

Sickness and Dharma

Talk by James Low

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You can watch the video here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_6dwdKPqoc

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Very nice to see your faces again. Welcome to everyone. Especially, welcome to our translators who have to work hard. It's very nice to be back with you again, and I'd like to thank many of you for the good wishes you sent me and for the prayers and practices you did. It was a sense of the warmth in our sangha.

This weekend we have the Tibetan New Year which starts on Saturday, so this is an important time to remember our debt of gratitude to the Tibetan people. For hundreds of years they have maintained this incredible depth and breadth of Dharma practice, and due to the kindness of their effort we are able to study and practice now.

Sickness is part of our human condition

Since I've been sick, this evening I'll say something about sickness, and I've written down some notes. Usually, I don't like to speak with notes, but I thought today it's better because my mind still gets a bit tired and vague.

One of the wonderful things about being alive is that whatever idea we have about who we are, life events are going to turn it upside down. From the beginning of the Buddha's teaching – he taught about The Four Noble Truths - he pointed to the suffering of birth, old age, sickness, and death. This is our human condition. When we are young, it's often difficult to imagine being old, which is nice because then you can just run around and have fun. If you're old and you imagine that you're young, that's where problems can arise. We have to be old when we are old, and with that comes sickness and eventually death.

All over the world populations are aging: in Europe, in China, in Japan. As the population gets older, fewer and fewer children are born. Then we have to think: who will take care of me? As the nuclear family, I mean just the parents and children in an isolated world, as that modality becomes stronger, the extended family is less functioning. So, if we get old and sick, especially now when we live longer, we have more time to remember how we once were, and yet it's gone.

I had prostate cancer. The cancer is quiet at the moment, but it could get active again. It would be normal to say: I had this illness. It had a big impact on my life. It changed what I had to do, going into the hospital and so on. Yet from the *Theravadan* point of view,

where they say there is absence of inherent existence in people, then what I take to be myself is a gathering together, an assembling of the five skandhas: form, feeling, perception, association, and consciousness. These function together, and this functioning is what I call "I, me, myself". The cancer was affecting only a little bit of the form, but when I went to the hospital, I am a bearer of cancer. If I went into the cancer department without cancer, they say: *"Go away, we have no interest in you."* But my cancer made me a very special person. The doors opened. *"Do come this way."* I am a cancer patient. My identity becomes merged with the cancer. The doctors are not very interested in me, only in this particular pattern of malignant cells which are misbehaving.

However, of course, the cancer is also very complex and dynamic. It doesn't exist as some-thing, something that I have or something that has me. As with all phenomena, cancer lacks inherent existence. This is the *Mahayana* view: All the ingredients that go to make me a person, when we look into the minutest forms of these manifestation, we find there is nothing truly existing. I want my cells to behave according to my interest, but the cancer cells, they have their own idea of what is fun. *"We can expand, we can take over."* At that point I say: *"You are bad."* But probably the cancer is thinking, *"You're very selfish. Look how many cells you have in your body. Give us a few more, just a few."*

So I come to see my body is a force field in which many factors are operating. It's a fact I have become old. And I became sick. What I call "I, me, myself" is relational. The subject forms moment by moment in relation to the object. If we live a long time, we encounter many different object situations which have some impact on us. So, due to causes and conditions, I find that I am healthy, happy, tired, sick... My experience of me, of how I am, does not point to any inner fixed essential self. I am the manifestation of multiple factors. This is very helpful if you get a sickness like cancer. Then you can see the cancer is not the enemy. It has not a bad intention towards me. Cancer cells are completely unaware of James Low. In fact, the cancer can show us: although I say, *"my body, my life, my plans, my future"*, these are all mere interpretations. These are merely signs stuck onto the sky.

Then, of course, we encounter this kind of paradox because people are good-hearted and supportive. They send me messages and *"hope you get better soon"*. This allows us

to reflect on how to integrate kindness with the fact that the object of our kindness or our concern has no real independent existence. It's so important when we are being kind or compassionate towards others or they're offering this loving warmth towards us, it's vital to separate kindness from reification. The fact that these specific patterns of factors arise for me at this time is my karma. As the Buddha said: If you want to know about your behavior in previous lives, look at your present body. And if you want to know about your body in your next life, look at your present behavior.

That is to say, in our ordinary interactions in culture, the focus of our attention seems to be often on the current factors which impinge on us. So if you have a difficult relationship with your boss, it's very normal to think: *"I hate going to work now, the boss is so terrible."* In this way the feeling tone of my unhappiness or distress becomes a factor intensifying the sense of the duality between self and other.

But the teaching on karma opens up a different perspective. Karma is generated by the subject's intention towards the object. If the delusion of duality is let go of, then the open space of awareness is free of karma. But the basis of karma is to believe that I exist in a world with other people. I act on them, they act on me. This solidification of my interaction in the world gives rise to this sense of friction. The world is rubbing on me and I am rubbing on the world, and this leaves a trace. Just as if you go into an old building and you climb up the stone steps, you see how they have got worn down in the middle by thousands and thousands of shoes. The people climbing the stairs are just climbing the stairs, but the fact that their shoe goes onto the step and exerts pressure in order them to push up to the next step, this leaves a mark. And so in all our interactions in the world, when we perceive it through this lens of duality, each gesture we make leaves some subtle trace.

We are unaware of our own pure ground

From the Dharma point of view, we find ourselves living within duality. This is explained as arising due to unawareness of our own pure ground. Now, because we are unaware of this ground, it is as if it has no presence or has nothing to do with us, and yet it is the actual source of all our experience moment by moment by moment. We have a sense, *"But I continue to be me. I was me in the morning and I'm me in the evening."* It is as if I

have a true or real sense of self which is like a thread stringing each moment of experience as if it was a bead. I'm stuck in this world of possibilities. I want to use my power, my freedom to make choices that give me more of what I want and less of what I don't want. And so my attention is pulled out through my five senses, checking for advantage or disadvantage. This is why meditation is such a radically different activity. Instead of looking out, we turn our attention and look inside and try to have some sense of: How is my mind? But that's a rare and unusual thing to do.

We live in cultures which privilege fun and entertainment. We experience boredom. We don't want to be stuck in a state of confusion or disillusionment, and so we seek distraction to take us out of that kind of mood. And there are so many distractions available to us. There's always something to leap towards or leap away from. And this activity, this dualistic activity, *"Where am I in relation to what is happening in the field of experience?"* feeds into our sense of being a consciousness. Consciousness is the name given to the aspect of our mental functioning which is focused on an object. That object can also be an internal object. *"I'm conscious of the fact that I felt unhappy after our conversation yesterday."* Some mood or some feeling tone is arising in me, and that becomes the focus of my consciousness. Mostly, that's what we think our mind is. It's a mental activity of selecting, evaluating, patterning. And although the basic quality of our consciousness is bright and illuminating, because this illumination is turned towards objects which are taken to be real and existing in themselves, the brightness of consciousness becomes a means of sustaining the dullness of not being aware of our own true ground. So we find ourselves living within duality due to unawareness of our own pure ground.

Seeing clearly vs. distorted vision

Unawareness is compared, often in tantric texts, to cataracts in our eyes. When cataracts develop, the power of the eye to see clearly diminishes, and there's a kind of hazy lack of definition.

As a general example, I don't usually wear glasses unless I'm reading. But sometimes I go into the bathroom with my reading glasses on, and I'm very surprised to see that the sink is very dirty. Now, being somebody who doesn't like doing much housework, I have

found a magical solution to this: I take off my glasses and everything is okay. My house is clean as long as I don't see it clearly. This is like the cataract. Once people have cataracts, very often they adjust to it, they adapt to it. Lack of clarity becomes my usual level of clarity, so it's clear enough. I live my life according to how I can see.

So the function of the practice is to remove the cataracts, to increase clarity, not to have any screen or veil distorting the immediacy of what is arising. Unawareness is, we could say, is also like a sleeping sickness, because we can't wake up. We live in a dream, yet we take it to be real. With these ailments, we think we see clearly, but actually we are imagining a world. What we call samsara is the result of imagining a world of existent entities that have no real existence.

The mental dullness or opacity of mistaking our imaginings for real entities is the first of the five poisons. When people smoke cigarettes, they enjoy smoking. Someone who doesn't smoke comes into the room and says, *"Oh, this smells really bad. You should open the window."* But for the smoker, the smell is so familiar, it's just normal.

This is so important to see: My mind is not clear, it is obscured, but I can't see the obscuration. And this opacity, like sometimes in bathroom windows they treat the glass so nobody can see in, our mind is like that. The glass has the potential to be clear, but when you blast it with sand, it takes on this opaque surface, this impenetrable surface.

In the same way, as we go through life, we have event after event after event. And each of these is like a little grain of sand rubbing against our potential for clarity. And of course, if you spend time with small children, you see the freshness with which they experience whatever is occurring. But nobody's going to pay you to be so fresh. So sadly, you go through school and you get a job, and you learn that opacity is the currency of samsara.

Coming from this lack of clarity, desire and diversion arise, along with pride and jealousy. These five poisons are very dangerous because we do not recognize that we are poisoned. We can see that there are many wars and conflicts in the world. When people are in conflict, they look through a particular lens. Someone else looks through a different lens. Both people are being quite authentic in saying, *"This is how it is."* And

this authenticity is difficult to see as false. We don't see that it's permeated by pride. We think, *"What I see is what I see, and this is how it is."*

There we have three aspects running together. *"What I see is what I see."* We add on to this though: *"And this is how it is."* That's where we go wrong. *"What I see is what I see."* We're now at the crossroads. I could be curious about your experience and say, *"And what do you see?"* And if you see something different from me, I could be interested in the patterns that are revealed to you.

Unfortunately though, if I take your patterns seriously, it relativizes what I see. What I see is only what *I* see. This is how we can tell we are caught up in karmic vision. If I could think that my vision is distorted or perverted by tendencies which arise through me which I cannot catch in the moment, then I might be able to be truly curious about what you see, what is your experience.

"But what I see is true. How could I live if I didn't trust my own judgment?" So in every situation of conflict, it's not that you have necessarily good people and bad people. You have people who are trapped in looking through their karmic lens, which gives them a limited vision. But in not recognizing this, or in refusing to recognize this, each of us make a claim to see the truth.

So when I don't look with my glasses, I see honestly, clearly that the sink in my bathroom is clean. Why other people are unable to see this, I don't know, because I know how it is.

Dharma: access to the vision of the whole

So whether we are calling people freedom fighters or terrorists or nationalists, what we see is limited vision. We see a part of the whole, we don't see the whole. Now, particularly from the point of view of dzogchen, this is very sad, because fundamentally we are not apart from the source. We have never left the source. It's not like Adam and Eve being thrown out of the Garden of Eden. Everything which arises is directly the radiance of the unborn ground.

But with this distorted vision, this astigmatism, I believe that partial vision is a vision of the whole. And on a relative level, this makes more and more obstacles to awakening to

the pure ground from which we are ceaselessly manifesting. It's only by recognizing that my current vision, my karmic vision, is limited that I can turn towards support, especially dharma support, to try to gain access to the vision of the whole.

As the *dzogchen* texts make clear, only the whole can see the whole. In the practice texts it's described as "seeing sky to sky." That is to say, when the various factors which are arising and passing, like clouds and rainbows... when we see that these leave no mark on the sky, then our mind is open and clear like the sky, and the field of experience is open and clear like the sky.

We are addicted to distraction

This is the need for the teaching, because we don't recognize that at the moment we are poisoned, like an alcoholic enjoying a brandy for breakfast. The drunk feeling, the toxic state of drunkenness, feels normal and good.

In the same way, people who are injecting heroin suffer withdrawal symptoms. The poison is going out of their system. That should be good. So as the heroin goes out of the brain, out of the bloodstream, that should be an improvement. But for the addict, it feels terrible. So, the addict has to go and look for more toxin in order to feel normal.

This is our situation. We are all intoxicated. We need help, but often seek help in further intoxication. There are many intoxicating and deluding possibilities. We can go to the cinema or watch a film on a computer. And if we like the film and we get taken into the film, we feel happy. This is a fairly benign, a fairly non-dangerous form of toxicity, but it's available all the time: entertainment.

I don't want to stay with the simplicity of things. I think, certainly for myself, when I read accounts of Milarepa and these great yogis, it's almost impossible to imagine what their life is like: in a cave, with the wind blowing, very thin clothing. We are not in such a situation. There's no bright shiny object to take his mind away from his situation. He doesn't have any distraction. He only has the Dharma to turn to. All that Milarepa had was his *tumo* to warm his body, his *mahamudra* to clarify his mind, his yoga, and so on. It's important to reflect on that, because our situation is very different. We have so many opportunities for distraction which we don't even recognize as being problematic.

Especially when we get troubles, when we get difficulties, physical pain, heartbreak, and so on, it's vital to stay with whatever is arising, not to go seeking for antidotes. If we want to awaken to the simplicity or the non-duality of whatever is occurring as a radiance of the pure ground, then it doesn't need our interfering or managing. As soon as you try to alter your own mood, to cheer yourself up, or to alter the external situation, you find yourself in the artificiality which is the work of consciousness. We want to relax out of the dualistic energy of consciousness into the immediacy of fresh awareness which doesn't need to alter whatever is arising.

Refuge: aligning ourselves into the flow of intrinsic connectivity

And right from the very beginning of our practice this is the underlying orientation. We begin by taking refuge. We start to rely on the un-intoxicated Buddha who sees with the wisdom eye. We look around: political leaders, many religious leaders, military leaders... none of them have the wisdom eye. They have a partial vision because they have taken up a position. They have settled themselves into one particular point of view.

But the mind of the Buddha, what is called the *dharmakaya*, is impartial. It doesn't go to this side or that side. It sees everything evenly. At first believing in the Buddha is a kind of inspiration, but as we come into the practice, we start to see that this is a path, this is a way of being which we can merge ourselves into.

The Dharma text remind us of the need for devotion and gratitude because when our mind is focused on the possibility of awakening, the other interesting phenomena which our world is full of start to fade into the background. It's not so much about renouncing the factors in the environment, but rather we bring the *dharma* to be foreground in our world so that the other phenomena are there, unaltered, but in the background, less able to impinge on us.

When we see the possibility of merging with the Buddha, which is a central practice in Tantra, we see that we can start to let go of our false, our misleading sense of personal autonomy. We need help. So what kind of help will truly be useful? Human beings will let us down - not because they are bad, but because they are trapped in a partial vision. They can only see the view from here, from inside looking out of their sense organs.

When we see that the teachings of dharma make sense to us, we have to find the right way of approaching them. We are advised not to see the teacher as a musk deer or to see the Dharma as a musk pod and ourselves as a hunter. The pod grows on the belly of the musk deer. It has a very strong smell which has been used in many perfumes, so it's worth a lot of money. The hunter doesn't care about the deer, he wants the pod.

The tradition reminds us that this is not the way to proceed, because if we are in this greedy approach, then we will want to add dharma onto ourselves so that we become big and important and shiny. The texts say, rather we should see the teacher as a doctor, the dharma as medicine, and ourselves as a sick person. We have to trust the doctor. We have to take the medicine the doctor suggests.

This is why we're doing longer tantric practices. We very often read long, long lineage prayers, remembering the names of all the different gurus from the time that the treasure text was first discovered or the time of the Buddha. We don't really know the story behind these yogis' lives, but we know ourselves that sometimes we don't feel in the mood to do practice or we don't want to study. So these gurus of the lineage, we get a sense they had more commitment, more patience, more capacity to stay with the difficult than perhaps we have at the moment. And so we pray to them.

Many people have grown up in Western cultures, Christian cultures, where prayer is a kind of hope. We pray, we do our best and we hope, "*Please listen to me. Is there anyone out there?*" But the tantric tradition starts with the fact of connectivity. In fact, the word *Tantra* means connectivity. The Buddhas are connected with us already. They see us, we don't see them. We do the practice in order to get so close to them that we merge into them. And then we can start to look through their eyes. And then what a different world it is.

This is why in the text very often they say: Don't remain in doubt, don't stay with uncertainty. You have to develop your devotion and trust until it is unshakable and absolutely clear. The Buddha is never on holiday, never unavailable. The difficulty is us, that our moods change, that we get carried away by different ideas. Prayer and devotion are ways of aligning ourselves into the flow of intrinsic connectivity.

So the great antidote to the sickness of taking oneself to be an isolate, a separate person, is firstly to trust the Buddha and all the teachings which have flowed from his enlightenment. *"I need the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha to help me."* This is not a pathetic position, but rather it's a profound method, because this reliance softens the error of duality and opens our heart to the primordial belonging within the mandala of wholeness.

The root of sickness is not seeing the inclusive wholeness

As the texts say, *"Samsara is like a dream."* If you're in a dream, you think, *"This is where I am."* Actually, your body is in bed, safe and warm, but you're dreaming of something else. You haven't left your bed in order to go into the dream. Being in the bed is the actual; being in the dream is an illusion.

From the very beginning, all sentient beings have been within the heart of *Kuntuzangpo*. This integral state is primordial; nothing changes it. But when imagination becomes the energy of a seemingly separated ego-self, all kinds of delusions arise.

Moreover, as we become less self-obsessed, the poison of isolation loses its power, and we become more aware of all the beings in the six realms. We see that their intrinsic belonging in the mandala of inclusive wholeness is hidden from them. This is their root of sickness. From this root comes all the other forms of confusion that pervade the six realms. Seeing this, we feel so sad for them.

It's very difficult to know how to live in samsara, if you take samsara seriously. Every day people are dying for their country. This is an amazing thing to do. Your name will be carved on a piece of stone and put in the center of the town. And some people will think they were defending freedom, and other people would think they were attacking freedom.

All forms of conflict and exploitation and abuse arise from the objectification of others. The world is open, it's just like the sky. But we believe it's full of real people. Some are our friends, some are our enemies. When we see this blindness, then we can start to follow the bodhisattva vision of being available for all, helping all.

The great medicine: the wisdom of emptiness and the kindness of inclusivity

The wisdom of emptiness lets us see that there are no real sentient beings as separate entities. We are all the flowering of the *dharmakaya*, our Buddha mind, which is open to all. So, when you walk down the street and you see cats or birds or people, these are all flowers of the Buddha. This is like the garden of the Buddha's heart.

There are no truly bad people and no truly good people either, because as long as you are a person, you are a form in a field of forms, and you are being moved this way and that by the shifts in the environment.

If we see ourselves as really existing in a world of existent things, it will be very difficult to have a pure life. In this way, the union of the wisdom of emptiness and the kindness of inclusivity is the great medicine. It is medicine for us and medicine for all sentient beings. So may we become true healers by dissolving the delusions arising from unawareness.

If you see someone in the street with a plaster cast on their leg because they've broken the bone, it's obvious that they have some difficulty. Problems in the mind are less visible. Problems of people's personalities, once you start to talk to them you might think, "*Whoa, this is a bit strange,*" but you can't see what it is that's driving their particular way of talking.

This is why meditation is so helpful, because we sit and our thoughts and feelings and memories arise, and we see, "*Oh, I am very strange. I'm a little bit crazy, and sometimes very crazy. I get so carried away by one idea, I want to sacrifice everything to follow it.*" And then the next day, something else seems fascinating.

The road to kindness towards others lies through the jungle of our own mental activity. And so it's vital that we learn to sit without entering into reactivity to whatever experiences arise and pass for us. And this is the focus of the work that we can do when we study, practice together.

It's very nice to be able to spend this time with you. I wish you a good and deep practice. No matter what occurs around us, no matter what forces are operating in this difficult

and dangerous world - if we keep the Buddha in our heart, we will undoubtedly make progress and find more space.

Now we come to the end, and hopefully we meet again somewhere, sometime. Bye for now.