

MEDITATION: THE PRACTICE OF BEING

*A talk by Vajra Regent Osel Tendzin to the Dharmadhatu
in Burlington, Vermont, December 2, 1987*

I am delighted to be here and to be able to present the basic dharma, over and over again. Tonight, I would like to talk about the experience of meditation according to what has been taught and according to my experience. I know that all of you have had sufficient contact with the basic teachings and have had a chance to practice meditation, so what I say will simply be adjunct to your own awareness.

It might be good to look at our experience in a simple way, from a fresh point of view. To begin with, the unoriginated, unborn state, which is like space, is basic awareness without any reference point. From that, various forms, such as sight and the objects of sight, smell and the objects of smell, taste and the objects of taste, et cetera, arise. From that arising evolve the concepts of body and name, and all the world's substances, and all the histories which we call this life, or our existence. In the Buddhist tradition, this is known as *samsara*, which means "confused existence." Confused existence is based on not seeing the origination, the process, and the dissolving of the very essence of

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things and, in general, not seeing the nature of the thought process. Without seeing the nature of the thought process, it is impossible to see the nature of things existing in what we call this world and the various worlds we live in.

Those various worlds are characterized by their different natures. One could live in a world of aggression, of constantly being angry at everything that happens. One could live in a world of passion, of constantly wanting to possess everything that happens. One could live in a world of ignorance, of constantly wanting to ignore everything that happens. The same could be said of all the other emotions that arise in one's mind, such as jealousy, pride, hatred, and so forth. And the same could be said about what might be called positive emotions, such as charity, kindness, and so on. Everything arises from basic space, without any obstruction at all.

It is essential to train our mind in such a way that, first, we understand basic space as a personal experience. If we do not understand basic space as a personal experience, then it's very hard to understand these worlds and what happens in them. In the same way, when we examine our lives, very few of us know what motivates us to make impulsive movements and decisions in our body, our speech, and our mind, and in our world altogether. Yet, we find ourselves making

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such movements and then looking for meaning, for some fundamental cause of such movements or the consequences of such movements.

What the Buddha discovered is that one has to know the reality of cause and effect. This is a fundamental point of the Buddhist teachings. If you do not know the reality of cause and effect, then your consciousness is simply a haphazard aspect of these vast worlds, with all their complications. You could be a haphazard being in the world of aggression. You could be a haphazard being in the world of passion. You could be a haphazard being in the world of ignorance. You could be a haphazard being in any particular world, without having any idea how you got there, what happens when you are there, and what causes you to go to another world. We find ourselves thrown from one situation to another, looking for a cause, but always a little too late to understand what has already happened.

The view of the Buddhist tradition is that the fundamental cause is basic space. From unobstructed, unimpeded space, energy arises and creates its own form. Its own form may be various bodies, colors, shapes, sounds, smells—all the things that occur in your ordinary perception. You experience these perceptions due to an ego, which is to say, some self-generated perception of a name and a form. But truly, your name and form only exist in a memory; you cannot find any particular moment when you started to exist. You say that you were

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born on such and such a date, and you have a birth certificate that says you were born at 2:05 a.m., or whenever. You have a dear mother who says, “I gave birth to you at such and such a time.” You, yourself, have no memory of birth. Therefore, it is impossible to posit a solid notion of yourself as an ego, as having a name and a form. Yet, we persist in that because we think it is possible to relate to the moments of our life, such as smell, taste, touch, and the rest, by means of a name and a form, and in that way we will have some understanding or knowledge of those things.

From the Buddhist point of view, the basic knowledge of those things comes from unobstructed space, which is the real ground of existence, the very basis for awareness. That which arises as movement in the mind, or that which arises as movement in space, is what is called awareness. And awareness is what is mistaken as an ego, but there is no ego as such. There is purely awareness, and awareness is not different from space; it simply arises in space. To point out this awareness to beings like ourselves, the Buddha taught the practice of meditation. Meditation is a basic practice of *being*: It has no object in mind; it does not exist in reference to the past; and in the present moment it has no solidity. It is purely a matter of being. And the question of being is the answer. Trungpa Rinpoche was very fond of saying that the question is the answer, which is a way of describing how

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we understand anything at all. When you understand space as the ground, then there is just pure being in itself, just who you are. When you understand the question as the arising of activity, then you understand being as it becomes something or other.

It is important to understand that this is not simply a philosophy, because if we have only a philosophy, then we have no experience. The truth of the matter is that every time something happens, we become aware of it. Where do you become aware of it? We say, “In our mind,” and that means in space. In other words, space becomes aware of its own movement. This idea, by the way, is basically pointing to ordinary experience by undercutting the quality of experience that is based on ego. Ego is constantly thinking and talking, constantly making up something about what is happening. However, from the point of view of meditation, the only thing that is happening is whatever instantly arises in space, and in that instant, whatever arises has no history. Therefore, it has no memory, and therefore, it has no future. And therefore, even in the present, it has no existence. It is simply pure being, which is like striking a match on a stone—the flame that occurs is the same as what occurs in space when experience arises: Strike! Ssst! Light! Bright! Smell, taste, touch—everything comes out of that. It's instantaneous and immediate.

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Most people have no idea about this. In fact, most people think that everything has always been “this way,” and therefore, it always will be “this way.” Therefore, everyone is trapped. The whole world is trapped in passion, aggression, and ignorance. It's so tight that you can't escape. If you move from passion, you get trapped in aggression. If you move from aggression, you get trapped in ignorance. If you move from ignorance, you get trapped in passion. Basically, no one sees the ground out of which all this arises. The Buddhist teachings point out that the ground is unobstructed space. That space is, in an ordinary sense, equated with or associated with what we call mind. Mind is that which knows. It doesn't know anything in particular; it is the quality of knowing. And that quality of knowing is what is illuminated in the practice of meditation.

When you practice meditation, you put yourself in a position that compromises your usual habitual patterns. You put yourself in a position where you are not supposed to move your body—at least not too much—not supposed to fantasize or indulge in excessive thinking, not supposed to imagine yourself being something or other, and not supposed to deliberately create a particular kind of emotional situation. In fact, you are not supposed to think about anything at all. Putting yourself in that kind of confined mental environment is what is called meditation practice. The way of practice is the way of discipline, and

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you have to put yourself in that situation in order to contact your own understanding, or your own being, which is basic space. By doing so without thinking or deliberately acting or even meditating—by simply being in that basic space—your habitual patterns begin to dissolve into emptiness.

Emptiness of what? Emptiness of any content. Your habitual patterns dissolve into the emptiness of any content, and what remains is purely texture. When you meditate, you just have a textural experience. Your world is thick or thin or furry or heavy or light—you begin to have thoughts like that. And those thoughts begin to dissolve into a more elemental space, which is like ice, or water, or fire, or air. And finally, those elements begin to dissolve back into the basic space. At that point your mind becomes expansive, like the sky, and even if clouds appear—clouds being thoughts—they are seen as part of the sky. Then you begin to understand what meditation is: Meditation is like the sky, free from clouds. And when clouds appear in the sky, whatever arises in that basic sky is not separate from it. Then you begin to understand that whatever happens in your life is none other than the meditative state.

The most immediate way to understand this is to practice meditation without any thought in mind, without any notion of goal. I understand that you sit and practice, but when you sit down, you

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should sit down in such a way that you leave the baggage behind. The baggage in this case is the thought of a goal, that when you practice you have to achieve something. That may be to feel better, which is usually what people have in mind—to change their state of mind, to feel differently than they felt before. People who are more ambitious think they're practicing meditation in order to attain enlightenment—which I think is probably better than practicing meditation to change your state of mind. But in some sense, they're not that different. I would suggest that you practice meditation from the point of view of no reason whatsoever. That means that from beginning to end there is no particular thread of egoistic ambition.

However, there is more to it, which might be described as putting a spotlight on what is happening. Meditation practice is simply spotlighting what is going on in your mind and your body. It's no different from your ordinary experience; it's just a question of turning up the lights. And it doesn't necessarily mean that when you stop practicing, you should turn down the lights, although that might happen. The wisdom of the Buddha has been presented in this way, because the time when you are meditating is the time when you think that something special is going on. That is not a problem as long as from the moment you sit down, you aren't thinking, "This is special." One hour's worth of "this is special" will give anyone a headache.

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Sometimes it takes a tremendous amount of humor just to sit down, and some of that humor is fooling yourself into thinking that you are doing something special. That's okay; you can trick yourself into doing it, as long as when you sit down you give up all hope and all fear. Hope and fear will not carry you to the shore of liberation. They will just make you more confused.

I would suggest that you put yourself in a situation that compromises ego. Put yourself in a situation where you cannot particularly wiggle—or, if you do, no one cares—which is basically sitting practice. In essence, there isn't any difference between sitting practice and wiggling, but if you wiggle when you're sitting, it becomes a gigantic movement in your mind. If you are sitting practicing meditation and notice an itch on your face, you think to yourself, “What's the problem? It's only an itch. It's only something that occurs on my face.” At the same time you realize you can't convince yourself that you should scratch that itch. That's when you first start to sit. You start to become at home with yourself and at home with space, because what originated in space, that itch on your face, is basically how energy arises: in space. You don't have to do something about that. You simply have to attend to it in your consciousness so that you can be awake to your life and eventual death. Whatever occurs in your life and death, you should be awake to it. Our practice is the practice of doing nothing. It's the best,

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it's the ultimate, and nothing else is good enough for us. You just do it, again and again and again. While you are doing it, you think, "I don't quite have it," or, "I do have it," and you have it for a while; and then you think, "I lost it," and it goes around like that. Meditation is the continuous stream of your consciousness, without interruption. It is purely and simply what is: good, wholesome dharma. This is the Buddhist way. This is the uncontrived way of working with space and energy.

This is the basic dharma according to the Kagyü lineage, condensed in this very short talk, because I think it's good to say things directly. It's very condensed, very solid, and very potent, and it takes into consideration the three-yana principle. That is to say, first, the understanding of the Four Noble Truths; second, the understanding of interdependent causation; and third, the understanding of liberation through the senses and the sense perceptions. That is fundamental dharma. What I have said is just painting pictures. I am not eloquent in technical language, but in terms of practice, I know a few things, and what I have said is a picture of what I know. I hope it helps you, and if it doesn't, we can do it again. In the meantime, you should hold yourself to a very basic discipline. It's not a matter of who you are or who you think you are; it's a matter of practicing meditation.

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If you have any questions about what I have said, please feel free to ask them. Please talk about whatever you like in terms of your practice and what is occurring to you.

QUESTION: I have a new baby, nine weeks old. The first words I started saying to her were her name and my name. My question is, I don't know why I did that.

VR: You don't have to use concepts immediately. You don't have to push connecting a name to a form; give it some time. How about a kootchie kootchie koo? From my experience with my own children, you can't help but say the baby's name. But when you're doing that, you should have an attitude of spaciousness and humor. The name came from nowhere, right? That's the humor in it. That's the beginning of understanding bodhichitta—understanding where things come from. Otherwise, it's "Do you remember that you are so and so? You must be so and so." No one remembers that, by the way. There is no way that you can tell anyone they are who they are. They won't remember. Do any of you remember when you found out what your name is? I don't, do you? No. So you can say her name all you want, but kootchie koo would do just as well.

QUESTION: You said that philosophy is not an experience. Can you clarify what you meant by that? Personally, I experience philosophy a lot.

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VR: When the baby cries, you have to do something. It's not a matter of thinking that babies cry because they are hungry or their diapers are wet—it's more immediate: you experience baby crying. It is the same with your experience of the world. When you feel pain or suffering or pleasure or happiness, you don't think, "This happened because..." If you do, it's because you have a philosophy. Awareness means knowing what's happening when it's happening. You have some basic relationship to what's happening in your body, speech, and mind. Do you understand? From unobstructed space arises energy of one kind or another, and that energy becomes perverted by possessiveness. Whenever energy arises, you think it's yours, and then you start to behave as if it's yours. You live a life that is yours from ego's point of view. There's no relationship to cause and effect. But if you reflect a little, you realize, "I understand; I made it up!" If you reflect further, you could realize that it made itself up. That takes a lot of confidence and a lot of sitting practice.

QUESTION: Sir, how do you see the relationship between space, the ground of being from which all movements of mind arise, and compassionate action?

VR: I think they are the same. When you see the ground of being from which all things arise, then you—whatever is "you"—becomes compassionate action. What other choice would there be? If you see the

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basic space, whatever arises is brilliantly illuminated—like stars appearing in a dark sky. In the same way, when you see that the basic ground has no ego, then whatever occurs in body, speech, and mind is simply the self-existing play of energy, which is bound to be compassionate, because it has no axe to grind. If there is no ego, there is no axe to grind. You're not thinking, "I'm doing this because I want you to love me," or "I'm doing this because I want money," or "I'm doing this because I want to live forever," or "I'm doing this because I want you to be happy." Or even "I'm doing this because I'm doing this."

The main point is that you have to meditate. Sooner or later, you have to boycott your ego. That's what it means to sit: you boycott all your discursiveness. Otherwise, it becomes purely philosophy. And when you meditate, just be there—here—and expand and let go. The only problem with meditation is that it doesn't *do* anything. Therefore, because of our habitual patterns, in a very short time we think, "Something should be happening." But it doesn't. At that point, you should be very strong and very careful not to think about anything. When your mind starts to move and you think, "Something should be happening," abandon those thoughts quickly, and get back into the basic space, which means the basic technique. Don't worry about accomplishment. Space is your friend. Loneliness is your dancing

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partner. Boredom is awareness, and awareness is buddha nature. You should keep to that. Whatever it is that you do, you should keep to that.

QUESTION: Sir, is the statement, “The question is the answer” the same as looking at the question?

VR: Yes; not looking at the experience, but looking into the question itself. If you create the basic ground by simply sitting, you shouldn't have anything on your mind; you just sit. The first time you practice meditation—and the first time means any time—you sit down on the cushion. There you are. The first thing that arises, look at it. That is “the question is the answer.” Because whatever arises in your mind will arise as question and answer, simultaneously. Whatever thought arises in your mind will be the answer to itself. Anytime, anywhere. Think about it, or don't. First, take your seat, and make a space for yourself by sitting in an uncontrived way. Breathe out, sit solidly on your cushion, look at what is, and whatever arises will be the question and the answer simultaneously. Whatever picture it makes, whatever form it takes, will eventually resolve itself in space once again. But stay with that basic posture and basic attitude. It's a very big space. And you find out immediately that it has nothing to do with you. So if your teeth begin to chatter, you should also consider that part of the experience. In other words, if you become afraid of the fact that there's no origin to

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your meditation practice, all the better. Then you should get into it a little bit more.

The second way of getting into it is not to move your body, even if you have disturbing thoughts. The third way is that when you have disturbing thoughts, label them “thinking,” in such a way that by labeling them you come back to basic space, which is the breath. When you're not moving your body so much, you don't get too agitated, and when thoughts arise, you label those thoughts as a way of coming back to the basic space. Coming back to basic space, coming back to the body, means coming back to the outbreath, which is space. So keep that in mind. It doesn't matter if you accomplish anything by that, but just keep that in mind. It's a very potent way of doing nothing. You don't have to go against anything to do it. You don't have to buck the higher forces or the evil forces or the good forces; you don't have to do anything. It is a good, simple, honest technique. It's the best way of doing nothing. Basically, you have to come back, time and time again, to that basic space to make sure that what you are doing is not based on ego, some sort of fantasy.

QUESTION: I understand that the question is the answer, but I still have to ask why would one do anything unless there is desire?

VR: Enlightenment is the desire. There is no other desire but to enlighten one's mind. That is why we do it, for sure. Why do it other

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than that? Why would we have these things? We want to enlighten our minds. The basic instruction is that your mind is already enlightened, therefore, put yourself in the situation to recognize it as such. The desire to do that is the only motivation to do it. So there's no need to say anything more about that.

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Ladies and gentlemen, there is a big, mighty world of dharma, especially the mighty world of dharma created by Trungpa Rinpoche, which he called Vajradhatu, which means “indestructible space.” Within Vajradhatu, Trungpa Rinpoche organized the Dharmadhatus, the local centers. *Dharma* means “things as they are,” and *dhatu* means “space,” so *Dharmadhatu* means “dancing in space.” Vajradhatu is the indestructible space within which dharmadhatu plays. So this center, this Dharmadhatu here in Burlington, Vermont, and Vajradhatu are masculine and feminine principles, dancing with each other. Since Trungpa Rinpoche has died, I have the main responsibility for carrying on this dharma lineage, and I have been traveling around to the various Dharmadhatus, seeing everyone and saying basically the same things I said tonight: We do not exist by holding on to the past, nor do we exist by projecting into the future. We exist as the present moment, whatever that might be, and we have tremendous confidence and pride in that.

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Everywhere in the Vajradhatu-Dharmadhatu mandala, this is happening. That mighty world of dharma is permeating all of physical space, creating a little bit of chaos everywhere, a little uncertainty when people wake up in the morning, wondering what's actually happening. Everywhere I've been in the Vajradhatu mandala it's the same. It's important to understand that those of you who are practicing in Burlington are no different from the people in Chicago or Vancouver or Toronto or Montreal or Halifax. Everyone is practicing dharma, and everyone is connected in their minds to the notion of basic goodness, which we call bodhichitta, which is the same as space becoming active. Without any reference point, without any ego, space becomes active. It becomes active in terms of practice, and when everyone is practicing, everyone is doing a good job, and no one is particularly unhappy. At the same time, the challenge of living in this world is constant. No one can get away from it, no one can say, "Now I understand everything."

It's a question now of what Trungpa Rinpoche used to call a stepping stone, a place to touch down and then jump from. The practice of being in a Dharmadhatu is one of those stepping stones. I would very much like to encourage you to expand your mind, and when you sit and practice meditation to understand that your meditation is not simply for yourself. I think it's time to put the screws

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on yourself a little. I think that's the key to overcoming self-involvement. Now, that is beginning to change. You should take that attitude of change and expand it, without becoming theistic, without thinking that you might get some sort of transcendental credit. Make sure that you have no particular thought about becoming more spiritually wealthy, or anything like that. Just open your mind, and let it go out. Open your mind and contact that basic space, and when things arise, they won't be so tight, and you won't be so afraid of them.

I would encourage all of you to make a little more effort in your own practice, because what occurs as enlightenment in one's being has to occur as enlightenment in the atmosphere. There is no such thing as enlightenment if it does not occur in the atmosphere. Enlightenment is both here and there at the same time. If you practice the dharma together, then enlightenment becomes part of the atmosphere of Burlington, and perhaps beyond Burlington, if you can extend your minds beyond Lake Champlain and all around. What else are you going to do? Other than that, you're just looking at your watch and waiting for the gong to ring.

It's very good to be here and talk with you, and I appreciate the invitation. I know that absence makes the heart grow fonder, and because Burlington is so close to Karne-Chöling, I had no choice but to come here. Do you have a good time here? I hope so; I can't imagine

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why you would be here unless you do. Some people think they are in a place because they are doomed to it. Some people think they are in a place because they are bound to it by duty. Some people think they are in a place because it's a stopping off place to another place. I can't imagine any of those things; I'm here because I'm having a good time in Burlington. I would like to go further with you, and I am happy to do so. So we should do it. It's easy to do; you have to practice it. It's hard to do; you have to do it. Easy and hard are simultaneous—they are what is meant by space and arising in space. Space is easy; arising in space is difficult. Or, space is difficult, and arising is easy. Whichever way you do it, it still comes down to practicing meditation and making use of the space.

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