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samsara as source of joy and unreliable refuge, Kalu Rinpoche and the blessings of difficult circumstances, using the 4 Thoughts and seeing experiences as always fresh, habituate resting awareness on continually unfolding experience, holding the view about the power of our intentions, the Thomas Merton story about spending our life to become a saint, what dedicating merit means

Student 1 [00:02:27] I have a question about the motivational side of taking refuge. I've just been noticing about myself lately... that I'm very attached to things in the samsaric world. And I noticed that, especially sometimes when I sit down to meditate, and I'm thinking about these things that I want to do or that I have done and... it's become sort of increasingly aware that I really enjoy some of those things. And I'm sometimes really reluctant to give up the thought! Because I sort of like thinking about those things. And I do use the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind on a regular basis to try and increase my motivation. And sometimes it's really clear... that going for refuge really... is worthwhile. But sometimes, and this is partly I'm sure, I have pretty fortunate circumstances in my life. I'm not in ongoing chronic pain, et cetera, et cetera. I think, well, you know, the samsaric world isn't so bad. And I know I've heard it said that part of renouncing samsara can involve sort of *revulsion* at samsara as sort of a helpful motivating factor to take refuge in a more serious way. And I guess I'm just wondering about that whole side of things, kind of the push... toward... refuge. The *serious* push. And being convinced, on a regular basis, that samsara is just... a loser's game. It goes nowhere. And sometimes I feel like I understand that. And sometimes I think I really don't. So, any comments would be appreciated.

LMC [00:05:06] You're just like us... for starters [laughs] Yes. Well, I don't think that... there's any need to encourage ourselves... to give up what we find to be a source of joy. This is not meant to be a martyr's... tradition, where we intentionally avoid all things that bring us some sense of pleasure or happiness. That's definitely not the case. So, let's put that there, because I think that's pretty important. Sometimes people do get... kind of stuck in the sense of... like I feel guilty I'm enjoying myself. There are other traditions you can go to if you want to do that. [laughter] This is not one of them. But... because we all partake of the larger community of spiritual traditions, we can easily kind of confuse those things. And... I think the issue is *definitely*... not an issue of trying to avoid... samsaric pleasures.

[00:6:47] But let's make a distinction here also. ... We all encounter the truth from time to time of the... unreliable nature of samsara. That is to say, we don't... feel really happy about all the things, all the time that we're involved in. And we don't have an awful lot to say about... how those things unfold. Like, next week you could... be diagnosed with a terminal illness. And the week after they could say they actually didn't find anything. It wasn't there. You just don't have a say over it. And there's a, there's a tendency to think that even studying... our mortality... and meditating on it is a kind of gruesome meditation.

[00:08:01] So, I will say from my own side, all of that can be plowed into an overarching sense of curiosity. Which we tend to give up when... we're in pain, physically or mentally, or we're disappointed deeply, then... we tend to give up the curiosity and move into kind of a strict place of aversion. Like, how do I get rid of this thing? So, I go back to... who I think was... one of the great teachers in the last century, of Kalu Rinpoche, who founded this center in the early 70's. Though this physical place wasn't here then, he established the organization, Kagyu Changchub Chuling. And I recall, and I could put many names on this, but there was a man who went to see

him for an interview and when he met Kalu Rinpoche, he said that he was in a lot of pain, mentally. Because... he had been trained as an attorney... and that had really gone sour on him. And he kind of specialized in things that he later felt were not good to do. And so, then he felt like he couldn't do that anymore. And so, that caused him pain because now he couldn't make a living because he wasn't trained to do other things. And in the midst of all of that, his wife divorced him and then he had to file bankruptcy. All of this in a relatively short time. And... sitting in front of Kalu Rinpoche, Kalu Rinpoche's remark was, "It's the blessing of the Buddha." And when I asked him about that, he said, "I wanted to punch him in the nose." [laughter]

[00:10:33] It was not immediately apparent to him, nor to most of us... why encountering really difficult circumstances would be a blessing. But in time, it became clear. When things are going well, we just cruise. We *just* cruise. We are not aware of our experiences. If they're pleasant, we just enjoy them. We don't notice their reality. We don't notice their lack of reality. And the same is true when we encounter difficult circumstances, we just feel miserable. We don't see the nature of the misery. We don't see the connections. Which should all be obvious to us that we're continuously in a profound and unbounded... net or web of interconnectedness, always. *Not* seeing that... we're continually looking for just the next... tasty morsel, you might say.

[00:11:43] So, I think when Kalu Rinpoche said that's the blessing of the Buddha, what he meant was, is that... it is this kind of... pain... this kind of... confusion... where you don't know what to do. You don't know where you're gonna go. You might even contemplate taking your own life. And then suddenly... you arrive at a place, in this case, Kalu Rinpoche. So, Kalu Rinpoche, having spent so many years in really difficult mountain circumstances, he's saying, it's a blessing. It's a blessing because... you would not be here if it weren't for that. So, that thing brings you here! And the result will be... that in time you will see also that that was a blessing, to have that. So, it's not like wishing terrible things on people. I mean, the average intelligence will tell us... you don't need to wish those things on people. [laughs] They just come anyway. And they confuse us. And we try to figure out ways to make things better. And sometimes we succeed. Then just as often we don't. And you never know which is gonna be which.

[00:13:11] So... I think that it's totally okay to enjoy everything. In fact, I think that... if you don't enjoy everything, we've got a problem. Because really... there has to be a way... to feel like our life is precious. Like, when we contemplate the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind, the first one is... precious human existence. And we often completely fail... on that one. For all sorts of reasons. Like, I have a terminal illness, let's say. And then we feel like... what the hell's *precious* about this existence? Or other things befall us and we just feel... victimized by it. But the more we engage in those Four Practices That Turn the Mind, for example, the more we see that the *issue* really isn't the events that happened. The issue is... that we constantly feel like these things are happening *to* me. In other words, I place myself in a position of inherently being a victim. Even if *good* things happen. It's like they're happening to me. So, I'm not taking responsibility for the thing that's occurring. And when we hear that, we often feel like... I didn't do anything to deserve that. And I think we can say, in all honesty, probably true. But that's not how things happen. It's like... there's a windstorm and a tree blows down on your car. You didn't really deserve to have the tree blow down on your car and ruin it. But that's the nature of... the world. We're not even talking samsara here. Even outside of samsara, trees blow down on your car.

[00:15:26] Samsara, we sometimes call it, in short, the world of confusion. Not necessarily the world of misery. The world of confusion. But because we're confused, we tend to, at some point, land in the place of experiencing being a victim... of something. Things go bad. We don't

recognize the *nature* of what it is that's occurring. And the result, is that we do not have a clue how to get out of it. Given all of that, you could purchase a 500-page book which would describe samsara, but I've never known anyone who reads more than about 30 pages. And then we feel like I get it. I get it. But the next thing is, we go out and see... the tree blew down on our car and we feel miserable. So, we don't *really* get it. Which is why those contemplations are meant to be there. And why... earlier today when I said... whatever occurs, it's never occurred before. If you say to me, I don't like this. I can say, well, you've never said that before. And even if you say I did say it, it's a different statement. It's a different experience. Like everything about the context and the meaning of what you said five minutes before is different. We are continually... kind of swimming in an ocean of... complete and utter change... all the time.

[00:17:18] So, a lot of what the Dharma is about... is, first of all, recognizing what is. Whether we want it or not. Not just recognizing bad stuff, but just recognizing everything is just what *is*. And... we cannot rely upon... now, let me put it in the more honest way, we can rely upon... never having that experience again. We trick ourselves sometimes saying... I was at that restaurant and I had the same meal that I had previously. But that's impossible. What you really mean is I had a very pleasant experience that was *like* the one I had before, that I was here. But a lot of what the Dharma is about again, is... recognizing the *absolute* uniqueness of every moment that goes by. We always say... whatever experience you're having now, you've never had it before. And when this one dissolves (into emptiness), you will never have again. And that often is a cause for our unhappiness. Because we didn't recognize that... *nature* of change and impermanence.

[00:18:42] So, I think that... many people get as much joy out of recognizing the *nature* of samsara, even when we feel like I would like to avoid this and then we can't. And so, we don't feel happy about that! Even *that* can be a source of joy and happiness. This is what it is. I'm recognizing it. The more I recognize it, the less I'm a victim to it. Because the less I put myself in the place of being a victim to it.

[00:19:22] So, I think one of the things about the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind... I'm trying to remember the teacher that that wrote this, but so many of them say it one way or the other. The teachings on the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind are presented... probably more often than any other set of teachings. And so, if you're a student of somebody, who routinely gives those teachings because they happen to know that they're really important... we arrive at this place where one, one teacher said, as soon as I say... let's talk about the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind... everybody recites the mantra, I already, I already know it. I already know it. I already know it. [laughs]

[00:20:10] And it's true. Partly because... we are so smart. And I don't mean that in a derogatory way. We are smart. Most of us are highly educated. As a culture, we're extremely highly educated. But almost 100 percent of it is in the realm of conceptual stuff. We don't get paid much in the world for having great experiences. We get praised and paid for doing something that somebody else needs... with our intellect or our intelligence, somehow... our skills. If you focus on the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind and really work with them... you will be rewarded for that. Not by somebody else. But rather by... having the sense, this is a fresh experience.

[00:21:31] Every time I look at... my attachment to things in the world, like what you were saying, it's helpful to just rest your awareness on the attachment itself. Which is neither good nor bad, really. But... if we become attached to it and can't let go of it, we already know... things that you

were attached to and can't let go of... are a cause of misery. And it's not that someone else caused it, even though it may be another person that you're attached to. It is just the result of our being attached to it and then not being able to have it.

[00:22:16] But there is *also* this joy of... recognizing experiences as they unfold continually. If you get in the habit of... and develop the skill... of resting your awareness on experience as it unfolds, you'll discover that those experiences unfold 24 hours a day. They never stop. And actually, that's the most profound level of shamatha. They never stop and you never *try* to stop it. And you just rest with it... without trying to change it... that's the shamatha. Without trying to make it something different - that's the shamatha. Just kind of enjoying the surprises... as they unfold. That's profound... shamatha. ... How we doing?

Student 1 [00:23:16] Great. Thank you very much.

LMC [00:23:18] Maybe we'd better stop. [laughter]

Student 2 [00:24:01] Lama Michael. So, earlier you told a different story some weeks ago about riding a bicycle. I just want to make a comment that I'm glad chronologically... it seems like your parents let you sit behind the wheel earlier than before they just let you go out on the bicycle and fall. Could be bad if you were, you know, empowered to just go for that ride in the car when you were using your imagination. Anyways, that's just an aside. [laughter]

LMC [00:24:39] Whew!

Student 2 [00:24:39] You're talking about views, right? And I... have heard this term about having the view of... that, like, all sounds or mantras. And yet sometimes when we're practicing, people ask us to be quiet. And I was just wondering if you could comment on the two approaches. One is the view that all sounds are mantras. So, if we speak or the kids make sounds... you know, it's wonderful, wonderful. And yet other times were asked to be silent.

LMC [00:25:20] That's a great question. I like that.

Student 2 [00:25:22] Thank you.

LMC [00:25:26] Next. [laughter] I'm just kidding. We often say that. So, many of us practice shamatha, Chenrezig or Green Tara, other practices and... it's pretty much universal that... in the teachings on that practice, we say all sounds are mantra. Now... there's some nuance there that needs to be looked at. [laughs] It's a great example of the value of the few. So, if I'm doing Chenrezig... and using Chenrezig as a support... for bodhicitta, which is the aspiration to benefit all beings... and to awaken... to this... awakened mind that we are all possessing, we do many things in that direction. So, if I'm reciting the Om Mani Peme Hum mantra of Chenrezig, then... of the many things that one can do with the mind while they're making that recitation... one of them is to imagine that your *intention* to benefit all sentient beings is bearing fruit. The intention itself is bearing fruit. And... that intention and that fruit are riding on the sound of the mantra. So, before you go any further, you immediately see, oh, there is a relationship here. If I hold the benefit of others... as preeminent... above my own benefit... almost anything I do while that's happening... it doesn't lose that intention. *That's* the view... that's so important. You hold the view that... the benefit of others is accomplished through *intention* first.

[00:28:05] And second, and it might be a distant second... through our meditation... which is more subtle. If I say I intend to benefit you... or I intend to hold the view that... you benefit from all the things that you do... and then I don't do anything more than that, you're likely to wonder, well, how come you said that? But we have this other view, the view that... everything that we think or do or say, which is meant to encompass pretty much everything that is in our experience... benefits others, when we hold the *view* that that is our intention. That when I speak it benefits others. That when I am sad and cry, that benefits others. That we just kind of continually mix that in. Like you're mixing in something sweet into something that isn't sweet yet. And the more you mix in, the sweeter it gets. So, the more that you intend... and hold the view... that what you're doing will benefit others, the more likely that what you do will benefit others arises. The more likely that the small things will become bigger benefits and so on.

[00:29:49] So, this is why we come to this place of... you cannot accomplish your own benefit. It's impossible from a Buddhist perspective, to accomplish your own benefit. Because as soon as you start to do that, you become attached to your own benefit. And *that* immediately becomes a drag. It slows you down. It turns you in the wrong directions. You're making decisions and thoughts are arising... based upon how you can get your *own* benefit, often at the cost of somebody else's. ... So, the view that we have is that... you practice this bodhicitta, which is... really holding the view... that the benefit of *all* sentient beings... is my benefit. In the long run, what else could it be? In the short run... I could find a 10-pound piece of gold in the road and go and cash it in and feel like, whoa, I really accomplished my own benefit. But then I have to hide the money. Otherwise, my friends will want loans and so on. [laughter] So, it's easy for intelligent people... without any practice in the Dharma at all, to see that.... it's difficult to navigate samsara consistently for one's own benefit.

[00:31:20] But to navigate samsara for the benefit of all others consistently frees one from samsara. So therefore, we say... the mantra accomplishes all benefits, all sentient beings. The truth is, is that... that's just one of an uncountable number of things that we could do or we could hold that. But that's the nature of how the Dharma has evolved as a kind of a rather large... set of teachings. [There] is that other thing... Kalu Rinpoche used to say that I always found really useful. You do not need to know the entire Dharma in order to attain complete enlightenment. Since it already resides in your... awakened mind... you don't need much. All you need, he said, is one thing. If you can find *one* thing that inspires you to practice... and you never do anything but that one thing... that's as good as if you discovered the entire pantheon of deities and the whole thing and then practiced and attained enlightenment. And which would attain enlightenment first? It's a toss-up.

[00:32:47] That one thing. It has to be the authentic one. There can't be just something you *like*, but something that you feel inspired by that feels to you like, this is the authentic Dharma. And maybe you go to someone who's your teacher and you say, is this the authentic Dharma? And you get confidence because the person says, Yeah, that's it. Just do that. And you just do that and you make all these other discoveries and maybe you never do anything else. And maybe all the other discoveries result in you becoming someone who actually accomplishes all of these different Dharmas. But accomplishing all of them doesn't make you more enlightened than having accomplished one.

Student 2 [00:33:33] Thank you.

Student 3 [00:34:12] Hello. I had a question. I recently have been looking into animal welfare in America and factory farming and the way that animals are treated and slaughtered. I recently

decided to go vegan as to help promote, you know, better... everything. But... along with that, it's been really hard to kind of grasp the severity of suffering that's happening with this. And also... in like sharing that with people like my brother who have completely opposing views on the matter. I was just wondering, is there ways to help respect where people are in their current process, I guess? For example, he really wanted to debate me about why it was okay to do something. And for me, it was very wrong. And for him, it was... a fight to make himself right. And so, I understand that that's where he's at. And, you know, forcing anything upon him wouldn't be beneficial. But anything that is helpful for myself to... come to terms, I guess, with the fact that that's the viewpoint of a lot of people. When I feel so strongly about something different.

LMC [00:35:42] Yeah, I know. Can you say again... what the issue is?

Student 3 [00:35:55] Well, I see a lot of suffering in animal welfare, but there are other people who don't... acknowledge it or see it. And so, coming to terms with that for myself is something I'm trying to do. In respecting other people at *where they're at* in their process, I guess. So, anything that's beneficial for helping myself... not be so angry at everybody all the time.

LMC [00:36:37] That's a nice question. ... Maybe it's helpful to... combine two approaches. One would be... a kind of detailed... personal approach. And the other one might be... a more grand... approach that encompasses... a larger thing. So, this may seem counterintuitive, but... I think that the... the smaller thing... is working on others. Smaller because... it often aggravates the situation rather than soothing it. ... And we're all subject to, what I think is... kind of humorously, I like to call it, the American disease. Though Americans are certainly not... the only ones that have it. But it's the disease of having to be right. And I think of it as a disease, because if you feel like you... have to be right, you are definitely suffering. And furthermore, the disease... creates another thing, which is... happiness *comes* from being right. Which actually just pushes it all down even further and heats everything up.

[00:39:27] But it's often the case that when we're in the midst of that, we can't see any of that. So, in a way, you have to make a choice, you know. Personally, I think the choice is easy. But, I don't necessarily hold that view for everybody because not everybody holds that view. Being right is somehow an objective to have, and it is also... kind of something that is measurable. It is measurable, if you insist that one and one is two, sort of measurable and agree that in a way we all agree. But for the kinds of things that you're talking about, there's almost *no* agreement... on it or it's rare to find agreement. And the things that cause us the most... *angst* and... become associated with anger, negative activities, these things just become more like that.

[00:40:41] If you study the history of wars... one of the most interesting things about wars... is that they start with very small things. *Very* small things often... like you cannot imagine that anyone would even care about this thing. And yet... they were just kind of like trace the pieces along the way, you can kind of see like, wow, we went from there to there to there to there, to there, to there, to there... and then we ended up in this place! Which is unimaginable. Nobody ever would have *gone* there if they had *known* that they were going to go there. And I think we all do that, in kind of small ways. It's again, it's part and parcel of... the disease of needing to be right. Which doesn't mean *being* right, of course. [laughs] It just is the *need* to be right. So... that's the small approach, is to fix the world. Though that seems like it's the really big approach. It's actually the small approach. The bigger approach is to... set the example.

[00:42:08] The example that you set... for others, which is really what's important, will end up being the example that you live. So, you get there by the grace of others, if you can see the connection. By the grace of others who are bugging you [laughs] and you want to fix them, of course. And you might be wrong. We're all broken to some degree. So, probably you're right. They're wrong. It's a rare individual who wants to hear that. Probably the only individuals who are even willing to hear it are those who have already recognized that they're cracked, they're already broken. And maybe they're hoping that they can find a way out of it. But otherwise your words will not be so helpful. The more helpful thing is... I want to tell a very short story of this.

[00:43:30] So, one of, one of my personal heroes was a Catholic man, Thomas Merton. Merton was at the Gethsemani Monastery where he lived. Became kind of renowned. And there was amongst all of the monks, there was one monk who admired Merton and asked for an interview with him. And he went to see Thomas Merton and Thomas Merton greeted him and said, so what's on your mind? And he says, Father Merton, I would... like your advice... for the best thing to do with my life. Merton's first comment was humorous. He said, Uh! I thought you were gonna ask something difficult. [laughs] And then he went on, he said, it's actually easy. It's actually easy. Spend your life becoming a saint. Now... on the surface, that seems like a throwaway. Like okay, I heard it. Not for me. He didn't mean that your life was *worthless* if you didn't become a saint. But the *value* was in the *effort* to become one. That... a thousand people could make the effort and maybe one would make it. But *all* of them making the effort, had done the right thing. It wasn't an issue of... did you succeed or not. By making the effort, you succeeded.

[00:45:33] So... I think that's a critical piece... for us in general, as human beings who would like to lead, if we could, exemplary lives for the benefit of others. Without... having to suffer... ourselves in the process. So, that really means... setting an example for ourselves. The example that I want to *be*, I need to *act* in that way so that *I*... can have that fruit. And, in the meantime, we can put... more sweet toppings on the cake by also adding to that, the wish that... by virtue of *my* wish and my *effort*... to exemplify that... will become a force that others cannot resist. Simple. And every time that you make that wish... you've added something more... into the jar of that... beneficial goodness. In time it becomes automatic. Following being automatic, like Merton, you just become known for that. And then it's easy. Because when you think that you might do something else, you then realize... everyone's looking at you... because of what you have done. Don't go off that trail.

Student 3 [00:47:25] Thank you.

LMC [00:47:27] Is that okay? [sound of the bell] Saved again.

[00:47:50] So, we dedicate this merit. So, I just want to say what dedicating the merit means. It actually follows on what your question... and... this is an issue of view again. ... There is a metaphor here that is very helpful. We all do good things. There is no one in this world who lives more than a few decades, who doesn't do, or has done, good things... no matter how awful they may have been... in their life and in the deeds that they have done. I've liked reading... biographies of really horrific people. And you find in those biographies things that they did that were actually really good. And you wonder, of course, how come they didn't do more of that instead of all these other things that they did? But aside from that, the important thing was everyone was capable and did. So, in other words, we all share a certain inclination and in some it rose up... to the top and in others it seemed to remain underground somehow. But the, the thing that I found... kind of wonderful was that everyone seemed to have the inclination, though they couldn't all do it. Maybe because they didn't have the encouragement or didn't, weren't with

the right people. Or maybe it was just what we would call the result of many things in the past. Even past lives and the interconnectedness of those things rolling forward.

[00:50:04] When we do something positive... it's very helpful for us to acknowledge it. Never write it off. Like that was small. Not really worthy of even noticing. Always acknowledge it. Always see it. You don't need to tell anyone. It's better not to tell anyone. But it's very important to notice it... and see it and... acknowledge it in the way of saying to yourself, I wish I could do those things day and night, in my sleep and when I'm awake. Everybody that I meet, all those things... like the aspiration to do that. And then... you dedicate the virtue of having done that.

[00:50:53] By dedicating the virtue of having done that... it now carries itself forward. Kind of like, you created this ball of aspiration, let's say... and you could have just said, well, that's good enough, not bad. And then you just leave the ball on the table. When actually you could have taken a step and set it rolling somewhere... where it would, the benefit would continue. By virtue of just the force of that. So, we often say that... that dedicating the merit that you have accumulated in just this one session, or even just having recited a single mantra once... we take that and we say, I dedicate that to all sentient beings. Even if I can never do another positive thing, may *this* one grow to something like, so big that all beings are freed. So, in that way, our benefit now rolls forward, kind of, as a result of the force of our wishes. So that's why we're about to dedicate the merit.

sangha [00:52:22] *dedicating the merit*