort, the fourth thing that is very essential for joyous effort, is rest. [laughter] I think this is very important. Rest is part of joyous effort. Part of being joyous and having effort in the practice is knowing when to take a break. It's knowing that we don't have to get neurotic and push ourselves and become a high achiever. We do something and we take a break. It is like when you do retreat, you do a meditation session and you take a break. You don't sit there and squeeze yourself twenty-four hours a day. You practice in some kind of reasonable way. If we are doing a lot of service work, we do a lot of service work but we also take a break.

The whole idea is that when we get burnt out, when we get exhausted, then it becomes very difficult to help anybody. If we push too much and we get tired in our practice, then it becomes difficult to continue, so that is why it is very important to learn to be balanced people and to learn to take a rest and take a break when we need to. That's very important.

That is a hard thing for us to do because so often we feel, "I just have to do more and more and more." But it's really learning to be balanced. People talk so much about, "Well, you just have to learn to say 'no.' When everybody's hounding you, you just have to say 'no.'" That kind of tone of voice and that kind of way of talking to ourselves is very different from saying, "When you work hard, when you are tired, you have to relax to recoup your strength so that you can go on." Both those things – "I have got to say no to these people" and "I have completed something and I am going to take a rest," – are coming to the same point, which is, as one person said, "If you want to be happy, resign as general manager of the universe." [laughter] But they are coming at it from two different attitudes.

When we get into this thing of, "Well I am going to stand up for myself and just say 'no,'" our mind is so tight. We are more at peace if – and again this relates to the whole thing of acceptance – we think, "Well I did something. I rejoice at that and I am glad that I did that. I dedicate that merit and now it is

completely okay to take a break because I am taking the break so that I can continue to benefit others.” You still get your break and your rest but your mind is happy and peaceful with yourself and with others in the process of doing that. We can learn to practice in a regular normal way without getting fanatical and without getting exhausted in the process. The important thing is knowing when to take a break.

### **Being responsible when we take a break**

And then of course if we need to take a break, to communicate that to the people that we are in dependent relationships with so that it doesn't become a case of lacking stability or steadfastness, as explained above. When we take a break, let people know and make provisions so that other people can take over what we need to do, instead of just fading out of existence. This is something that is very important because I think sometimes we know we need to take a break from something, but we are so afraid to say to somebody, “I need a break.” We are afraid or we feel that they are going to humiliate us, or we are going to feel humiliated if we say it. I don't know what exactly is going on in our mind, but because we are afraid to be direct and honest with the person, we just drop the whole thing, fade out of existence, and leave the person saying, “I thought you were going to come over and do this for me, but I haven't heard from you in weeks.” The desirable approach is to be responsible when we take breaks, when we take rests, and not feel guilty when we do.

### **Pacing ourselves**

One part of rest is taking breaks so that we don't get tired. It is also learning to pace ourselves, in our life in general, and in our practice. It is not four hours of meditation today and nothing tomorrow, but this whole thing of pacing and joy and consistency. It is building up a different habit, isn't it? Because wouldn't it be nice to be consistent and joyful and pace ourselves properly so that we get a proper balance of effort and rest? If we did that, then we could make a lot of progress.

### **Doing practices within our capability**

Another aspect of this thing of rest is to temporarily postpone doing practices that are too difficult for us at the present moment. Rather than jumping in way over our heads and starting with practices that are very high and complicated so that we just start feeling, “Oh God I am so confused,” and give it up, maybe just hear the teachings on those practices. Know that we won't be able to put them all into practice right away, but we are listening and we are taking it in as much as we can, but we are not going to make it the centerpiece of our practice right now because we are not capable of doing it.

Often there are opportunities to hear teachings that are quite high or quite complicated and we need to make a decision. We may say, “If there is a lot of commitments and I am not able to do them, then maybe I shouldn't take this certain empowerment.” Or we may decide, “Well, there aren't very many commitments, or I can handle the commitments that there are, so I am going to take this. But I know that I am not going to make this the centerpiece of my practice because if I look honestly, I don't have the determination to be free and bodhicitta and wisdom yet. Making this tantric practice the centerpiece of my practice is going about it upside down. I'll keep my commitments and I'll do my mantra and visualization everyday, but the real place where I am going to put most of my effort, is let's say, determination to be free, working with the eight worldly concerns, bodhicitta and wisdom.”

The thing is to be able to know where different practices are on the path, know what we can take and what we can't take, and how to balance our practice. There is a real tendency in the West to think, “Well, this is the highest practice. The fastest ones to enlightenment,” and so we jump in. We start to practice....

### **[Teachings lost due to change of tape.]**

...“...But that is something that is quite difficult. I aspire to be able to do it. There are certain aspects of it that I can do right now. I will do these right now, but the real place that I am at is, (let's say,) eight worldly concerns. That's what I am really going to work on right now.” Again it's coming to a kind of balance and temporarily postponing things that are difficult so that we can actually practice and make some progress on the things that are at our level right now.

Sometimes we find people who say, “Okay, I want to do prostrations. I want to do mandala offerings. I want to do Guru Yoga. I want to do Dorje Sampa. Give it all to me because I want to do 100,000 of them all!” And then they do like a hundred of them all and then say, “Oh it's too much, forget it!” These practices are wonderful practices, but look at your capabilities and say, “Well, maybe I should just work

on one of them right now. Or maybe I will work on all four or five of them, but I will just do a little bit each day." That's perfectly all right. Many people choose to do that. That can be quite good. You work on all of them at the same time and don't worry so much about the numbers. It is important to do things in moderation instead of thinking I have to do it all at once and push, push, push.

### **Not getting attached to the results**

Then another aspect of resting – and this is an interesting way of interpreting rest – is that we give up attachment to the things that we have already attained. Sometimes people might attain a certain level of calm abiding or a certain level on the bodhisattva path or they might begin to have certain states of samadhi, and resting here means taking a rest from those to progress onwards to upper things. It's taking a rest from being self complacent and smug in what we have already attained. Once you start getting some progress on the path, it's tempting to think, "Oh I have this samadhi and it's incredibly blissful. Let's forget about the wisdom aspect right now. I like the samadhi!" Part of what resting means, is not letting ourselves fall into being complacent or being attached to whatever attainments we have achieved, but taking a rest from those in order to make further progress.

### **Striking a balance**

Again with this whole thing of resting, it is very important not to push ourselves in the practice, because if we do push ourselves, then what used to be Dharma practice becomes something that creates more mental disturbance and anxiety inside of us, like when we think, "OK, I am going to do 100,000 Dorje Sampa mantras in 1 month!" Dorje Sampa is designed to purify the mind. It brings up your garbage, but you get a lot of good feeling from the meditation too. You will learn a lot. But when you push yourself excessively, then instead of the practice helping you along the path, you get *lung* – a kind of nervousness or anxiety because you are pushing, pushing, pushing – and then you can't do anything. Again it's this whole thing of being balanced. Dharma practice doesn't mean just mumbling off a certain number of mantras so that we can say, "Oh yeah I have said this certain number of mantras or I have done this number of prostrations." Rather, Dharma practice means maybe going slowly and really doing the transformation that is involved in those practices.

So this concludes the far-reaching attitude of joyous effort.

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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>