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the benefit of training with using totality of our experience as object of awareness rather than our breath, defining buddha mind as being source of all experience, freshness and equanimity, working with our aspirations that others be free of suffering

LMC [00:00:35] So this, uh, for those of you who don't know, this is a period now of maybe forty-five minutes, something like that for... open discussion, open questions. Whatever you would like to say or do... almost. [laughter]

Student 1 [00:01:10] One thing that happens in the meditation like we were just engaged in, is that... this is just speaking from the experience that I was having here a few moments ago, is that the loss of the anchor of an object of attention is... challenging. And I wondered if that might be challenging for other folks. Because when you've been practicing in a certain way where you have that anchor and then you're, the instruction is to... let go of those things. ... I just wondered... how do you... compensate for the loss of that? You know, because... if you miss the piece of... observing experience, then it could be just the same as sitting in a room and not doing anything and wondering why you're doing that. Does that make sense?

LMC [00:02:31] As much as anything. [laughter] Would you say that again? That was a sneaker.

Student 1 [00:02:52] Without the anchor of an object of attention... in shamatha practice, it seems easy to lose your way. And devolve into... sort of mindless cogitation.

LMC [00:03:14] Yeah. And why are you raising that?

Student 1 [00:03:21] What to do about that?

LMC [00:03:23] What to do about it? Are you raising that as a comparison with how we normally do shamatha?

Student 1 [00:03:49] Yes.

LMC [00:03:49] Placing our awareness on our breath, for example? Well, the first thing that I would say is... in neither one of these do I find it easier to rest my awareness on the object. So the object in one case is the *totality* of experience. Not a specific thing. Not just the breath or not some other little thing. But... if I go to just following the breath, I have the same issue exactly. Distraction arises. Just following the breath is like... about as boring as you can get unless somebody is throttling you, [laughter] in which case it's really interesting to get your breath. But other than that, it's no more, I think it's actually *more* interesting to rest your awareness on the panorama of experience as it arises.

[00:04:56] So having trained ourselves to rest our awareness on an object which could be something like this, [holds up bell striker] super interesting...and... moving to our *actual* experience as it arises. In the very beginning, that's quite difficult because we're not used to putting our awareness on an experience. Any experience! So if I want to put my awareness on this cup, there's nothing that... magnetizes me to that cup. I mean, it's not compelling. But if I'm having an experience... like, I just got a terrible medical thing happen or a diagnosis or some disappointment, something negative or something very positive, I'm *really* wanting to put my

awareness on it. Or... I'm skipping something that could be really useful. Like, for example, someone gets a diagnosis of, you know, you're likely to live for another six months, but not more. And many people would feel like that was tragic. And they would be consumed in their thoughts and experiences. Everything that they do and think and said would be... flavored by that news. And the advantage of putting that in with *all* of your experience... you get a different mixture.

[00:06:49] Admittedly, it takes a while to change the routine. But... following... the *plethora* of all of the experiences that we have *every* moment... leaves you with a sense of... discovering something about yourself. Which is neither discrete... like we're looking for, it's *that* thing over there! Instead of that, it's the totality of my experience which cannot be named. You can call it the totality of my experience, but it doesn't match the actual thing. So that's my personal experience of it. And I think that not everyone will appreciate that. But I do... [laughs] appreciate it.

[00:07:52] And I think that if our *intention*... is to actually... discover what we are, not *who* we are, but *what* we are in this body and in this state of mind and all. If that's our intention, which really joins with Buddhist practice, then paying attention only to small, discrete things... like I have a pain in my nose today, so I'm putting my awareness on that. The pain in your nose now becomes the totality of who you are. What do you do with that? It's not interesting. It doesn't draw you into it later. What do you discover? But when you are kind of overwhelmed by things, it works best when you've practiced that. And so you're used to watching *all* the things that are occurring while you're practicing, while you're meditating. Some of them are terrible. Some of them are pleasant. Some of them are ecstatic. Some of them make you scared. And normally... we do the practice, the meditation of shamatha, with a certain sense in the background of... I'm here to fix things. And that thing by itself is a problem. Because it never works. [laughs].

[00:09:32] So in my experience, it *never* works. My mind never gets calm. I mean, I can't really say that completely. But it doesn't appear to become calm by any specific thing that I do. And if I watch my mind when it is at its most busy and wild state, it actually is more calm than when it wasn't calm. [wry chuckling] And that calmness is not a *thing*. It's not a thing to look for. It's not a thing to put a name on it because the name is not that thing. So what are you going to do? I have to confess from my own side, working with as many practices as we've had and we *do* have... I don't mean to reject... or embrace any particular part of it, but I find it... sometimes intensely useful to look at all the stuff that's going on.

[00:10:45] As we often say, the nature of mind itself is an experience machine. The mind itself never stops generating experiences. It *never* stops. And as Kalu Rinpoche used to say in 1973, it never stops whether you're asleep or awake. And then I remember him stopping for a poignant moment and then saying, dead or alive. It's like it never stops. And that's totally my experience. Watching all the experiences that are occurring... it never stops. Putting my awareness on my breath... in the background, there's all this churning stuff going on at the same time. Which feels like, why can't I stop that? And I think the answer is, what are you trying to stop it for? Who said to do that? [laughs] It's not in any instruction manual either. Nor any advice that I ever heard from any teacher saying 'you should stop that'. [laughter] So why not take the totality of the experience we're having, put our awareness on it and just embrace everything as if you'd never seen this movie before and you will never see it again. It's never happened before and it will never happen again. But if you sit down and open yourself to all that experience... *that will now happen*. Not again, but it'll happen for the first time again, and it will never occur again. It's like yesterday's breakfast, [laughs] so to speak.

Student 1 [00:12:41] Thank you.

Student 2 [00:12:45] Lama Michael, you mentioned a long list of things at the beginning that are buddha mind. And I think you said like discouragement is buddha mind.

LMC [00:13:05] Discouragement. Yeah.

Student 2 [00:13:08] I'm confused because... if discouragement is buddha mind what is *not* buddha mind? And maybe I don't understand what buddha mind really means.

LMC [00:13:23] I think we use we use the term buddha mind in different ways. And so one way is to think of buddha mind as the awakened mind. And that's okay. That's one way to look at it. And another way to look at it is that buddha mind is actually the source of *all* experience. It is the mind that we all have. We are all endowed with that nature. And so we might be asking ourselves the question then, how come I'm not enlightened? But the many ways of talking about that, one of them is that... in a certain way we *are* awakened. The fundamental issue is that we don't recognize it.

[00:14:14] And so we bring our troubles, our confusion, our opinions, our labels, our ideas about ourselves and about others... and we believe in them and we solidify them and not really paying attention to what we're doing. Or maybe we're reacting to fear or anxiety of some kind. Those things appear in the same mind that we call buddha mind. That anxiety, that fear is not something that is somewhere else. That is occurring within our minds. It's not like we have one mind that's confused and another mind that's not.

[00:15:03] So, I don't want to be confusing by even saying that... and I know that in certain teachings, we also make a distinction between the confused mind and the awakened mind and so on. It's an effort to be helpful with these things. But at some point, we also... hopefully come to the place where... we recognize that the experiences that we have, all of them, like Kalu Rinpoche statement way back in 1973... the experiences that we have, all of them, without exception, arise from that mind. And we can call it the awakened mind. And refer to someone who is awakened and enlightened. That's one way to use that.

[00:16:13] And another way is to understand that the nature of mind itself generates those experiences. They arise. And they arise... if you need to understand it in a kind of conceptual way, we can say that the truth of interdependence is really what we're looking at here. In other words, if I say to you something which pleases you, then that affects our relationship and the way that we talk with each other. And if I say something which is disappointing, then that affects our relationship. So that the next thing that we say to each other is flavored by what we just said and what thought we just thought.

[00:17:01] And if you elaborate that into a kind of chain, you can have a certain conceptual understanding of the nature of karma. Like things unfold and grow. It's like if you plant [a] certain kind of seed in your garden, something grows from that seed. And if you leave it there, more seeds come and things happen. And if you let other animals come, more things happen and change. We normally narrow our scope of the experience so small that we feel like we really understand it. But when, when we sit down and practice shamatha in the way that we're doing it. Or any of the other practices we do... personally, I just have to say from my own side, I prefer to own the confusion. If confusion arises, then I want to see the confusion. I'm not interested in

getting rid of it. Because if I just put my awareness on it, the clarity arises. ... I'm not saying that it stays! [laughter] I saw it coming. [lots of laughter]

[00:18:32] I think that some people who have another level of realization, or even any of us on occasion... have a sense of insight. And then the challenge is, can you just let that be? And the answer is often, nope! I just have to do something with it. And then it's gone. So I actually prefer... personally, to just have what's there. Let it come, and if it's filled with anxiety and self-loathing and all of the things and harmony and beauty and love and kindness and all that, I would prefer to just have the experience and not try to change any of it, not try to make it into something else. Even the pain. It's like, if I can, I'd prefer to just have it and see it and sometimes even *that's* joyful. ... Does that make sense? Yeah, not that it needs to. [laughter]

Student 3 [00:20:04] With respect to the practice that you have instructed us in and have been describing... resting in the awareness of the totality of experience as it arises. Is that any different than... resting in the awareness of awareness?

LMC [00:20:37] No. I mean, awareness is an experience. So we can say awareness of things. But I think here we're talking about the actual experience of the awareness. So if you rest your awareness *on* awareness, which is a very exalted state, at least in theory. I think in theory, because of the fact that it's very difficult to put it there. We often joke it's kind of like balancing a marble on a marble. It's theoretically possible, [laughs] but it's not likely at any given moment that you manage that thing. But I think it's still worthwhile placing our awareness on awareness.

[00:21:27] And... maybe... I don't actually know this, but I think that it might be that placing an awareness... let's say... at a time when the mind is not overwhelmingly busy... that we've slowed down enough that we place our awareness on... the experiences that are occurring. And sometimes there are uncountable experiences. It's kind of like you're in a hailstorm of some kind. You can't count the hailstones. But other times you just hear the ping and the ping and... you can count it and you can listen without being disturbed. And I think our experiences that we have day by day, moment by moment... are like that.

[00:22:19] Sometimes we can rest our awareness on it and kind of encompass in our awareness all of the experiences that are occurring. And we can have a feeling that we are still... while that is happening. There's a stillness there, which is very kind of satisfying... without putting any more spin on it than that. If you can do that with five things, you can do it with 50 things. It's the aquarium thing. If you can look in the aquarium and see 20 fish, you can look in the aquarium when there's 200 fish. It's the same. As long as you're not trying to write down, well, this is a gourami and this is a that and a that. And I don't know, that one looks kind of sick. I better note that. You're doing all those things, then it doesn't quite work. But it's okay to help the fish get well if they're sick. But we're now talking about the nature of awareness and our own being and what we understand about ourselves.

Student 4 [00:23:59] Lama Michael, you started this morning by saying that we should go for refuge to our own awakened mind.] And you said this many times before. It's a common instruction that is given in, you know, Mahamudra and Dzogchen teachings.

LMC [00:24:21] Yeah.

Student 4 [00:24:22] So no doubt that's the *view*. You know, the view being that your own buddhanature, your own awareness... from it all the three kayas emanate. And so all your

appearances, everything. But where I want to go with that instruction is, how do you make that instruction practical? So your own awakened mind is your source of refuge. Therefore, what do I do with it? I mean, so if there's a human being I can go to, a teacher, like yourself, I can go and ask for guidance. But when I go for refuge to my own awakened mind, you see, most of the time I'm acting from the stance of not pristine awareness, but from the stance of a confused sentient being. ... The closest I get to pristine awareness, okay, or any approximation of it is when you sit in Mahamudra. But... that's not very practical.

LMC [00:25:41] What is not practical?

Student 4 [00:25:41] Well, I mean, how do I work with the sense that, or with the saying that... your own awakened mind should be the place of refuge?

LMC [00:26:04] The intention in turning our minds towards refuge is that we acknowledge our confusion. We acknowledge... all of the elements of confusion, our pain, our joy. All of the things that we do that causes more confusion and so on. And so normally we go for refuge in the restaurant we're going to have lunch at. I don't think that's an exaggeration. We go into various places and meet various people and we have various conversations which lead us to have experiences pleasant and unpleasant. And so when we turn our minds to refuge in *The Buddha*, which is usually how it's stated, that's fine. That's a starting place... refuge in *the Buddha*.

[00:27:28] We can even put a Buddha statue in front of us and go for refuge to that Buddha. There's nothing really wrong with that. But that *statue* is not going to do much *for* you. It's not going to... come to your house and sit down with you and have a conversation. It's a hunk of metal. But it *represents* something. And what that representation is, depending upon what level you want to approach it, but I am interested today in saying it's about... the higher teaching that all sentient beings, human or otherwise, are endowed with that awakened mind. So that's the starting place. We *already* are endowed with the awakened mind. Everybody says that.

[00:28:31] They don't necessarily say what to do with it. But we start by just acknowledging that we need refuge. In other words, I get confused. I get angry. I ruin my friendships. Whatever it is that we are confused about or where we make mistakes or our arrogance overruns us and people run away and we run away. All sorts of things happen that don't feel like they are in accordance with our spiritual path.

[00:29:06] So we keep coming back to going for refuge to the Buddha. I can remember... for at least two or three years, meeting Kalu Rinpoche in 1973. I never heard, I think it was stated, but I never *heard* anything about... the teaching that even confused sentient beings, (which is what we call human beings, is sentient beings, that is, they're confused), I never heard that our minds were inherently... we were endowed with the awakened mind. I never heard it. And my guess is, is that it was said many times. But since I had not a clue as to what that meant, it just sort of like floated by, like so many things. Well, I'll catch that one later. Later never came.

[00:30:09] And so today I say... we say that we are endowed with the awakened mind. But that's merely kind of like a name. You're endowed with the awakened mind. But we immediately... if that's all we get, *you're endowed with the awakened mind*. The awakened mind is the same mind the Buddha has. ... It's not enough. We're just *stuck* there with something that sounds like a rather miraculous promise, but it never gets delivered. And then we're told... because we go back to our teachers and we say, what happened? And I even heard somebody once say, I don't know how I lost it. I can't remember who the teacher was, but I remember them

laughing about it. You *can't* lose it. It's not some *thing*. Well, that's befuddling to Americans who are highly conceptual and really good at being conceptual. So why is it that we can't get this? So the awakened mind is something that we are all endowed with. You cannot approach it... satisfactorily... conceptually. It doesn't come through that door. Something else has to happen.

[00:31:49] This is one of our great obstacles. We can do and, as a culture have done, extraordinary things with our conceptual minds. Almost unbelievable things. But we're still confused. And that doesn't quite seem like it should be like that. Because we have out conceptualized everybody, it feels like. What went wrong? And [laughs] it's just that nothing changed. It's not like anything went wrong. Just nothing changed. It's the same. We were endowed with the nature of awakened mind. And we still are. We just don't know how to drill for that.

[00:32:44] So we're still trying. And what we're talking about today, resting awareness on... rather than on an object like this leaf, you know, is a perfectly appropriate thing to rest our awareness on, because it's the kind of leaf that fell from bodhi tree where the Buddha was enlightened. So we can make a lot out of that and inspire ourselves. Well, I got one of these. What could go wrong? [laughter] You know, it's like... I mean, it's funny and it's not funny, right? I mean, I like this. I got to say, this has been sitting on this thing every time I come for some time and I actually like to see it. It reminds me of things, but... it's not enough. Or we could approach it from the other side, it's too much. There's something that's not there.

[00:33:52] So I think what we, what we're trying to do from the very beginning, maybe from the day that we first encountered this tradition of Buddhism and all the practices, sometimes I think it's helpful to go back there. Like, what were you thinking? What is it that you wanted? Why did you go there? What did you think would happen? And I think most people might say... well, I know many people who did say... I was in trouble. Or, I was getting a divorce. Or maybe I was thinking about taking my life or something like that. And so I came here thinking, this is the last chance. So I know at least one person who had that to say and did *not* take their life.

[00:34:47] I also know one person who took their life. Despite. The truth is, is that knowing that person, I know that they actually never pursued it. They always had it on their agenda, but never *did* any of it. So they always *wanted* to. And many friends tried to encourage, but it just wasn't enough. So we can go back and say, like Buddhist's do, we say, well, maybe that's karma. That's a kind of cheap shot in one way. Not very helpful. But I think, again, the truth of interdependence is helpful. We have all done a myriad of things, not just had myriad of experiences, we've done a myriad of things. And every one of those, each one thing that we did, followed something that came before and something that came after it. And we *are*, kind of, the living result of that endless chain. Which as Kalu Rinpoche said, has no beginning and no end. It never occurred before and it will never occur again.

[00:35:59] I found that to be one of the most interesting challenges. Everything is fresh. Is also a very helpful view to hold. You know, how we sometimes say, I've got this music in my mind, it keeps going over and over and over. It's helpful to just stop for a moment and acknowledge, no, actually, that's a wrong view. You think you're hearing the same thing over? It's not. It's different every time. It never occurs twice. Ever. And in the same way, when you feel like... yesterday was difficult and today's difficult also. We trick ourselves.

[00:36:48] It's actually more helpful to just hold the view that any experience I have has never happened before and *will* never happen again. It does something to our stream of awareness to

hold that view. Which also, I think, most of us could say it's easy to hold that view and believe it. I put this shirt on today. I put the shirt on yesterday, let's say. No, actually this is a different shirt, even though everyone will say no, that's the same shirt. You bought it yesterday, you're wearing, it's the same shirt. We all can easily conceptualize that there is no such thing as the same shirt. This is faded a little bit. You know, we can't recognize it. It's not gross. But in some way it's not the same shirt.

[00:37:46] And my anger with somebody yesterday is not the same anger that I have today. Or my same kindness or joy. It's not the same. It's brand new. It's very helpful to hold that view. And in the context of that, instead of labeling ourselves something, I'm an angry person or I'm a kind person or something, we have the sense of... no, this is like a continuous moving thing. It never stops. And again, we can kind of look back at the teaching on... we're endowed with the nature of mind itself. And Kalu Rinpoche's statement... it pumps out experiences day and night. Forever. And there isn't a single one that is the same as any other one. And because we're Buddhists, we have to say dead or alive. That it didn't start when we were born or conceived. Nor does it end when we die. And one may believe that or not. I don't think it's important whether we believe it or not, but I think it's a great view to hold. That *there is no such thing as some experience which never changes*. Even you play the same music, it'll be a little different because the thing that makes the music... just easy. There's no such thing as something that never changes.

[00:39:28] And what better example than our state of mind? We cannot find a moment which is the same as a previous moment. If you're still enough to look at it, you can see I have sat here for two hours and count 500 experiences. And none of them look the same. And many of them are radically different. So it's pretty easy to come to that view. That's just what it is. If you feel like taking your life today... stick around a while. [laughs] Because it'll change into something totally different. It's an important thing to hold, from our practice perspective, because there's a natural tendency that we want to have, which is to stabilize.

[00:40:26] It's more important to us than enlightenment. We get so wound up in it. If I'm happy today, I want it to be permanent. If somebody hurt me yesterday, I never want to see them. ... We just do that all the time. And it leads to endless disappointment. I had five meals at that restaurant. It was really good. And the last one was terrible. I'm never going back there. So we just construct these things continuously. So the meditation's wonderful. You sit down, you put your awareness, if you can... put your awareness in shamatha on every experience that arises. And what you will find, after some period of time, like a day or a year, [laughs] that you will have a natural inborn... sense of equanimity... about your own experiences. Which is far more important than even the very important equanimity of relationships with people. That's a critical one. But even more important is the equanimity of your experiences.

Student 4 [00:41:47] Thank you.

LMC [00:41:48] Good luck. ... [laughter] You have to be careful who you say that to.

Student 5 [00:42:06] Every day I do my loop around our city, as I go to work and then come back home. And I see the same movie over and over again. And in that movie is the plight of our homelessness. The homelessness that's happening. And it's the same movie that is playing every day. It's not a pleasant movie. It brings me sadness. It reveals my helplessness. And as you are talking about this repeating yet changing a little bit, I feel that in order to deal with it, some of us may have to become desensitized. Right. It's the norm. You see it all the time.

Because if you are aware of each of the human lives that is suffering, it hurts so much. So sometimes it's in the periphery of your view. So you act like you don't see it. Because it's always there. And yesterday I was driving to the airport, which is the gateway to our city, and there were tents lined up on 82nd. And it just awakened me how serious the problem is. But because I see it every day, I worry that I am becoming numb to it.

LMC [00:43:59] It doesn't sound like it.

Student 5 [00:44:02] And not just me. My children take the path, you know, around the city to go to their school and their activities. So how, as Buddhists, we don't lose our compassion. Because we can't do anything about it.

LMC [00:44:22] Well, it's a good question.

Student 5 [00:44:27] Something practical? [laughs] I pray. I chant. I do what I can. I send out the good karma.

LMC [00:44:51] So let me ask you something. Do you feel that that's effective?

Student 5 [00:44:57] It calms me. but not, not, not... it will reoccur.

LMC [00:45:03] Yeah. So is that helpful to anyone other than yourself?

Student 5 [00:45:14] It's helpful to me. And then when I go and I volunteer to feed, and you know, the homeless or cook for them and things like that, then I'm helping. But it's just constant. Constant. And I worry, or I fear, that I'm going to become numb and it won't affect me anymore.

LMC [00:45:41] It doesn't sound like you need to worry about that. I mean, it sounds like you are concerned. So I'm asking the question whether or not you feel like it's helpful. And you're saying that it's helpful for you. But I think there's another question, which is... who else is affected by what you're doing? And is it helpful for them? Because in many ways, that's why we want to do something about it, is because we want others to be helped also. It's painful to see the suffering. I'm also reminded that not everybody suffers in that. Just as a point of reference.

Student 5 [00:46:39] Maybe they became numb already. Maybe they don't see it anymore. Just like you didn't hear that one...

LMC [00:46:47] Of course. Yeah. I think that's a universal human condition, that numbness. So what I, what I mean to say is, I have known, and do know, people who... who live in tents by the side of the road and all. And I have known people who actually choose that. So I just want to make, I just want to make the point that it's not 100 percent universal, the relationship to those things. But when *you* feel like there's pain there... and discomfort, which is certainly the great majority of people who are in those situations, then something happens to you when you acknowledge that pain... in yourself. Isn't it?

Student 5 [00:47:41] Yes.

LMC [00:47:41] And again, due to the truth of interdependence, because you are changed, you, therefore, bring something different to others. ... First, I mean, that's simple, isn't it? It's simple. ... So when you bring that, so now you're bringing that right here. So we're in this room together.

We're having this conversation. So what's happening is, is that you're sharing *your* concern... about it . And your concern is being considered. If we look at our experiences arising, then we have a sharing of your experience that you're sharing. ... Clear, so far?

Student 5 [00:48:42] It doesn't do anything. The suffering will still be there, whether chosen or not chosen... by the folks.

LMC [00:48:52] No. Wait. Wait, wait, wait. What you are saying is that the suffering is permanent. And if *that's* true, we may as well give up. Because there's nothing can be done. But it's not permanent. But in your language, you're inferring that it's permanent. Nothing can change. Nothing can be done. It is often the case that things change very slow. But... it is *not* the case that there is anything that doesn't change. All things change. And they change by virtue of... what we think, what we feel, what we say and talk about and work with with other people. All of those things is an interdependence there. That change is inevitable.

[00:49:50] The person who lives in a tent by the side of the road yesterday is not the same person who was in it yesterday. Though you might go and see that person, they are not the same person. Changes have taken place. It's not like a light switch that yesterday they were one person and today they're the same. And so we flip a switch and now they're different. It is a continuous... process. So when you... make your wishes, you chant and make wishes in that way, for people... that affects you. It affects other people because you're affected. That effect continues. I would say, do your *very* best... to hold a view that when you make the wish for the benefit of others, whether it's a specific person or a group of people, that you make the wish and hold the view that just making the wish even has an effect. And therefore, it is not a waste of your time. Keep doing that.

[00:51:10] And pretty soon someone will say, hey, what are you doing? What are you saying? And some of those people will then say, Oh, that's a good idea. I think I'll do that too. So don't make yourself think that it's small to hold the view and the wish that others would be happy and have a life with sufficient comfort and food and... and all. Don't make that small. That's a big wish. And if you keep doing that... it will affect more people than you think. And it's even good to not particularly acknowledge that. You don't need to acknowledge it. You just need to do it. It will take care of itself. You don't need to see the result either.

LMC [00:54:48] Okay, we'll dedicate the merit.

sangha [00:54:53] *dedicating the merit*

LMC [00:55:29] Thank you all.