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Becoming and Being a Bodhisattva

**Teachings presented during the Manjushri Retreat at
Karma Chang Chub Choephel Ling, Heidelberg, in October 2009.**

“Until I awaken, I take refuge in
The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Supreme Assembly.
Through the goodness of generosity and other virtues
May I awaken fully in order to help all beings.”

“Namo Guru Manjushri Ye”

Before reciting *The Short Dorje Chang Lineage Prayer* together, let me say many thanks to Lama Dorothea for offering Dharma continuity at Karma Chang Chub Choephel Ling and let me greet all of you who have come here kindly.

During this seminar, we will be looking at the activities of Bodhisattvas, particularly of Noble Manjushri, *Jam-dpäl-dbyangs* in Tibetan. We have statues and paintings of Bodhisattva Manjushri. They are his outer representations. His inner meaning is that he is the personification of *shes-rab*, ‘wisdom-awareness.’

Wisdom-Awareness, *shes-rab*

Whether we are engaged in worldly activities or are treading the path of Dharma, we can’t have enough wisdom-awareness. The more worldly knowledge and spiritual wisdom we develop, the more positive results and beneficial qualities will arise in us. *Shes-rab* isn’t restricted to Dharma studies and activities but is important in all walks of life.

Looking at people, everyone has a different degree of intelligence, another translation of *shes-rab*. Some people are very intelligent and wise, some aren’t very smart and intelligent, while others aren’t all too bright and have no wisdom. So, everybody is individual and different.

The opposite of intelligence is ignorance, *ma-rig-pa*, and the opposite of ignorance is *shes-rab*. Ignorance means ‘not-knowing.’ When we have eliminated not-knowing, then we know and thus have knowledge, i.e., *shes-rab*. There are innumerable things to know and we can never learn everything that can be known.

We have to develop and have a tool, i.e., a method, in order to be able to even approach all the things that we need to know, and our tool is *shes-rab*, ‘intelligence.’ In school, children develop a method to sharpen their intelligence, which enables them to win knowledge. They start by learning the alphabet. Through their years in school, children continue learning more and more from teachers and step-by-step attain knowledge of what they need to know. This is how we, too, develop *shes-rab*. In order to increase our knowledge, we not only need qualified teachers, but we also need to be diligent, *brtsong-grüis*.

Just as everybody is different, teachers are also different. Some can convey knowledge quite well, while others can’t. If a teacher doesn’t have a good understanding of the subject that he or she is trying to teach, he or she won’t be able to teach satisfactorily. So, teachers need to have a good understanding of what they are trying to teach others. Furthermore, they need to have experience in order to be able to teach well. This is all the more so for spiritual teachers.

There are two categories of knowledge. They are: *jig-rten-shes-rab*, ‘worldly knowledge,’ and *mthar-thug-gi-shes-rab*, ‘transcendent, ultimate wisdom-awareness.’ Having worldly knowledge depends upon having good teachers and upon being diligent; it can be attained easily. *mThar-thug-gi-shes-rab* is so subtle that it cannot be taught by a teacher who is merely specialized in worldly topics. Ultimate knowledge can only be attained by entering and treading the spiritual path and by receiving instructions from a qualified spiritual teacher.

There are three levels of ultimate knowledge that should be known, that should be integrated in life, and that should be practiced. They are: the view, the meditation, and the action. Firstly, by means of their intelligence and in reliance on the instructions they have received from a qualified spiritual teacher, devotees who have embarked on the path of Dharma need to exert effort and attain knowledge of the view. Secondly, they need to experience the teachings by meditating what they learned. Generally, meditation means ‘abiding in mental absorption.’ But, it is necessary to have *lta-ba’i-shes-pa*, ‘knowledge of the view,’ in order to be able to abide in the calm of the mind. Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Thaye tells us that a meditator who hasn’t learned and doesn’t know the view is like a blind person. This means that it’s necessary to learn the view before meditating. Learning the view entails *shes-rab*.

When speaking about the view, it is necessary to speak about *prajnaparamita*, the Sanskrit term that was translated into Tibetan as *shes-rab-kyi-pha-rol-tu-phyin-pa*, ‘transcendent knowledge.’ The Tibetan term is a description of the Mahayana aspect of Lord Buddha’s teachings on emptiness, which is the lack of inherent, substantial existence of all things.

There are various instructions in Buddhism to understand emptiness. It is often said that the ultimate truth is the truth of emptiness, but wisdom isn’t emptiness. Based on the Madhyamika Tradition of Buddhism, we learn to understand the ultimate truth of *shes-rab-kyi-pha-rol-tu-phyin-pa* from the vantage point of the Shentong Tradition of Mahamudra and learn that emptiness doesn’t mean nothing. So, emptiness and wisdom refer to our own mind, *sems*. Isn’t it so? Where else can transcendent knowledge be other than in our own mind? We are ignorant as long as we don’t know this, are deluded because of this ignorance, and

therefore wish to unravel and overcome our delusiveness. To do this, we need to increase our *shes-rab*, our ‘wisdom-awareness.’

When we examine carefully, we see that our mind isn’t nothing, but that it is present. What is the sign for saying that we have a mind and that it is present? The sign is that sometimes we experience suffering and sometimes we experience happiness, i.e., due to having a mind, we have a great variety of pleasant and unpleasant feelings. If our mind were nothing and merely emptiness, we couldn’t experience suffering and happiness. When we look at our mind, we see that it has qualities as well as shortcomings and defects. Because of our defects, *skyön*, we experience suffering in our mind; and because of our qualities, *yön-tän*, we experience happiness and well-being in our mind. Most people and most living beings experience approximately 95% of their lives in suffering and pain. Those 95% are caused by their mind’s shortcomings and defects.

As long as we are not aware of our errors and defects and don’t even know what having them implies, we remain in the darkness of ignorance. Qualities and defects are mutually exclusive, i.e., if we have many defects, we will have less qualities and vice versa. Therefore, by increasing our qualities, our defects will automatically decrease. When we have 100% qualities, we will be *skyön-gnäd-med-pa*, ‘without the least fault or defect.’

The root of all suffering and happiness is in our own mind. Both suffering and happiness are feelings. The feeling of suffering means we aren’t happy, and the feeling of happiness means we aren’t suffering. Who and what experience suffering and joy? Our mind. So, we see that our mind is present and isn’t nothing. Ultimate, transcendent wisdom-awareness, *mthar-thug-gi-shes-rab*, means fully knowing our mind.

It isn’t easy to attain ultimate wisdom-awareness. So, with diligence, we engage in skilful methods, *thabs*, to precisely and deeply know the way our mind really is, *sems-kyi-gnäs-lugs*. Meditation is one skilful method, and it consists of many levels and stages. One method of meditation is the practice of Noble Manjushri, the Lord of Wisdom. Since we cannot imagine and do not know how our mind really is, we visualize Manjushri as the meaning, as the symbol, and as the sign of our mind. He is the meaning of our own mind. In order to transform our mind, we meditate *dön-kyi-‘jam-dpäl-dbyangs*, the ‘meaning of Manjushri,’ *brda’i-‘jam-dpäl-dbyangs*, the ‘symbol of Manjushri,’ and *rtags-kyi-‘jam-dpäl-dbyangs*, the ‘sign of Manjushri,’ the last two being his outer representations. Our spiritual teacher will instruct us how to engage in this meditation practice correctly; it is of no use trying to meditate him without having received the instructions.

The teachings of Lord Buddha speak of attaining the two bodies of a Buddha, the *Dharmakaya* (‘the truth body’) and the two form kayas, which are the *Sambhogakaya* (‘the enjoyment body’) and the *Nirmanakaya* (‘the manifestation body’). Manjushri’s meaning is the Dharmakaya. His symbolic aspect is the Sambhogakaya, and his sign is the Nirmanakaya. When we meditate Manjushri, we concentrate on his Sambhogakaya form and imagine that we are one with him. Practicing in this way, we are cultivating the view and meditation. There are many different methods and stages to meditate Manjushri as Sambhogakaya.

At this point, it is important to remember that wisdom-awareness is the antidote of ignorance, *ma-rig-pa*, and eliminating ignorance is the purpose of meditation practice. We will never be able to overcome our ignorance as long as we don’t have clarity of *shes-rab*, ‘wisdom-awareness.’ We will continue having negative emotions (pride, jealousy, desire, greed, stupidity, miserliness, anger, hatred, etc.) and the resulting painful experiences as long as we

fail to develop and don't have the clarifying quality of wisdom-awareness. As our ignorance diminishes more and more by meditating Manjushri, our negative emotions become less and less, and as a result our wisdom-awareness increases.

When meditating Manjushri, there is the subject calling to him, the object, which is Manjushri, and the action. These three aspects always need to be present while practicing.

Those persons whose mind is very obscured by ignorance and negative emotions cannot perceive a Sambhogakaya form, so Manjushri as Sambhogakaya cannot appear to them. Since we cannot perceive the Sambhogakaya form, we need much devotion and need to be confident that Manjushri is truly present when we meditate him. The veil of our ignorance becomes thinner and thinner through our devotion and then the quality of *shes-rab* grows more and more. When this occurs, we will be able to directly perceive Manjushri in the Sambhogakaya form. But, as beginners, we need to develop devotion, which doesn't mean he will immediately appear to us. At first, it is like drawing a flower on the surface of water. It doesn't matter how much we draw, the picture will vanish and no flower can be visible. Giving rise to devotion again and again and developing it further and further is like drawing a picture of a flower in sand. It will become visible, yet it will be swept away when a wind blows. In the same way, our negative emotions will arise again and again. So, we have to develop stable devotion, which is compared to carving a drawing into stone. Then, no matter how much water flows over the stone or how strongly a wind blows, our drawing will not vanish and cannot be destroyed. Therefore, it is extremely important to develop strong devotion, until it becomes as stable as a drawing deeply carved into a stone. We focused our attention on Noble Manjushri here, but this applies to all meditation deities.

We saw that we meditate Manjushri as the representation of wisdom-awareness, his symbol of wisdom-awareness, and his sign of wisdom-awareness. We also saw that devotion engenders wisdom. We know that he is a Bodhisattva and therefore embodies wisdom with which he eliminates the ignorance of all living beings, thus benefitting them.

Contemplating in which way Manjushri is a Bodhisattva and acknowledging that wisdom is realization of Dharmakaya, he is a Buddha. A Bodhisattva, *byang-chub-sems-pa*, is someone who works for the benefit of others and there are many ways to be of service and of help. In order to eliminate the ignorance of others, a Bodhisattva needs to have wisdom-awareness, which is represented by Noble Manjushri. Furthermore, in order to eliminate beings' negative emotions, such as anger and aggression, a Bodhisattva needs to have love and compassion, which is represented by Noble Chenrezig. This doesn't mean that Chenrezig has no wisdom, rather, he is the personification of love and compassion by which he eliminates beings' anger and aggression. This also doesn't mean that Manjushri lacks loving compassion, rather, he is the personification of wisdom by which he eliminates beings' ignorance. We need to have both aspects in order to overcome all our negative emotions - wisdom that cognizes emptiness and the skilful methods of loving kindness and compassion. Bodhisattvas are those persons or beings who free others from suffering. To accomplish this aim, they have the skilful methods of loving kindness and compassion as well as wisdom-awareness.

Bodhisattvas appear in a great variety of ways and needn't appear in the form of a deity like Manjushri or Chenrezig. They can appear as meditation deities, as kings, as ministers, as doctors, as tradesmen, as servants, and so forth. A Bodhisattva is someone who works for the benefit of others, which says nothing about his or her appearance. So, there are certainly Bodhisattvas among us who work for the benefit of others. We can call anybody who works for the benefit of others a Bodhisattva.

There are three characteristics of a Bodhisattva. Firstly, a Bodhisattva never grows tired or becomes weary of accomplishing the aim of liberating beings from suffering, no matter how hard it might be. Secondly, a Bodhisattva never hesitates helping other beings, no matter how many there might be. Thirdly, a Bodhisattva never stops helping others, no matter how long it might take. Whoever has these characteristics is a Bodhisattva.

Some people benefit others a lot, which isn't easy but is hard work. Whoever does hard work for the benefit of others, without thinking too much, has the quality of a Bodhisattva. For example, there is much work in a Dharma center and many problems arise. If someone isn't disturbed and doesn't become discouraged by these difficulties, he or she has the quality of a Bodhisattva, whereas becoming tired and upset isn't the way of a Bodhisattva. Not being overwhelmed by the magnitude of help that is needed but doing what is possible is having the quality of a Bodhisattva. Feeling discouraged by thinking that there is so much to do and that it will take too long is not the way of a Bodhisattva. We needn't think about what it means to be a Bodhisattva too much, because whoever has the three qualities just described is a Bodhisattva. If a king has these three qualities, then he is a Bodhisattva in the appearance of a king. If a minister has these three qualities, then he is a Bodhisattva in the appearance of a minister. If a menial worker has these three qualities, then he is a Bodhisattva doing the work he is doing. We are free to reflect whether we have these three qualities.

Some people think that they are on the path of a Bodhisattva because they engage in the meditation practice, but if they reflect the three characteristics of a Bodhisattva and think, "Oh no, that would be too hard and too much for me," then they aren't a Bodhisattva. It is very important to know the three characteristics of a Bodhisattva and to ask oneself whether one has them or not. For instance, if one is engaged in office work or if one is a servant doing menial work, one can ask oneself whether one has these three qualities or not. There is much hard work that needs to be done in communities and many people work together in small or larger groups; nobody accomplishes anything, not to speak of everything, alone. Groups usually have a boss, so a boss who has these three qualities will be a very good boss; anything he or she does will be the activity of a Bodhisattva. We can have great trust in somebody when we see that he or she acts in this way.

It is very important to know what it means to be a Bodhisattva. We should give up thinking that a Bodhisattva is an imagination or a deity that just stands around. Being a Bodhisattva takes place in our own mind. We are the ones who will become and be a Bodhisattva when we have the three described qualities. If we think about it and find that we have these qualities, then we can think of ourselves as being a Bodhisattva. If we aspire to become a Bodhisattva, we only need to develop and have these qualities. We can meditate loving kindness and compassion as long as we want, but we won't become a Bodhisattva as long as we don't have these three qualities that are the characteristics of a Bodhisattva.

Dedication

Through this goodness, may omniscience be attained
and thereby may every enemy (mental defilement) be overcome.
May beings be liberated from the ocean of samsara
that is troubled by waves of birth, old age, sickness, and death.

By this virtue may I quickly attain the state of Guru Buddha, and then
lead every being without exception to that very state!

May precious and supreme Bodhicitta that has not been generated now be so,
and may precious Bodhicitta that has already been never decline, but continuously increase!

May the life of the Glorious Lama remain steadfast and firm.

May peace and happiness fully arise for beings as limitless in number as space is vast in its extent.

Having accumulated merit and purified negativities, may I and all living beings without exception
swiftly establish the levels and grounds of Buddhahood.



Photo of Venerable Chöje Lama Phuntsok teaching at Karma Lekshey Ling at Weißenthurm, Germany, in October 2009 and photo of Joshua Hehl offering a yellow rose on the inauguration day of the new center, symbolically for this article, too, courtesy of KLL. Special thanks to Michael Slaby for having recorded the teachings presented in Heidelberg and for having made the CD available to us, and sincere gratitude to Lama Dorothea Nett for having organized this most auspicious event in Heidelberg. In reliance on the fabulous simultaneous translation of Tibetan into German by Hannelore Wenderoth (seen on the photo at the top), these teachings were translated into English and arranged by Gaby Hollmann, responsible and apologizing for any mistakes. All persons and institutes mentioned here have copyright for their contribution. Lama Phuntsok's article is made available by the Dharma Download Project of Khenpo Karma Namgyal at Karma Lekshey Ling Institute in Kathmandu, by Karma Chang Chub Choephel Ling in Heidelberg, and by Karma Sherab Ling in Münster for personal use only; it may not be reproduced in any form nor be published. Munich, 2009.