

**FROM “NO SELF” TO LIBERATION—
THE PARADOXICAL WISDOM OF EMPTINESS**

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Why Buddhism is Fascinating

I am honored and happy to talk at Stanford's "Buddhism in the Modern World" lecture series, and I hope that you will be back for future talks on Buddhism. Since this is the first talk in the series, I think it's appropriate to first say a few words about “Buddhism in the modern world.”

I was trained in computer science. After graduating from college, I worked for the aerospace industry. It was a good job, the salary was good, the work was easy, I was single, what more could one want in life? Well, something was missing. It was not that I lacked friends or I didn't have fun; there was just a void. I couldn't imagine myself doing this work for the rest of my life. I thought that there must be some deeper meaning in life, so I started searching. And that's how I encountered religion, particularly Buddhism. From the very beginning, Buddhism fascinated me. I knew then that I needed to do something else in life, but wasn't sure of what to do. When in doubt, go back to school. So I went to grad school to get a degree in Computer Science (on artificial neural networks). But in the meantime I was delving deeper and deeper into the study of Buddhism and I was fascinated by it in many ways.

The Truth of Buddhism is Verifiable

First of all, I was really surprised to find that Buddhism is quite scientific in its approach to spirituality. Why? We know that the scientific methodology is that any theory you come up with should be verifiable and repeatable in experiments. Well, that is also true with the Buddha's teachings. Buddha wanted speak of the truth only. As a Buddhist monk, I certainly believe that what Buddha teaches is the truth, but anybody can say theirs is the truth. What is truth? Truth should be something that can be verified by everyone, and that is indeed true for Buddha's

teachings. For example, the Four Noble Truths, the Six Perfections, etc., can be verified. (These are not our topic tonight.) Buddha actually rejected all speculations that could not be verified, speculations about spirituality, of which there were plenty in India 2500 years ago. Indeed, philosophy and religion in India were already very advanced by then. Buddha looked at them, kept what made sense, and then rejected what didn't make sense. He rejected what could not be proved, experienced, or practiced. And I'm confident that if you would take the time to study *and* to practice—not just to study to gain knowledge, but to *practice*—you will also find that what Buddha says is true. Buddha was pragmatic. His teaching is useful in our lives. So that is the first thing.

Buddhism is Rational

Buddha tried to understand truth in a very rational way. So the second thing that fascinated me was how sensible and how rational Buddhism is. But the funny thing is, in analyzing phenomena and analyzing the mind, Buddha was able to come to some very surprising and counter-intuitive conclusions. For example, he says that there is "no self." Now, who am I? What are you? You are sitting here. There's "no self." That's about as counter-intuitive as you can get, but it actually makes sense, and I hope by the end of this talk you can get a little sense of why it makes sense.

Buddha also said that "form is emptiness, emptiness is form." "Form", or *rupa in Sanskrit*, is a Buddhist term that means material things, physical things—and it is actually empty. That's another very counter-intuitive concept. But Buddha says that it is not a concept, it is reality. The advancement of science, especially in chemistry and physics, actually can help us understand this better. In Buddhism, it is also understood that time and space are integral; they are not separable. Einstein made the idea of time-space continuum acceptable to all scientists. So there are many things in Buddhism that were not comprehensible at that time, at least for the less advanced practitioners. But now we can understand them better with science (again, this is another topic.) There's a lot of correlation between Buddha's teachings and the theory of relativity and quantum physics. It's very surprising. When Einstein said that "time is relative," that shocked everyone. What do you mean by "time is relative"? But it is. Buddha said that also. In quantum mechanics they discovered that in the sub-microscopic world there is no subject and object. The subject and object—the person doing the experiment, the observer, and the observed—cannot be separated.

That's surprising because science had always counted on being able to objectively observe the environment in order to make certain conclusions. But since each time you do an experiment, you affect the thing you are experimenting on; how can you ever get totally objective reality? The logical conclusion is, "no, you can't." And that is right in line with Buddha's teachings on the emptiness of what we see, what we experience, what we observe. Now, emptiness is not a denial; it doesn't mean nihilism, or that what you see and hear do not exist. No, it means that things are not what they seem, or even what you experience. There is a whole other aspect to it—an impermanent, non-intrinsic, non-individual aspect to it. We'll explain that more later.

Buddhism is Relevant to Our Lives

The third thing that fascinated me about Buddhism was its relevance to our lives. Buddha started by trying to understand why people suffer. Why is there suffering? Why do people hurt each other? That's a problem we've always had from millenniums ago. It's still a problem. Prince Siddhartha left the palace and tried to find a solution. So he was looking for a way to happiness, lasting happiness. He was enlightened; that means he found the answer. And the answer is right there in his teachings. Yet we don't learn from his lessons. That's why I think it is very important that we have this lecture series on Buddhism in the Modern World. We are seeing that Buddhism is becoming more and more studied and accepted in the western world, and that is a really good thing. But Buddhism is also to be practiced. It's not just a philosophy. If you study it as knowledge, you will only understand it to a certain point beyond which you cannot even comprehend it, because it is not in your experience. What Buddha taught was his own true experience. It's a universal experience. So that's why in the Four Noble Truths, the last one is the Path—the path to nirvana, the path to *end* suffering and to lasting bliss. The path is what you do, how you practice. So it's more than just a teaching; it's more than just knowledge; it's something that you live. When you live it, it will change your perspective. It will change your life. It will enlighten your path. Even though Buddha lived some 2500 years ago, the teaching is just as relevant now if not more so than before.

So those are some of the reasons why I think Buddhism is very important and why it is fascinating.

The Meaning of Liberation

First of all, just like in science and philosophy, we need to define our terms. What do we mean by liberation? Liberation can mean many things to different people; but what does Buddha mean by liberation? Well, liberation can have meanings on many different levels. Being free from your pain, your miseries; being free from anxiety, stress, fear, and anger—that is liberation.

Understanding "no self"—that is liberation. To put it differently, being able to understand why you're here, who you are, what you're doing. Being able to get rid of the confusion about our purpose, to awaken from the illusion that we're living in—that is also liberation.

What is birth? What is life? What is death? We don't know. We all face death and we don't know death, that's why we are fearful. Does anything happen after death? If you don't understand death and what happens after death, then what is the point of all your accomplishments? So, understanding life and death, even being able to transcend life and death—that is liberation.

Attaining nirvana, being able to achieve the ultimate bliss—that is liberation. So the Dharma (the Buddhist teachings) can help us understand that. And the key thing in all of this is the concept of "self." Basically, the issue is being able to understand your own mind.

There are many different kinds of knowledge in the world. I was a science person. Scientists spend a lot of time, all of their time, studying the world that we live in. And we have come to some probable truths or we're getting really close to some underlying law of nature. Well, just like a scientist, Buddha also wanted to understand everything, but then he went in a totally different direction—the inward direction. He realized that the world that we perceive and the knowledge, the language, the concepts, and everything that we do to each other, all come from the mind, all come from our thoughts. So, if you don't understand your own mind and your own thoughts, you never get the whole picture. It's like studying a tree. You could study the leaves—there are tens of thousands of leaves—you need to study the branches, trunk, and the roots. But if you study the seed and you completely understand the seed, then you can understand the whole tree. Similarly, the mind is the seed of all knowledge, all truth, all things. Therefore Buddha probed inward. Trying to study your own mind with your own mind. That's really hard. That's why meditation methods are important; they are ways to teach your mind to be so focused, so concentrated, so clear, so refined that you can actually analyze and study yourself. So when

Buddha studied himself, he said, "There is no self." When you understand this, when you're awakened to this, then you can get enlightened. So, let us talk about "no self."

The Meaning of "No Self"

Most of us have mistaken conceptions of who we really are. To show our delusions of the "self," Buddha talks about "no self." To understand "no self" or "selflessness" is to be liberated. Another way to say it is to "discover one's true nature."

Who are you? Does anyone of you know yourself completely? It is a fact that there's so much about ourselves that we don't know. If you know yourself, if you know your mind, why do you do the things you know you shouldn't do? Why do you overindulge in chocolate or coffee? Why do you get angry when you know you shouldn't? Obviously there is something at work behind your conscious mind, which you're not perfectly clear about. We have many ideas of who we are but we really know very little. Let us try to understand what is *not* the self.

1. What People Think of You

I will talk about the meaning of "no self" in four ways. First of all, how do people look at you and what do they think of you? How people view you comes to be a large part of your perception of yourself. Ever since you were little, your parents had certain ideas about you, and called you certain names. They said you were this and that and this way and that way. As you grow up, your friends, teachers, and associates all think of you in various differing ways. So how people view you is a big part of your self image. Some people are considered beautiful, some are considered ugly. Some are considered nice, some are considered rude. And we get angry and miserable when people call us ugly, or dumb. Should we?

I grew up in Taiwan. I was a very skinny kid, with dark skin; so, many kids teased me in school. "Did your mom feed you soy sauce instead of milk?" I wasn't happy about that. And then one day in class we learned that there are people of different colors—white people, black people, yellow, red, and brown people—and then they started calling me "Skinny Brownie." Ah, childhood trauma? And then when I was a teenager I moved to the United States and found out that things were different here. Guys would come up to me and say, "Hey dude, where did you

get that cool tan?" What tan?! I was born with it! And girls would come up to me and say, "What's the secret of your diet? How did you ever get so slim?" What diet? I just couldn't put on any weight. And they actually envied me. A very different culture! So, if you're worried about not having a tan, being very pale, go to Taiwan, they'll worship you.

So, the idea of what is pretty, what is ugly, what is cool, what is nerdy ... really has no standards. One way to understand "no self" is that other people's perceptions of you do not decide who you are. It's relative. You may know this already, yet it affects you everyday. What some people call you, what other people think of you, can make you upset or happy, ecstatic or very depressed. But it doesn't have to be that way, because the self is empty. The self that other people see in you is empty. That's what Buddha means when he says "no self"; he means that your understanding of yourself, your self image, this ego-personality, is a false self; it is not real; it is a composite of many different things, and things change. If you go to Taiwan, they think of you in one way; you go to America, they think of you another way; you go to Europe, they think of you in yet another way. Well, which one is the real you? Are you ugly, are you dumb, are you beautiful, are you smart? In high school, I won an award for being the best in math, so I got into Caltech in Pasadena, and the first math test I took, I flunked it. There you go. The number one math person in high school, and now flunking a math test. So what am I? Am I stupid or am I smart? Probably many Stanford students have had a similar experience. You were the best student at your high school; you came here, and everyone else was just as smart, if not smarter. It's a shock. Does your rating in class add anything to you or take away anything from you? It is not an integral part of you, is it? Because your performance, your appearance, and judgments about you, will change. They are impermanent (e.g. I got better in math). Yet what people think of you is a very large part of who you think you are. Now that's a "self," a self that is dependent on other people's opinions. Therefore this self is an illusion, but it can seem so real. And it can hurt. Well, if others' opinions are useful to you, then use them; if they are not, throw them away. There is no fixed self and you're free to change that. That's the first way we can understand "no self."

2. What You Possess

The second way to understand "no self" is to look at what you possess. Practically, for many people, what you possess seems to define who you are. Whether you are rich, whether you have

a big house, a Mercedes or BMW; what clothes you wear, what you have achieved; what's your status, fame, wealth, power; is your girlfriend pretty? All of what you possess come to be part of you; they come to be part of what people think of you and what you think of yourself. Now, how real is that?

Take wealth. It is an illusion. You don't really possess it. Guess what? Five groups possess your money. Who are they? First, it's your government, the IRS; in ancient times, the king or the emperor—they could take anything they wanted from the people. So, your government has a hold on your money. Second, natural disasters: earthquakes, fire, floods; when they come, there's nothing you can do about it. We had a big earthquake four years ago in Taiwan, the biggest one in 50 years, and many were devastated. I was in the town of Puli, the epicenter; that's also where our monastery was. Entire villages were destroyed. So do you really possess the house? The money? You don't. It's an illusion that you actually possess it. And the third group is thieves, robbers. When they take things away, the chances of recovery are slim. The fourth is doctors. People get sick. No matter how much money you have, you're willing to give it to the doctor, just so that you can stay alive, wouldn't you? The fifth group is your children. Be careful, if you cheat someone of a million dollars and run away, when that person dies, he may be reborn as your child. Then you willingly give everything to him, right? At least Chinese parents would do that.

In America we have a sixth group that has hold of your money, the lawyers. Now, seriously, who really possesses your money? You don't possess it. You possess the temporary right to use it. So make good use of it. Don't bring it to your grave, for then it becomes useless. Money is only money when you spend it in the right way. Are rich people happy? Are the richest people the happiest people? No. Is the poorest person the unhappiest person? No. There was a poem written by a Chan Master. (In China we call it Chan, in Japan it is called Zen.) This Chan Master lived on top of a cliff where he built a little hut. It was not a very good hut and it leaked. One night there was a storm. The next morning he wrote the following poem to commemorate that event:

*On top of this thousand-foot cliff sits a hut
Which this old monk shares with the clouds.*

Literally he said, 'This old monk lives in half of it, the clouds live in half of it' (the hut). "This old monk" is himself. What a way to look at your house. You share it with the clouds, with nature. What's inside is outside....

Last night a storm chased away the clouds.

Ah, even clouds are not as free as this old monk.

Isn't that wonderful?

Now think about it, if you were on top of that cliff and there was a storm and your house leaked, how would you feel? You would be cold and wet and cursing. Perhaps thinking about suing somebody. You wouldn't write a poem like that. Why are the reactions so different? It's because the Chan Master has a different perspective, on wealth, on possessions, on what is important. Maybe inner peace is more important. Maybe contentment is the biggest wealth.

Many people want fame, but are the most famous people happy? Usually they are not. Usually they are the unhappiest. Fame can destroy you. That is not to say that fame is not good or wealth is not good. Buddha was very famous in his lifetime, but he had no problem with that. It's not having fame or wealth, it's not the lack of fame or lack of wealth either; it's how you deal with life's different situations. Do you have the wisdom to live with them when you have them, and let go when they are gone? Non-attachment. When your wealth or fame is gone, can you be just as happy?

Buddha was a prince. He had everything, and he gave up all of it. Then he became the Enlightened One; he had ten thousand disciples and kings and queens prostrating to him. He had everything again. He could live with it, and he could live without it. What's the difference? The difference lies within. It's your mind; it's your perspective. If your self identity, your meaning, and your self-worth depended on what you possess, you'll never be happy. So that's another way of understanding that there is no self. There is no person who owns anything. What do you have? You don't have anything. You came into this world with nothing, and you leave this world with nothing. Everything is just in passing. Don't fool yourself into thinking that you actually have

something. So then there is no need to be miserable when you lose something. You have nothing. But you do have the good karma, the blessing, to use these things for a while. Take your car, for example—don't curse when it breaks down, because when you bought it, you knew it would break down someday. When you buy the car, you also buy the death of the car, isn't that right? So, when you understand this, you are freer. You are one step closer to liberation.

3. Being in Control

Third, we can look at "no self" from the perspective of control. Buddhism examines the concept of "self" and characterizes it to mean the following: being in control, being able to possess something, and having an intrinsic, unchanging, independent existence (which we will discuss next). We all believe that this body is ours. It's me; it's mine. But do you have complete control of it? No. If not, how can you call it your body? You grow old, you get sick, you die; there's not much you can do about that. Everybody loses the physical body—what we call death. And it could be tomorrow. I'm not trying to depress you or curse you; it's a fact, isn't it? Buddhists are not pessimists, just realists.

Buddha once asked his disciples, "How long do you think you will live?" The first disciple thought, "I'm young, I'm healthy, I probably will live for 50 years, but I'll be conservative, I'll just say five years." To this Buddha replied, "You don't know life." The second disciple said, "Five years we cannot be sure of, but surely I can make it through today." Buddha said, "You don't know life." The third disciple said, "Surely I'll live to finish this meal." Buddha said, "you don't know life." And the fourth disciple said, "I'm taking this breath, but I don't know if I can take the next breath." Buddha said, "You know life."

If you don't know about your own life how can you say you know yourself? Actually, it's not that depressing, trust me, to know that you don't have much control of your body beyond this current breath. Why? If you know that life can end at any time, you won't waste time on computer games, gossiping, or getting drunk. You can now live fully, moment to moment.

You are not in control—at least not currently, as a mortal being. You are not in control of your aging and death. Not being in control is not the real problem; to not accept this fact is what leads

to suffering. The election is over, one half of the people are happy, and the other half are really upset. If you are upset, what can you do? Nothing, if you want to stay upset. You have to accept the results. Are we hopeless? No. To change things we need to understand causality—cause and consequence. This is one of the fundamental principles in Buddhism. There is a causal relationship among all things that happen. In fact, that's what science is based on—causality. If you do scientific experiments, each with the same setup and the same conditions, you'll get the same results. That's repeatability and verifiability. However, it works not only in physical phenomena, but also in mental, spiritual phenomena. What are the causal relationships involving happiness and suffering? Suffering and happiness are consequences. To be happy, we need to understand the cause of happiness. To avoid suffering, we need to understand the cause of suffering. If you want to live a long life, you need to understand what it takes to have a long life. For example, Buddha teaches that to avoid poor health or a shortened lifespan or accidental death, we should avoid killing. When you take life away from others, causality dictates that your life will be taken away. If you want to be rich, what do you do? Besides working hard and not being wasteful, you need to give, and create good karma with people. When you give, the blessing will come back to you. You can take your time to verify these yourself. The point is, we are responsible for our fate, and we can do much to change it, but we have to work from the cause, and not just complain about the results.

A few weeks ago in Colorado, within two weeks, two college students, a freshman and a sophomore, went to fraternity parties and got so drunk that they died from overdrinking. The freshman girl actually drank the equivalent of some 40 beers. And so, understandably, the Colorado school board is very concerned. Two student deaths in two weeks from drinking. What do you do about it? They are talking about forbidding alcohol in fraternity parties. We have many college students here, you should know, is that going to work? No. When I was in college, in every fridge in every dorm, there was plenty of beer. Same thing here, right? They are 18, 19 or 20 years old, freshmen, sophomores, juniors, they're underage; but it's a fact that you can get access to alcohol easily on just about every college campus. So these rules won't really work. We need to look at the cause. What is the cause? When I went to Caltech, I was surprised to find students who used drugs. They're top students in the nation; why do they do that? A few months later, I understood why. *Pressure*. You at Stanford should understand that well. There's so much

pressure. School is hard, and week after week after week, you are given so much homework, and each homework assignment is so hard. I used spend all of Saturday and Sunday just to finish three or four math problems. So it's the pressure, but students don't know how to relieve the pressure. In our freshmen class at Caltech there was one very smart girl, who was hooked on computer games. How smart was she? The homework that would take me a whole week to finish, she could finish all in two evenings. All the other times, she was in the computing center. In those days, there were no fancy graphic games like what we have now, just ASCII characters on CRT screens, Rogue. Anyone remember that game, Rogue? It's way before your generation. So she played that computer game day and night. After two quarters she flunked out. A real shame. But it is cause and effect. How do you relieve the pressure? It's a serious problem in colleges, especially good colleges. I seriously think all the universities should have meditation classes. Learn how to be calm, learn that you can deal with anxiety and pressure if you discover the joy of inner peace. Alcohol or drugs—they are ways to drown you, to numb you. They don't solve the problem. If you learn how to be calm and clear-minded, to attain that inner peace, then you can deal with all kinds of pressure. These are our brightest students. We need to do something about these problems.

So, what can you control, what can you not control? You do have control to a certain degree. You can always affect your fate. Your fate depends on your own karma, your own actions, your own deeds. If you put in the right cause, you will be closer to the right results. You need to understand what cause leads to what consequence. Meditation is important to help you deal with stress, pressure, and fear by gaining control of your thought patterns. We get into this vicious thought cycle. The homework's hard! Life is hard! Stress! The more you stress the harder life gets. It's like when you try to speak in public and get nervous; the more nervous you get, the less well you speak, and the more nervous you get. It's a vicious cycle. By the time you've given a hundred speeches, then you can deal with it like a breeze. What's the difference? The difference is that you don't get trapped in that vicious thought cycle anymore. You can snap out of it. You can *always* do that. You can always snap out of that stress cycle. The thought pattern is a habit. How to reduce stress, how to overcome stress completely, that's another topic. We do not have complete control of our body or mind, so this "self" is illusive.

4. Illusion of Individuality

The fourth way, probably the most difficult way to understand "no self" is this illusion of individuality. I, me, myself—Of course I'm an individual, right? But in what sense? In what sense are you an individual? Is your body yours? What kind of question is that?

It's a serious question. Did you eat lunch today? Yes, that veggie sandwich you ate, or whatever you had on the lunch table, is it your body? Is it? (No.) But when you swallowed it, was it your body? Was it? So, is that sandwich your body or not your body? You continuously take the outside world into your body, and what is "inside" continuously goes out. Your body flows in and out. Well, which is your body? Is a tree your body? Are the leaves your body? No, but the leaves give off oxygen, and you breathe it in. The oxygen combines with your blood cells and goes to your brain, and that's why you can do your homework. That tree becomes part of you. It becomes part of your intelligence. But where does the tree come from? From the sunshine, so the sun is part of you; from the earth, so the earth is part of you. I breathe out carbon dioxide. Carbon dioxide is absorbed by the tree. So you are in the tree. Your atoms are probably the same atoms that were on the bodies of the Buddha, or Confucius, or Jesus.

Who is this "you"? Who is not "you"? What is not "you"? What is the boundary of your individuality? Your personality is shaped by how your parents raise you, what you read, what your professors teach you, and how people think of you. Which is your original thought? Is there an original thought? So, your body, your personality, your ideas, your mind—which one is individually yours? That's kind of scary isn't it? No, it's not scary; that is just a fact. Having understood this, you haven't lost anything, you haven't gained anything, right? You still have the same body, it's just that it's not yours, that's all. In fact, the person sitting next to you—you're probably breathing into her, and she's breathing into you. So, you're in her and she's in you; that means you're brothers and sisters, like family. *We are family*, in a very real sense of the word. My body is in your body, your body is in my body; we just temporarily have this flesh. This flesh perishes and regenerates, this goes on continuously; it gets absorbed back into the environment and goes into other animals. Animals are your brothers and sisters. So, when you hurt other beings, you are hurting your own brother or sister.

5. Interdependency with Others

The last point, really the same point, is our interdependent-ness or interconnected-ness with other beings. Look at your life from morning until night. In the morning, you brush your teeth with your toothbrush, made in China. The toothpaste comes from some other state. Your clothes come from Europe. Your car comes from Japan. To be able to brush your teeth, take a shower, get dressed, and eat, you are already dependent upon millions of people. Who grew your food? Some farmers somewhere. And their parents raised them. So you are related to their parents. You depend on their parents to give birth to the children who grow your food. So, you are related to and depend on everybody in the world. We do depend on each other, right? That's what Buddhist compassion is based on. It's based on truth, the fact that we really are related and do depend on each other. That's why we should be compassionate to everyone, be kind to everyone. "Love your enemy" is what Jesus said. Buddha says the same thing.

Love your enemies. Not only should you love your own parents, your family, your friends, but you should love your enemies. Because if you don't love your enemies, how can you help them change? If you hate your enemies, you just reinforce the hatred, you will be fighting hatred with hatred, and you will never be able to change them. The vicious cycle will never end. What happens when your brother makes a mistake? You teach him patiently because he's your brother. That's why you should love your enemies. It's only when you love your enemies that you can hope to change them.

So, who am I? Have I annihilated you? No. When Buddha says "no self," he does not mean that you do not exist. Buddhism is not nihilistic. Emptiness is not nothingness. Emptiness means that everything has no intrinsic identity, that there's no such *a* thing. Your body is not independent. You depend on water, air, food, a lot of things, and those things in turn depend on everything else in the world. Everybody in the universe is related to everybody else. *Interdependence.* Our karma is all mixed together. Karma means action. Our actions are all mixed together. Our personalities influence each other. So that's what we mean by emptiness. There's no absolute individuality, no individual existence. That's liberating. Why? Because when you are empty, when you realize that you are empty, then you can be everything. If you work from the right

cause, then you can be anything you want. That means we all have infinite potential. Buddha says we all have the Buddha nature, the potential to be fully awakened to Truth, to become Buddhas. That's another thing that fascinates me about Buddhism. Compared to other religions, it's fascinating that everybody can become the perfect being. Buddha achieved "no self." When he became enlightened, did he just *poof* and disappear? The body is still there—the body is still interdependent with other things. But all the Buddha's actions, and all his speech and thoughts were beneficial to the world, and he was in perfect peace. So it's okay to let go of this illusion of individuality. After all, your individuality is temporary; your personality is also temporary and ephemeral. You can change your personality if you want. Even if you don't change, in this life you have this personality, in the next life you will have another personality. Whether you believe in rebirth or not, that's what happens. So that's what's empty. It's like empty space. Empty space can accommodate anything, can embrace and encompass everything. When your mind is empty, you can be anything.

Along with this understanding comes the realization that we are all like that. We are all infinite, unlimited. That's what we call *purity*. That's the intrinsic virtue or intrinsic purity that we can achieve. When you are in that state, you cannot do anything to harm anybody, because you become one with all things and all beings. That doesn't mean that somehow our lives merge together. No, you're still you, but "you" are inconceivable and indescribable. That's why Buddha says "no self." Any characteristic that you can use to describe yourself is not intrinsic; it is changeable. But that's okay. By understanding "no self," you haven't lost anything. What is there is still there (albeit ephemerally).

What *is* already there? ... I'm speaking now, can you hear me? Can everyone hear me? (Yes.) You say you can hear me and understand me. You perceive. This "knowing" itself. Do you have it? Yes? Tell me, this knowing, which you all individually possess—is it male or female? You look like a man, you look like a woman, and if you want, you can get a sex change operation. Gender is delusion. But this "knowing" is not. You've always had this knowing. Nobody gave it to you; nobody can take it away. Somebody can take your body away, take your possessions and your sensations away, but nobody can take this knowing away. It existed before Buddha was enlightened, before you were born, and will exist after you die. It cannot go away. This

"knowing" is beyond gender, beyond feeling, beyond form. You use it every moment. You are using this knowing to hear me now. That is a fact. That is experience. Try to feel it. This is not theory or philosophy. It is reality. This *is your Buddha nature*. If you fully manifest it, you are the Buddha. And yet, you cannot describe it. I call it "knowing"; you can call it awareness, you can call it consciousness, soul or spirit, but actually this knowing is consciousness before it acts. This knowing, sentience, awareness, is neither big nor small, neither Chinese nor American, neither Japanese nor Indian, neither black nor white, neither rich nor poor, neither ugly nor beautiful. Do you know what I'm saying? This is it. It is this knowing. That's why we are all fundamentally equal. This knowing is indescribable and that's why there's "no self," no self characteristics. But it could be *any* self. That's why we are so different. You learn to behave and react in a certain way. But if you want to change, you can change. So emptiness is liberating; "no self" is liberating. You can change any habit that you have. You can quit your addiction to computer games if you want. You can do anything. You can be a Nobel laureate. You can be a monk like me. You can attain perfect wisdom and compassion and be a Buddha. So when you understand "no self," you can be all these. That is freedom; that is liberation.

Questions and Answers

I've already overused my time, any questions?

Question: So what is the intrinsic, unchangeable thing that you can bring through death?

It is this "knowing." But many people are confused about it. We take our thoughts, our conscious judgments, our reactions, our emotions, our feelings, to be ourselves. I like this, I hate that. People take these thoughts, feelings to be the self, but they are always changing. That's why you feel this void. But amidst everything, happy times and sad times, this "knowing" is always there. So in meditation, you let go of all these thoughts and all these concepts about yourself. When you let go of all these ideas about yourself, your mind becomes clear like still water. The mind is like a pool of water. We constantly stir it with our greed, desires, and concepts. Stop! When the water is still and clear, you see everything as it is. It just is. In spiritual cultivation you don't

build anything, you don't achieve anything, you just recover what is already there. And when you get there, that is also ultimate bliss; it is ultimate peace, ultimate joy.

It's kind of hard to imagine why that inner peace is joyful unless you practice meditation. If you practice meditation, you'll find that the calmer and more mindful you are, the more serene you are, the more joyful you are. It's not joy that comes from sensory stimulation; it's a quiet, serene, satisfying kind of joy. And it can go deeper and deeper. And you can actually achieve that by living your daily life and doing everything you do. That's what the Chan (Zen) practice is about—to be able to achieve that serenity and inner peace in everything you do. Whether you're talking, walking, eating, taking a shower, or getting a speeding ticket—you can be joyful.

"Thank you, Officer. I'm glad to be able to contribute to the police force." Why not? Right?

Question: I have a question about your discussion on individuality. I think one thing that clearly defines the limits of each and everyone's border is pain. Any comments on that?

The border of pain—is it so real? You feel pain in this body because of your attachment to this body. When you achieve a certain deep enough *samadhi*, or concentration of mind, single-mindedness, when you are not as attached to your body, then the pain does not affect you. It's actually possible to be able to achieve that state. So pain is an illusion. I'll give you a more mundane example. Suppose you kick the table and hurt your foot. "Ouch! That hurts!" And then your best friend calls and you get into a conversation on the phone, talking very happily, and you forget all about the pain. Why? Because your mind is not on the pain. Even ordinary people can do that. Pain, actually, is an illusion. Also, if you're meditating, you cross your legs, and at first it's very painful. But, if you go beyond a certain pain barrier, the pain will go away. Even if it doesn't go away, it's there, but it doesn't affect you. It's hard to explain; those of you who have experienced it know that. The pain can be there, yet it doesn't affect you. And your fingernails and hair and bones. You don't feel pain in them, but they are considered part of "you." On the other hand, you can feel pain when your new car is scratched, even though the car is not part of your body, because you are attached to the car.

Q: If you understand the concept of emptiness, couldn't you still define the self as "free agency?"

What do you mean by "free agency"?

Your own choices, and...

Yes, in fact, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Guan Yin, also known as Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, is said to have 32 manifestations. (A bodhisattva is a Buddha to be, someone who is practicing the Buddhist way, who wants to be a Buddha, who is very compassionate, very enlightened.) Beyond a certain stage in your practice, you can actually be in control of your form and appearance. That means that you can take on any physical form that you like. That means a bodhisattva can be anybody. The person sitting next to you could be a bodhisattva—you never know. Hard to believe? Let's look at it this way. Why are we not in control of our lives? Why are we not in control of death? It's actually possible. There've been many cases of Buddhist masters, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indian, who were able to leave this body, and take on rebirth or another incarnation at will. It's not suicide. They are free from death. Why? Because they have this kind of control. Look at what happens when you see chocolate, or a beautiful dress. You lose control. We are not mindful. We give our minds up to our desires. We let our desires grab us. That's why you are not in control of your own fate. You *can* be if you understand causality; the cause of all karma is your mind. Every moment, if you are mindful, you know what you are doing, you do what's the right cause, then your fate is in your own hands. That's part of the practice of transcending death. You can actually transcend birth and death.

Question: Can Buddhahood be obtained in one lifetime?

Well, there will be *one* lifetime when we achieve Buddhahood. It can take many, many lifetimes. Enlightenment can be achieved in one lifetime. Enlightenment is not Buddhahood. Enlightenment means that you have suddenly understood and experienced emptiness, or "no self". Another way to say that is to say you have understood the true nature of the self. But that doesn't mean that the habits that you accumulated, your thought patterns or habitual reactions, and your desires, are completely gone. You have just understood that the desire and the anger are totally

based on delusion, the delusion of the ego-personality. So it will continue to take time to practice to become a Buddha. But if you don't start in this life, you'll never get to that life.

Question: Buddha never actually said "no self," but "not self" instead.

You can say "no self", you can say "not self", you can say "selflessness", maybe selflessness is easier to grasp.

Question: It seems like an important distinction when you talk about the Buddhist practice. In Buddha's time, people were really discussing philosophy. 'Am I self, am I not self?' [Buddha says] I don't care, I just want people to get out of suffering. so, you look at characteristics and it looks like there's no self there. It seems like there is a difference.

The important thing is that everything, every characteristic you can say about yourself can be changed, and that's why there's "no self." And that leads to liberation, being free of the concept of "self." (*Our time is up.*) Well, you know an hour is not enough for emptiness; Buddha spoke 100,000 lines on emptiness—The *prajnaparamita sutra*. Thank you.