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the accumulation of merit, the unbounded view, difference between views and beliefs

LMC [00:01:05] So for those of you who are not familiar with the process, we're about to engage in our normal Sunday morning, kind of open conversation, is what I experience it as. So there's questions on people's minds. And if you are afraid to ask a question, then we encourage you to overcome your fear. It's part of the Buddhist practice, to overcome your fear. But if you can't do that, you're likely to hear your own question asked by somebody else. So there's advantages to having a large open group. You can talk about things that you might find difficult under other circumstances. So the ball is in your court. If you have a question about the practice this morning or anything about Buddhism in general or particular, or your own practice, really anything.

Student 1 [00:02:20] Could you tell us something about Lama Tashi for those of us who didn't know?

LMC [00:02:37] 1994?

Bill [00:02:37] When did he come to San Francisco?

LMC [00:02:41] That's true. ... Well, we have a long history with Lama Tashi. He lived at the San Francisco Dharma Center for many years. I say many years, like, you know, we're talking like maybe a decade. And even before, he did a long retreat. He did a long retreat in the 80s. And I think he did some into the 90s a little bit. And somewhere along the way, it was shortly after I came here, that he requested just a temporary place to stay after a retreat. And we invited him to and he came and stayed. Originally, it was supposed to be like less than a month and it turned out to be more than a decade. [laughter] So that was that.

[00:04:10] He, you know, he did various things and had relationships with various people and he had students. And certainly, when he died yesterday morning, he had people at his bedside. And for most of all of that time, I have to say that there isn't too much that I know about him. Except for the outer appearance... of seeing him regularly at the center. So if I had a more specific question about him, I would, you know, maybe be able to answer it... [00:06:28] And he also did, at some point, he started giving Buddhist classes at the prison in Sheridan.

Student 2 [00:08:13] So in our class on Tuesday, we got into a little discussion about the accumulation of merit. And it was, I think from my perspective, really in the context of trying to build some sense of confidence. That even when our practice doesn't feel good, that it's actually planting the seed of something positive.

LMC [00:08:40] And what did you say? [laughter]

Student 2 [00:08:44] We said yes to that. But I'm really, it's put this topic in my mind now. And I'm really interested to know what *you* would say about the accumulation of merit.

Student 3 [00:09:05] Can I add something to that?

LMC [00:09:07] Oh yeah, sure. Answer the question. [laughter]

Student 3 [00:09:13] I'm going to confess that we put this on our agenda in class. Then we got into it and we realized that it's not something we relate to very closely as [my wife and I]. I don't want to necessarily expand that out to Americans, but it's a weird concept. And I've always *had* it there. And I've always trying to relate to it. And have a hard time.

LMC [00:09:40] I think a lot of people have an issue with accumulation of merit, myself included, for a very long time. And so, it's easy to confess I had a really big problem with the accumulation of merit. Somebody might have said, yeah, that's because you didn't *have* any. [erupts in laughter] But it seemed that for such an important thing in the tradition as the accumulation of merit, which is really a big piece of the underpinnings of the *entire* philosophical system of Buddhism, to be something that felt unwieldy and required confidence in things that we just couldn't get our teeth in somehow. It was really a big deal. So I think that anyone who engages in Buddhism is going to come up against that thing. And I actually don't think it needs to be the unwieldy and difficult thing that... we made it into.

[00:11:00] So part of the part of the challenge, in just the entire transition of Buddhism from its origins in the East, in India and Tibet and beyond, part of the problem is our ever-present work on that transition. Like how do we get it into an accessible way in *our* culture without abandoning? We like to peel the shell off the walnut and still have the walnut inside. And some would say that's impossible. But I totally disagree with that position.

[00:11:48] So coming back to the accumulation of merit, I think that we actually all have an extremely easy way to relate to that. And that we already *do* relate to it. But we just call it something else. And all we need to do is take the *simple* thing that we already relate to and elaborate it slightly, or a lot depending on our proclivity, but I don't think it requires a lot, and that is that there's no one here... you have to be really out of touch with yourself and other things to not have the experience that everything that I think and do and say... trains my mind. There are no exceptions. I have a passing thought. I don't like that person. And that's *all* that happened. And I've just planted a seed. And it's so easy to relate to.

[00:12:50] And that's the foundation of the accumulation of merit. If you can see... how it is that when we give rise to certain kinds of thinking, then certain results follow from that. We're basically on the trail. All we need to do is follow the breadcrumbs. We're there with it. Now, is that not true? I mean, that much. So you can say, I think, where does that fail?

Student 3 [00:13:31] I have an answer. It fails when we have a transactional relationship with the Dharma. And we think the merit comes from my good practice. And so you sit down and you're distracted the whole time and you get up and leave and think that was a dud. And then you don't appreciate... there must not have been any merit because my practice was a dud.

LMC [00:13:55] Yeah. That's a big piece. That wasn't the piece I was thinking of. But actually, that's very important. A transactional relationship with the accumulation of merit is *fatal*. It's fatal to the sense of *connection* to the accumulation of merit. The problem isn't that it doesn't pay off like that. Sometimes it does! And that's the problem. Is that then we believe that. And actually, we don't need to believe anything. If we could put belief aside and just relate to the experience, it would be a lot better. Just relate to the experience. I scream at somebody today. Tomorrow they don't call me back. [laughs] That *is*, in a certain sense, the accumulation of merit from the opposite side. So on the other hand, if I call them up and apologize and we make everything

look good, then something else happens. That's kind of like the close side of the accumulation of merit.

[00:15:08] In other words, it's not a big deal. And it certainly doesn't describe the depth of meaning of the accumulation of merit. But I think that there's a doorway there that we all walk through every day, all the time. Every time we have a thought... it's happening. So *I* would have said, rather than what you said, is that the big thing... I totally agree, the transactional relationship is really something to avoid. And at least notice when we're doing it, that we're doing it, because that's *also* the accumulation of merit. When we notice our own foibles, that's the accumulation of merit. If we don't notice them, there's no accumulation. When we notice that we're doing things that are not helpful for ourselves or others, and we *intentionally* continue to do them anyway, that also is an accumulation. But that usually gets categorized as the accumulation of karma, negative karma. But that's basically what merit is too. It's just another name for it. The merit side of it is the focus on the positive. Because what we're always trying to do is encourage ourselves to do something that's positive. The question is, what *is* positive? Isn't always obvious.

[00:16:36] But I think the big barrier is the unbounded view. That is the real killer. Because I can see in this life how those things line up. But if I put a boundary around my experience, which begins with my conception or my birth and ends with my death... and this is the big one, I'm smart! So *I* can get away with stuff. You're dumb, so you can't. So therefore, I better tell people, do good things, follow an ethical life and all because you're going to get in trouble otherwise. But that doesn't impress us so much. Because we do manage to do all sorts of things that we aren't really happy about doing. But we succeed in getting away with it as long as it's not a federal crime and the FBI isn't after us. We do manage to do all sorts of things that we don't feel good about having done.

[00:17:42] But there's also this sense, which is common in our culture, that things come and go. And what you did last year, or the year before, you know, that's gone. Forget about it. Which has a certain nice appeal to it. But from the Buddhist perspective, what you did is part of who you are. Whether you see it or not. And the majority of what we are, we don't see... and experience. So what we have to do is, this is my sense of... I'm just saying how *I've* worked with it is... is I look at it and I think if I had a large jar into which I poured... clean water and dirty water at various times. I could put clean water in the jar and it would be clean water. If I added something else to it, it would gradually become something else. And the degree to which I put other things into it would determine what that water was. And if that water was actually my stream of consciousness, now I have some sense of how karma unfolds, how we accumulate karma through the accumulation of merit and other things.

[00:19:07] But the unbounded view, that our minds do not begin with our conception and our birth and do not end with our death is a *critical* feature of our practice. Critical feature of the philosophical underpinnings of Buddhism in general throughout *all* the schools. I think it's the hardest single thing to deal with because we have a sense that it should be rational. It should be a rational thing about that. So in pondering this for a very long time, I suggest there is a rational basis for it. So the rational basis which denies... not the unbounded view, but it denies the *likelihood* that our experience is unbounded. You see the difference?

Student 4 [00:20:09] Could you repeat that?

LMC [00:20:12] The rational view generally, if I say, "You know, your experience does not begin or end with this life. It is far beyond that." The rational objection to that is... I don't see any example in the world that would show me that that's true. ... In fact, and I would call this the non-rational or false-rational view, which many people feel is rational. The fact that I don't see any evidence for it proves that it isn't there. That I think is false-rational, just by ordinary, rational rules. [laughs] Because otherwise nobody would ever travel to Japan from here because you can't see it. [laughter] So even if you've been there once, you still can't see it. So why would you get on an airplane, which also still doesn't make sense? I don't see any people flying.

[00:21:18] I mean, the great majority of the things we do are based upon our not being able to witness them in the moment. We do them anyway because Bill said you can get there on an airplane. So I think, well, you know, Bill did it. I can do it, too. And I don't see Japan. So the fact that we can't see something is the worst reason to not understand it or to think that therefore you *do* understand it. There is a necessity, in order to grasp this and get the benefit of it, is a necessity to hold the unbounded view. Currently we feel that it's not a rational view. We need to get past that. That rational objection that I can't see that my mind began before this life. Nor can I see that it continues after this life and therefore it does not exist. That is actually not good reasoning. [laughs].

[00:22:26] And so oftentimes people will say, I can't hold the rational view because I can't see that unbounded perspective. Just like we can't see Japan, I can't see that my mind began... well, really, what we say is it has no beginning. It's not just that it transcends the boundaries of this life. There isn't any beginning or end. Beginnings and ends apply to relative phenomena. And we take the nature of mind to be an absolute phenomena. So it doesn't have a beginning and end. And the way we reference that is by calling it unborn, undying. It's the only thing that falls into that category. And that is its defining characteristic, unborn, undying.

[00:23:15] So what we need to do is... we need to hold the view that that *is* the case. And here's where we stumble again. And that is that we feel like we're being asked to believe something we can't see. I can't experience my mind being unborn and undying. And of course, as teachers of the Dharma, we want to say that's because if you *could* experience it, you would be enlightened. [laughter] And so, that's out there a ways.

[00:23:52] In the meantime, holding the view has its own benefit. And let's take an example of that. One of the cherished views in the mahayana tradition of Buddhism is... that there is not a single sentient being, so we say sentient being rather than human being, because sentient being includes insects and birds and animals and maybe even bacteria, who knows. Some rather large group that's larger than most of us would think about. So not a single sentient being who has not been our mother. ...

[00:24:48] Why is that such a precious view? And anyway, I don't believe it. [laughter] For the same reasons, again, I don't believe it because I've seen so many people's mothers and there wasn't a single one that was an insect. But obviously, that's not true. You've seen the insects and their mothers all the time. When the weather changes and thousands of ants come into your kitchen, for example. [laughter] So the *view* is critical. The belief is... dangerous. We want to hold that view because the view opens us to something that we currently are not open to. And we need to be open to it in order to get a larger... understanding of how it is that we relate to our own existence, our own sense of existence and the existence of others.

[00:25:55] One of our most precious teachings is on what are called the Four Immeasurables. The Four Immeasurables are delightful and easy to understand. And they include having unbounded compassion for all sentient beings. So that's what makes it unbounded. Its boundless because it's for *all* sentient beings. Not just our friends, our family and so on, but for all sentient beings. And the same with a wish for the happiness and to be free of suffering... rejoicing in the virtues of all beings. Which you say like, how could you rejoice in the virtues of all beings? Some of them are not virtuous. But in an unbounded perspective, we can say there's no such thing as someone who has not been unvirtuous and will not be virtuous again. So by virtue of the unbounded perspective, we open this *enormous* door which allows us to see things that we could not see before when that door was closed.

[00:27:09] Unbounded equanimity. ... Boundless equanimity for all sentient beings. Not just for our neighbors, our friends, our family, but for all sentient beings. This is a *key* in the mahayana tradition. So we must, in order to engage in the practices fruitfully, we must make an *effort* to hold that view. We must also abandon the *felt necessity* that we believe in it. As if it was something. The mere fact that we can hold the view doesn't mean that we understand it. ...

[00:27:53] But one thing that we can understand is... we have a small view and we replace it with a large view, we can experience that directly. [laughs] Like we immediately get it. Oh, I see how this would work! I actually have given myself permission to feel a sense of kindness, loving kindness and compassion for every sentient being. Even the worst perpetrators of damage in history. Maybe *especially* those. ... And because we don't *believe* it, but we see all of these things through the lens of the view. The lens of the view is really kind of a nice way to hold it because you're not actually making any kind of a judgment about it. You're just looking and seeing.

[00:28:51] Anyway, the issue of the view, the issue of the unbounded view, of views in general... in the vajrayana practice are critical. You can't practice the vajrayana without carrying the requisite views. They are like tools! So the accumulation of merit brings it back all down to ground level again, like everything that we do. Kalu Rinpoche used to say... he would say it somewhat jokingly, but actually, as people listening to it, it didn't always sound funny. That is to say, he would say things like... he would be sitting there giving a teaching and there'd be, let's say, a couple of hundred people listening to the teaching. And he would say that when he was a child, he had a special kind of caring for insects. And that he would often spend his days going around as a child, like if an insect fell in water, he would take it out, put it on a rock or whatever it was. And then he said so then he says, "So many years later, I come to the West and there's all these students here." [laughter] The implication was clear. And it was funny. But the truth is, is that he held that view. Not, I don't think, in the sense of a belief, though he may have.

[00:30:36] Generally speaking, the view is more soft than a belief is. We kill for our beliefs. In the views, we don't kill for the beliefs. The belief is a personal thing you carry around because it's very helpful to understand the deepest teachings and to prepare yourself to experience the deepest experiences.

Student 5 [00:31:04] The view is about the possibility?

LMC [00:31:08] Well, no, the view is a complete certainty. I mean, you hold the view. You can say, well, I'm not so sure about this view, but that's kind of like walking up to a telescope to look at the universe. Now, I'm not so sure I want to look at that, you know. Maybe I'll look. Maybe I won't. A view is really just a way of looking at things. But not just a way of looking at things.

Because the deeper practices that are done in all of the traditions in Buddhism require a certain kind of view. Though, to be honest, some of the traditions appear to encourage a kind of belief.

[00:31:51] Beliefs tend to solidify positions, right? Views are not meant to solidify these things. They're meant to provide a lens through which we experience other things. But not to form a belief, a hard shell around them. When we do that, we start dividing ourselves up into competing groups. That is, I don't believe what you believe. The problem with you is... [laughs] and so on. We remove ourselves; we can see very quickly how... turning a view into belief can move us from the place of compassion and loving kindness into criticism and judgment really fast. And that clearly... is not the direction which bears fruit. ... How are we doing? Are we confusing this or we clarifying? It's really important.

Student 6 [00:32:56] So continuing on that topic... the stumbling point I would get with accumulation of merit would be on the special days of Lha Bab Duchen or something where it's supposed to be like multiplied. And it was like, oh, that sounds like so much superstition or hoodoo. And then part of me would go, well, it lets me imagine myself connected to the greater sangha, the exalted sangha. So is that multiplier kind of thing fit with the unbounded view? Is it useful to get past what I think is possible? The unbounded view, as in letting me taste a more expansive reality?

LMC [00:33:56] Well, that seems helpful, doesn't it? I think we have to also, from time to time, be honest. [laughter] We don't want to get addicted to that, [laughter] but still.... part of the issue that we naturally have... and not everybody has it, but when I'm not holding the view, I always consider, not everybody has this issue. But those who don't have the issue haven't looked like / have. [laughter] Just so quickly moves into that place. And all equanimity dies in that spot, instantly. It's like a snowflake falling on a hot rock. It's gone. Judgment and equanimity do not live in the same house. So it doesn't mean that there isn't discrimination that's valuable from time to time, but when we talk about superstition, I'm going to just say what seems to me to be the truth... there is no country on this planet that's more superstitious than this country, in our culture. And that's not to say that superstition is great and we should follow superstition. But I think that a lot of what we see in the east or the south of north or wherever, that we identify as superstition, or at least we suspect it is, it probably is that.

[00:35:52] But does that mean that there isn't something inside of that, that is valuable to the people who have that superstition? And that we have trouble adopting it because it *is* a culturally based belief of some kind. So then, this becomes a big problem for us in the movement of, what we often call, the transplanting of the Dharma in the West. What do you want to transplant? And what do you want to leave behind? And whatever you leave behind, are you so sure that that wasn't something critical, that should have been kept? And we can get frozen in that place and not move around it. But then we recognize in our practice that we also are not honest with our own practice and our understanding. It gets quite difficult.

[00:37:01] In fact, I think, another view that's helpful to hold... is that it's often the case that when we do something that is radically new, there's always an up and a down side to it. It's troubling on the one hand. And on the other hand, it may open things up for us. And somebody may say, I can't hold loving kindness for all sentient beings because of my experience in this life. Some people will have experiences in this life, where holding compassion for half a dozen special beings is the best they can do. ... And so that's the best they can do. It doesn't make sense to push harder. But what *does* make sense is... we can hold that loving kindness and that compassion for those individuals who are not able to do it. Because they hold the seed and the

ability to do it. So it's just a question of how do you nurture that ability to open it somehow. But demanding people to be like we are is exactly the prison we're trying to escape. [laughs]

[00:38:29] And so, it really requires a continuously deepening understanding of these things, both through practice and study. I think conversation opens it up. Dharma brothers and sisters who meet together and talk about these things, it's very helpful. And we're gradually, just trying to, like, open those boundaries up until they don't exist anymore. It's partly I think what we see when we meet great beings. We see... that sense of unbounded-ness, kindness for everyone. A recognition that everyone has the awakened mind, that nature is there. It's like nothing to do. Like the Buddha said, the only thing that differentiates you from me is *not* the awakened mind. We both have that, the exact same. But I recognize it. You don't. That's what he said. And I think pretty much, that's a piece of the foundations of the practices.

[00:39:42] There are no beings who are lacking that nature. So we start with that. And that's a reasonable place to start. And then we have to struggle with this. This is a struggle. I mean, in this room, there's a lot of intelligence and education. And yet we struggle with this thing still. Partly because culturally, we have certain boundaries that we set for ourselves. Which in some ways are healthy. You have to do that. And in other ways, they keep us from seeing deeper things. We have to explore all those things. And we're in the midst of it as a culture. For people who want to see Buddhism deeper and understand it deeper, that's the way you plant it. The best way to plant it is to see deeper, meditate deeper, see more of your own mind and so on. The rest will take care of itself. I totally believe that. But it's helpful to sit around and talk about it... on a cold night with a fire in a fireplace. [laughter] So this is sort of our fireside chat, isn't it, without the politics, hopefully.

[00:41:04] So thank you for this. And we'll dedicate the merit now.

sangha [00:41:07] *dedicating the merit*