

Annam Thubten

No Self, no Problem

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Chapter Six

Acceptance: the method of effortlessness

Dharma Quote of the Week

The spiritual path is truly simple. It is simple because it is not about acquiring, accumulating, or achieving anything. It is all about giving up what we don't need. It's about giving up what isn't useful instead of acquiring things with the idea of going somewhere or achieving something. That was the old game. That game which we have been playing for a long time is like a vicious circle. It has no end.

Sometimes the spiritual search itself prevents us from seeing the truth that is always one with us. We have to know when to stop the search. There are people who die while they are searching for the highest truth with philosophical formulas and esoteric techniques. For them spiritual practice becomes another egoic plot which simply maintains and feeds delusions. Amazing! Buddha, God, truth, the divine, the great mystery, whatever you have been searching for, is here right now. (p.37)

--from *No Self, No Problem* by Anam Thubten, edited by Sharon Roe, published by Snow Lion Publications

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(Sample pages 54-63)

Each of us has a strong desire to live a life free from all unwanted conditions: illness, misfortune, old age, and death.

A few weeks ago someone asked me to talk about old age. I could see from the expression on his face that he was experiencing fear regarding the problem of so-called old age. As long as we are living in this human form it is impossible to have a life that is completely free from the conditions that we don't want: old age, illness, and other kinds of problems. Sometimes we are so extremely fearful that we have what I call a

phobia. Phobia is a psychological term that means we fear or dread something in an obsessive, even irrational, way.

This primal desire for perfect conditions is a complex mixture of our instinctual impulse for physical comfort and our unconscious drive to be free from anything that even remotely reminds us of our fragility and mortality. As a result each of us constantly fantasizes about having an utterly perfect existence.

We want to be in a paradise, in a heaven free from every circumstance we don't want to face. In all of human history, no one has actualized that kind of a life. Still we maintain and feed this childish fantasy that if we fight hard enough against reality, then sooner or later we will achieve this idealized life, free from all unwanted conditions and situations. Some of us work very hard fighting against reality.

One time I was invited to a party. There were a few people drinking champagne and soaking in a hot tub and, while they were in these very nice circumstances, they were complaining about their lives. They were complaining at that same exact moment they were drinking champagne and soaking in a hot tub and right after they had finished eating a very nice dinner. You see that this is contradictory. In some sense this is a little out of balance. These people had everything. They were having a fantastic time in terms of enjoying worldly pleasures and at the same time they were creating an imaginary experience of suffering and conflict. What they were complaining about doesn't really exist. If you looked for a reason to suffer, you could not find it anywhere in the proximity of their current situation.

In the same way, when we think that we have conflicts and hindrances, most of the time we can never actually find out where these conflicts and hindrances are. That's because they are only found lingering in our consciousness. Our consciousness is like a factory where we create all kinds of imaginary problems. It is a big factory.

Many people are rightly afraid of pollution. They are afraid of things like air pollution from automobiles, factories, oil refineries, and so forth. But unawakened consciousness is, I think, much more polluting than any of these. It might be useful to visualize that there is a factory in our consciousness constantly producing the pollution of imaginary problems, imaginary conflicts. It is the full time job of this egoic mind. No wonder that most people are suffering

People always suffer either consciously or unconsciously because they mistakenly believe that if they fight against reality then they will be able to achieve their fantasies. They will be able to achieve this childish fantasy that they can have a life free from all unwanted conditions such as old age, car accidents, not having enough money, being sick, having aches, and so forth. Maybe when we look back forty or fifty years from now, if we live long enough, the problems that we are struggling with today will be just a memory. Hopefully we will be quite awake at that time and we will say to each other, "I

was so immature then. I really didn't have to take everything so seriously because everything is already emptiness." One day we will be able to say that.

In Buddhism it is often said that there are external and internal hindrances, in other words, external obstacles and internal obstacles. The external obstacles are the more physical obstacles that we all face—things like earthquakes, being tired, a toothache, a flat tire, or anything that gets in the way of what we want. Nobody is born under such auspicious or lucky stars that they don't have to face external obstacles. We are constantly facing external obstacles each and every day. The moment we wake up, our nose is clogged. That is an external obstacle. The toilet doesn't flush correctly. That is an external obstacle too. Our fingernail is too long and our nail clipper is missing. That is an external obstacle. These are small obstacles.

However, every now and then we can have a major life crisis, like discovering that we are terminally ill or that we don't have enough money to buy food. That happens too. That is happening here to some extent, but it is not as widespread as in parts of the world where, day after day, people don't have any food. Either there is none or they can't afford to buy it. People can't feed their children. They don't know if there will be anything at all to eat tonight. They have to go out on the street and beg. That's their only hope of getting something to eat. At least most of us know that we are going to eat tonight. External obstacles can be challenging especially when there is a life crisis like the death of a loved one. Also, we could become ill, unable to meet our physical needs. It is very difficult to be in that position when you don't have a sense of spiritual realization, when you are not somebody like Milarepa or Machik Labdron or even one of my teachers, Lama Tsur Lo.

Lama Tsur Lo suffered from a spinal deformity. He was completely bent over at the waist and could not stand up straight. He always used a walking stick. He couldn't walk without it. His physical appearance was the exact opposite of the Greek god of beauty, Adonis. The extent of his wealth added up to zero. But Lama Tsur Lo was truly content and very, very happy. He had great spiritual realization but he was very humble and wanted people to think of him as very ordinary, not as a special or holy person. When you have true realization, like the great masters, you can transcend everything. You can transcend illness. You can transcend every problem that you can imagine and even those that you cannot imagine. There's not one single crisis or life condition that you cannot transcend when you are completely liberated, transformed, awakened inside through the power of cultivating spiritual discipline. For ordinary people who don't have that internal liberation, the external obstacles can be very challenging, so challenging that sometimes it can actually push them away from the path to liberation.

There is a tendency in many of us to think that spiritual practice is going to fix all of our problems. We carry these unexamined, infantile hopes and fantasies. This has to do with the fact that our relationship with spirituality is often dominated by unconscious forces. It is not the squeaky clean business we hoped it to be. It is a tricky, painful,

exhilarating, and ecstatic voyage. What could be more complex than that?

As long as we are building defense mechanisms, transformation will be exiled to the realm of improbability. And these defense mechanisms, wearing a spiritual mask now, comprise layers of denial, each one more subtle than the other. It is like finding a new cradle where we can be infantile again and have no responsibility for ourselves. Mommy and Daddy are projected onto an omnipotent god or guru who will take care of us eternally. There is nothing more gratifying than having no responsibilities. Conversion experiences are so sumptuous and juicy and vacation is so desirable. But this cradle is not well made. Sooner or later we will encounter its limitations.

When we become involved in a spiritual path, we see that it isn't going to fix all of our problems. As time goes by we begin to see that life's problems are not getting easier. There is no magic wand, so it is very common to lose that initial love that we had with our spiritual practice. Spirituality is not about fixing all of our problems and the earlier we find out about this, the less disappointment we are going to face. We have to let go of all of these fantasies. The earlier we let go of them the better it is. If we hang on to them, we often run into disappointment and that can sometimes create a huge obstacle to inner awakening. It can completely draw us away from the path. So we have to remember this and maintain the perspective that our spiritual path is not really a remedy or antidote that is going to fix all of our problems. It is not going to remove all of our unwanted conditions. We are not going to be loved by everybody because we are on a spiritual path. The world is still going to relate to us in the same way it used to. Nobody says, "Oh, now you are on the path. Now I am going to be much kinder to you. I'm going to send flowers. I'm going to create rainbows everywhere you go. I'm going to pave a nice royal road wherever you walk." On the contrary, sometimes it seems that the world becomes even more challenging when we are on the path because the spiritual path wakes us up. It requires losing all of our investment in illusion. Growth can be painful.

There is a saying, "Be careful what you wish for." We have to be careful what we wish for because sometimes if we pray for liberation, especially if we pray for liberation right now, then the world can be very wrathful and very challenging. When the world presents difficulties and obstacles to us it means that now, fortunately, we have the opportunity to pass through all of our reactions, all of our habits, all of our thought patterns, all of our karmic behaviors. We can rise above all of these illusory conditions and maintain the mind of the Buddha, blissful awareness.

Therefore, if we are determined to discover awakening at any cost, then we must also expect and be prepared for the fact that we may run into challenges and difficulties. These challenges are not always external obstacles; they are internal obstacles too. They include experiences of doubt, anger, irrational emotion, depression, and so forth. Even Buddha encountered a great challenge before his awakening. He had a vision that he was being attacked, ambushed by the forces of Mara, just before his total

enlightenment. It was the defining moment where he had to choose between triumph and utter defeat

So now the question is, How are we supposed to deal with outer conditions, the external aspects of everyday life? The answer is acceptance. We have to learn how to accept what is. This is the number one goal. Learning how to accept what is is the number one goal for spiritual seekers. Sometimes we do accept what is. As the great Tibetan saint Patrul Rinpoche said, “When your belly is full and the sun is shining upon you, you act like a holy person. But when negativities befall you, then you act very ordinary.” This means that it is easy to accept the circumstances of our life when everything is going well. But as soon as our expectations are disappointed, in the blink of an eye we lose all of our saintly composure. When things are going in the opposite direction, it is very hard to accept what is. The spiritual precept, the discipline that we have to try to maintain in our heart in all situations, is learning how to stay open in each moment. When we are not ready to accept, we are completely under the jurisdiction of ego and we don’t accept anything. We don’t even like the fact that we are on this planet. But there is nothing that we can do.

Ego is the problem. Sometimes ego is very spoiled, like a child who is constantly throwing tantrums. Sometimes ego doesn’t accept where we are. Sometimes ego doesn’t accept who we are. Sometimes ego doesn’t accept the way things are without any real complaint. So what do we do? There is nothing that we can do. Sometimes ego doesn’t accept the fact that the sky is blue but there is nothing that we can do. TYou see. Sometimes ego doesn’t accept that we are living on a planet that is permeated with natural disasters, earthquakes, floods, and other catastrophes. All we can do is accept that and learn how to surrender to the flow of all events.

When we accept the way things are we are able to love everything and everybody. When we are not able to accept even one thing in this world right now, then how could we ever develop boundless love? Lack of acceptance is conflict. Conflict is pain. It is psychological pain. It is a spiritual illness. As long as our hearts are tormented by that pain, we do not have the strength to give our heart to anything and because of that it is impossible to bring about inner awakening. Enlightenment, you see, is just another name for boundless love.

It is almost impossible to practice loving-kindness towards all living beings without addressing, in a meaningful way, the innumerable problems arising in our own lives. It is a contradiction, you see. It does not work. If our heart is tormented because we are not able to accept things the way they are, then it is impossible to open our heart. It is impossible to let go of all of our defenses and embrace others. Therefore we have to constantly practice and deepen our awareness. We have to remind ourselves to accept things as they are. This is pretty much what the teachings called Mind Training are all about. Mind Training in Buddhism is about carrying those perspectives and even reciting slogans, phrases like “I shall accept the way things are.”

There is a wonderful student who writes a reminder to himself every morning when he wakes up. He tells me, “Today my practice is to accept the way things are.” Or, “Today my practice is to love everybody.” Today my aspiration is, “I’m not going to get angry. I’m not going to judge people. I’m going to be thankful for everything.” He comes up with these amazing thoughts every day out of his utter devotion to spiritual practice. In the same way, we should turn our minds to reciting and carrying out those teachings, those enlightened perspectives, and say, “I am going to accept everything.” When we accept everything then there isn’t any problem. All problems dissolve right there.

When we don’t accept even one small thing then a small problem can become a big problem. Just a tiny problem, when you don’t accept it, can completely destroy your entire inner peace. Imagine that we look into the mirror today and suddenly realize, whatever . . . there is something wrong with our clothes. There is something wrong with our hairstyle. We have nice hair but then one hair goes astray. It is going this way and we want to keep pushing it, wanting it to go that way. If we take that seriously, it can be enough to destroy our whole day. At first it is no problem. Then we think, “I don’t like the fact that one hair is going in that direction.” Our mind has a tendency to blow everything out of proportion. “I really hate the fact that one hair is going in the wrong direction. I don’t like it. I hate it.” This dark thought keeps growing and before we know it our entire consciousness is taken over by that dark, poisonous thought. Then we become angry. We start yelling at people and they start yelling back at us. It creates this whole problem out of nothing. This might sound ridiculous, yet this is how most people live in the world. In general, we are dominated by our thoughts. We are not the master in our own house.

When we accept not just the small problems, but also even the big ones, then they become very easy to handle. We become like those great, enlightened masters, who were able to maintain a mind of love and ecstasy even when they were facing death. There are many stories about the enlightened ones who died in great bliss and grace. They did not carry any unfinished issues. For them death is not a termination but a homecoming. Ultimately there is no one to die. But death looks very real when we are still identifying with small self.

As spiritual seekers we don’t have to invite challenges but we do have to celebrate challenges when they visit us. I am not saying that we have to go around looking for trouble. That is not our assignment. But when troubles arise we must know how to surrender to them and accept them. We even have to be jubilant in a crisis and think, “Oh, this is such an extraordinary, golden opportunity to practice how to accept what I don’t like. If I am able to accept this condition at this moment in my life, then I will be able to transcend all of my fear, all of my insecurities. This is a blessing in disguise.” We have to almost prostrate to the challenges when they visit us without invitation. When they are actually knocking at our door, we have to be thankful to them. In that sense, as spiritual seekers, we have to take our whole life as our practice, as our path. Life is our

path. From the moment we wake up in the morning until the time we go to sleep at night, our whole life is filled with opportunities for cultivating acceptance, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, awareness, and mindfulness.

We don't have to be in any special place to practice true spiritual discipline. We don't have to be in a temple or a place of meditation. Life is filled with many opportunities to learn and grow. A friend of mine died of cancer. He had an expression that he used when he was going through difficulties. He always used to say, "This is AFOG, another f---ing opportunity to grow." That was his holy incantation, a little unconventional, but it worked for him. I remember him dancing and singing the last few months of his life. He told me that he had no fear. I sat with him while he was dying and he was totally peaceful. Looking at him was like looking at the face of a sleeping child. There was the same innocence and purity.

The internal obstacles, these are the more intimate issues. Imagine those psychological and spiritual issues that keep coming back. These internal issues keep coming back even after we feel we have resolved them. Sometimes we may feel



Anam Thubten

Anam Thubten's training in Tibet and his years of experience teaching Westerners are beautifully distilled in his remarkably clear new book, No Self, No Problem. This excerpt describes the core of the spiritual path.

Simple Awakening; (excerpt from *No self no Problem*)

When awakening happens, there is no longer any desire to become someone other than who we are. Every previous idea of who we are vanishes and along with it the pain, guilt, and pride associated with our body. In Buddhism this is called no self. This is the only true awakening. Everything else is a spiritual bypass. This awakening is what we should be aiming for from the very beginning of being on the path. It will rescue us from falling into unnecessary spiritual traps.

When we are openhearted and ready to drop our previous perceptions of self, then spiritual awakening can happen at any moment. There is a beautiful analogy. Imagine a dark cave that hasn't been illuminated for a million years. Then one day someone brings a candle into the cave. Instantaneously the darkness of a million years vanishes. Like that, when your true nature is realized there is no longer this "I" searching for anything else.

The awakening has nothing to do with our background. It has nothing to do with whether we have been meditating for a long time or not. It has nothing to do with meeting impressive teachers or gurus. It is simply dependent on whether or not we are open to it.

This opening, this receptivity, is basically related to our ability to resist arming the ego with concepts and ideas. A true spiritual path transcends all concepts and belief systems. It is not about reinforcing the mind's illusion of self as an identity. It is not about being a Buddhist, a saint, or a better person. It is really about deconstructing all of our illusions without any mercy.

It is very important to look into our mind to see what we are looking for, what we are seeking. This is especially relevant when we are going to receive spiritual teachings. When a spiritual teacher impresses us, we might discover that our desire is completely antagonistic to authentic awakening. Perhaps our mind is looking for comfort, for validation, for a spiritual high, or a new set of beliefs. Sometimes our ego convinces us that we are realizing this sense of no fixed self but at the same time we are holding on to another concept like trying to be sacred or spiritual. Holding on to concepts such as "sacred" or "spiritual" while we are working towards transcending self-attachment is very subtle.

Perhaps this sounds like a lot of work, like an arduous insurmountable task. It isn't when we find the secret ingredient. That is to know that this "I" is a fictitious entity that is always ready to wither away the moment we stop sustaining it. We don't have to go to a holy place to experience this. All we have to do is simply sit and pay attention to our breath, allowing ourselves to let go of all of our fantasies and mental images. Then we can experience connecting to our inner world.

As we begin to rest and pay attention, we begin to see everything clearly. We see that the self has no basis or solidity. It is a complete mental fabrication.

We also realize that everything we believe to be true about our life is nothing but stories, fabricated around false identifications. "I am an American. I am thirty years old. I am a teacher, a taxi driver, a lawyer...whatever."

All of these ideas or identities are stories that have never really happened in the realm of our true nature. Watching the dissolution of these individual stories is not painful. It is not painful to see everything dissolving in front of us. It is not like watching our house burn down. That is very painful because we don't want to lose everything. Spiritual dissolution is not like that because what is being destroyed is nothing but this sense of false identities. They were never real in the first place.



The Benefits of Falling Apart (excerpt from *No self no Problem*)

When we pray, what we are doing is invoking the spirit of devotion. Devotion is about no longer resisting anything.

We are no longer trying to hold the composure of this illusory entity, ego or self. Self is always collapsing and dissolving in each and every moment. It dissolves if we leave it as it is because it's not real from the very beginning. It's already unreal. It's already collapsing. When we try to construct and maintain the illusion of self, then we suffer quite a lot. We experience insecurity and madness because we are trying to uphold something that is already falling apart. Self is already falling apart. Suffering is already falling apart. And who is it that works so hard twenty-four hours a day trying to keep samsara together while complaining about it at the same time? Who is that person?

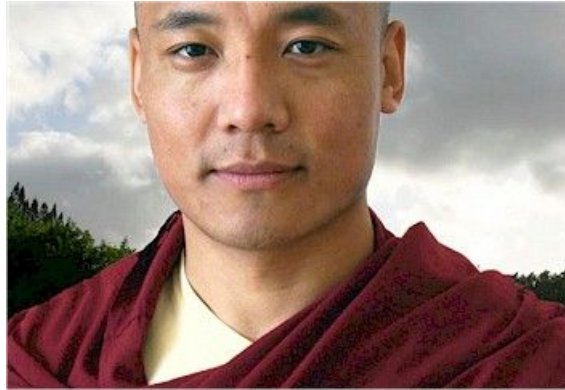
There is a bit of a dichotomy here. It's confusing too because we come to the spiritual path with a lot of enthusiasm and determination. We are complaining about samsara, our misery, and we are looking desperately for liberation. At the same time, we must remember that samsara is already falling apart. We may wonder how that can be. I have been stuck in it for many lifetimes. This vicious cycle is not falling apart on its own. The question is actually, "Who is the self? Who is the one who is trying to maintain that samsara?" Samsara is really very high maintenance. It costs lots of headaches and heartaches to maintain. Who is this self trying to construct samsara? Who is that person?

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"Real freedom is freedom from our own conceptions, from the psychological veil that is distorting the way things are. When we are free from our own unenlightened mind, that internal veil, we see that most of our problems are imaginary. Everything is a manifestation of great emptiness. That means that everything is divine. When we are able to surrender to reality we experience a great awakening. The act of surrendering to reality is enlightenment



Prayer, Awareness, and Choosing Enlightenment: An Interview with Anam Thubten



Anam Thubten

Jeff Cox: *Sometimes when I'm troubled, I'm moved to pray. But as a Buddhist I don't think of it as asking God for something. What is your view on the purpose of prayer?*

Anam Thubten: There are many ways to understand prayer. It means something different from person to person—and even for the same person, it might be different at different times.

To me, prayer is an act of devotion, and a non-conceptual, powerful method of dropping the ego mind of control, fear, doubt, and anger—right in the moment—and realizing the Buddhmind or bodhicitta. It is an act of surrendering everything to that great work of the universe—beyond anyone's control—and trusting in the grand play of the universe. When you trust in it, you feel released from the fear and insecurity and accept—not acceptance like we are trying painfully to accept something we don't appreciate, but true acceptance with trust.

The object of prayer is not so important in Buddhism, even though there are lots of deities and benevolent spirits. Buddhism teaches that deities such as Avalokiteshvara or Tara are not outside of oneself—they are an expression of one's true nature, the emptiness, the source of all things, the absolute truth.

JC: *So praying to Chenrezig is a way of calling on your own inner strength to help make circumstances go in a better way?*

AT: Absolutely. In the Tibetan tradition, we have these three buddhas (or bodhisattvas), Manjushri, Avalokitesvara, and Vajrapani. Manjushri symbolizes intelligence and wisdom, Avalokitesvara symbolizes love and compassion, and Vajrapani symbolizes strength, courage and power. They are all expressions of what we truly are; each of these principles is an inherent property of our basic nature. So when we pray to them, it is an act of invoking those inherent enlightened qualities present in all of us. In the ultimate sense, there is no object that is being prayed to—there is no separation between the object being prayed to and the person praying.

JC: *In your book No Self, No Problem you discuss how acceptance is a key to waking up to your true nature. Does this mean that one should go along with whatever is happening?*

AT: Part of Mahayana teaching is about bringing all things onto the path to enlightenment. This means that whatever happens, you accept it as a way to develop the enlightened qualities inside you—courage, love, forgiveness, compassion. From another perspective, the concept of acceptance is tricky because it has a connotation that you have to deliberately try to convince yourself to accept everything. The big question is who is it that is trying to accept and reject in the first place—the ego is present as the one trying to accept. The ego is running this whole game.

JC: *So the acceptance you are speaking of is not the opposite of rejection?*

AT: No, it is not the opposite. The enlightened mind (Rigpa or Buddhamind) goes beyond both accepting and rejecting—there is nothing to accept or reject—because Buddhamind is in perfect relation with the nature of all things. In this realm there is no conflict. So the idea of accepting and rejecting is really transcended. It doesn't exist there; it only exists in the ego's mind. In the Dzogchen tradition, the notion of accepting is regarded as a subtle effort of ego that has to be dropped in order realize the great peace or nature of all things.

JC: *In your book, you use the term "non-doing awareness." Can a person maintain non-doing awareness even while action is going on?*

AT: Absolutely. Non-doing awareness is not about whether you are doing something or not. The art of maintaining non-doing awareness is a rich practice.

JC: *Is the opposite of non-doing awareness the thinking of oneself as the doer?*

AT: The non-doing awareness can have different meanings. On one level we can speak of awareness as not doing anything. Awareness transcends all notions of effort. It doesn't try to reject or acquire. It is already enlightened, so there is nothing to purify, nothing to abandon, nothing to achieve. It itself is non-doing, it doesn't involve any effort or strategies in itself.

JC: *It is aware of the content of experience.*

AT: Absolutely. When one resides in that, it is totally different from any ordinary state of mind. It is different from trance states or samadhi which many people regard as spiritual. When one experiences pure awareness, there is no doing because there is nothing to be done. There is no act of trying to purify. There is nothing to acquire. It is in perfect harmony and relation with ultimate truth. The ordinary mind is very engaged in some kind of effort to dismantle the empire of the ego delusion and in trying to acquire something. It is very involved with doing.

JC: *Awareness is present in all states but we don't notice it.*

AT: Exactly. It is insight, knowing the nature of all things, the profound absolute truth of all things. In Tibetan, awareness is called Rigpa or Yeshe. "Ye" means primordial—it is already in each of us—that innate wisdom is not some conception or knowledge that we can acquire from reading, thinking or lectures. It is inherent in each of us. "She" means knowing the inconceivable, transcendent, and yet simple truth of all things. We can call it emptiness, dharmata. The rational mind cannot comprehend it. Awareness in this sense is insight (prajna). It is not that we are just enjoying some kind of stillness or some beautiful state of mind. Whenever we can reside in this—this is the highest form of practice—in that moment our mind is no longer different than the mind of Buddha Shakyamuni.

JC: *Does this awareness have the three qualities of the three buddhas you spoke of earlier?*

AT: Absolutely. This awareness doesn't happen with a big procession. It happens in a quiet and subtle manner. It is unfathomable like the ocean whose depth we cannot see. Awareness is the Buddhmind, a reservoir of enlightened radiance of wisdom, joy, compassion, love—they just happen on their own. Like the brilliant sun in the sky, it is the source of all the enlightened qualities that radiate from it. They are innate and are an expression of that awareness.

JC: *So for someone with this awareness the qualities of intelligence, love, compassion naturally radiate into their environment and spontaneously change things.*

AT: Yes. There are stories of the Buddha traveling into towns and cities; he brought his amazing benevolent presence. When someone is fully immersed in this awareness, what he or she naturally does is express that enlightened nature.

There was a lama named Mani Lama from Golok. When he was a young boy, he had a sudden awakening. He left his ordinary life, and traveled around eastern Tibet. Because he was not educated in a monastery, he didn't know how to teach in a traditional way, but people felt a tremendous peace around him. So wherever he went, people would gather around him. Because he didn't know what to teach, his teachings were short.

People would come and sit with him. Sometimes he gave spontaneous talks or would sing with them. Often he would sing the Mani or six-syllable mantra, and so people called him the Mani Lama. This is a great example of how, when someone lives in awareness, then his or her being becomes a radiance of compassion and love.

JC: *Since awareness is present in each of us, what does it mean to practice being aware?*

AT: Awareness is the nature of our mind and is not deceived by the world of illusion or display. When mind is deceived, we are deluded, ignorant of our true nature; this is the foundation of samsara, of conflict and suffering. The other side is the awareness or enlightened mind which sounds very grand but is very simple. Each moment is a tipping point—each moment we decide whether or not to be enlightened and free! There is a verse in one of the spiritual songs: "There is only one ground (the dharmadhatu or source or underlying truth of all things), only two paths and only two fruitions." This is one of my favorite verses, because it says there are not three paths, only two paths, the path of awareness and the path of unawareness. Every moment we either choose to be on the path of awareness or on the path of non-awareness. So in each moment we are enlightened or not.

When we really contemplate this verse, it shocks our minds. It is easy for many practitioners to think that even though they are not actually residing in awareness that somehow so long as they are doing the various practices they are making some kind of progress according to some invisible scale or record—because they are doing all the right practices they are going in the right direction. When you contemplate this teaching, it shocks your mind because you realize you are making the enlightenment choice in every moment.

Basically two things are happening, everything else is irrelevant—either you are enlightened in this moment or not. It is possible that I could be sitting on a beautiful meditation seat and doing all sorts of spiritual practices but I am completely unawakened. On the other hand, I might be cleaning my toilet and wearing blue jeans, but I could be residing in the awareness—this is what matters.

In the end, there is only one practice, that of maintaining awareness. And because it is uncontrived, it is not the effect of a cause—you cannot produce awareness. Whatever you can produce is "nyam," an altered state of consciousness—it can be enticing, seductive, whatever. People can get lost in nyams and think this is rigpa, bodhicitta, or samadhi. But mind is deceiving itself. Awareness cannot be produced. Buddha was asked "What causes mindfulness?" and he said, "Mindfulness itself." This answer is perfect—and can be non-satisfying.

There is a lama from Kham who said that the only way that you can have genuine realization is by holding 108 sessions a day. What he means is not that we must have

literally 108 sessions a day but rather that we should remember periodically throughout the day to pause. Pause and stop talking, wherever you are, as a way to get back to awareness.

JC: *Getting lost in thought seems to me to be a big obstacle to being aware.*

AT: Buddha spoke of attention as one of the most powerful methods to become free. Instead of going along with the mind and believing its stories—living the dream-like life—Buddha was suggesting to pause, to stop and look deeply into the nature of all things. Instead of wandering and dreaming, pause and look carefully and pay attention to everything carefully. When we do that, sometimes the perfect understanding or prajna reveals itself to us—we have the direct insight into all things, simply by paying attention to the depth of all things. We stop and pause as a way of questioning what the truth is, what freedom is.

This is an effective method for waking up. Right now in this moment. When we practice the traditional Buddhist methods we talk about mindfulness, we talk about paying attention to the breath and one's activities. The true meaning of paying attention is more than about paying attention to the body or breath—it is a way of stopping the work of the deluded mind, stopping the wheel of suffering that the ego is spinning. Look into the depth with a sharp, keen observation so that we can see the truth right there. You will stop spinning the wheel of delusion and see that the truth of all things or emptiness is not so far from us—it is everywhere.

JC: *It is empowering, and humbling, to think that each moment we make a choice to be awake or not.*

AT: In that sense it is very simple but it requires a lot of dedication and discipline to break down all the habits that distract us from awareness. It takes lots of meditation practice.

JC: *Thank you Rinpoche for this teaching—I really appreciate your time for this.*



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