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This is a unique time in the history of Buddhism. Different Buddhist traditions are meeting and interacting with one another here in the West, often for the first time in centuries. Just as the dharma spread from India through many countries in Asia, each one finding its own voice, here, too, we're seeing the emergence of a Western Buddhism, something that is unique to our own time and culture.

The defining characteristic of this emerging Western Buddhism is a basic pragmatism, rather than an adherence to some philosophical system or sectarian viewpoint. What most characterizes the One Dharma of the West is an allegiance to a very simple question: What works? What works to free the mind from suffering? What works to accomplish the heart of compassion? What works to awaken us from the dream states of our ignorance?

As Western Buddhist practitioners, we've been brought up to question and investigate, and this exploration can become a great strength of our dharma practice. The different teachings that are coming together and interacting here in the West are being tested and challenged by each other. We're hearing different teachings, we're reflecting on them, and we're practicing them and testing them in our own lives, in our own meditation experience. Many of us are practicing in several of these different traditions. It's not uncommon for people to list as their various teachers Tibetan Rinpoches, Chinese, Korean, or Japanese Zen masters, Thai ajaans, Burmese sayadaws, and Western teachers of every school. We may have various opinions about whether or not this mixing is a good idea, but it *is* what is happening. And so our challenge is to understand it and craft it in such a way that it becomes a vehicle for awakening.

As these ancient traditions meet, pressing questions emerge. Is the melting pot approach simply creating a big mess? Or is something new emerging that will revitalize dharma practice for us all? How much of our spiritual practice and discipline is embedded in cultural overlays from the East that are neither relevant nor helpful to us in our Western society? And on the other hand, do we sometimes water down, or even leave behind, the essence of the teachings simply because they take us beyond our Western physical or psychological comfort zone? How much can we pare away or alter before we start missing the point of it all?

Other questions, too, more personal and immediate, arose as I began my exploration of different traditions: What do you do when two of your most respected and beloved teachers say opposite things about that which is most important to you? What to do when you come to a fork in the road and both signposts seem to be pointing in the right direction? As I struggled with these dilemmas, one question began to emerge: Is there One Dharma of liberation, One Dharma of freedom, that embraces all the viewpoints, even apparently contradictory ones?

In considering this question—Is there One Dharma underlying the various teachings and schools?—the first step for all of us is a willingness to let go of sectarian viewpoints. If we hold on to the idea that our way is the best, the highest, the fastest, the truest, it becomes impossible to consider a One Dharma of freedom. David Brinkley wrote a book with a wonderful title that captures the irony of the sectarian stance. The title of the book is: *Everyone Is Entitled to My Opinion*. And often we go through life with just that bias.

For many years I studied in the Theravada tradition, practicing vipassana meditation in India and Burma. Then, ten years ago, I also began some practice and study of Tibetan dzogchen meditation, with two very great dzogchen masters, Tulku Urygen Rinpoche and Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. They were wonderful beings and tremendously inspiring. But especially in that first year, as I was beginning this new practice, I was tormented by the comparing mind. Some Theravada teachings seemed quite different from the Tibetan teachings I was hearing. I was caught in the dilemma of trying to judge which was right, and then wondering how I could know? I went back and forth. Some Zen literature describes koan practice as swallowing a red hot iron ball that you can neither expel nor digest, and that's what this dilemma felt like to me.

After a month of intense questioning—Who's right? Which teachings are true?—my mind came to a sudden resolution, providing the framework for understanding the possibility of One Dharma. It was the understanding that all the teachings, all the words, all the sutras, are skillful means for liberating the mind, rather than statements of absolute truth. When we take words to be statements of ultimate truth, then differences of opinion will inevitably result in conflict. This is where ideological wars come from, and we see in the history of the world an endless amount of suffering because of it. But if we see the words and the teachings as different skillful means for liberating the mind, then they all become part of a great dharma feast. How can I use this teaching to free my mind? How can I use this to open my heart?

All the Buddhist traditions converge in one understanding of what liberates the mind. It is summed up very succinctly in one teaching of the Buddha: "Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as 'I' or 'mine.'" Whoever has heard this has heard all the teachings. Whoever practices this has practiced all the teachings. Whoever realizes this has realized all the teachings." Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as "I" or "mine." Non-clinging can be understood on two levels. The first level is non-clinging as a non-sectarian instruction for practice. What to do? Don't cling. There's no Buddhist school that says, "Cling." How to practice in the world? Don't cling. It hardly matters what form we build around that. We can not-cling in a Tibetan house, we can not-cling in a Zen house, we can not-cling in a Theravada house. The essence of One Dharma is the same. But non-clinging is not only an instruction of practice. On the second level, it is also a description of the awakened mind. If we want to know what enlightenment is like, what awakening is like, we can practice the mind of non-clinging, non-fixation, nonattachment to anything at all. It's the mind of open groundlessness. So how can we practice this? How do we practice the mind of non-clinging? Clearly, the more quickly we recognize where we do cling, the more quickly we can relax the mind into that space of openness, of ease, of freedom. And the Buddha was very helpful in pointing out where we do cling, just in case we're missing it. The first arena of clinging is the obvious one: we cling to pleasant experience. We like what's pleasant. We like pleasant sights and sounds and tastes, pleasant sensations in the body, pleasant feelings. We like pleasant meditative states. There's no problem with the pleasantness of them; it's part of our life experience. The problem is that we often devote our life energy to the getting, sustaining, accumulation, and repeating of these pleasant experiences. It's as if our life revolves around getting one more hit of pleasantness. But, as we all know, these pleasant experiences don't last, so they don't really have the capacity to bring us happiness, to bring us completion, to bring us fulfillment. We're always seeking more—that's samsara, the endless wheel of becoming, fueled by wanting. The force of desire is not just a trivial habit; the habit of wanting what's pleasant is rooted so deeply in our conditioning.

At one point I had been practicing in India for quite some time, and as can happen in times of long-term, intensive meditation, my mind had become very open, clear, and shining; my body was open, the energy flowing. It was the kind of sitting where you think you will get enlightened any minute. I was happily in that state, sitting away, waiting for the big moment...and then the tea bell rang. What was served for tea in the evening was a cup of tea and a very small banana. So I'm sitting in this glorious state and the tea bell rings. What is my first thought? "I need my banana." And, sure enough, I got up from my "enlightenment-in-the-next-moment sitting" and went for the momentary pleasant experience.

Even someone as remarkable as His Holiness the Dalai Lama speaks of the strong force of desire in the mind. He told one story at a conference in Los Angeles. Every day on the way to the conference, he was driven down a street with shops selling the newest technological toys. As you know, he has a great interest in the latest technologies. On the last day of the conference, he recounted what had been going on in his mind as he was being driven past these stores. He said that by the end of the week he found himself wanting some of these things, although he didn't even know what they were.

Again, it's not that there's a problem with having pleasant experience—it's just part of our lives. But when we make it the focal point of our lives, it becomes the basis for tremendous frustration, because it can never fulfill its promise for happiness. At the time of death, what meaning will all the various pleasant experiences have? What really will be of value at that time? What will be of most value is the ability of the mind to not hold on, to not grasp, to not cling. But we can't wait until the time of death to accomplish this. We need to practice it now.

The second arena of clinging that the Buddha pointed out is one that has tremendous consequences both in our own lives and in the world. This is the attachment we have to our views and opinions about things. We're very attached to our own points of view. We're attached to being right. What's so amazing is that we're often attached to our opinions regarding things we know nothing about. But that does not seem to weaken our attachment.

One example of this attachment to view—and the possibility of relinquishing it—happened when I was teaching at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, in the first years after it opened. His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche was due to speak, and there was a poster announcing the talk. Dudjom Rinpoche was the head of the Nyingmapa lineage of Tibetan Buddhism and revered as a great enlightened being. It said on the poster that Rinpoche was the incarnation of Shariputra, who was one of the two chief disciples of the Buddha.

From the Theravada point of view, when you're fully enlightened you don't take rebirth. As I had been steeped in these teachings, I was sure that Shariputra, second only to the Buddha himself in wisdom, certainly didn't come back. But then I saw this poster about Dudjom Rinpoche, incarnation of Shariputra. My mind went on tilt. How to hold this contradiction? In a moment of inspiration I suddenly realized that I had no idea whether or not Dudjom Rinpoche was the incarnation of Shariputra. I really didn't know. And it was such a relief to realize that because I didn't know, I didn't have to have an opinion about it.

We don't know a lot. We don't know much more than we know. And it's a relief to let go of our attachment to views, our attachment to opinions, especially about things we don't know. A new mantra began to form in my mind: "Who knows?" This not-knowing is not a quality of bewilderment, it's not a quality of confusion. It actually is like a breath of fresh air, an openness of mind. Not knowing is simply holding an open mind regarding these very interesting questions to which we might not yet have answers.

Of course, even more difficult is letting go of our attachment to things we think we do know. Even when our opinion is based on some experience, it's still limited. When we don't hold on to our viewpoints quite so tightly, it allows for the possibility of seeing from other perspectives. We might actually learn something from someone else. One of the great Japanese Zen masters, Bankei, had a wonderful line in his teachings. He said, "Don't side with yourself." This is a good reminder to keep an open mind. This is part of our practice.

The last attachment and clinging that I want to mention is the one that is the most deeply rooted, the most difficult to see through and understand—that is the attachment we have to the concept of, or belief in, self. Seeing through this illusion of self is the heart of the One Dharma of liberation. Every Buddhist tradition will talk of this, because it is this insight, this understanding, which is ultimately liberating; it is the seeing through the illusion, the concept, the belief, the idea of a self-center. But selflessness is also the most puzzling aspect of the Buddha's teachings. If there's no self, who's sitting here? Who gets angry? Who falls in love? Unlike many other aspects of the teachings, selflessness is not easily accessible to our normal level of understanding. It takes a disciplined practice to investigate and explore the deepest nature of this mind/body process.

One image might help us understand the meaning of selflessness. Think back to the last time you saw a rainbow. You look up at the sky, see this beautiful rainbow, and feel the momentary joy that comes from that experience of beauty. But is there something in and of itself that is the rainbow? Or, is the rainbow an *appearance* arising out of the coming together of different conditions? There is air, moisture, and light arranged in a certain way, and out of those conditions a rainbow appears. But there's no substantial thing-ness to the rainbow: it's simply an appearance arising out of conditions.

Self, Joseph, each one of us, is like the rainbow. There is, indeed, an appearance of self, and on that level of appearance, self exists. Just like it is true that we have the experience of what we call rainbow. On the relative level, we do relate to one another as individuals. So it's not to deny the appearance of self, but to realize that it is only an appearance. When we go beyond, or see through, or begin to understand the conditions that are giving rise to the appearance, then we come to taste the profound teachings of the Buddha on emptiness. Emptiness does not mean that things aren't there; it means that they do not have some self-existing nature independent of conditions. When we see this in our experience, we begin to understand the selflessness of this whole life process. And the deeper the wisdom of selflessness, the more love and compassion flow freely. A Sri Lankan monk summed up the great value of realizing emptiness when he said, "No self, no problem."

More than 2,500 years ago, the Buddha set in motion this great wheel of the dharma. It has rolled across continents and oceans and has touched the lives of countless beings. The dharma has been expressed in so many different cultures, each with its own language and idiom, expressing skillful means for liberating the heart and mind from grasping. Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to as "I" or "mine." This is the One Dharma of liberation, and all the teachings, all the words, point to that freedom.

I'd like to close with some words of my teacher, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. He said, "I would like to pass on one little bit of advice I give to everyone: Relax. Just relax. Be nice to each other. As you go through your life, simply be kind to people. Try to help them rather than hurt them. Try to get along with them, rather than fall out with them."