

HEALTH IN THE BUDDHIST TRADITION

The Vajra Regent Ösel Tendzin

The following are the first two talks of a series called "Health in the Buddhist Tradition" given at the Naropa Institute, Boulder, Colorado in July of 1981.

Talk One: 27 July 1981

THE VAJRA REGENT ÖSEL TENDZIN: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to welcome you all to this course of study. To begin with, we should clarify the terms being discussed. We are using the term "health" in a very specific way. That is to say, we are not particularly focusing on health as something to be acquired, but rather as an intrinsic capacity of all beings. And "health in the Buddhist tradition" means that this intrinsic capacity has a particular description and involves a particular journey.

The basic ground of our course is what might be called a sense of being. This is the notion of relating to the earth, of making a relationship to the ground we are on, of feeling solidly here. This sense of being here, of being grounded, is contrasted to the notion of floating above the earth. Floating above the earth is due to the continuous conceptual preoccupations that we manufacture, which produce an unhealthy state of being.

Those preoccupations are based on expectation, and that expectation is based on a mistaken relationship between body and mind. In order to be simple, settled, and relating to the

earth, we must realize that body and mind are actually synchronized. They are not separate.

The general notion of health is that we must nurture our existence, cherish it, and preserve it in some way; that we possess health and therefore we must guard it and maintain it. What we are discussing here is the notion of trust and confidence in our basic state of mind, and that involves trust and confidence in the environment as well. We could trust in what is actually happening in a simple, straightforward way.

Usually we rely on the excessive production of thoughts and emotions to fortify our existence and stabilize our healthiness. But actually the reverse happens. The excessive preoccupation with thoughts, emotions, fantasies, and expectations produces an unsettled situation, constantly.

As human beings we have an instinct to survive. The body survives because we breathe. If we have a problem with breathing, we try to get more air. If we are in danger, we look for a possibility of surviving. It is necessary to see that the instinct to survive is not particularly alien to our existence or foreign to our state of being. But somehow we twist that instinct into a concept. We begin either to mentally survive or bodily survive, but the two never seem to meet at the same point.

Generally speaking we have a mental instinct to survive. In other words, our conceptualizations — our concepts and expectations — seem to rule our state of being. When that occurs, we have a state of being which is involved with struggle, tension, and anxiety. That struggle produces further conflict between mind and body, and therefore we have a chaotic situation in our life. We don't know which way to go or what to pursue.

Survival can be seen as part of a total experience of our sense of being, of being grounded, being here. Surviving does not need the elaboration that we constantly manufacture. We are here, at this very moment. At this point we are not saying to ourselves, "Be healthy, survive, exist." We are simply

here. But in our day-to-day, moment-to-moment experience we are constantly flipping back and forth between the real experience of being here — experience without elaboration, simply as it is — and our interpretation and conceptual notion of being here.

Body and mind are not separate. In order to realize this it is important actually to feel one's body in the environment. Now you could say, "If I feel my body in the environment, isn't that just more conceptualization? Isn't that just more thought process and emotion?" Well, yes it is, but there is a slight difference. If you direct your thought process, your emotion, and your sense of the environment simply to the matter at hand — to being where you are, on the spot — then the separation between body and mind becomes rather fuzzy, indistinct in a way. When it becomes indistinct there is a possibility of touching this moment as the ground of healthiness, the ground of our existence. There is a possibility of actually being part of the total situation.

When we separate ourselves from the environment through conceptual mind, then we are actually encouraging unhealthiness because we do not take part in the total power and strength of the environment. The absence of strength in the environment is due to all the excessive analytical and discursive thoughts and the implications and motives involved in those. We create an atmosphere of constant complaint, dissatisfaction, and resentment, which leads to illness of some kind. So health in this case is being totally grounded in the environment, in the body, in the actual notion of existing.

Our time together in this course should be spent on exploring the notion of synchronizing body and mind. In other words, on seeing how the instinct to survive and being part of the environment can be one expression. It boils down to this: clinging to the notion of a healthy situation only drains you of that very health itself. Clinging to life through experience — whether it is exciting, depressing, painful, or pleasurable —

clinging to any experience at all drains you of real healthiness. But allowing yourself to be with the process of living each moment as it is, is discovering true health.

In the Buddhist tradition the technique of uncovering healthiness is simply allowing yourself to be as you are. This is a very simple notion, and at the same time it is very profound and deep. It is deep in the sense that there is no limit to the notion of being as you are, and profound in the sense that when you are as you are, then you are not looking for something else.

Without a sense of discipline it would be very difficult to discuss this topic in detail. The discipline we are talking about is the discipline of meditation as taught in the Buddhist tradition. Meditation simply means acknowledging one's groundedness, one's being on the earth, simply, straightforwardly, without any complication. It involves being with yourself as you are, moment by moment, without the notion of having been somewhere, having to go somewhere, having to get healthy, or having to cure yourself. Meditation practice is the straightforward proclamation of genuine health. Be as you are without any complication at all. Just simply be as you are.

If you have any questions, we could have a discussion.

QUESTION: Does the Buddhist approach to health disregard the use of herbs, for example, or is it just an approach of mind practice?

THE VAJRA REGENT ÖSEL TENDZIN: We are not talking about disregarding anything. That's the whole point. Generally speaking, when we disregard some aspect of our existence, we become unhealthy. Therefore we have to get healthy.

Q: I understand the practice of meditation helps, but don't things like herbs keep your body healthy while you're working on it?

A: Well, the question is what notion we have of our body. We have an idea, a concept about our body. And we put things into it, take things out of it, rub things on it, because we have a notion of what it should be.

There seem to be two aspects — what is called mind-body, and what is called body-body. Mind-body is interpretation of the actual body itself. Body-body is body without interpretation, as it is.

Q: Then at what point does unhealthiness arise? Is it my mind that causes my sore throat?

A: No. It is because of trying to preserve our existence that illness happens.

Q: In the [Naropa] psychology program, we were told that besides the instinct to survive, there is also an instinct to death. Could you comment on that?

A: That is the same as not being willing to be part of the whole environment. When you cut yourself off from the real source of health, then your instinct turns towards death rather than health. It is like cutting a beautiful flower from the rest of the plant, putting it in water, and thinking it will stay that way for a long time. Then it begins to wither and die.

The same thing happens when you separate yourself from the complete healthiness, the totality of the situation. In some sense we are not willing to take part in the complete experience of the moment, what is happening right in the moment.

Q: So there is some resistance to accepting the whole experience?

A: There is definitely resistance towards being who we are, in the moment. We actually resent the fact that we even have a body that causes us all these problems.

Q: There seems to be a problem with overconceptualizing the whole thing. But since that seems to be a large part of what goes on with us all the time, how do we work with that?

A: The point is not to encapsulate health or make it a prisoner of some particular concept. Once you begin to expand, you

begin to see that you are part of the healthiness of the whole atmosphere. Otherwise you are trying to take care of your little thing by taking your three tablets a day. “Then I’m going to be healthy and continue to be healthy, and I won’t ever have to worry about not being healthy, which means I don’t ever have to worry about this existence coming to an end.”

Q: So some gaps just naturally start happening in your concepts?

A: Absolutely. Some gaps have to happen in the whole process, otherwise you are actually a slave to death.

When I lived in Los Angeles in 1968, we bought all our vegetables from one particular farm that grew only organic produce. After a year, we saw an article in the paper that said they had been lying — they were spraying everything. But we thought we had these great organic vegetables, and we felt healthy because we ate them. So the joke is on us. It is absurd to try to maintain health by identifying ourselves with one thought or another.

I would like to work more intimately on this topic with all of you. In order to do that, I recommend that you practice meditation for some period of time so we have the possibility of communicating further. Thank you very much for your kindness and your patience and your basic healthiness.

Talk Two: 30 July 1981

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. In continuing our discussion of health in the Buddhist tradition, we should concentrate on defining basic health. That is not to say that the process of healing, or overcoming illness, does not happen. But if we have more awareness of the basic healthiness of our being, then the healing process can take place spontaneously

rather than having to be contrived or be based on continual struggle.

In our previous discussion we talked about being grounded and having a relationship with the earth, which is obviously involved with the notion of body. By body we mean not only the physical body, but the body of the environment, the world we live in. And that sense of being grounded is extremely important. Being grounded means the absence of fantasy, the absence of wishful thinking. In some sense being grounded has a certain quality of boredom. But if we look carefully, we see that our preoccupation with fantasy — continually involving ourselves with discursive thoughts, expectations, motives, implications, and so on — produces an unsettled quality in our life.

We also discussed the notion of trust in our basic state of mind. This means that we do not create a situation where we separate ourselves from the environment. When we create a citadel, a fortress of who we are, we do not partake in the energies of the situation. When we isolate ourselves and create a fortress around ourselves, we actually become weak.

And the last point we noted was that in order to achieve, or shall we say uncover, basic health, it is necessary to synchronize body and mind.

Going further with our topic of health, we should talk about what we call psychosomatic body. Psychosomatic body is the result of interpretation, of mind interpreting body. In this sense, mind projects itself onto the situation, onto the environment.

Such projections are basically the interpretive factor of mind. When we look at things, feel things, sense things, we do not generally do that as a simple process. Instead, we project our notion of self onto whatever appears as phenomena. When this process of projection is coupled with the notion of protecting, nourishing, and increasing ourselves and our sense of health, then we have a distorted version of things as they

are, a distorted version of reality. That distorted version causes us to create further and further expectations about *this*: this body, this person.

As you sit here right now, you feel your body sitting on the chair, you feel your feet on the floor, or if you cross your legs, you feel the back of your leg over your knee. You have a sense of the temperature and the light in the room. All of these sensations are what we call psychosomatic, that is, mind-body interpretations. We could say that we shape the world according to our projection of the world, our expectation of the world. We are not actually feeling the *body-body*, the actual body, of the world, of ourselves. What we are relating to is our projection, our interpretation. Our task is to understand how to bring together mind, body, and mind-body. By mind-body we mean the interpretive factor, that which connects the actual body and mind together.

Basically what happens is this: we flicker back and forth between the actual feeling of body, and interpretation. We flicker back and forth very quickly, and that flickering quality causes a kind of uncertainty in our being. It is as if something has been left out, something is missing. That flickering quality causes us to think that we must somehow protect ourselves, nurture ourselves, and be healthy. This flickering also gives rise to elaboration of the mind-body experience. Simple experience becomes so exaggerated that we allow what is called illness to descend into our body. Illness is not something intrinsic, but it is the result of the split between who we are and who we think we are.

So because of the flickering, we have uncertainty. Uncertainty gives rise to elaboration, which produces further fantasy. And when we are in the midst of such fantasies, we completely indulge ourselves. We become totally wound up in the interpretation of whatever sensations we are experiencing. The result is that we are constantly, moment by moment, day after day, checking on how we feel. "How do I feel right now?"

I feel this, I feel that; I feel irritated, I feel good, I feel . . . oh, I have a pain in my left knee.” And on and on we go with our continual preoccupation with this psychosomatic body.

Because of our preoccupation, we invite all kinds of chaos into our lives. Illness is the result of chaos, and chaos is the result of lack of mindfulness. Over a period of time, our preoccupations and projections become very solid, and we develop habitual patterns of relating to our body and the rest of the world in an egotistical way. We become so fascinated with being Mr. or Miss or Mrs. So-and-So, that we constantly occupy our time relating to our own existence. It is simply a matter of continual wishful thinking. At that point, basic health is completely missed.

How is it possible not to invite illness? According to the Buddhist tradition, the excellent means of not corrupting our basic health is the practice of mindfulness. We realize that we are constantly projecting some notion of me and my body and my world, and we work with that. It is not that we have to discard the projections altogether, but we begin to become mindful of them. When we become mindful of the fact that we project, that we actually shape our bodies according to our mind, then we become more attentive to how we actually conduct our moment-to-moment existence: how we think, how we act, how we are sensitive to the environment. At the same time, our understanding becomes much clearer, and we realize that the split between mind and body creates and shapes the psychosomatic body, and that is what we are dealing with all the time: our version of ourselves, our interpretation of ourselves.

So the practice of mindfulness works directly with the psychosomatic body, the interpretive factor. The practice of mindfulness in this sense is the reminder of basic health, or what is also known as well-being. Each of us has a notion of being, but it is one that is entirely caught up in our thought process, our emotions, and our projections. In this case we are

talking about well-being as that which is grounded, that which does not move, so to speak.

Not moving means not being wishy-washy in terms of relating with a situation. For example, we may be in a room, let's say at a party. Some people there are aggressive, some are pleasant and lovely, and some are bored. As we project onto that situation, our mind shapes our body according to that projection, so that we become either aggressive or bored or lovely or happy. However the situation seems to present itself, we take that shape. The practice of mindfulness is the practice of refraining from allowing one's mind to take on the image or shape of the situation. By doing that we develop a relationship with ground, with the earth, and we are no longer subject to self-inflicted illness.

We shape our body because body and mind are not completely one, not synchronized. The whole notion of mindfulness is based on working with interpretation, allowing interpretation to dissolve by itself so that the actual union or completeness of body and mind can be seen straightforwardly. Health, or well-being, does not have to be invented, but it actually is.

If you have any questions, we could have a discussion.

QUESTION: Our most celebrated meditation teachers — His Holiness Karmapa, Dudjom Rinpoche, and Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche — have all been ill as we've known them in the last decade. I'm wondering whether their illnesses have been symptomatic of a split between body and mind. Are their illnesses self-inflicted?

ANSWER: When someone actually understands body-body, that understanding brings about freedom from fear. In that case the appearance of illness is not all that important. From the ordinary point of view, the appearance of illness is shocking. The fact that we have something as insignificant as a

rash, for example, suddenly brings us back to that flash of uncertainty: Is this body? Is this mind? What is going on?

In terms of what you might call enlightened beings, I think it is a very different situation. According to the tradition, they usually took on the larger illnesses of the society as a whole. But if you meet any of these people, you never find that they are depressed about their illness, which is an interesting point. It is not a case of euphoria, of being so sick that they cannot think clearly. You find that certain teachers, such as our own for example, who have been afflicted with very serious illnesses have, at the same time, a completely lucid and clear understanding, moment by moment, of what is going on. So in that sense it is somewhat different.

I think that is what we are aiming at here: the notion of not experiencing body as an interpretation. When you interpret what is going on with your body, then you always have the notion of me and my body as being separate. Because of that there is continual uncertainty, and therefore there is fear, which invites further illness. But when the body is understood as it is, then illness is not all that big a deal.

Q: I wonder if mind, body and projection are the same as body, speech, and mind. Don't the traditional Buddhist teachings say that speech is some kind of link between body and mind?

A: You see, projection is basically interpretation. To interpret means that we feel some basic split, and therefore we want to make a connection. I want to make a connection with you asking this question, and you want to make a connection with me answering this question. So there is something in between, and that is our projection. In terms of being healthy, that is basically what we have to work with. And working with that requires us to be mindful, that is, not getting lost in interpretation, but actually seeing body, speech, and mind as one thing.

Q: So body, speech, and mind are basically inseparable?

A: I think so.

Q: Is speech what you were calling mind-body?

A: No. Speech is referred to in various ways. For example, it is sometimes referred to as the quality of intellect, which is a kind of connecting factor. But in this case, we are talking about actually being grounded, so that thinking, speaking, acting, being, are one. At the same time, in terms of discovering basic healthiness, the intellect or the interpretive factor is what we have to work with.

Q: So is illness the intellect misinterpreting the situation?

A: Generally speaking, that is the case. Let's say that you feel sick. What happens to you when you feel sick?

Q: Well, I am comparing my state of being with the memory of some other state of being and saying there is something amiss. So then I define that.

A: That is a very important point. When you feel sick, you are very conscious of your state of being, that you exist as somebody. When you do not feel ill, you do not have that sense of being. But when something happens that seems to be out of sync, then you feel that you exist. Any little thing throws us into chaos, and as soon as we encounter chaos, we question who we are. As soon as we question who we are, we experience uncertainty and ungroundedness, and we begin to float. Then we become sick.

Q: I was interested in what you said about the process of projection. I've always understood projection to be a kind of inner state that is projected outwards. For example, if you had an inner state of anger, you might look at the outer situation and see anger there. But it seems that you are saying that you would imagine a lot of ideas, such as anger, out there, and then take them back on as your inner state.

A: That's right.

Q: So it's really a flip from the way we usually understand it.

A: Yes, it certainly is.

Q: Thank you.

Q: You said that we flicker between our feeling of body and our interpretation of body.

A: Yes.

Q: I feel that all I've been working with is my interpretation. I wonder if you could describe a little bit what the feeling of body would be like?

A: It is very simple and at the same time very hard to describe: it is the absence of interpretation, which is the absence of struggle. And more than that, as we have discussed, it is a feeling of groundedness, of a sense of being. When you experience the absence of struggle, then even if there is illness, body is basically healthy by itself.

Q: So when I'm flickering back and forth and I feel that absence of struggle, and then I start to doubt that, is doubt the interpretation that I am putting on top of the space that was free of struggle for the moment?

A: Yes. And then we begin to feel guilty about that whole process, which complicates the situation further, so that we suffer further.

Q: You connected the idea of interpretation with projection. Is it possible to discover some accuracy in perception, or in one's mind, or is it a matter of interpretation stopping altogether? Is there such a thing as an accurate projection?

A: There is no reason to talk about accuracy or inaccuracy in terms of projection. Mind projects. That is the truth, and that happens. Whether it is accurate or inaccurate, we get involved, and we start to go down the garden path.

Q: So mindfulness is just not interpreting so much?

A: Mindfulness is certainly not interpreting. It is just being there with the projection, with the whole process. It is being still. When you see how mind and body form the interpretive or psychosomatic body, then you begin to become truly healthy.

Q: Thank you.

A: You're welcome.

Q: It seems that in our culture there is a tremendous disrespect for our bodies. Where does that come from?

A: That is always the result of interpretation. There is no real understanding or experience of body-body. Everyone is simply interpreting the world according to their projections, and seeing their projections to be real. It is basically unhealthy. There is me, and there is my health that has to be protected from intrusion by the other.

Q: So it is some concept that we are not strong enough to withstand the disease that is outside?

A: Yes. It is the concept that we have to protect ourselves or eventually the disease outside will get to us. That is actually a joke, because the basic disease of the body is death. Everyone is going to die. That is not to say that we should just disregard our body and mind, but it is the case that health does not come about by trying to protect ourselves from inevitable death.

Q: But I usually feel that I am healthy and the other people are diseased, and therefore there is something to protect. It doesn't particularly seem like I'm trying to protect myself from death.

A: That feeling of being healthy and the others being diseased is simply an interpretation. It is very arbitrary. You feel healthy because your projections line up with your expectations.

Q: Thank you.

A: We live in a world of separation because we have not synchronized body and mind. That is why we call the practice of meditation "mind-full-ness." Mindfulness means the mind is full and therefore it includes the bodily situation as well. There is nothing left out, and nothing is discarded. It is a simple, direct situation.

Please think about these things that we have discussed. And as you are thinking about them, realize that you are thinking about them. Then you might feel a sense of body, and you might feel a sense of mind. And you might feel that there is a

possibility of bringing those two together completely. In that way, hopefully you can stimulate and take part in the environment so that can manifest basic health, not just here, but beyond this situation, which would bring a lot of benefit.

Once again, thank you for your patience and your inquisitiveness.