

The Way of Basic Sanity:

A Brief Overview of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche's Perspective on Sutric Buddhism

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In this essay I attempt to provide a synopsis of Trungpa Rinpoche's unique perspective on Buddhist hinayana and mahayana practices. To have included an overview of Tantra would have meant writing an article of similar scope, so I have confined myself to presenting his views of sutric Buddhism. It has not been an easy task to summarize Trungpa Rinpoche's views, ranging as they do across so many profound issues. The number of his books is already quite extensive, with more publications arriving. While Trungpa Rinpoche is a very organized thinker in one respect, in another he almost defies systematization; his virtuosity with the English language, spontaneous outbursts of poetic expression and brilliant insights into our human folly can appear suddenly at any instant of his discourse, making it very difficult for anyone to write about his work and do his thinking justice. My task is a more humble one. I have simply tried to draw the reader's attention to certain salient features of his vast and profound teachings, selecting themes that I have personally found to be important and inspiring. As much as possible I have also allowed Trungpa Rinpoche to speak for himself, by including examples from his books to illustrate the points I am making.

In these teachings, Trungpa Rinpoche presents a very direct and explicit Buddhist method of discovering our own, fundamental, basic sanity. His writings provide a very methodical approach for prevailing over our neurotic tendencies, for he regarded this to be the fundamental method for realizing our basic sanity on the spiritual path. In his understanding of the human condition, neurosis is the result of

acquiescing to egoistic domination and the consequent entanglement in a variety of predictable self-deceptions. He highlights how calculating, shrewd, and resourceful the ego can be, and how willfully we thereby misuse our emotions in the course of our everyday lives. He also clearly elucidates Buddhist methods for cultivating compassion and wisdom: the two essential qualities for attaining enlightenment, or for realizing the basic sanity that is our innate inheritance as sentient beings.

Basic sanity

One of the vital and recurrent themes in Trungpa Rinpoche's thought is this notion of basic sanity. Throughout his teaching career he tirelessly returned to this topic, thereby emphasizing its significance for our times. Perhaps the best way to understand what Trungpa Rinpoche meant by 'basic sanity' is that it is a particular attitude or distinctive state of mind: an unencumbered openness characterized by the absence of hope and fear. As he explains in *Transcending Madness*:

You could have a basic sound understanding of the logic of things as they are without ego. In fact you can have a greater sanity beyond ego; you can deal with situations without hope and fear, and you can retain your self-respect or your logical sanity in dealing with things. -*Transcending Madness: The Experience of the Six Bardos*, pp. 17-18.

It should be acknowledged at the outset that the notion of transcending hope and fear is predominantly associated with the teachings of the Kagyu and Nyingma schools of Tibetan Buddhism. It was quite common for Trungpa Rinpoche to make liberal use of certain fundamental concepts from these two schools to convey the principal Buddhist teachings, even when the subject matter did not directly involve Tibetan Buddhism. Something of the flavor of Tantric Buddhism can also be detected in all of his discourses, such as this following extract from *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, which is typical of Trungpa's teaching style:

Somehow we lost the unity of openness and what

we are. Openness became a separate thing, and then we began to play games. It is obvious that we cannot say that we have lost the openness. "I used to have it, but I have lost it." We cannot say that, because that will destroy our status as an accomplished person. So the part of self-deception is to retell stories. We would rather tell stories than actually experience openness, because stories are very vivid and enjoyable. -*Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, pp. 67-68.

Basic sanity in Trungpa Rinpoche's thought represents the attitude of enlightenment which is free of hope and fear. The implication here seems obvious enough: the attitude of ignorance, if it can be put that way, dominates our deluded, samsaric, mind through the inveterate afflictions of hope and fear. In the idiom of Trungpa Rinpoche's teaching style, this would be termed 'neurosis.' Trungpa Rinpoche's view was that, in order to appreciate our basic sanity, we should not endeavor to disassociate ourselves from these afflictions or neurotic tendencies, but learn to work with them as the actual basis of our spiritual journey. As he states in *Crazy Wisdom*:

Developing basic sanity is a process of working on ourselves in which the path itself rather than attainment of a goal becomes the working basis. - *Crazy Wisdom*, p. 15.

Spiritual materialism

One of the fundamental ways we go astray and become enmeshed in the tangential currents of hope and fear is through a spiritual malady that Trungpa Rinpoche famously termed 'spiritual materialism.' As Trungpa saw it, the American spiritual scene was going through a major upheaval, where young people were leaving Judaism and Christianity in droves, experimenting with hallucinogenics, and dabbling in a plethora of Eastern religions, mysticisms and philosophies. Trungpa Rinpoche regarded this as a critical moment in American history; one that was pregnant with many spiritual

possibilities. On the one hand, there was the ubiquitous danger of degenerating into spiritual materialism; seduced by the myriad spiritual promises that proliferated, and continue to abound. On the other hand, there was the very real possibility of a proper and complete reception of Tibetan vajrayana Buddhism in the West. Trungpa Rinpoche set himself the task of introducing young Americans to the authentic teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. He did so in his own unique fashion, creating a completely novel yet strictly traditional style of presentation in the process. He was convinced that to make any spiritual progress we have to begin with ourselves; with what he characteristically referred to as 'our own neurosis.' In his inimitable style, Trungpa Rinpoche describes it this way, "If you are utterly confused, you are confused to the point of seeming to yourself to be unconfused. This is what we call 'spiritual materialism'..." (*The Lion's Roar*, p. 5.) His enduring message was that it is only through meditation practice that we can entertain any possibility of eradicating our neuroses. Any spiritual journey has to begin with oneself and one's own neurotic mind, and unless we begin with ourselves in this way, there is the pervasive danger of turning our spiritual yearnings into a form of materialism. He warns his students in *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*:

It is important to see that the main point of any spiritual practice is to step out of the bureaucracy of ego. This means stepping out of ego's constant desire for higher, more spiritual, more transcendental versions of knowledge, religion, virtue, judgment, comfort or whatever it is that the particular ego is seeking. One must step out of spiritual materialism. -*Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, p. 15.

Hopelessness

Trungpa Rinpoche presented a unique and contemporary approach to dealing with our neurotic tendencies. For him, a truly spiritual journey toward basic sanity has to begin with a sense of hopelessness -- the

recognition of the complete and utter hopelessness of our current situation. He assured his readers that they are required to undertake a major process of disillusionment in order to relinquish their belief in the existence of an external panacea that can eliminate their suffering and pain. We have to learn to live with our pain instead of hoping for something that will cause all of our hesitations, confusions, insanity, and pain to disappear. This theme is elaborated upon in *Illusion's Game*:

Creating this kind of hope is one of the most prominent features of spiritual materialism... There are so many promises involved. So much hope is planted in your heart. This is playing on your weakness. It creates further confusion with regard to pain. You forget about the pain altogether and get involved in looking for something other than pain. And this itself is pain... That is what we will go through unless we understand that the basic requirement for treading the spiritual path is hopelessness. -*Illusion's Game*, pP. 61-62.

To make any advances on the spiritual path, according to Trungpa Rinpoche, we have to realize that there is no savior, no such things as a divine hand that will reach down and lift us out of our malaise. In fact, he claimed that being hopeful is simply a form of neurotic confusion, a symptom of self-deception; of not being true to oneself. A fundamental sense of fear and dread lies at the basis of this approach, for to think that there is something other than ourselves, to be found outside ourselves, that will rescue or save us from ourselves is completely misguided, to say the least. We are compelled to pursue this kind of intervention because of the painfulness of our existence. As Trungpa says in *Dharma Art*:

The experience of I, me, a personal existence, ego, self, whatever you want to call it, has a sense of immense fundamental pain. You don't want to exist, you don't want to be, but you can't help it... We are allergic to ourselves; therefore, we create

all kinds of sicknesses and pains. -*Dharma Art*, pP.
46-47

Throughout his life, Trungpa Rinpoche presented the Buddhist message in a very challenging and uncompromising fashion. Even the central Buddhist notions of enlightenment, Buddhahood, and nirvana were not to be treated as objects to be pursued and possessed as some kind of reward for our efforts. Trusting that such transcendental realities will allay our fears of neurotic confusion and samsaric suffering is something that Trungpa Rinpoche equated with using a carrot and stick to control a donkey. As he says in *Crazy Wisdom*, "in spiritual materialism promises are used like a carrot held in front of a donkey, luring him into all kinds of journeys; in transcending spiritual materialism, there is no goal." (*Crazy Wisdom*, p. 15.) To introduce another Trungpa-ism -- this is equivalent to grasping the wrong end of the stick. He alleges that we are driven to this kind of impulsive and humiliating behavior because, "Nobody has given up hope of attaining enlightenment. Nobody has given up hope of getting out of suffering." -*The Lion's Roar*, p. 22.

From Trungpa Rinpoche's point of view, to be overly enthusiastic and enthralled by enlightenment is to begin our journey with the kind of subtle fallacy that guarantees bewilderment. This misconception arises because we have not confronted a genuine sense of hopelessness and we are still trying to escape our own condition for some more enchanted realm of existence. Trungpa demanded total, uncompromising honesty and authenticity with ourselves in this regard; even more so than any other Buddhist teachers in the West. This requisite can be gleaned from the following assessment in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*:

In other words, the whole thing is based upon another way of looking at the psychological picture of ourselves in terms of a practical meditative situation. Nobody is going to save us, everything is left purely to the individual, the commitment to who we are. Gurus or spiritual friends might instigate that possibility, but fundamentally they

have no function. -*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*:
p. 2.

A transformative sense of hopelessness is an essential element of the path for two reasons: the fascination with enlightenment and nirvana has the potential to become a dangerous distraction from our present condition, while the fixation on a god or divine being that will rescue us, reduces us to a puerile state of dependency. Both of these approaches encourage the kind of wishful thinking that leads to spiritual materialism. We cannot use transcendental, nirvanic, concepts to safeguard ourselves from the realities of conditioned existence, nor can we draw succor from thinking that a divine being will bestow salvific favors on us and release us from our current state of imprisoned desperation. Buddhism, being nontheistic, does not hold out any promises of divine grace or supernatural interventions, as Trungpa Rinpoche makes clear in *The Lion's Roar*:

You see, Buddhism is the only nontheistic religion. It doesn't contain any promises, or doesn't permit any. It just suggests the basic necessity of working with ourselves, fundamentally, very simply, very ordinarily. It is very sensible. You have no complaint when you get to the other end of the trip of Buddhism. It's a very definite journey. -*The Lion's Roar*, pp. 23-24.

Trungpa Rinpoche felt strongly that theism has the tendency to create a sense of dependency, which renders the individual perpetually hopeful, but without any real certainty about his or her own redemption. He felt that this approach was both psychologically harmful and spiritually vacuous. The approach of non-theism on the other hand, emphasizes a genuine sense of hopelessness that, in an ironic twist, produces a real sense of conviction in our own ability to secure liberation for oneself and by oneself. Trungpa Rinpoche could not stress enough that this genuine sense of hopelessness, along with trust and faith in oneself, are the real precondition for engendering an authentic spiritual development.

The openness and lack of ground that this hopelessness engenders

is not unworkable; but it has to be filled by faith. Trungpa did not intend faith in something external, but a trust or conviction in our own ability to liberate ourselves. In Trungpa Rinpoche's thought, genuinely experiencing a sense of hopelessness does not lead to despair or a sense of the meaninglessness of life; it gives rise directly to this trust in oneself. This is the natural result of genuine hopelessness, because of the attendant realization that nothing we can imagine or strive after will safeguard ego's territory. Something of our basic sanity will be allowed to surface as a result. A sense of meaning and faith will arise from this trust in ourselves and our own self-determination. Hopelessness and faith, Trungpa Rinpoche says, must coexist if we are to discover our basic sanity. As he says in *The Lion's Roar*:

We have completely tired ourselves out, exhausted ourselves beyond our hopefulness. We realize that life is hopeless and that any effort we put in to gain further experiences is also hopeless. Then we get into a real understanding of the space between us and our goal. That space is totally and completely full. And that fullness is what is called faith... Faith here means dedication to and conviction in one's own intelligence... You have trust in the basic truth of what you are, who you are. -*The Lion's Roar*, pp. 28-29.

In Trungpa Rinpoche's teachings, faith consists of seeing everything about ourselves as workable and salvageable. In this context then, faith has to be understood in a different way from traditional religious contexts, where hope and fear go together and both involve placing trust in the unknown. For Trungpa, faith is a task that can be carried out by ourselves, because in spite of our neurotic tendencies, confusions, and bewilderment, we already possess the innate intelligence and ability to extricate ourselves from our samsaric entanglements. As he says in *Meditation in Action*:

You see, you are your own best friend, your own closest friend, you are the best company for yourself. One knows one's own weaknesses and

inconsistency, one knows how much wrong one has done, one knows it in all detail, so it doesn't help to try to pretend that you don't know it...-

Meditation in Action, p. 26.

This kind of conviction in oneself represents a tremendous act of courage. Being hopeful, on the other hand, only indicates a sign of cowardice that is intimately associated with feeling helpless. By establishing trust in ourselves, we also simultaneously develop the ability to trust others, particularly our teacher, spiritual friend, guru, and so on. Not having faith in oneself or trusting our own innate basic goodness only leads to a sense of desperation that is precariously veiled in a thin layer of hopefulness and an obvious mistrust of others. All that we have is hope.

For Trungpa Rinpoche, this kind of hope is simply wishful thinking and should be rejected as useless and demeaning. This may come across as very provocative for many readers, but it is worth pursuing Trungpa Rinpoche's explanations on how this lack of courage and trust in ourselves can manifest as arrogance and egoism, ensuring the interminable neurotic habits that conceal our vulnerability, meekness, and ultimate lack of faith. As Trungpa says, "Our problem all along is that we have been too smart, too proud." (*The Lion's Roar, p. 23.*) We do not want to relate with anybody else because we have become completely fixated on enlightenment. In fact, we may eventually find any kind of trust exceedingly hard to generate.

These attitudes ensure we remain in a state of perpetual immaturity. As Trungpa was fond of saying, we must take stock of ourselves and pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. Nothing external is going to come along and change things for us. While Trungpa was aware that this may initially appear to be a bleak message, its crucial outcome is one of elevation. Realizing that we can turn our lives around by accepting our utter condition of hopelessness will bring about a feeling of joy rather than despondency and desperation. Once we have given up hope, we can really traverse the spiritual path instead of constructing fantasies or recoiling from doubts. As he makes clear in *The Myth of Freedom*:

[Joy]... transcends both hope and fear, pain and pleasure. Joy here is not pleasurable in the ordinary sense, but in the ultimate and fundamental sense of freedom, a sense of humor, the ability to see the ironical aspect of the game of ego, the playing of polarities. -*The Myth of Freedom*, p. 45.

A genuine experience of hopelessness, Trungpa assures us, is an indefatigable defense against the dangers of spiritual materialism because it brings about fearlessness. Fearlessness is another essential ingredient in Trungpa's vision, for both hope and fear must be confronted on the spiritual journey. The lure of spiritual materialism lies in its empty promises of an eternal, paradisiacal, heavenly existence, or the promise of being elected by a divine being for special favors. In the end however, these ideas only create the conditions for a perpetually infantile state of dependency.

hinayana

Tibetan Buddhism has always favored a more progressively developmental structure to soteriology than many other forms of Buddhism. All four main Tibetan schools accordingly have their own system of the 'paths and stages' format of spiritual cultivation and development. These are typically presented in the form of 'three yanas' or 'three vehicles': hinayana, mahayana, and vajrayana (or Tantrayana). These three yanas can be presented from many different perspectives -- we can find the views of the historical, doctrinal, geographical, philosophical, and individual spiritual developments there. Trungpa Rinpoche, along with many of the great Kagyu and Nyingma masters, was not interested in Buddhism's doctrinal, historical, or philosophical perspectives in themselves, but in what spiritual bearings these yanas have for the individual. Understood in this context, hinayana does not refer to a particular doctrinal school, but to an individual with a specific mental disposition and character. In *Journey Without Goal* Trungpa Rinpoche gives just such a definition of the hinayana:

hinayana literally means the "small or lesser vehicle," but it would be more accurate to call it the "narrow way." The hinayana is small or narrow in the sense that the strict discipline of meditation narrows down, or tames, the speed and confusion of mind, allowing the mind to rest in its own place. The hinayana is also called the "immediate yana" because hinayana practice allows simple and direct experience of our own minds and of the world. We begin to realize that whatever we experience -- whether good or bad, positive or negative -- is workable, tamable. -*Journey Without Goal: The Tantric Wisdom of the Buddha*, pp. 1-2.

Unlike many traditional Buddhist teachers who have lived and taught in the West, Trungpa Rinpoche clearly saw the necessity of taking students through the three yana perspective of Tibetan Buddhism in a very traditional way. Tibetan lamas have often tended to be very liberal with tantric initiations, teachings, and practices, thus unwittingly helping to fuel their student's distraction and fascination rather than providing a solution to it. Trungpa Rinpoche was quite unique in taking his students through the step-by-step process of the hinayana, mahayana, and finally vajrayana methods of Buddhist teachings and praxis. To begin the Buddhist path, the individual practitioner must first embark on the hinayana or 'small vehicle' by dealing with his or her own mind.

Four Noble Truths

The best way to manage one's mind is through contemplating the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the way out of suffering. Typically, Trungpa Rinpoche presents these truths in an immediate and contemporary manner, where the everyday experiences of modern life are clearly encapsulated in the traditional teachings. In correlation with his statements on spiritual materialism and wishful thinking, Trungpa asserts that suffering is an all-pervasive

feature of human experience because of our overwhelming desire to resist or deny the existence of our pain. He argues that this is a self-defeating exercise, because pain is not something we can rid ourselves of through an act of will, and we only manage to create more pain for ourselves by trying to do so. The variegated experiences of suffering that we are subject to, are exacerbated by both the denial of suffering and the insistence that happiness is something we can obtain in the absence of pain.

While acknowledging that it is part of our deep-seated habits and cultural expectations to regard happiness as something that we have to obtain in the absence of pain, Trungpa clearly presents the Buddha's teaching that happiness is obtained through working with pain rather than trying to make it go away. In fact, it is predominantly our attitude toward pain and our responses to it that determine whether we have a happier life or an unhappy one. As Trungpa Rinpoche explains in *Illusion's Game*:

The problem seems to be the attitude that the pain should go, then we will be happy. That is our mistaken belief. The pain never goes, and we will never be happy. That is the truth of suffering, *duhkha satya*. Pain never goes; we will never be happy. There's a mantra for you. It's worth repeating. You've got the initiation now: you've got the mantra. -*Illusion's Game*: p. 60.

It is essential to the spiritual path that we wake up to this fact and realize the fundamental insight of the Buddha into *duhkha satya* (the truth of suffering). When examining this experience of suffering, Trungpa argues that there is both an element of intelligence and stupidity involved in denying our pain by 'hiding our private parts,' as he expresses it. What he seems to be suggesting here is that we find our pain and vulnerability embarrassing and constantly try to hide our fundamental discomfort to the best of our ability, pretending even to ourselves that we are completely in control of our lives, or in Trungpa Rinpoche's terminology, we insist on preserving our egoistic territory. To do so is both intelligent and stupid, because our discomfort is

transparently obvious to others. Denying our pain and finding ever more ingenuous and sophisticated methods for hiding it from others only compounds our misery and intensifies our deluded state of mind. Thus we stupidly compound our pain. It would be far more intelligent to acknowledge the reality of dukkha and try to address it in a practical way. As Trungpa Rinpoche states in *The Lion's Roar*:

We should admit this infamous, familiar pain.

This is the pain that is actually happening. We cannot say that it is just nothing. It is the biggest thing that we have to hide. We plan all kinds of ways to hide it, thinking that nobody will know...

It is really very, very embarrassing; and that embarrassment is pain, dukkha, suffering. Trying to hide our private parts does not work out the way we wanted it to. -*The Lion's Roar*, pp. 9-10.

For Trungpa Rinpoche, the origin of the all-pervasive, ubiquitous, suffering we endure lies in our restless nature: we never take a break from our drive to succeed, acquire, and experience all manner of objects that might enrich our lives. As a result, there is a tremendous sense of speed involved in the accumulation of the material and emotional things we seek in order to ease our pain, and we never allow ourselves the space to be with ourselves, even for a moment. Trungpa Rinpoche says that grasping after things only accelerates the speed with which we scour for an ever-increasing number of material acquisitions and psychological comforts. As he explains in *The Lion's Roar*:

The origin of the suffering of our thingness is circling with speed. The origin of the suffering is the speed. Graspingness, re-creating one karmic situation after another. -*The Lion's Roar*, p. 18.

The solution to this is revealed in the Third Noble Truth: the truth of cessation. Trungpa Rinpoche consistently maintains that if we pay attention to our inner inklings, we will find that we already have a basic nature of sanity within ourselves. This discovery is what will allow us to stop our struggle and relinquish our endless, neurotic,

need to secure and solidify ourselves. Instead, we can wake up to the present state with ourselves as we are. Trungpa has this to say about the innate quality of our basic sanity in *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*:

We begin to realize that there is a sane, awake quality within us. In fact this quality manifests itself only in the absence of struggle. So we discover the Third Noble Truth, the truth of the goal: that is, non-striving. We need only to drop the effort to secure and solidify ourselves and the awakened state is present. -*Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, p. 153.

The way to go about shifting from the position of striving, speed, and the struggle to maintain our solid ground, to a state of non-striving is laid out in the Eightfold Noble Path. By following and engaging in the practices of this path, we can attain some understanding of suffering, impermanence, and egolessness based upon the hinayana path. As Trungpa Rinpoche explains in *The Myth of Freedom*:

It is this fear of exposure, this denial of impermanence that imprisons us. It is only by acknowledging impermanence that there is the chance to die and the space to be reborn and the possibility of appreciating life as a creative process. -*The Myth of Freedom*, p. 13.

Refuge

In order to embark on the hinayana path, we have to assimilate the four noble truths and make a real resolve to commit ourselves to following the Buddhist path. At that point it is essential to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. By taking refuge in these 'Three Jewels' of the spiritual path, we are transformed into homeless travelers without any abode. Trungpa Rinpoche describes the impulse to take refuge in *The Heart of the Buddha*:

Since we are in an emergency situation, the first thing we learn is that our struggle to pull ourselves

out of samsara has to be given up. Being engaged in a struggle may give us some sense of security, in that at least we feel we are doing something. But that struggle has become useless and irrelevant: it only makes things worse. However, the pain we have experienced in our struggle cannot be forgotten. We have to work with it. Rather than struggling to escape pain, we have to make it our path. -*The Heart of the Buddha*, p. 64.

As sentient creatures we never really have a permanent dwelling place, but we injudiciously continue to seek one and thus inure ourselves to our ignorance by believing that we have found a home in samsara. Nonetheless, our experience of samsara itself is constantly evolving, which is why it is depicted as 'cyclic existence' in Buddhism. As sentient beings we are continually transported from one state of existence to another in accordance with our karmic inheritance. Sometimes we may be transported to elevated states of existence and other times demoted to lower states; but the process is continuous and unrelenting until we are able to liberate ourselves within our own basic sanity or enlightened state. As there is no permanent, secure homebase to be found in samsara, it is necessary to simplify ourselves and our expectations by becoming a 'homeless one.' As Trungpa says in *Orderly Chaos*, "true homelessness is just giving up without taking on anything new; it is just simplifying yourself without questioning what you are going to get in return." -*Orderly Chaos: The Mandala Principle*, p. 22.

For Trungpa Rinpoche, taking refuge and becoming homeless in no way entails handing our lives over to some greater spiritual authority and relinquishing all responsibility for ourselves. It means only that we give up the familiar ground that supports our ego and admit that our ego is incapable of controlling its world or securing itself. Trungpa, in fact, describes taking refuge as the most authentic way of becoming responsible for our own lives. For example, in *The Heart of the Buddha*:

By taking refuge, in some sense we become

homeless refugees. Taking refuge does not mean saying that we are helpless and then handing all our problems over to somebody or something else. There will be no refugee rations, nor all kinds of security and dedicated help. The point of becoming a refugee is to give up our attachment to basic security. We have to give up our sense of home ground, which is illusory anyway. -*The Heart of the Buddha*, p. 87.

Surrender

The real essence of taking refuge consists of totally surrendering oneself. Trungpa Rinpoche's conception of total surrender warrants a brief explanation, because it represents a very interesting notion. He says that we must not surrender our individual responsibility to an 'other,' yet maintains that it is essential we undergo a complete process of relinquishment. By 'surrender' then, Trungpa Rinpoche means going beyond fascination and expectation, which is a continuation of the theme of hopelessness that he highlights so much. This surrendering is a way of extricating ourselves from the egoistic tentacles that keep us entrapped in our self-delusions. As such, taking refuge is done through this surrendering, this freeing of oneself from egoistic control. By taking refuge we are availing ourselves of the opportunity to awaken, to become like the Buddha in whom we merge as the embodiment of the path. As he explains in *The Myth of Freedom*:

"Surrender" means opening oneself completely, trying to get beyond fascination and expectation. Surrender also means acknowledging the raw, rugged, clumsy and shocking qualities of one's ego, acknowledging them and surrendering them as well. Generally, we find it very difficult to give out and surrender our raw and rugged qualities of ego.... We can afford to surrender that raw and rugged neurotic quality of self and step out

of fascination, step out of preconceived ideas. -
Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism, pp. 24-25.

As I understand it, Trungpa Rinpoche is making a very helpful suggestion for modern-day Buddhist practitioners. He differentiates taking refuge in the Buddhist teachings from the kind of alternative refuges offered by the religious and secular traditions of the West, especially the kind afforded by Western psychotherapies. It is very common for people to come to Buddhism and take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha in the hope that they will quite literally be saved by them, or rescued from whatever mental afflictions they may be suffering by a Tibetan lama. As Trungpa Rinpoche clearly states in *The Myth of Freedom*, we should surrender such notions at the doorstep of the Buddhist path:

All the promises we have heard are pure seduction. We expect the teachings to solve all our problems; we expect to be provided with magical means to deal with our depressions, our aggressions, our sexual hangups. But to our surprise we begin to realize that this is not going to happen. It is very disappointing to realize that we must work on ourselves and our suffering rather than depend upon a savior or the magical power of yogic techniques. It is disappointing to realize that we have to give up our expectations rather than build on the basis of our preconceptions. We must allow ourselves to be disappointed, which means the surrendering of me-ness, my achievements. -*The Myth of Freedom, p. 5.*

Shamatha

In strict accord with the three yana approach of Tibetan Buddhism, Trungpa Rinpoche began by training his students in the practice of sitting meditation. He placed great emphasis on the practice of shamatha, because it is only through shamatha that we can learn to confront our own minds. Sitting with one's mind is the best way to

experience the sense of hopelessness that Trungpa Rinpoche never grew tired of emphasizing. In *Dharma Art* he comments:

In sitting meditation, you don't trip out, but simply sit, identify with your breath, work with your thoughts. You do everything very manually, very definitely, constantly. But in postmeditation practice, you are here. You are definitely here: whether you are combing your hair, pressing your clothes, walking around, taking a bite of a peach, or whatever you are doing in your life. -*Dharma Art*, p. 20.

To learn to be genuine and authentic and not yield to our innate impulse to scramble after a dazzling array of spiritual attainments, lofty meditation experiences, divine encounters, and so forth, we must first find a method of nullifying this tendency to aggrandize our egos and simply learn how to dwell in peace. This is achieved through the practice of shamatha meditation. Trungpa Rinpoche defines shamatha as 'dwelling in peace,' but adds, "Peace here refers to the simplicity or uncomplicatedness of the practice." -*The Lion's Roar*, p. 92.

The mind has a tendency to be drawn to various sensory and mental objects. In our unreflective moods we chase after material things or emotional comforts such as love and companionship, while in more reflective moods we give reign to the same tendency by scrambling after spiritual things. Neither of these approaches allows us to be with ourselves. We are always stepping outside of ourselves, with what Trungpa Rinpoche described with provocative acuity as 'a poverty-stricken attitude.' Shamatha meditation, on the other hand, allows us the luxury of dwelling in peace with ourselves and our neuroses. It is this simple, uncomplicated, and non-duplicitous approach that constitutes the true spiritual path.

In this context, I would like to draw the reader's attention to one small but significant aspect of Trungpa Rinpoche's presentation of shamatha meditation. In many Buddhist traditions, shamatha is consistently presented as emphasizing the suppression of thoughts, to a greater or lesser degree. As a consequence of Trungpa Rinpoche's

impeccable training in the Kagyu and Nyingma methods of meditation, he discouraged his students from suppressing their thoughts during sitting meditation from the commencement of their practice. Instead, he instructed them to deal directly with whatever arose in their minds, without employing any of the techniques for suppressing thinking or fabricating a peaceful state of mind. The following passage from *The Lion's Roar* is therefore typical of his many shamatha meditation instructions:

All those things that happen in sitting meditation are relating with ourselves, working with ourselves, exposing neuroses of all kinds. After you have been through a certain amount of that, you master the experience of breathing in spite of those interruptions. -*The Lion's Roar*, p. 93.

As Trungpa Rinpoche pointed out, the cause of suffering is our speed, the ever-increasing acceleration of the tendency to chase after things with greed and grasping. In order to work with suffering, we need to do something to slow this unbridled and undisciplined energy of the mind. Constant agitation is like looking through the windows of a fast moving train, because everything is subject to the blur of our neurotic speed. There is no effective method for treating our neurotic speed other than the practice of shamatha. From having slowed the neurotic activities of the mind, we simultaneously allow ourselves the opportunity to see things more clearly. As Trungpa goes on to say in *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*:

It is important to remember that the practice of meditation begins with the penetration of the neurotic thought pattern which is the fringe of ego. As we proceed further, we see through not only the complexity of the thought processes but also the heavy "meaningfulness" of concepts expressed in names and theories. Then at last we create some space between this and that, which liberates us tremendously. -*Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, p.224.

Mindfulness

Sitting meditation is the very foundation of Buddhist practice; everything else is built upon it. The core of sitting meditation is the practice of mindfulness. Trungpa Rinpoche's main theme when presenting sitting meditation with mindfulness was as a way of making friends with ourselves, or in his words, 'making friends with one's own neurosis.' A unique feature of Trungpa Rinpoche's teachings on shamatha is his insistence that meditation practice is a way of making us more acceptable to ourselves.

No other Buddhist teachers have drawn our attention to the need to find ourselves acceptable as a precondition for spiritual growth. Friendliness toward ourselves comes from the open space generated by sitting practice. It is here that we allow ourselves to perceive our individual, neurotic mind directly. While our natural tendency is to avoid our faults and shortcomings, this evasion is transformed by the process of mindfulness, which allows us to observe our habitual tendencies without judgment or withdrawal. Trungpa points out that a gradual sense of self-acceptance arises as a result of that perception. The friendliness that develops in sitting meditation has to be contrasted with the more insidious affliction of narcissistic self-love, which is not based on genuine self-acceptance.

Ego has a way of placing tyrannical demands on us, with certain things designated as acceptable and other things censored, suppressed, or pushed out of conscious purview due to their potential to cause discomfort, unease, and even serious pain. In shamatha meditation, we can create the genuine experience of space and get to know ourselves more thoroughly -- warts and all -- as the saying goes.

Trungpa describes this process in *The Lion's Roar*:

Neurosis in this case is inability to face the simple truth. Rather than do that, we introduce all kinds of highfalutin ideas -- cunning, clever, depressing. We just purely bring in as much stuff as we like. And that stuff that we bring in has neurotic qualities. What "neurotic" finally comes down

to here is taking the false as true. The illogical approach is regarded as the logical one. So just relating with ourselves in meditation practice exposes all this hidden neuroses. -*The Lion's Roar*, pp. 91-92.

Trungpa Rinpoche's also insisted that shamatha should not be perceived as a special act we perform. There is tremendous value in seeing meditation as a natural thing to do, rather than something special or extraordinary. Everything we do in life is executed in either of two ways: purposefully or instinctively. The practice of mindfulness meditation is designed to help us cultivate a state of mind that is mid-way between these two. We are not trying to cultivate a very deliberate and purposeful way of being and acting, nor do we allow ourselves to succumb to a completely mindless, habitual, and instinctive way of behaving. By avoiding both of these approaches we can settle into some kind of natural ground that is alert yet relaxed. As Trungpa states in *The Heart of the Buddha*:

In this case, mindfulness means that when you sit and meditate, you actually do sit... You don't try to formalize the sitting situation and make it into some special activity that you are performing. You just sit. And then you begin to feel that there is some sense of groundedness. -*The Heart of the Buddha*, pp. 30-31.

Cool boredom

Trungpa Rinpoche is insistent that while sitting meditation is rewarding in itself, we should not become too excited about our meditation experiences. Instead, we should concentrate on becoming aware of a less celebrated state of mind, which he terms 'cool boredom.' For Trungpa Rinpoche, this boredom is a sign that our meditation experience is developing and something we should embrace with enthusiasm rather than growing dejected about a perceived lack of progressiveness.

This seems to me to be a very helpful instruction on Trungpa

Rinpoche's part, because many meditators understandably expect their meditative efforts to constantly bring new and novel experiences; if not continually, then at least intermittently. When we have the experience of cool boredom, we may interpret this as a symptom of reaching an impasse in our spiritual progress, because it has none of the characteristics of anecdotal experience. According to Trungpa Rinpoche however, it is necessary for us to go through this kind of boredom. This experience is unique to meditation and is designated 'cool' because it is actually quite refreshing. As Trungpa Rinpoche consistently emphasizes, there are many beneficial aspects to be had from this experience. In *The Myth of Freedom*, he explains cool boredom in the following words:

Boredom has many aspects: there is the sense that nothing is happening, that something might happen, or even that what we would like to happen might replace that which is not happening. Or, one might appreciate boredom as a delight. The practice of meditation could be described as relating with cool boredom, refreshing boredom, boredom like a mountain stream. It refreshes because we do not have to do anything or expect anything... As we realize that nothing is happening, strangely we begin to realize that something dignified is happening. There is no room for frivolity, no room for speed. We just breathe and are there. - *The Myth of Freedom*, pp. 56-57.

Lack of credentials

Trungpa Rinpoche also urges us to resist the hoping for credentials as an outcome of our practice. This admonition is another perspective on the Buddhist path that is unique to Trungpa Rinpoche. He called it 'Buddhadharma without credentials.' It is an indication of Trungpa Rinpoche's integrity as a meditation practitioner and teacher that he emphasized the importance of eschewing credentials of any kind as an integral part of the spiritual path. No other teacher, before or

after him, has underscored this point with such insistence. Trungpa brings this issue back to meditation practice, explaining that it is the experience of cool boredom that will assist us to overcome this hankering after credentials. He addresses this in *The Myth of Freedom*:

Boredom is important because boredom is anti-credential. Credentials are entertaining, always bringing you something new, something lively, something fantastic, all kinds of solutions. When you take away the idea of credentials, then there is boredom. -*The Myth of Freedom*, p. 53.

This seems to be an extremely important attitude, in light of the fact that most of the world's great spiritual traditions speak of levels of attainment, gradations of consciousness, and so forth. They distinguish between superficiality and depth, ascending or descending and different paths and stages of development. One could therefore be forgiven for wondering, 'What stage of development have I reached?' 'What level of meditative concentration have I developed?' 'How close am I to attaining a particular level of spiritual realization?' While not denouncing the importance or reality of some of these stages of spiritual attainment, this obsession with credentials is an attitude we must relinquish for our own benefit, because it abets rather than aids our spiritual growth. As Trungpa Rinpoche says, the search for credentials is a sickness we have to dissect within our meditation experience, without protecting ourselves from fully experiencing our neuroses. He likens this process to having 'an operation without an anesthetic' in *The Myth of Freedom*:

We begin meditation practice by dealing with thoughts, the fringe of ego. The practice of meditation is an undoing process... So the practitioner who is involved with credentials begins with an operation. Credentials are an illness and you need an operation to remove them... They prove that you are sick so that you can have attention from your friends. We have to operate on this person to eliminate the credential sickness.

But if we give this person an anesthetic, he will not realize how much he has to give up. So we should not use anesthetics at all. -*The Myth of Freedom*, pp. 51-52.

This idea of non-credentials is a significant concept in Trungpa Rinpoche's thinking. He continually points out that we should never under-estimate the importance of engaging in spiritual practice without the desire for any form of recognition or acknowledgement, because it only reinforces the deluded tendency to define our territory and solidify our existence and prove our worth to ourselves and others. It therefore limits and corrupts any spiritual insight we may attain in ego's claustrophobic domain. The temptation to pervert our experiences with credentials arises from the fact that ego has no real solidity, as Trungpa Rinpoche accentuates in the following passage from *The Myth of Freedom*:

In order to cut through the ambition of ego, we must understand how we set up me and my territory, how we use our projections as credentials to prove our existence. The source of the effort to confirm our solidity is an uncertainty as to whether or not we exist. Driven by this uncertainty, we seek to prove our own existence by finding a reference point outside ourselves, something with which to have a relationship, something solid to feel separate from. -*The Myth of Freedom*, p. 19.

Vipashyana

With the practice of shamatha meditation and mindfulness, where cool boredom prevents the mind from being trammled by the constant search for credentials, we can begin to grapple better with our egos. While it is the proper establishment of shamatha practice that allows this to happen, shamatha alone is not sufficient to cut through ego. We must learn to practice vipashyana meditation if we are to gradually gain a real understanding of egolessness.

In the mindfulness practice of shamatha, the meditator is forced to

deal with his or her subconscious gossip and discursive thoughts. While Vipashyana practice is based upon this development of mindfulness, it is a far more powerful method for allowing us to cut through the mechanisms of ego. This is so because vipashyana meditation allows us to become more aware of the whole environment, as this, "allows us to become less self-centred and more in contact with the world around us..." (*Training the Mind*, p. 149.) The awareness of our underlying mental habits and tendencies continues to grow, as we develop an expansive sense of clarity about our surroundings, which gives rise to a greater insight into the nature of existence. It is this understanding of the insubstantial nature of ourselves and our world that really transforms the well-entrenched delusions that prevent us from realizing our basic sanity. Trungpa Rinpoche often advised his students that to see that the phenomenal world has no more solid existence than we ourselves do, will enable us to see the whole thing as a great display that demands nothing from us. This is an essential step in our spiritual development, as Trungpa makes clear in *The Heart of the Buddha*:

With further practice, we begin to lose the reference point of self-consciousness, and we experience the environment of practice and the world without bringing everything back to the narrow viewpoint of "me." We begin to be interested in "that," rather than purely being interested in "this." -*The Heart of the Buddha*, p. 134.

It is essential to combine both mindfulness and awareness in Buddhism, so shamatha and vipashyana techniques must be practiced with equal emphasis, because shamatha will give rise to vipashyana, and mindfulness will give rise to awareness. Trungpa Rinpoche's teachings were quite traditional in this regard. Mindfulness allows us to become aware during specific mental experiences or everyday activities, such as conversing with others, walking, sleeping, lying down, eating, and so forth, while vipashyana is a non-directional awareness, because it takes in the overall, spatial context within which

these experiences are placed.

According to Trungpa Rinpoche, this type of vipashyana awareness has to be precisely defined, because we can exercise awareness in many different ways. Often we have the experience of awareness that we might call 'tacit awareness,' such as when we go about daily chores like as driving. Then there is 'focused awareness,' which has to do with narrowing our focus on a deliberately chosen object, such as typing on a computer keyboard. Then there is another kind of awareness, which Trungpa Rinpoche called 'panoramic awareness,' because with it, "you see the whole scene. There are no sidetracks." (*The Lion's Roar*, p. 11.) According to Trungpa, the ignorance responsible for throwing us into a state of samsaric confusion is a product of a mind with a mono-dimensional and narrow focus. It stands to reason then, that the opposite of ignorance would be a mind that is panoramic, spacious, unrestrained, free-flowing, and wide-ranging. This panoramic awareness is developed by expanding on the awareness that we have already developed in mindfulness practice. It seems that there is a gradual development from mindfulness to awareness, to focused awareness, to panoramic awareness. Trungpa illustrates the significance of panoramic awareness in *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*:

We begin to see the pattern of our fantasies rather than being immersed in them. We discover that we need not struggle with our projections, that the wall that separates us from them is our own creation. -*Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, p. 168.

Prajna and egolessness

The panoramic awareness that we develop in vipashyana meditation is directly related to the traditional Buddhist concept of prajna. Trungpa defines prajna as the mental power that is endowed with the dual faculties of intellect and intuition for, "Prajna, or intellect, is completely intuitive as well as intellectually precise." -*The Heart of the Buddha*, p. 16. Intuition, in this context, seems to imply a certain, instinctive,

sharpness of mind; of being able to spontaneously see things clearly with precision and directness. At the same time, prajna has the quality of intellect, which also involves a very precise and subtle ability for fine discrimination. This discrimination is possible because it is no longer so closely tied to our egoistic sense of the world, to me and mine; it is unencumbered by our insecurities and territoriality. As he explains in *The Dawn of Tantra*:

Prajna is precision... It is the precision or sharpness of intelligence that cuts off the samsaric flow, severs the aorta of samsara... So the ultimate idea of intellect, from the Buddhist point of view, is the absence of ego, which is prajna. -
The Dawn of Tantra, p. 82.

Vipashyana insight then brings about the realization of two-fold egolessness: the recognition of the insubstantial nature of both self and the phenomenal world. We begin to understand that all the suffering we experience, the entire gamut of pain and misery that we endure, is brought about by an erroneous conception of 'self' and 'other.' In Trungpa Rinpoche's thinking, this brings about two distinct yet related revelations: the recognition of our fundamental aloneness, where no external savior who can bestow liberation upon us, and a tremendous feeling of connectedness toward our fellow creatures and the created world.

Again in Trungpa's vision, something that was initially fearful and the cause of great anxiety, can blossom into something positive; in this case, into an effortless connection with the world. Here, he seems to be suggesting that a total acknowledgement of our own aloneness, coupled with seeing that there is no supernatural principle to be relied upon, allows us a sudden insight into the real significance of the sentient and non-sentient things of this world.

As such, this realization of egolessness does not push us into an abyss of nothingness; it brings a positive and holistic perspective to the whole process of the Buddhist path. Egolessness, in Trungpa Rinpoche's conception, opens up a whole new possibility of living and interacting with sentient beings and the created world. Trungpa

confidence that we have been born fundamentally rich and that we must develop this richness, we must allow ourselves to be awake, to let our natural instincts emerge. Trungpa describes the mahayana path in these words in *The Myth of Freedom*:

In the hinayana the emphasis is on acknowledging our confusion. In the mahayana we acknowledge that we are a buddha, an awakened one, and act accordingly, even though all kinds of doubts and problems might arise. In the scriptures, taking the bodhisattva vow and walking on the bodhisattva path is described as being an act of awakening bodhi or "basic intelligence." Becoming "awake" involves seeing our confusion more clearly. We can hardly face the embarrassment of seeing our hidden hopes and fears, our frivolousness and neurosis. It is such an overcrowded world. And yet it is a very rich display. The basic idea is that, if we are going to relate to the sun, we must also relate with the clouds that obscure the sun. -*The Myth of Freedom, p. 104.*

In Trungpa Rinpoche's view of the Buddhist path, it is the realization of two-fold egolessness that allows us to open ourselves to others without fear or trepidation. It was the obsessive concern with our ego that stood in the way of fully developing relationships with others. Through shamatha and vipashyana practice, our ability to appreciate others develops naturally and we find ourselves gravitating toward the bodhisattva path.

The altruism that is associated with the mahayana is not something that has to be forced or structured into our lives -- it is the natural evolution of basic sanity once our egoism has been undermined through vipashyana. The mahayana path is based on the discovery that others are more important than ourselves. In a sense, we begin to discover that we do not really exist, at least not in the fixed, predetermined way that we imagined, and the result of this discovery is that we develop the space to take a real interest in the welfare of

others. As Trungpa Rinpoche states in *The Lion's Roar*:

At the beginning there is a vague idea that something is not quite right. There is something wrong with oneself. Things are questionable, and one begins to look into the question, to relate with the pain, the chaos and confusion. Then at a certain stage some of the answers that arise out of the search begin to create further hunger, further curiosity. One's heart becomes more steeped in the teachings. Then the mahayana experience of intense dedication to the path begins to take place. Dedication to the path in this case also means compassion, a loving attitude toward oneself and others. One begins to find one's place in the universe, in this world. -*The Lion's Roar*, pp. 62-63.

Bodhichitta

As we become acutely aware of others and the myriad ways in which they suffer pain and degradation, we are compelled to make the resolve to do something to alleviate their suffering and find a way to work for their benefit. This impulse is called bodhichitta in Buddhist literature. As Trungpa Rinpoche explains, giving rise to bodhichitta does not simply require a good heart; it also requires good intelligence as well. It is our heart that generates the warmth associated with compassionate action, however we need intellect to discriminate between actions that are truly beneficial for others, from actions that serve our own self-interest or misconstrue the needs of others. It is this combination of warmth and skill that constitutes compassionate action. The best way to realize bodhichitta is to cultivate bodhichitta, for while bodhichitta is innate in ourselves as 'awakened heart,' it requires nurturing and training to fully materialize in our actions and minds. We do this through the practice of shamatha and vipashyana meditation and by bringing mindfulness and awareness into all activities of life. This is the practice of compassion, of expanding our

concerns beyond our own egoistic territory and generating warmth and gentleness towards others. As Trungpa says in *Training the Mind*:

In the mahayana, when we begin to realize the bodhisattva principle through practicing bodhichitta, our concern is more with warmth and skillfulness. We realize we have nothing to hang on to in ourselves, so we can give away each time. The basis of such compassion is nonterritoriality, non-ego, no ego at all. If you have that, then you have compassion. Then further warmth and workability and gentleness take place as well. - *Training the Mind*, pp. 149-150.

Buddha-nature

Bodhichitta requires both warmth and intelligence, and this intelligence is also regarded as an innate quality within us, in Trungpa Rinpoche's thought. In its innate form, this intelligence is known as buddha-nature, which is another term for our basic sanity. Just like the warmth that portends bodhichitta, our innate buddha-nature is something that can be harnessed and refined through the practices of the mahayana path. In an interesting anecdote, and one that again reflects his Kagyu and Nyingma training, Trungpa Rinpoche highlights our basic sanity as a persistent reality by describing it as the other face of ego. He suggests that ego has a Janus-face, a two-sided head, with one side fixated and territorial, giving rise to the samsaric experiences of entanglement, and the other face a clear and unencumbered one that critically surveys all of our samsaric experiences. Our territorial face thrives on having a narrow focus, its main task being the pursuit of security. The flip side is our basic sanity, or buddha-nature, which is much more flexible and spacious and quite unconcerned with our narrow hopes and fears. Trungpa Rinpoche highlights this double-sided nature of the ego in *The Lion's Roar*:

Ego is that which thrives on the security of your existence. Beyond that there is intelligence that sees the foolishness in trying to thrive on

your security. It sees that insecurity as the ego's problem. The intelligence that sees that is called tathagatagarbha in Sanskrit, which means "buddha nature." Every act that perceives pain and impermanence and egolessness and the five skandhas, and even that which perceives meditation itself, is an act of non-ego. In other words, we could say that ego has two aspects: one is the honest and solid, sincere ego; the other is the critical surveyor of the whole situation, which is somewhat intelligent and more flexible and spacious. That aspect that is spacious and flexible, intelligent, is regarded as non-ego and called tathagatagarbha. -*The Lion's Roar*, p. 101.

Bodhisattva vow

In order to strengthen the resolve of the mahayana path, we need to take the bodhisattva vow. The bodhisattva vow is the commitment to put others before ourselves. This vow aids us in the stabilization of our bodhichitta, or benevolent heart, because it ensured that we maintain our focus on becoming open to the world by remaining aware of the suffering and confusion of oneself and others. It is based first and foremost on the commitment to take responsibility for ourselves and do something about our own confusion. Instead of being the cause of further chaos and misery in the world, we can work on ourselves as well as others.

Trungpa Rinpoche however, makes it clear that the bodhisattva vow is not taken to shield ourselves from the confusion and chaos that surrounds us, or the aggression, passion, frustration, and frivolousness that throw us off balance. We have to give up our privacy, give up our ideas of building our own credentials by developing a greater vision and being willing to work with others. In fact, in his view, the essence of the bodhisattva vow lies in the commitment and willingness to work with the chaos and confusion of our samsaric mind until we attain enlightenment. As he explains in *The Myth of Freedom*:

The sanity of this tradition is very powerful. What we are doing in taking the bodhisattva vow is magnificent and glorious. It is such a wholehearted and full tradition that those who have not joined it might feel somewhat wretched by comparison. They might be envious of such richness. But joining this tradition also makes tremendous demands on us. We no longer are intent on creating comfort for ourselves; we work with others. -*The Myth of Freedom, p. 105.*

Compassion

Apart from the innate intelligence that we already possess in the form of buddha-nature, or basic sanity, we also have what Trungpa Rinpoche often called a 'soft spot,' which inextricably ties us to the vulnerability and needs of others. In his view this soft spot is something that we already possess as the inborn capacity for compassion. Trungpa's insight into the human condition understood this soft spot as related to a sense of tenderness that we have toward ourselves. The interesting and unique perspective here is his notion that our soft spot grows out of resentment. In *Illusion's Game*, for instance, he says, "The resentment is an outward-directed defense mechanism for protecting yourself, which automatically suggests a sense of softness, a soft spot in oneself." -*Illusion's Game, p. 84.* Perhaps we should pause here to try and understand the connection between this soft spot, basic intelligence, and resentment. Intelligence here means something very fundamental and primal, perhaps even visceral, rather than something cerebral. What Trungpa Rinpoche seems to be suggesting is the very fact that ego is so vulnerable pushes it into adopting a defensive posture and a mechanism for self-protection and self-preservation. It operates this way due to an underlying fear of being usurped, overwhelmed, or even destroyed. The fact that ego tries to present itself as an invincible entity when it is really quite vulnerable is an indication of the presence of softness. In *Training the Mind*, Trungpa clearly states this position:

Whether we are crazy, dull, aggressive, ego-tripping, whatever we might be, there is still that sore spot taking place in us. An open wound, which might be a more vivid analogy, is always there. That open wound is usually very inconvenient and problematic. We don't like it. We would like to be tough... Our basic makeup, the basic constituents of our mind, are based on passion and compassion at the same time. But however confused we might be, however much of a cosmic monster we might be, there is still an open wound or sore spot in us always. There will always be a sore spot. *-Training the Mind, pp. 14-15.*

The intelligence aspect comes about through employing resentment as a strategic maneuver of the ego for its own self-protection, and this, in Trungpa Rinpoche's thinking is the major source of our neuroses. The conflicting emotions are also skillfully used in order to solidify the ego's ground and territory, whether this is in the form of anger, jealousy, or subconscious gossip. The main point is that all of our conflicting emotions come about because of our overwhelming concern for the health of our own ego and its mistaken attempt to secure its position. Although misguided, Trungpa Rinpoche says, this is a way of showing kindness toward oneself and therefore an indication of ego's ability to be soft. According to Trungpa Rinpoche, we have to rely on this softness and basic intelligence in order to generate compassion. This innate sense of sensitivity is what allows us to cultivate bodhichitta in the true sense and thereby develop the genuine compassion of a bodhisattva.

Trungpa Rinpoche spoke about compassion in many different contexts with different emphases on its multi-dimensional, manifold facets. Another quality that Trungpa Rinpoche highlights is the notion of spaciousness, where 'spaciousness' means that compassion is not enacted for any specific determinate goal. It simply wells forth from a spirit of generosity that does not focus on relative notions of either the recipient of that generosity or our benevolence in offering it. Such

compassion arises from what he called 'spontaneously-existing joy.' In *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, he says:

Compassion has nothing to do with achievement at all. It is spacious and very generous. When a person develops real compassion, he is uncertain whether he is being generous to others or to himself because compassion is environmental generosity, without direction, without "for me" and without "for them." It is filled with joy, spontaneously existing joy, constant joy in the sense of trust, in the sense that joy contains tremendous wealth, richness. -*Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, pp. 98-99.

A further quality that Trungpa Rinpoche identifies for genuine compassion is the impulse to be kind to oneself, one's problems, and one's neurotic tendencies; it is a compassion that we feel toward ourselves rather than others. While this is similar to his notion of developing friendship towards oneself in shamatha meditation, in the mahayana context of the bodhisattva it becomes an idea of the utmost importance. For here, it is not simply a matter of accepting our own neuroses; we must utilize that neurosis as an integral part of our spiritual growth. Trungpa Rinpoche coined another unique expression for the cultivation of bodhichitta in this context, referring to our neuroses as the 'manure for bodhi.' He encouraged us to acknowledge the complete pattern of our experience in both its good and bad aspects and regard that as our inherited wealth, rather than something to be abandoned. Cultivating this friendliness and sympathy toward ourselves is another important component of compassion, because it will allow us to transform our neuroses into basic sanity. As he says in *Meditation in Action*:

Through thousands and thousands of lives, we have been collecting so much rubbish that now we have a wonderful wealth of this manure. It has everything in it, so it would be just the right thing to use, and it would be such a shame to throw it

away. -*Meditation in Action*, p. 24.

Another aspect of Trungpa Rinpoche's thinking about compassion is that while it involves a willingness to work with others, we must not try to cultivate compassion in order to create companionship for ourselves. In fact, genuine compassion arises from the experience of loneliness or being alone. Having a willingness to be alone creates its own space, which is the fundamental space that makes the generation of compassion possible. As Trungpa explains in *Orderly Chaos*:

I suppose, to begin with, in order to develop compassion you have to be willing to be alone or lonely. You are completely and totally in a desolate situation, which is also open space at the same time. The development of compassion is not a matter of acquiring a partnership with things, but rather of letting everything be open. So the sense of loneliness or aloneness is the real starting point of compassion. -*Orderly Chaos*, p. 89.

Genuine love and compassion is nevertheless difficult for us to practice or receive from others. That is because our love and compassion usually suffers from the distortions and corruptions of our own neurotic tendencies and predilections. No modern day Buddhist teacher has stressed distinguishing a healthy practice of compassion from a less savory, less salutary, practice than Trungpa Rinpoche. We often think of doing something good for others, of being a good neighbor, establishing good neighborly relationships, loving thy neighbor and so forth, as a paradigmatic way to love our fellow beings and judge what treatment should be accorded to them. This has become the yardstick of our behavior and conduct toward others. Trungpa Rinpoche's rejection of this form of action is quite unambiguous. He says that trying to be a good neighbor or a good person is not genuine love and compassion; it actually falls far short of the really genuine and pure love and compassion that is demanded of us in the context of mahayana meditation. As he explains in *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*:

That is the basic openness of compassion: opening

without demand. Simply be what you are, be the master of the situation. If you will just "be," then life flows around and through you. This will lead you into working and communicating with someone, which of course demands tremendous warmth and openness. If you can afford to be what you are, then you do not need the "insurance policy" of trying to be a good person, a pious person, a compassionate person. -*Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, p. 214.

Real love and compassion has to come from being who we are, not from trying to be who we would like to become. It is not about attempting to become someone whom we are not, trying to be a good, loving, and compassionate person, rather than simply being one. A genuine ability to be compassionate, according to Trungpa, has to come from meditation experience. It will not arise from purely interacting with our neighbors.

Idiot compassion

In many of his writings, Trungpa Rinpoche often makes a distinction between two different types of compassion: a genuine and a non-genuine one. Genuine compassion is an absolute form of benevolence, while non-genuine compassion is referred to as 'idiot compassion' in Trungpa's terminology. In fact, this expression has become a staple in many modern-day Buddhist books. In *Illusion's Game*, Trungpa explains his position thus:

There are two different types of compassion. There is actual compassion, direct compassion, absolute compassion. Then there is the other kind of compassion that Mr. Gurdjieff calls idiot compassion, which is compassion with neurosis, a slimy way of trying to fulfill your desire secretly. This is your aim, but you give the appearance of being generous and impersonal. -*Illusion's Game*, p. 29.

What Trungpa Rinpoche is most concerned about in relation to a genuine practice of compassion is the fact that when we are trying to be pious, good, compassionate and so forth, it is very easy to be drawn into a superficial form of kindness, which is devoid of courage and intelligence. Our effort to practice compassion can be jeopardized by egoistic preoccupations and our tendency toward a territorial mentality, seeking credentials, spiritual materialism, idiot compassion and all the potential pitfalls that he has alluded to in his writings. It is worth quoting the following passage from *The Heart of the Buddha* in full:

It is perhaps most important in working with others that we do not develop idiot compassion, which means always trying to be kind. Since this superficial kindness lacks courage and intelligence, it does more harm than good. It is as though a doctor, out of apparent kindness, refuses to treat his patient because the treatment might be painful, or as though a mother cannot bear the discomfort of disciplining her child. Unlike idiot compassion, real compassion is not based upon a simple-minded avoidance of pain. Real compassion is uncompromising in its allegiance to basic sanity. People who distort the path -- that is, people who are working against the development of basic sanity -- should be cut through on the spot if need be. That is extremely important. There is no room for idiot compassion. We should try to cut through as much self-deception as possible in order to teach others as well as ourselves. So the final cop-out of a bodhisattva is when, having already achieved everything else, he is unable to go beyond idiot compassion. -*The Heart of the Buddha*, p. 126.

Emptiness

A genuine compassion that transcends idiot compassion is grounded in the realization of emptiness and the twofold egolessness mentioned above. Trungpa states that the appreciation of emptiness occurs automatically if we have clarity. When we are no longer fixated on reference points or solidifying our fragile sense of self, we can afford to be expansive toward others. When our obsessive concern with ego's desperate need to solidify its territory grows more relaxed, and our basic sanity begins to prevail over ego's neurotic speed, we have reached the doorway to enlightenment. When we no longer have to struggle with ourselves and our world, we begin to find that our spiritual development has become a natural thing. The dark, narrow focus of ignorance diminishes, while the expansive vision of basic sanity heralds the dawning of the enlightened mind. Such a realization of emptiness coupled with the development of compassion is equivalent to attaining basic sanity in Trungpa's thought. Genuine compassion and two-fold egolessness compliment each other, as Trungpa Rinpoche elucidates in *Training The Mind*:

Shunyata literally means "openness" or "emptiness." Shunyata is basically understanding nonexistence. When you begin realizing nonexistence, then you can afford to be more compassionate, more giving... We have lots to gain and nothing to lose at that point. It is very basic. -*Training the Mind*, pp. 13-14.

Conclusion

When I first read Trungpa Rinpoche in the late 70's and early 80's, there were two main qualities about his work that made a great impact on me personally. The first was his style of teaching. He had a rare gift for making the Dharma come alive with his choice of English words and idioms. Although he presented Buddhism in a very simple fashion, it was clear that it veiled a very deep knowledge of the Buddhist philosophical traditions and a profound personal understanding. He infused the full import of the Buddhadharma into the English language, and presented it in its most genuine form -- as something that should

be understood existentially. His choice of words and phrases was quite unparalleled, even in English, and far superior to anything other people were writing about Buddhism at the time. Rather than simply be content with a working knowledge of the English language, Trungpa Rinpoche inspired me to go further in its mastery for the sole purpose of presenting the teachings more comprehensively. The other quality that made a big impression on me was Trungpa Rinpoche's total acceptance of his Western students. He really believed that his Western students were just as good as their eastern counterparts, and he gave himself to them thoroughly and openly, without any kind of hesitations or reservations.

In summary, Trungpa Rinpoche's whole notion of basic sanity is attained by acknowledging our innate intelligence and learning to combine that with our soft spot. These two basically correspond to the development of prajna (transcendental knowledge) and karuna (compassion) in mahayana Buddhism. For Trungpa, prajna has to arise from our basic intelligence. That intelligence, along with our capacity for compassion, are innate qualities and do not need to be fabricated or created from something new. It is a natural unfolding that is facilitated by and dependent upon the practice of shamatha and vipashyana meditation.

Trungpa Rinpoche clearly illuminates the innate quality of our warmth and compassion when he discusses the notion of our 'soft spot.' He says that even in our most hateful states, our anger and aggression arise as a response to feelings of hurt and pain within ourselves; therefore the initial impulse of our aggression is sensitivity toward ourselves. It is this sense of tenderness and vulnerability that represents the potential for compassion. As such, Trungpa Rinpoche's instructions on Buddhist practice are designed to assist us to realize the reality of our innate capacity for awakening or sanity, without succumbing to any illusions, unrealizable expectations, or bogus spiritual promises. By simply allowing ourselves to feel our pain and continue to work with our discomfort, embarrassment, resentment, emotional conflicts, fear of existence, and so forth, we will assuredly transform ourselves over time. That seems to be Trungpa Rinpoche's

fundamental message of basic sanity.

Trungpa called this approach 'buddhadharma without credentials,' because it enables us to genuinely be ourselves, without needing to fear our own pain, or hope for salvation from outside. We no longer require patches to conceal our insufficiencies or avoid challenging situations. If we acknowledge everything in our world as it is, without labeling something as good or bad, we can work with our immediate experiences simply and directly. We will have no need to aggrandize ourselves with credentials or bolster our failing spirits with unrealistic expectations. Thus everything goes toward enlightenment, according to Trungpa Rinpoche; nothing can obstruct it. Even our own neuroses hasten the dawning of basic sanity if you know how to relate to them and regard all psychological and emotional states as a workable situation. It is for this reason that the fearlessness of the lion's roar can be proclaimed.