

Ethics and responsibility: when teachers behave ‘badly’

Extracted from some teachings on “The Two Truths”
given by James Low in Frankfurt on the 11th March 1995

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I want to briefly take up the question of ethics and responsibility.

The view of emptiness is that all things are empty, nothing is real and this is also the view of wisdom. The view of compassion is that although nothing is real in itself, sentient beings, due to ignorance, are attached to both their own bodies, reputation and possessions. We need to always combine wisdom and compassion, and this relates back to what I spoke about yesterday regarding the inseparability of the two truths – that one attempts to act from the view of absolute truth and also as if what was happening in relative truth was real, out of compassion for beings.

Now, very often people do things in the world that disturb us. We have ideas about which behaviours go with which functions and roles. Sometimes it is easy to see when something is ‘appropriate’ and at other times it is more difficult. For example an English dentist was recently in court accused of having interfered sexually with his female patients after he had given them general anaesthetic. This is not something that dentists should do, as everyone would agree, and as is spelled out in their professional code of conduct. Generally we would also say that parents should not hurt their children and if we heard that a parent had done that we would probably want to inform the police. But if the parents decided to sell their child’s bicycle because the child has not been doing their homework, is that hurting the child or not? The child might feel unfairly persecuted and if they told their friends the other children would probably say, “Yes, *your parents are being really cruel.*” Although the child could feel quite persecuted it is more difficult in this example to work out whether the child was actually being persecuted or not. We have no courts to decide on that and people usually struggle with these little torments in the privacy of their own homes and sometimes on the street. The child might say, “*You are my parents, I need a bicycle, it’s your job to give me the things I need so why don’t you give me a bicycle? If you don’t give me a bicycle it’s a clear sign that you are not proper parents therefore I don’t want to live with you any more.*” Here you have the situation that the child has one particular set of assumptions about the parents’ responsibility and the parents have another set of assumptions and it can be difficult to reconcile these assumptions.

Now, as I mentioned yesterday, there are many many stories around about the behaviour of Buddhist teachers. Typically one might have a situation where a teacher does something and the student wonders about that behaviour and thinks, “*Why is the teacher doing that? Maybe that is not a very good thing to do. I don’t like that. I don’t think a teacher should do that.*”

We are told we should have the ability to make use of whatever teachers do and here is a teacher who is lying to people in order to get money or who is exploiting his students in a sexual way. We wonder why this is going on? We might think that this person has been practising meditation for ten or twenty or even fifty years and still they are behaving like that, so this is very bad. We might decide then that obviously the practice of meditation doesn’t help at all and so I’m not going to do it. As citizens in democratic states we know that we are entitled to ask “*Why?*” and it is always quite a useful question. It is also fair enough to say that someone who sets himself up as a spiritual teacher should not exploit other people.

Obviously we make judgements about this in terms of our sense of ordinary morality, of what is right and what is wrong. I certainly think we are entitled to these thoughts and in fact we should have these thoughts and if we are unhappy with peoples' behaviour we should ask them, "*Why are you doing this? What is the purpose of this?*" However I think if we are wanting to practise Buddhist meditation with an interest in understanding something of ourselves in the world, we have also, *not instead of, but also*, to look at things in a different way.

Can a Dharma view help us understand this contradiction?

The first question that one would want to ask from the point of view of a meditator is, "*What is going on?*" and then we also need to think that if we are asking the question "*What?*", how can we use the Dharma to help us to understand the nature of what is going on? "*What*" is determined by your view.

Now if you are looking at things that appear in the world as being real – in the relative truth sense that we discussed yesterday, of there being both something actually there as well as something that I am attached to – then with that view, subject is acting on to object with a definite intention and understanding and is able to clarify things on one level, the horizontal level of subject-object interaction. That is to say, you can work out whether something is a good or bad thing to do within a particular socio-cultural frame of reference. However at the same time as being able to get this horizontal clarification, you are intensifying the subject-object split because you are saying, "*I know what is what.*" and so you make subject more real and object more real. So acting from that view simply intensifies your own addiction to samsara.

If we take the Mahayana view, informed by the idea of emptiness, the person that we hold the opinion about is empty. We, the person holding the opinion about that other person, are also empty, and the opinion that we hold about the other person is empty too. Subject, object and the connection between them are all empty. If we are meditators our primary task is to recognise the truth of this. It's very difficult to recognise the truth of this if we have a strong opinion about something or about what someone has done. So when we are in a situation that is emotionally charged, it is very difficult to be able to relax enough to recognise that this object is not real. That it is the display of emptiness, that it is pure because it has never been born as a real entity. This is the most important thing.

Then, in order to maintain this understanding of everything being empty, you can use all the Dharma techniques that you know, impermanence, reflection on suffering to loosen your own attachment, use of Shamatha, dissolving meditation, whatever.

If you practise the Dharma from the position of being a child you will get fucked. You must take responsibility for being in the world. If you have been able to find a good papa or mama who will take care of you always, send me their address, because I am also looking for one!! The reality is that the practice of the Dharma is practised by the practitioners of the Dharma. And the practice of the Dharma is hard because the practice of the Dharma is essentially the struggle with your own assumptions and your own fantasy dreams that someone will make the world nice for you.

As I said yesterday, the belief that some good papa will come along and save you is ignorance. But if you free yourself from attachment to the fantasy that some good papa will save you then you can make use of somebody who might well be a good papa, as if they were a good papa, as part of using an intentional method to free yourself from attachment.

That's a very very important difference. If you don't recognise that difference you are confusing attachment to samsara with liberation into nirvana. When people say that the Dalai Lama is Chenresi they are completely mad. Whatever the Dalai Lama is, he is emptiness and you don't understand that he is empty by calling him Chenresi. You don't get an understanding that he is empty by praising his good qualities or being charmed by his smile, or seduced by his sweet words. You understand the emptiness of the Dalai Lama, not on the basis of the Dalai Lama, but on the basis of your own bum being on your own meditation cushion for a long period of time!

If looking at the Dalai Lama would give you the experience of emptiness and enlightenment then everyone in Tibet would have been enlightened. You only get enlightened through your own struggle. There are no

magic magicians of Tibet who will come and breathe up your nostrils and wash out your brains. So when gurus abuse their students, if you think about that in terms of *'there is a real guru, there is a real student, there is real abuse going on'*, then you are simply cultivating the dualistic perception which is the origin and maintenance of samsara. What you have to do is – on the relative truth point of view – when you find that teachers behave in a way you don't agree with, then you should try to speak to them and challenge them and not collude in keeping secrets of disgraceful behaviour.

What you need to remember is that whether the guru is enlightened or an asshole, your enlightenment will come through you and not through the guru. Your enlightenment comes to you *via* the guru, by making use of the guru, by using the guru as a method. That is why having a very bad-tempered nasty unpleasant guru is very useful, because that guru's behaviour will so shock you that it will give you very strong dualistic views and then you should take these very strong dualistic views to your meditation cushion and try to dissolve them in emptiness. Because if you feel your guru has betrayed you and you are able to dissolve these feelings of betrayal into emptiness, then your guru has given you a great blessing!

But of course your guru didn't give you the blessing because he was enlightened. He gave you the blessing because he was an asshole. That's why it doesn't matter if the guru is enlightened or an asshole, your enlightenment will come from your own work in trying to understand the Dharma and put it into practice.

So it's very important to practise on these two levels, on the level of an ordinary being having clear thoughts about what is right and wrong, and on the level of a meditator to take whatever occurs into meditation and dissolve it into emptiness so that it doesn't tie you into a tight knot and waste hours and days and months thinking, *"Who is the real Karmapa?"*, *"Why did my guru touch that woman's fanny?"* Who cares? You can echo that kind of dualistic thought forever. Why people do what they do is a great mystery and the world is full of stories and reasons to help us understand why other people do what they do. But when we are busy thinking, *"Why did Sharmapa say this?"* or *"Why did the Dalai Lama do that?"*, we are taken out of ourselves, and we lose energy and we lose our own focus and we lose ourselves and this is not helpful. [James was giving these teachings at a Kagyu centre, hence these examples.]

But if we are meditators it is much more interesting to ask, *"Why am I so attached to the question of what Sharmapa did?"* *"What is so interesting about gossip for me?"* Looking at things in that way we understand more about our own attachment and the way that we go into solidifying the split between subject and object, rather than dissolving into an open empty awareness. One of the things C. R. Lama said to me was *"You don't have to pretend that you are employed by the CIA to investigate the Buddha."* I had been working on two texts and each said different things about Buddha Amitabha and so I was asking him for clarification: *"But which one is true?"* C. R. Lama told me, *"When you read this one it's true, and when you read that one it's true"* This is because what is important when you are reading a text, is for you to have some faith. If you have faith it will help your meditation practice and it will help you to get enlightened. If you, as a scholar, can prove that one text is more real than another, what will it do? Give you a job, maybe in a university.... But it won't get you enlightened.

Should we intervene?

So, on the one hand we want to develop wisdom by taking the most strongly dualistic experiences of the world, the things which are most troubling to us, and try to dissolve that in meditation. For example you could imagine watching a child being tortured and saying to yourself, *"This is emptiness, this is emptiness."* However at the same time we have to practise compassion, so that as soon as we see someone even beginning to hurt a child, we would stop them. It's clearly very difficult to integrate these two things.

It's often said that wisdom should be as vast as the sky – that is to say that it accepts everything just as it is without trying to correct or improve the world in any way – but compassion should be as sharp as the point of a needle, able to go quickly and accurately into situations in order to transform them and remove suffering and increase happiness. How these two are to be integrated is one of the great mysteries. When we understand that we have the three kayas. In our own practice on the path sometimes we have to focus on developing wisdom, and sometimes we need to focus on developing compassion. So we need to be able to act in the world to help beings and to stop the abuse, and at the same time, do this without taking the situation seriously, so that even when we say to someone, *"Stop it! What are you doing?"* our words are

empty, we and our intention are empty, and the person we are addressing it to is empty. This is difficult to understand and it does take quite some time to develop these qualities.

Our main enemy is hypocrisy. So it may be that in some situations you see some injustice being done by a powerful person – it could be your boss at work, it could be your guru, it could be anyone – and you might feel too afraid to confront them. If that is your actual situation at the moment, then you have to accept that *“I am too afraid to say anything.”* But even if you are too afraid to say anything you can still take the question to your meditation room and look at it and try to understand *“Who is the one who is so afraid? What is the basis of my fantasy that turns me into a coward?”* In that way we can turn our own cowardice and our fears of rejection and abandonment into part of the path. If you are able to understand the nature of your own cowardice, that it is arising out of emptiness, that understanding will give you a profound courage which will let you move on to be more honest in the world.

So the path of the Dharma is one of struggle. This seems a reasonable place to end our teachings! Have you any questions or thoughts about that.

Why are we told to have devotion and what use is it?

Question: How does this fit in with having devotion to the guru? Is devotion to the guru only my projection then? Do I have to take back this projection?

James: So when we are told to have devotion to the guru we have to understand what that means. The guru is emptiness in the world embodied. The guru might forget that that is what he is, forget that’s he’s got ignorance like everyone else. But *we* have to remember all the time that he is empty. Devotion to the guru is devotion to the living presence of form and emptiness. That’s what devotion is.

Gurus have to be allowed to make mistakes. What on earth would it mean to be right all the time? If you please one person you don’t please somebody else. Since the beginning of time not one person has been alive who has pleased anyone and I don’t see any evidence that modern-day Tibetans are likely to break that tradition.

If we have devotion to some historical figure or to some particular person on the basis of their historical story then this sort of devotion may make you stupid. You can read a big book about each of the Karmapas over sixteen lifetimes, what they did but that book can make you ignorant. However seeing Karmapa, visualising Karmapa, taking Karmapa into your meditation, visualising Karmapa dissolving into emptiness and arising from emptiness, recognising that Karmapa is emptiness when you say, *“Karmapa cheno, Karmapa you are empty, save me take me into the emptiness that is you”* – that has got nothing to do with the socio-economic-cultural status of the Karmapa or with the books written about him. A lot of devotion to big lamas is on the basis of a public relations story which hides the reality of who they are. This is why devotion is often completely nonsense. Devotion to the guru can be very harmful when it stops you making use of the guru.

Question: Can everything not be used as the guru?

James: Yes. By making the guru very special you are using the guru to intensify dualistic thinking. You are actually interrupting the world by saying that the guru is very good, and ordinary people are not very good.

Externally the guru should disturb your mind and internally you should dissolve your guru into emptiness. The more disturbed the guru makes you, if you can dissolve that disturbing bastard into emptiness and keep him in emptiness, even when you are talking to him, then you have a real realisation. Because you are talking to somebody and you are thinking, *“This guy’s a tosser. How come I have spent all this time with this really weird person?”* At the same time you are able to recognise that this thought that is arising full of anger, potentially making subject and object separate, is actually empty. That is the real use of the guru.

Question: So does it not work then to use devotion as a method?

James: Yes, it does work. You are using the guru as a kind of a koan. You believe that something is of value there, but that you haven't understood it. Merely to say, "*The Dalai Lama is enlightened*" doesn't do anything for us, it does not stir anything up. But if you were spending time with the Dalai Lama and he was annoying you and you were trying to understand, "*How come this annoying bastard is enlightened?*" and you struggle and you struggle with this, then you may get something and you recognise "*Ah!*" Then you have got something. Just to say, "*He's enlightened*" doesn't make you do any work. That's what it is about. Devotion and the Guru is to transform you. Now, whether the Dalai Lama is transformed or not is his business.

Question: I am totally devoted to Chhimed Rigdzin who has the sweetest face you can imagine but I have heard stories about his behaviour which are the exact opposite so I feel a big split.

James: If you spend your time saying on the one hand he is very very nice but on the other hand he is very very bad, then all you do is continue to develop dualistic perception. Whether he is enlightened or is an asshole is not really important, except to him. It is a method, to use him to try to understand that he is enlightened yet behaves like an asshole. Then that is work *you* can do. What *he* does is his business. What you do is your business. When the text says, "*Whatever the guru does is pure*" it means that this is not just whitewash – this is struggle! This is an invitation to psychic warfare in your head. This is very hard work. It is not easy but if you really realise something for yourself that doesn't matter.

Question: How can the devotion method you describe work if there is a break in the lineage or if the guru has not realised the transmission?

James: Rather than recording what we understand as historical accounts of people's lives, Tibetan scholars wrote hagiographies, idealising or idolising biographies. That is to say, the tradition has taken up the importance of recording all the practitioners in one's lineage as being great and wonderful people. What is not recorded are most of the other things these people did. I've been around in Tibetan Buddhism for more than twenty years and I have heard a lot of bad gossip by one lama about another lama. So I am very clear that there is not a secret history, but in fact there is a very public history of knowing the faults of each and every teacher. So you have a public life and a secret life. But if the secret life is not known because it doesn't get recorded in print, it vanishes.

The histories that do we have are culturally-defined histories; they are a particular kind of literature. They are often written in a way that we find very confusing because they are full of contradictions but they are contradictions which don't exist if you are inside the bubble of faith. For example Milarepa meditates in a cave. He hears some news and comes down from his cave and goes looking for his mother. He goes to his old home, now all tumbled down and there in the back corner is a pile of bones. His mother had died alone of starvation while he was sitting in his cave working for the enlightenment of all sentient beings. Now, having abandoned her care, was he complicit in the murder of his mother? These sort of questions are real questions. They are the sort of questions that we face in our lives. Is it better to get a job and look after my sick old mother, or is it better to do a three year retreat in India? That kind of question. Many people have these questions. On a beautiful weekend like this is it better to be taking the kids out to play in the countryside or is it better to come to something like this? I personally believe that the history of Tibetan Buddhism is full of questions like that, but they are not the questions which are very much recorded through the lineage.

So when we come to think of pure lineages or unbroken lineages, we are talking, for me anyway, not from the sense of ordinary history as we would understand, we are talking of fantasy, we are not talking of reality.

Question: So how do I know if the method I am given is efficient or if it works or not. I don't want to waste time trying this one and that one. How do I check?

James: That's one of the big problems isn't it? Either you pretend you are a small child and you trust the big parents, or you take up some of the responsibility, go to people, check out what they're about, check out if they are really honest or not. For me, honesty is always about struggle. Honest people always

struggle. Western intellectuals, the ones who are honest, are always full of questions and doubts. Honesty is a doubt. I don't think honesty is the easy answer, but that's me.

In the tradition it's the other way round. Honesty is the easy answer, but we know that behind the scenes, that's where all the doubts are because Tibetan culture is an Asian culture, and so has the outer public persona and the inner tension. In the West we have turned it around. We put our doubts up front. So we are from a different cultural matrix. That is why I think that a particular danger for us is the fantasy projection that there are no doubts or contradictions in these cultures.

If you want, as the path, somebody to worship and adore, then it is probably best to have somebody who is a bit distant, like the Dalai Lama who you wouldn't see much or see close up. If you want a teacher who is a tool, somebody to work with you, then it has to be somebody whom you can engage with and probably somebody who also has doubts in some way.

We don't know what the past was, the past is a construction created according to different cultural myths. But what we can know is, we can know people. We have to check out if the person seems to be honest, we can observe their behaviour. This is what the traditional texts say, that for several years you should meet with people and enquire into their behaviour and check it out. Ask, see if they speak to you honestly, see if they tell you funny stories that make your head spin rather than explaining things, see if your life is made more powerful, more clear. Or, if you are disturbed, at least is it a creative disturbance rather than a negative disturbance? Through that I think we get a sense of whether the lineage is alive.