

The Devil Debates an Angel
Course Three—Ultimate Meditation
Class Two: The Emptiness of Time (verses 60-69)

1) *We've already looked into whether we are the parts of our body, in one moment of time, and we've learned that we are not all these parts together, until we think of them as "me." And that thought pops up out of a karmic seed that we planted in our mind previously, through many acts of kindness. In this next section of his text, His Holiness the First Panchen Lama examines the parts of our mind, over time. How can the example of the pen help us understand these moments of our mind, and "me"?*

[We all know the story of the pen: a human sees it as a pen, a dog sees it as something to chew. Both are right, from their own point of view; and the object is neither a pen nor a chew toy, left by itself in an empty room.]

This example helps us understand how "me" is not in the parts of me. If you think about it, the pen has a certain number of parts: barrel, point, coloring of the plastic. All these parts are the same, whether a dog looks at them or a human looks at them. But from the very same parts, these two beings draw a completely different conclusion about what the object is.

This in itself is a proof that the pen is not in its parts: a final "part" is required for it to be a pen, and that is our unifying perception of the parts into a pen. The dog and the human lay different perceptions on the parts, and then combined these parts equal either a pen or a chew toy.

And of course we remember that these two different perceptions arise from two different karmic seeds in the mind—from the two beings having treated others differently in the past.

Our next step here is to realize that this same situation applies to our own mind. Our mind is made up of different parts: in a single moment, for example, of certain basic mental functions. Over a period of time though the mind is as well composed of different moments

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of consciousness: the awarenesses of a multitude of different objects, illuminated by the light of the mind. All of these moments together are our mind, over a period of time.

Except that again we have to add that a final “part” is needed; and, again, that is our perception of our mind. Just as two beings can see the parts of a pen in two vastly different ways, we can have vastly different unifying perceptions of the moments of our own mind.

One “me” at one point in my life can perceive essentially the same train of thoughts as a mind which is unhappy, or depressed; and at a different point in my life a different “me” can perceive the same train of thoughts as happiness.

Happiness is not “in” the train of thoughts any more than a pen is “in” its parts—the dog proves that. How we perceive the parts or moments of our own mind is completely dependent not upon the content of those thoughts, but rather upon how well we have treated others in the past.]

2) As he discusses our perception of the moments of our own mind, His Holiness the First Panchen Lama takes the opportunity to speak of our very perception of time. How does this help explain our experiences in the chair at the dentist, or in the arms of a lover?

[We all know that time can move quicker or slower, depending on what we’re doing. That’s why so many high-school boyfriends and girlfriends suddenly realize they’re out after the time that their parents asked them to be home—and it’s why an hour at the dentist can seem like an eternity.

In explaining how this works, we need to look at the parts of a length of time themselves. When we think of how time passes, we imagine tiny moments flashing by, one by one—like the tenth-of-a-second numbers on a stopwatch.

Thinking more carefully, we can imagine that there should be a micro-instant of time which is the shortest amount of time that a human being can register. Parts of time which are shorter than this cannot be registered, and so we can’t “pile up” bigger instants of time from them: you can’t build a wall with bricks that are too small to see.

His Holiness though begins to question these shortest “registerable” moments of time. Logically, we understand that they must each have their own beginning, duration, and end;

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that is, there must be a part of this instant which is closer now, and a part of it which is farther from now. But these “parts” of the shortest perceivable instant of time—being shorter than the whole instant—must not be something which we can perceive.

But if we can't perceive the beginning part of a shortest instant as being different from the ending part of this instant, that means that we can't perceive any duration of this instant between the two. Which means that we can't be perceiving the instant.

But we do.

The solution to this conundrum is that we cannot be seeing the passage of time, if time exists within the instants—in the same way that a pen seems to exist within its parts. But we've already learned that this is not where the pen is, because if it was in the parts then a dog looking at the same parts would also see a pen.

As with the pen, when we see the passage of time we are not seeing something that exists out there in the parts or seconds that compose the time. Rather, a karmic seed is opening in our mind and forcing us to see the passage of time—which then explains why time can seem to pass at different speeds with a lover or with a dentist.

If time existed in its parts or seconds, it would always pass at the same rate, the same number of seconds per minute. But since it is a perception imposed upon our reality by our mind, it can properly feel slower or faster.]

3) Now that we have disproved that the body or the mind could exist in their parts—that me could exist in my parts—the Angel goes off on a poetic section proclaiming that “the root of every evil has finally been severed.” How does this follow?

[If “me” existed in my parts, then I could never be different from the way that I presently perceive the sum of my parts. That is, suppose that the way I see myself now is a fairly “normal” perception: my life is just average, and I have no reason to expect that it's going to change. This condition, if it existed in the parts to me, would be permanent: since the parts (2 arms, 2 legs, etc) don't change, there would be no reason to expect the sum of the parts to change.

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Luckily though, each one of us is a “me” which is coming not from our parts but from how our own mind puts our parts together into someone. And the mind is acting according to the seeds that are opening inside of it. Those seeds, again, are planted according to how well we take care of others.

Up until now in our lives we haven’t understood how this process works. And so we continue to plant a mixture of good and bad seeds almost at random. Which means that our lives are a mixture of happiness and sadness.

The fact that we don’t understand how the seeds work is what His Holiness calls here the “root of every evil.” And the evil that he’s referring to is a life of ups and downs, where good and bad things happen to us and we have no idea why.

Once we have grasped how “me” is not in my parts, but rather in the results of how we treat others, then with understanding we can devote ourselves to making sure that others are always happy. This creates seeds then that bring us our own unwavering happiness.]

4) His Holiness (in verse 64) makes the radical statement that “none of your negative emotions ever started.” How are we to understand this statement?

[Once we understand the principles behind planting seeds, we start working hard to plant good seeds. At some point in our spiritual training we learn that large quantities of good seeds can be destroyed by a few minutes of strong anger. Naturally then we become interested in the process of how anger is first triggered within the human mind.

Most of us instinctually feel that our anger is instigated by some event or person outside of us. Someone we know walks up to us and call us stupid, and this (note the expression) “makes” us angry. Let’s look at exactly how this happens.

The other person opens their mouth, and then their vocal cords fluctuate and make certain sounds—the various vowel and consonant sounds that are necessary to produce the word “stupid.”

Let’s consider just the first sound of this word, s. If we think about it, there must be a sound of some duration which comes out of the person’s throat and then strikes the air

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molecules that separate us from them. Molecules are bumped by the ones coming out of the throat, travel a short distance, and bump into other molecules, like billiard balls.

At some point, a molecule at the end of the chain reaction bumps into our eardrum. The eardrum is moved, ever so slightly, and this tremor is transmitted to the bones and nerves which inform the brain that there is a sound.

Let's look closer at how that last molecule hits the eardrum. At the very first microsecond that it touches the eardrum, there must be a single point of contact. This point cannot have any width, because if the molecule is a sphere then it doesn't have any flat surfaces: if the point of contact were two of any measurement wide then either it wouldn't be the first point of contact, or there would be a part of the sphere that wasn't rounded.

If the point of contact though didn't have any width, then the molecule could never move the eardrum—the thing pushing on the eardrum wouldn't be wide enough to move any of it.

It's impossible thus for the word "stupid" to be arriving in the ear the way we naturally feel that it does. It can't start to be heard by the ear, which in turn means that we can't start to get angry when we hear it. What we think is happening cannot be happening. This is why the text says a negative emotion cannot start.

What's actually happening is that a seed is opening within our own mind. It was planted there when we called someone else a bad name earlier. It opens and creates a tiny sound in the mind, which we perceive as coming from the other person.

If we understand that we have called ourselves stupid—if we grasp that the anger never started, at least in the way we thought that it did—then we won't get angry, and our good seeds will no longer be endangered.]

5) *Are things, as His Holiness says in verse 68, really a "single song" in which "all things are equal"? When scriptures say that a suffering life and a life of happiness are ultimately all the same, are they being literal?*

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[We see many references in the holy books which state that all things are equal—the idea that “Your life of suffering is just the same as the nirvana that you reach when that suffering is ended” is constantly repeated.

Which is essentially the same as saying that there’s no difference between someone punching you and someone kissing you.

This statement cannot of course be literal, and it would be foolish for us to think that we should abandon our efforts to reach spiritual freedom, thinking that somehow our current life of suffering is anyway just the same.

But is there any way in which all these things really are equal, in a single song?

All things are equal, in the sense that none of them is coming from their own side: in the sense that each of them possesses its own emptiness, and each of these emptinesses is similar. That is, each emptiness consists of the simple fact that no given thing exists in and of itself: nothing is coming from itself.

Rather, all of the things and people around me are coming from me, from the seeds that I have planted, from how I have behaved towards others.

Deep inside, we tend to have the wrong idea that some things are more “empty” than others. We understand for example that a pen must be coming from me, since it can at the very same time be perceived by a dog as a chew toy. If the pen were coming instead from its own side, then the dog would also have to perceive a pen.

When it comes to something that we have an emotional issue or attachment with, though, we tend to lose our understanding that the person or situation is coming from me. It’s hard to believe that something very hurtful which my husband says to me has actually originated with me. We want to blame him, to say something back to him, and then with this we plant even more bad seeds, to see him criticize us again and again.

If rather we can come to an understanding that all things are equally empty—that the pen and my husband are equally coming from me, and equally devoid of coming from their own side—then this will serve us very well. We will avoid creating a new bad seed with our husband, we will avoid anger, and thus reach the nirvana or end of suffering which is equally empty to a life of suffering, but infinitely more fun!]

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6) *His Holiness says in verse 69 that “there is no Buddha to this state of mind,” much less the Devil. What state of mind is he talking about, and what clue do we get from the next verse?*

[The verses in this section of the text which precede verse 70 describe the emptiness of things. We then hear about a state of mind to which not even the Buddha appears. And then in verse 70, His Holiness begins to speak of the “aftermath”—a standard technical term which always applies to the period following the direct perception of emptiness. From this we can deduce that in the verses immediately preceding this verse he is referring to the direct perception of emptiness.

One of the points that His Holiness the First Panchen Lama—and the Angel—are making about the direct perception of emptiness is that none of the Three Jewels even exists to this state of mind. This is a pretty radical statement that needs some explanation, and which is not in any case comes with an exception.

In the traditional textbooks of a major monastery such as Sera Mey, we read of a higher version of the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma (the Teachings), and Sangha (the Community). The Three Jewels can be described as the object of worship for a Buddhist—the object which a Buddhist believes can provide them protection from a world of pain. How this protection works is important to understand.

The ultimate Dharma—the Dharma Jewel—actually consists of the direct perception of emptiness: that ultimate state of knowledge which we reach by studying relative Dharma—the teachings—carefully. Although this state of mind is perceiving emptiness, or ultimate reality, it is not part of the ultimate reality which it is perceiving.

Remember that emptiness is the unchanging absence of anything coming from its own side—it is a void, a negative; it is the fact that something which we thought was there is not there at all. The mind though—even the state of mind which is perceiving this ultimate reality—is a positive thing, a presence, and constantly changes from moment to moment.

Unless we are already an Enlightened Being, our mind as we perceive emptiness can only in those moments perceive emptiness—this absence of something coming from its own

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side. It cannot perceive something existing within deceptive, or lower, reality. We can say then that there is no Dharma, no Dharma Jewel, to this state of mind.

The ultimate Sangha Jewel, the Jewel of the Community, consists of those individuals in the world who have perceived emptiness directly. People are similar to the mind in that they are positive, changing entities—and so neither is this Jewel something which can appear to a mind directly engrossed in ultimate reality.

As for the Buddha, this Jewel is considered to possess three or four different aspects. The Buddha as a person cannot be perceived by the state of mind which is only in communion with ultimate reality. There is though one aspect of the Buddha which is this reality itself: it is the emptiness of all the other aspects of their being. Thus we can generally say that “there is no Buddha to this state of mind,” but there could be a special case.]

Coffee shop assignment: Please meet with at least one other person—or better, a group of people—whom you didn’t know well before this teaching; do your homework together and discuss together any questions you have. Please write here where, when, and with whom you did your homework:

Meditation assignment: 15 minutes early in the day, and 15 minutes later in the day, thinking about your own worst negative emotion, and how it might change if you knew that the people and things around you were coming from you. Please write here the two times that you started these meditations (homeworks without these times will not be accepted):