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*working with experiences and the accompanying attachment & aversion, highest practice of placing awareness on awareness itself, sentient beings and the nature of confusion, bodhicitta and the Merton story*

**Student 1** [00:01:34] As you were saying, 'relax', the most important thing: relax... is like the best thing we can do... what's needed for shamatha. And I notice I can do it... and then my mind almost... *yearns* for distraction. Like it's a form of entertainment. And I'm wondering as a way to build up... stability in the shamatha... build up the ability to relax... I notice I can do certain tasks... like when I was a woodworker, when I could prep for... days, weeks. When it came to a glue up, it might be five, six hours without a break. I could focus because there was something I was doing. ... Actively doing. And I'm wondering if I gave myself alternating task like the 'doing' of a contemplation, or maybe an inquiry... and then let drop. And then... contemplation or inquiry and then let drop and just... relax. But... am I fooling myself to guess that that would be useful? Or is it just a different form of entertainment, distraction? ... That's a serious question. You're just smiling at me. [laughs]

**LMC** [00:03:17] Oh it was? Oh, sorry. I don't entertain serious questions. [laughter] This is everybody's plague. We want to... sit down, shut up... put our awareness on some object in the meditation. And we find that... like you say, yearning for some kind of a distraction. So, first of all, I think it's helpful to not throw anything away. Like if you can hold the *view* that any experience that arises is valuable. No matter what it is. And there's that quote from Kalu Rinpoche that I've recently been enjoying. Saying to myself, that... he said the best experience to rest your awareness on is the experience you hoped you'd never have. And the reason for that is also clear... that the experience you hope you'd never have, of course, would naturally be some... *intense* experience. Otherwise, he would have said the experience you always hoped you'd have. [laughter] And that was not *it*.

[00:04:51] So, the issue was... one is... extraordinarily... pleasant experiences we are deeply drawn to. And those that are very painful... emotionally or physically... we are repelled by. And as we all know, the *issue* in the context of our Dharma practice is... how do we deal with attachment and aversion? Attachment we all enjoy. Especially when it works. We feel like we've attained some level of realization. When actually what we really need to be working on is undermining the attachment. It's not the experience that's bad. It's the attachment. Or conversely, the aversion. So, it's not so hard to kind of fool ourselves when we encounter a very positive experience... and we throw our arms around it... and love it! Oh, it's not so hard to think like, well, this is a nice stability. But that's why Kalu Rinpoche said the best experience to rest your awareness on is the experience you hoped you'd never have. So, I want to I want to say something about that in particular, because I think it's key.

[00:06:21] We tend to judge our meditation... on the basis of... maybe not... the most useful report card. The most useful report card would include... resting your awareness on whatever experience happened to arise. And in any given day, you don't have to *work* at it. There are experiences that arise. Memories are experiences. Physical sensations are experiences. So, as they arise during the day, we instantaneously... develop a relationship with the experience. I wish I wasn't having that thought again... or that experience again. And so... the encouragement to... honor the more difficult experiences... because they contain the most power.

[00:07:30] So, the example is... this little thing that I hit the bell with... I can set that down on the table and put my awareness on it. And it comes and goes and comes and goes. But I put my awareness on it pretty good. And then I pat myself on the back when the session is over. Yeah, that was a good meditation. But... the *attachment* that took me into that place... is still there. So, in other words, this [holding up the stick] actually doesn't have much power. So, I might have a little more power if I put... statue of the Buddha in front of me. Honestly, I'd have more power if I put a picture of my teacher in front of me. But really... there are many more experiences that you would say, I would like to have any experience *but that* one. And if we can, we have to remember that... the highest level of the shamatha is placing your awareness on the experience. But that is actually one level *below* the highest. The highest is to place your awareness on the awareness itself.

[00:08:39] And anyone who's tried it knows... that is really imbued with, like... many layers of trickery [laughs] that we play on ourselves. And if it involves pain... or serious aversion, we just don't want to do it at all. At some point in that thread of our meditation practice and engaging in the Dharma, we have to come to the place where... when I have a *really* negative experience... that really grabs me by the throat, the first thing I do is... recognize it as a jewel. ... And so I placed my awareness.... I'm saying 'I'... I'm just wanting to remove the 'I' and say this is what we need to do! We need to place our awareness on that as if... *this* is the secret to understand. I hate that experience. And in the middle of it... I do my best then to put my *awareness* on that experience. Not as a judgment, but just to have the experience of the awareness *mixed* with the thing that I don't like. Now, if the thing that I don't like is also not really life threatening or health threatening in any way, it's helpful in the beginning to be clear and be confident that actually the meditation is not going to hurt you.

[00:10:03] And many people actually have the experience, the meditation hurts me. Putting my awareness on something which is very painful... causes me more angst. So, they'll say things like that. So, "It's hurting me more!" So, that then you have to back away... and work with things that are not so powerful. And maybe keep in the back of one's mind... that thing from Kalu Rinpoche saying... the *best* experience to have... but only really if you can put your awareness on it. Otherwise, you just run for your life. So, if you can put your awareness on the experience, which feels like... I hate this. I want to just be rid of it. And instead, just sit right in the middle of it and feel it dissolve around you. Then you come to a different place in relationship to the meditation.

[00:10:58] Shamatha meditation, at that point, is not necessarily peaceful. ... If it is peaceful, we're likely to get trapped in... identifying with it. 'I'm such a peaceful person.' And then, of course, somebody you see who doesn't like you says, "*You* are not a peaceful person! I don't like you." You know? [laughs] So, then... you feel like you're not peaceful. But you're likely to blame the person who pointed the finger at you. So, we need to keep coming back to the experience that we're having. And the more power it has, the better. So, that we can feel like... in our meditation, how many times do we feel like... my meditation is perfect. And it lasts about as long as a marble that I'm balancing on another marble. I can *put* my awareness there. But as soon as I let go of it, it's gone. That's because you don't care about the marbles. You don't care about the marbles. Who cares? I don't care about this. [holding up stick] So, it's missing one day. Who cares?

[00:12:08] We need... the experience is best if it's something we really *feel* captivated by. So, for example, we often say put a statue of the Buddha in front of you. It's *best*... if you met the Buddha. And you were *overwhelmed* with... insight and things. Now you have an object to place

your awareness on. It is like really powerful. So, this is one of the reasons why... in our tradition, we put a lot of emphasis upon the teacher and really the very exalted teachers that we occasionally meet and feel like we've been... overwhelmed with blessings, maybe. So, now we have a powerful thing. When that experience arises periodically, we just stop everything and put our awareness on that. So, that we can in that moment... *feel* the nature of that relationship... in a positive way. So, I think that's enough... for me. [laughs]

**Student 1** [00:13:15] Yeah, so... I'll be working with... my delight in being distracted? But, you said something else that reminded me of what I realized lately. I don't *really* believe that I only have *this* moment to practice. And so, my motivation is not... gripping and intense enough. That it's like, oh yeah, if I don't accomplish it this session, I'll have tonight. I'll have tomorrow. And so... you just reminded me of that... when we *really* believe something or when we just tell ourself something. Anyway. Thank you. Thank you for your teaching.

**LMC** [00:14:14] Experience is king. It always is. No matter how deep our conceptual understanding goes, if it isn't a support for the experience... and resting with it, then we have... compromised the power of it.

**Student 2** [00:14:48] So, I kind of want to carry that further because I'm a little... confused about the part where you say rest attention in this gripping kind of negative experience, perhaps. So, maybe you could elaborate or I could even give an example of something that happens to me a lot in meditation. I will be visited by, you know, a recent argument or a conflict with someone, either intimate or not, with someone I love or not. And... I don't know, in my practice for many years, it's always been... 'and let that go and come back to the breath.' And, you know, 'let's not dwell in that. Let's not go down a story. That's not me. I don't identify with that story of that interaction and that experience.' So... I think what I was trying or have been trying is to, you know, accept that. Recognize, oh, that's just a worrying thought or that's... maybe labeled a thought and then come back to my breath, come back to my body. What does it feel like? I guess I'm wondering what you mean by bring awareness to that, if you could elaborate. What do you mean by bringing awareness to... this intense experience? If it's not letting yourself go down the story. Or identifying with the, you know, I could get... I could go for, you know, maybe it's been three minutes and I've replayed an argument or something. I will... ooop, I left this... present moment. So, I come back. So, I guess, yeah, I'm not seeing how they go together.

**LMC** [00:16:23] Well, maybe they don't go together. [laughs]

**Student 2** [00:16:26] Well, how resting in the experience... what do you mean by that, I guess?

**LMC** [00:16:32] Resting in the experience. Well, of course it's *best*... to begin... like we began with this. [holding up the wooden stick] And... I think many people could go like a decade with this... and their shamatha practice will improve... a little bit. Maybe a lot in some cases. But we have experiences all the time. I mean, you're sitting there. If you just *look* in your body and in your mind, you immediately have experiences. And those experiences are more powerful than most inanimate objects that you would put in front of yourself and place your awareness on it. Now, we're trying to balance our awareness on some other thing. And the best thing, in the end, the best thing is to balance our awareness on the awareness. But that is really very difficult. And so we say, that it's kind of the end point.

[00:17:38] We need to be able to rest our awareness... on awareness itself. You can try it. There's no harm in it. I think... I can say it from my own side, I tried it many times. There was no

harm in it. And there didn't seem to be any benefit either. So, it's kind of like, ahhh, well that's nice. But... there's really... not particularly compelling. So, if you can develop the habit, and you can do it with almost any object that you have a *relationship* with. So, when I say relationship, I mean an object with which... your presence and that other thing... results in you having an experience. And even if the experience is not big... it's likely to be more than the experience you get from this. [holding up wooden stick]

[00:18:34] So, you remember something. Ohhh, I remember a big argument I had with somebody. So, that's fine! Just in the moment you remember it, you have a little bit of a shock experience. Like maybe... if you're thinking about it, you think, gawd, I hope that never happens again. Or, I'm going to really *fix* that person. You'd have that sort of thing. All of those things result in an experience. And the experience that we're just talking about, like a conflict of some kind, will result in a visceral, physical experience. And that, that's a fine place to put your awareness.

[00:19:13] So, we could say, well, you're just putting your awareness on your body. But... I don't know any other body that I appreciate more than my own. [laughs] Or more attached to than my own. And so, if you're sick, you're having an experience. You can lie in bed. Ohhhhhh. And you can also... put your awareness on that *feeling*. The feeling of aversion that you have... and the feeling of the pain in the body. And... if you *can* do that... even for one minute, you're likely to have a different experience than you had when you were just lying in bed and hoping that this would go away soon.

[00:20:01] So, the experience is preeminent. It is the single most important thing in our entire lives. We get up. We walk around. It's like, we're having experiences day and night, all the time. And we also say, by the way, dead or alive. The experiences continue... rolling out. Even you don't know your dead. Even you don't know you're alive. They just keep rolling out. And we think of them... as *not* precious. When every last one of them... holds a kernel of insight... if we could just place our awareness on it long enough to have that experience.

[00:20:44] So, it doesn't matter what the experience is. But experience is generally speaking, more... useful than any other single thing. And if it's slightly... tainted... it's probably slightly better. So, long as it's not too big. The trick is you got to find your place with it. Like... if you're really good at it, like some of the Indian sadhus, you know, they sit in flames and things. So, if you're good at that, that's probably a really good thing to do. But it doesn't mean that *you* have to do *those* things. You have plenty of experiences day and night, all the time. And so... take one that's difficult... and treat it as... this is the object of my meditation. By virtue of *that* alone, it is precious. It's like I'm opening up... a nut and I have never opened *this* nut before. So, I actually don't know what is gonna be in it. Whether it's edible? Filled with spiders? Or some other thing.

[00:21:50] So, when you place your awareness on the experience, it will not remain the same. As soon as you put your awareness on it, your experience in relationship changes. So, you just follow that. If you can do that with your meditation, that is really very good shamatha. And it not only is very good shamatha, it *instantly* reveals itself as highly useful in the context of being alive in this world and having wholesome and unwholesome relationships. ... Is that...? [inaudible response] Thank you.

**Student 3** [00:22:46] Hi Lama Michael. So clearly, this is probably... more evidence of my ignorance, but one will hope that you know, confusion arises as wisdom. So, and there's

probably... many more questions involved in this one question. So... you have a saying that, you know, "There's that wave again." You know, it's not the same wave. There is that wave again. And I think you've described that in regards to looking at the experience. And I thought some of that was in regards to... observing it and trying to see its true nature of, like, emptiness. Comes, your gripped by it and it goes. Also, when you were talking today about relaxing, it reminded me of what I think is the Song of Niguma. Which is, you know, the sky is empty and non-conceptual. Cut the root of the conceptual mind. Cut the root and relax.

**LMC** [00:23:58] Yeah.

**Student 3** [00:23:58] Is the nature of awareness... which is, you know, easy to say, you know, in this conceptual framework that we habitate [?inhabit], maybe not so easy to get to. Is your awareness non-conceptual? ... Or true awareness non-conceptual?

**LMC** [00:24:23] I think awareness, is by nature non-conceptual. Is that fair?

**Student 3** [00:24:31] Okay.

**LMC** [00:24:31] Your personal *commentary* on that experience is not necessarily deeply imbued with experience. But you can't get away from the experience also. Can you?

**Student 3** [00:24:50] One could try, but you know. You could try to get away from it, but it's there.

**LMC** [00:24:57] Yes! And would we say the trying gets you away from the experience? Yes! It does. And it lands you in another one. [laughter] So... without complicating this... I think most people would say... that *any* experience that I can place my awareness on... and just rest on it... is more helpful than putting... this [wooden stick] in front of me and resting my awareness on it. So, if you have a deep sense of connection, devotion with the Buddha... and you put a Buddhist statue in front of you, that can be really helpful. And many people use that as their primary thing. If they don't have the statue, they visualize... the image of the Buddha and so on.

[00:25:54] And I can say from my own experience that that works great! Once you have the relationship. But if somebody just gives you a statue and you have no relationship, no teachings, no connection to it, and you're going to rest your awareness on that... it *can* be that it's almost completely devoid of experience. You're trying to have a relationship with the Buddha. And so, your closest connection is this statue. But... it doesn't always work great. So, it's helpful a little bit to like receive some teachings on the Dharma. "Oh, yeah. And these are the same as what the Buddha gave?" "Yes, the same exactly what the Buddha gave." And there's many more things. So, you get piece by piece and you start to have a relationship with it. Now, the statue... is a little more useful, a little more interesting. It, it grabs you a little bit more.

[00:26:56] It's like seeing people go down the street that you don't know. And then you meet somebody and you have a relationship with them. Even if it's only "Good morning. Oh, it's a nice day. You know, I hear it's going to snow. Yeah. Okay." Well, already there is a relationship... with just *something* there. And you can turn around and walk and while you're walking away, place your awareness on the... *experience*... of just having that very short conversation with somebody you never knew before. And may never see again. And immediately, you have a different sense. That experience now is three dimensional. It's not just a simple memory. Now it is... much more imbued with things. And that's a very simple example.

[00:27:41] So... if someone calls you up and you get in a big argument with them. If you could place your awareness, which you probably will not be able to do... [laughs] but if you could push your awareness on the *experience* as it is unfolding. Anyone who has done that... will immediately agree... that it *radically* changes the conversation one hundred percent. And you have the power and the authority to do that at any moment. ... So, the mystery is, why the hell aren't we doing it?

**Student 3** [00:28:29] Easier... it's hard.

**LMC** [00:28:33] Who said that?! [laughter]

**Student 4** [00:29:13] I'm curious if you could speak to *sentient beings* and what is meant by that?

**LMC** [00:29:24] What's a sentient being? ... I remember all the way back in the 70s when the great teacher Kalu Rinpoche was mentioning that. And the translator kept referring to sentient beings. And I think there was probably no one in the room except the translator... who had ever heard that word before. What *is* this thing that you're talking about? This confused thing, and all of these things. [laughs] And so, finally, somebody managed to ask the question. And the translator basically said, 'Rinpoche, they don't know what a sentient being is.' And... he was speaking in Tibetan, of course. So, we just heard the translation. And so, Kalu Rinpoche then... he laughed... at that and he says, "It's you!" [laughter]

[00:30:19] And then... elaborating a little bit... it came to the point of... anything that has a mind... is a sentient being. But then... he elaborated it just a little bit... and he said *fundamentally*, it's anything that has a *confused* mind. And then as he went on, you suddenly realize that... I'm not sure I've ever met one of those latter ones. Like not confused? I don't know who that is anymore. I mean, if I look at an ant crawling along the ground, I'm not sure what confusion means to that ant. But from our own perspective, he then went on to talk about the nature of confusion. And, of course, we could each... talk about it endlessly. The nature of confusion. The absence of utter clarity... in relationship to our experiences. So, here we are back to experiences again.

[00:31:28] If I have a difficult... experience that I would not especially choose to have... but as we know most of our experiences, we did not choose to have... we categorize them as pleasant and unpleasant and in-between. But we didn't necessarily choose... to have the vast majority of them. So, he was just saying that sentient beings, of course, are continuously imbued with experience. Again, day and night, dead or alive... they just roll out continuously. The nature of mind is... that it is an experience machine. It generates experiences... continuously.

[00:32:12] So, not understanding the *nature* of those experiences is the nature of confusion. And sentient beings live in the world of confusion without recognizing the *nature* of that confusion. And so, they suffer. Of the many ways we can talk about the causes of suffering, that's one of them. We don't recognize the nature of our own experience. So, we may be having a really beautiful, joyful experience. But not recognizing the nature of it... when that experience dissolves, we're likely to feel unhappy about losing the experience. Or something else like that. ... Is that enough about suffering or...? Suffering's easy to elaborate on. [laughs]

**Student 4** [00:33:11] Thank you.

**Student 5** [00:33:15] So when I see an organism, how do I know whether that organism has a mind? Is worthy of my efforts?

**LMC** [00:33:32] Oh. worthy of suffering or being free of it?

**Student 5** [00:33:38] Being saved. How do I make that determination? Where is that mind?

**LMC** [00:34:26] Well, it's just not simple... [laughter] for starters. You have worms and you take a medicine and you kill the worms, right? So, I think there's a different answer here... in a kind of larger context of the Dharma. And then there's another answer, which is about... our lives and the culture that we live in. And many other characteristics that surround us most of the time. So, I think the first thing is... I want to go back to the simple statement that we were looking at some weeks ago where... we were... I want to say, entertaining ourselves with... talking about the Dharma. And the phrase that I found kind of interesting to propose is that... we are utterly unable to accomplish our own benefit.

[00:35:40] When we look close at that, in the context of the Dharma, we can say... absolutely! Not *able* to accomplish our own benefit. And the reason is that when we make an *effort* to accomplish our own benefit, even in a small way, we're meditating and feeling better. *I'm getting somewhere*. We measure the thing on the basis of how better I feel. If I'm feeling good, then I must be doing something good. But actually, I can say from my own personal experience, I have felt good about terrible things in the past. [laughs] Terrible things that *I* did! So, it's not quite a good measurement, just that I'm feeling good today.

[00:36:27] And I think if we look at it even in a slightly shallow way, the grand proposition... in the mahayana tradition is the expression of bodhicitta. And bodhicitta is about benefitting others. Which right off hand, the first person who has never heard it before will say, "Well, when do I get to benefit myself?" And then they hear, "Oh no, that never happens. You never want to do that. You really want to benefit others... even when you don't want to." And so, you have to get the sense that actually... *it may be true*. I cannot benefit myself. I can *only* benefit others and from benefiting *others*... the benefit flows from them. And accomplishes the benefit of *all* sentient beings. And... I'm not enlightened. So, that makes me a sentient being. So, the benefit I experience comes from others.

[00:37:39] And we codify that and elaborate on it in many different ways. And many practices where we accomplish the benefit of others through rituals and things, and the others aren't even there. ... Or are they? So... I want to tell this story that many of you heard, so I apologize in advance. It's short. I apologize for its shortness and the fact that I'm saying it again. [laughter] Guilty on all counts.

[00:38:19] Does everybody know Thomas Merton? Personally? [laughter] Okay. Well, I had, you know, through his through his writings, kind of a love affair with him. I *loved* what he said and the things that he said... in many places. And so, he lived in a little hut near the monastery. And... people would come to him for advice. And so, one, one day there was a young monk who was going to see him. And the young monk came, knocks on Merton's door. And so, Thomas Merton comes and he said, "So, what are we doing today? And why are you here?" And the young monk says, "Father Merton, I would like you to advise me on what the *best* thing that I could do with my life is. What is the best thing that I could do?" And Merton... he quips... he says, "Oh, I thought you were gonna bring a difficult question." [laughter] And then he says it's

fundamentally easy. You spend your life... doing what you can... to become a saint. Period. That's it. Every minute that you put your effort *there*... will be a fruitful minute. So, if you do that every minute of your life... you will, you will have the *best* life that you could possibly have had. Simple, straightforward advice. I think it translates almost one for one to... the practice of bodhicitta. Because those who practice bodhicitta... endlessly... they become bodhisattvas. Which is our word for a saint... kind of.

[00:40:21] So, I think that... when we look at things like bugs and... and things that we eat and kill and eat! ... We cannot... entirely get away from harming others. It's inherent in the conditions within the confused world. You take a breath. Almost without exception, on that breath there are living things. And... that living thing dies. And many things, when we walk on the ground, we kill things. We're continuously... harming other beings. And even with extreme cases, it's like we still end up harming beings. Like it's not possible to completely escape doing that. So, we put more effort into benefiting more beings. Whether they are... single celled amoebas or human beings or whatever, to just spend our lives... I think this was what Merton was looking at... spend your life... working to benefit others. And you can benefit yourself. But the more that you *focus* on the benefit of others, the more you will benefit others and the more happy you will be... for it.

[00:42:02] That's kind of the simple formula. And, you know, it's greatly elaborated in texts on the practice of bodhicitta and other practices. That you put your effort into benefiting others. That is *how* your benefit is accomplished. And it sounds like, on the surface, like we have here, a martyr tradition. Like, when do I get mine? [laughs] And I think the answer to that is... you get yours in every minute that you even just hold the *wish* for the benefit of others. And when you hold the wish to harm someone, you annihilate that whole path for some period of time. Some people will say extremely, that if you make the wish to harm someone, you literally kind of obliterate your path. But... it's not permanent. It's obliterated in that moment. And it can be resurrected again at any moment when you realize... whew! that was a mistake. And you move into it in a different way.

[00:43:10] But filling our lives with the aspiration to benefit other beings... is fundamentally... the cause of joy and happiness. It doesn't come by virtue of searching for it for ourselves. Even though we can *food* ourselves on that score. When we look at it deeply, we can see... that actually the intention to benefit others... the continuous *wish* that they would be free of suffering... is actually the cause of our happiness. ... Try it. [laughs] At least. ...Okay. We're getting close to the end of the world here. [laughter]

***sangha*** [00:44:17] *dedicating the merit*