

MY STORY

A View of Practice

KIM ROBERTS

HIGH ON A HILL OVERLOOKING KATHMANDU SITS A Buddhist monastery called Pullahari. The seat of Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche, Pullahari is home to 300 Tibetan monks and a transitional community of Westerners who come each year to study the Buddha's teachings. This year, we are studying a portion of the *Uttaratantra Shastra*, describing the importance of maintaining the correct view of practice. From this perspective of the teachings of the third turning of the wheel of *Dharma*, we could look at the practice of yoga. The Buddha was, after all, a yogi who developed his understanding of practice to the highest level.

In order to have an experiential understanding of the nature of mind, which we could say is the ultimate goal, we must ensure our view is in accord with our practice. What distinguishes a spiritual practice is the intention. We practice first to learn the boundaries of ego so we can disassemble it, or rather see it has never existed. In our normal view of the world, we create an image of ourselves and then struggle to maintain this illusion even though it is merely a construct of our conceptual mind. The first step on the path starts with seeing the empty nature of ego.

Correct view is absolutely necessary for this to happen. While the ultimate understanding of this correct view is to realize the true nature of mind, we can look at the approach as a successive development of perspective. Depending on our level of understanding and capacity, we can take three different perspectives: the Buddha's three turnings of the wheel of *Dharma*.

SELF LIBERATION

From the perspective of the first turning, sometimes called the *Hinayana*, the practice of yoga is a tool we can use to exhaust negative *karma* and cut our bad habits. From this perspective, we take things to be apparently real, and we work with the phenomenal world in order to purify our karmic afflictions to attain peace.

The nature of *samsara* – cyclic existence through which confused beings wander until realization is attained - is suffering. Until we realize the ultimate nature of reality, we practice virtuous acts in order to cut our craving for anything that generates negative karma and thus keeps us enmeshed in this sea of suffering. We bring our attention back to our breath and our bodies back to our yoga mats. Returning again and again to awareness of the present moment in order to develop positive habits, we necessarily reduce our negative habits. At this level it is as simple as this: we are merely observing our habitual patterns.

While we are practicing yoga, we are not engaging in harmful activities elsewhere. The danger in this perspective is falling into an eternalist viewpoint where we get attached to the positive acts



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designed to lead us out of attachment. In other words we could get attached to our practice or how it looks. This could have the unfortunate effect of strengthening ego. If we remain in this perspective, we may miss out on the potential for further deepening our understanding about the true and limitless nature of mind.

REALIZING EMPTINESS IS WISDOM

In the second turning of the wheel of *Dharma*, also called the *Mahayana* or Great Vehicle, we learn wisdom is seeing the empty nature of all phenomena. Everything composite and created is bound to fall apart again, therefore, impermanent. So, we can't rely on phenomena to be consistent; they are untrustworthy reference points. Watch your practice from one day to the next. Many factors combine to create this thing we call practice: the food we have eaten, our current mental and physical state, the weather and environment, our ideas and understanding of practice, all of which change or evolve.

So, emptiness does not mean nothingness. It means that nothing can exist in and of itself, in a bubble. Every form depends upon countless causes and conditions to come into existence. Thus all phenomena are illusory, without substantial or lasting existence,

just like an asana or an obstacle preventing us from attaining an asana. When the practitioner sees this, liberation is attained. In practical terms, this means we no longer take mental obscurations, which we experience as confusion or obstacles, as real. Rather, we see these obscurations as mere fluctuations of the mind (*chitta vritti*), so they are no longer a source of attachment or confusion. We see through them just as we see through images in a dream or a movie.

What does this mean to a yoga practitioner? That we should not be attached to any results we may attain through practice. We may enjoy our healthy bodies, but as much as we might try to work against time, inevitably, we are dust in the making. We cannot even hope for realization or enlightenment, since these too, are mere concepts. The more we grasp, the more our goal eludes us because there is nothing to attain. Detachment is the only appropriate response.

However, there is a danger of falling into a nihilistic viewpoint. From the ultimate perspective, it is not enough to see that everything is empty of true nature. This is not an easy excuse to give in to our whims or practice only when and how we feel inclined. We must not conceptualize emptiness. For full and perfect enlightenment we must give up even our clinging to an idea of emptiness. Nihilistic conceptions are considered a more serious mistake than the realist conceptions that take phenomena to exist as they appear. As the great Buddhist saint Saraha warned: To consider the world as real is a brutish attitude
To consider it as empty is even more savage

CLARITY IS COMPASSION

If our view is incorrect or incomplete, then so will our path be. If we are practicing simply to attain a state of bliss for ourselves, or if we use a concept of emptiness to justify the whims of ego, then we are missing a fundamental understanding of the laws of nature, namely that we don't exist as we appear. We are simply a conglomerate of phenomena, or if you prefer, space and light. A lightshow. So what use to devote all this time to practice for something that will be over in the blink of an eye?

We practice out of compassion. We see how we and those around us suffer from a belief in self, spending our lives striving to reinforce this self through social standing, fortune, position, and endless ways of creating a place in the world. Compassion begins with the simple desire to benefit others, through practice. Compassion in this sense is non-partial toward all beings. Our practice should not only benefit those in our immediate circle; we should love and care for all sentient beings as we would love our only son. Then here is the magic: once we begin to help others, this actually benefits us.

So the practice is twofold: to reduce self-importance and to benefit others. This is a natural response to understanding emptiness. Once we see self does not exist, we realize how silly it is to waste time strengthening a non-entity. We then naturally want to extend out to others. We see the futility in trying to maintain this image of

self, and the joy in helping others.

The ultimate essence of reality is the total freedom from all conceptual fabrications. So from the ultimate point of view, all phenomena are simply the union of emptiness and luminous



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clarity. Yoga practice is an amazing tool to experience this. Although our *asanas* are empty of lasting nature, they are luminous and bright. This union is our natural state, what remains when we have cleared away all the obscurations and concepts. What we uncover is the ultimate true nature, which is open, relaxed, spaciousness and peace. And peace is nirvana.



Kim is currently on retreat. Check www.papayayoga.com for updates