

Meditation and the Fourth Moment

By Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

A lecture from “The Tibetan Buddhist Path” class taught by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche during the first summer session of the Naropa Institute, in July 1974.
<http://www.lionsroar.com/beyond-present-past-and-future-is-the-fourth-moment/>

When we talk about stages on the path, in relationship to our meditation practice, we have a problem with the terminology. We tend to think of a staircase: We take the first step, and then we take the next step and the step after that. We think meditation practice is like being in an elevator. As things become defined or clarified on the path, we go up in the elevator, and the numbers of each floor appear as we rise from one stage to the next.

The problem is that meditation is not like progressing through stage after stage after stage. Rather, meditation is more like the process of growing up and aging. Although you may celebrate your birthday on a particular day, that doesn't mean that, when you blow your candle out at your party, you suddenly go from being two years old to being three. In growing up, there is a process of evolution, a process of development. That is precisely the issue as far as meditation practice is concerned. Meditation is not based on stages, but it is a process that takes place in you. Such a process takes place in accordance with your life situation.

In the Buddhist tradition, it has often been recommended that you become a monk or nun, leave your home and family, leave all your relatives, your village, your province, and then join another home, which is called a monastery. However, we have a problem here. If you leave home and become an inmate of a monastery, you are re-establishing yourself as “being at home.” You left home, but you have found another home. Conscience, your sense of right and wrong, is very powerful here. You may feel that you are in a better home, one that is a divinely enlightened and improved home sanctioned by the buddhas. Or for Christians in a Christian monastery, they would feel it's sanctioned by God. That is another problem. Again, we are thinking about attaining stage after stage, rather than understanding spiritual development as an evolutionary process.

In the Indian Hindu tradition, the recommended approach might be to learn the craftsmanship of your trade and worship God simultaneously. As a young man you practice your craftsmanship and do your pujas. As you evolve, you become more and more in contact with reality or God. Finally, when you are ready to retire, you get a divine pension. As an old person you are regarded as practically and spiritually wise. You retire and follow the spiritual life, and you die in a state of spiritual ecstasy.

There are many disciplines that talk in terms of stages and landmarks of spirituality. You take a certain vow, you take on a discipline, and from that point onward you are a different

person. For example, in the Jewish tradition you have your bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah; you enter manhood or womanhood. There are many things like that.

It's deceptive if we see the process as a sudden one: once you get your title and the deed that goes with your title, you think you have become a slightly advanced and different person. From the point of view of true spirituality, we have to face this misunderstanding. There is nothing that should be regarded as a sudden jump at all. Rather, there is a gradual process, an actual process that takes place constantly.

People talk about sudden enlightenment, a sudden glimpse, satori, and all kinds of other spiritual attainments. But those things require the conditions for you to pull yourself together. You need to be in the right frame of mind to experience such a thing. So-called sudden enlightenment needs enough preparation for it to be sudden. Otherwise, it can't happen at all. If you have a sudden accident in your motor car, you had to have been driving in your car. Otherwise, you can't have the accident. That is the whole point: whenever we talk about suddenness and sudden flashes of all kinds, we are talking in terms of conditional suddenness, conditional sudden enlightenment.

Sudden enlightenment is dependent on the slow growth of the spiritual process—the growth of commitment, discipline, and experience. This takes place not only in the sitting practice of meditation alone, but also through the lifelong experience of dealing with your wife, your husband, your kids, your parents, your job, your money, your sex life, your emotions, whatever you have. You have to deal with everything you experience in life, and you have to work with and learn from those situations. Then, the gradual process is almost inevitable.

Scholastically and experientially there is no such thing as sudden enlightenment in Buddhism. So-called sudden enlightenment is simply insight, or understanding, that depends on what we have already experienced. We call it sudden in the same way that you might say, "Suddenly I saw the sunrise." Or, "Suddenly I saw the sunset." But what you are seeing is dependent on the situation that already exists, and you are just making it sound dramatic. The sun doesn't suddenly rise or set, although you may suddenly notice that it's happening. It depends on your experience.

The point here is that there is continuity in the spiritual journey. You begin solidly, you progress solidly, and you evolve solidly. Don't expect supernormal magic of any kind on the spiritual path. Some of you may have experienced some kind of magic, maybe so. Some of you have read that such magic does exist, did exist, or will exist. However, magic doesn't suddenly exist. The magic depends on the magician, and the magician depends on his trainers, so magic cannot appear unless there is a magical situation or environment. The sudden, magical "zap" we have been told about is purely mythical. The zap cannot take place unless you are in the situation to be zapped. Automatically, the zapping is part of a gradual process rather than a sudden experience.

No one can save us from the state of chaos or samsara unless we understand the meaning of chaos and confusion, unless we have experienced it and suffered from it. Otherwise, although we may be in the midst of chaos, we don't notice it. You don't begin to notice chaos until you are already on the path. Then you begin to feel uncomfortable. You feel that something is a nuisance. Something's bugging you constantly. You realize the chaos when you are already making the journey.

We should also understand that the spiritual journey we are discussing—the so-called journey and so-called spirituality—has nothing to do with the “spirit.” Here, “spiritual” refers to the self-existing healthiness that every one of us possesses. We are not talking about the mythical concept of God or some divine power that we cannot understand but we feel we have to accept. We are talking about something very literal and real.

The spiritual journey can only take place if we make ourselves available to the path, to begin with. The path is you. If we didn't drive motorcars, we wouldn't have highways. Because people drive cars, therefore we have roads and highways. It is an interdependent thing. You exist; therefore, the path exists. It is very personal—as well as impersonal. The path exists because of you, but on the other hand, a lot of other people can tread on your path. That is the meaning of sangha, or community. You discover the path and you are the maker of the path—as far as you are concerned—but having created the path, a lot of others use that path.

The shamatha experience, the slow process of mindfulness that takes place on the beginner's level, allows us to be available to ourselves. Before we become missionaries or social workers, whether in the conventional sense or on the level of bodhisattvas and tantric practitioners, we have to work with ourselves and pull ourselves together. The first step towards being a social worker or a preacher is to make sure that you don't become a nuisance to others. The starting point is the shamatha practice of meditation, in which we begin to catch ourselves being a nuisance to ourselves. We find all kinds of thought problems, emotional hang-ups, and physical problems with meditation—problems of all kinds.

We find that we are being a nuisance to ourselves, let alone being a nuisance to others. We get angry with ourselves, saying: “I could do better than this. What's wrong with me? I seem to be getting worse. I'm going backwards.” We're angry at the whole world, including ourselves. Everything we see is an insult. The universe becomes the expression of total insult. One has to relate with that. If you are going to exert your power and energy to walk on the path, you have to work with yourself.

The first step is to make friends with yourself. That is almost the motto of shamatha experience. Making friends with yourself means accepting and acknowledging yourself. You work with your subconscious gossip, fantasies, dreams—everything. And everything that you learn about yourself you bring back to the technique, to the awareness of the breathing, which was taught by the Buddha.

Having made friends with yourself, you feel a sense of relief and excitement. At the same time, you should be careful not to get overly excited about your accomplishment. You are still a schoolboy or a schoolgirl. If last night's homework was good, that doesn't mean that you are done with school altogether. You have to come back to class, you have to work with your teacher, you have to do more homework, precisely because you were successful. You have more work to do.

Next is the experience of vipashyana, which is a sense of fundamental awareness. Such awareness acknowledges the boundaries of non-awareness, the boundaries of wandering mind. You begin to realize the boundary and the contrast. Your awareness is taking place and your confusion, your mindlessness, is also taking place. You realize that, but you don't make a big deal about it. You accept the whole situation as part of the basic awareness.

Not only are you aware of your breath, your posture, and your thought process, but you are fundamentally mindful and aware. There is a sense of totality. You are aware of the room; you are aware of the rug; you are aware of your meditation cushion; you are aware of what color hair you have; you are aware of what you did earlier that day. You are constantly aware of such things. Beyond that there is nonverbal, nonconceptual awareness that doesn't talk in terms of facts and figures. You have a fundamental, somewhat abstract level of awareness and of being. There is a sense that "This is taking place. Something is happening right here."

A sense of being—experience without words, without terms, without concepts, without visualization—takes place. It is unnameable. We can't call it "consciousness" exactly, because consciousness implies that you are evaluating or conscious of sensory inputs. We can't even really call it "awareness," which could be misunderstood. It's not simply awareness. It's a state of being. Being what? One never knows. It is just being without any qualification. Are you being Jack? Are you being Jill? Are you being Smith? One never knows.

This may sound rather vague, but it is not as vague as all that. There is a very strong energy. A very powerful thing is taking place. There is a shock, the electricity of being pulled back into the present constantly: here, here, here. It's happening. It's really taking place.

There is an interesting dichotomy here: on the one hand, we don't know what it's all about. On the other hand, there is enormous precision and understanding. Such directness is taking place. That is the state of vipashyana, a state of realization or insight. You begin to see inside your mind on the level of nonverbal awareness. Nonverbal cognitive mind is functioning. You may say, "Now I hear the traffic. Now I hear the cuckoo clock. Now I hear my wristwatch ticking. Now I hear my wife yelling at me." But you also have to say: "I hear but I don't hear at the same time." Such totality is taking place. A very precise something or other is happening. That is the state of vipashyana. It is nonverbal and nonconceptual and very electric. It is neither ecstasy nor a state of dullness. Rather, a state of "hereness" is taking place, which is described in the Tibetan Buddhist literature as *nowness*.

Nowness is sometimes referred to as the fourth moment. That may sound more mystical than what is meant. You have the past, present, and future, which are the three moments. Then you have something else taking place, which is called the fourth moment. The fourth moment is not a far-out or extraordinary experience as such. It is a state of experience that doesn't even belong to now. It doesn't belong to what might be, either. It belongs to a non-category—which provides another sense of category. Thus it is called the fourth moment. That is the state of vipashyana, or the state of non-ego. The Tibetan term for this is lhakthong dagme tokpe sherap, which means “the knowledge of egoless insight.” It is a very real experience in which nothing can be misunderstood. It is such an overwhelming experience. The experience comes at you. You experience it precisely and in great detail.

With that point of view, you are able to work with yourself and your life situations because there are constant reminders taking place in everyday life. All kinds of little hassles arise. You forgot to pay the telephone bill, and the message from the phone company is getting heavier and heavier. They are about to turn off your phone or sue you. Your motorcycle is about to catch fire, because you are over-revving the engine. Your grandmother is dying. Your family heritage and parental relationships are calling for your commitment and attention. You can't afford to forget about them. All kinds of past and present reminders are happening.

There is a constant state of turmoil. Problematic situations happen constantly. If you look closely at where the problem came from and what it is all about, you begin to experience the fourth moment. Problems come and problems go but still remain problematic. That is the state of the fourth moment. A problem remains a problem. Nothing dissolves into a love-and-lighty beautiful creamy honey lotus lake. It remains still potent, slightly painful, sour—as if the world, the universe, is staring at you. The world is looking at you with a disapproving look. You haven't been quite as good or as enlightened as you should be. The world gives you that look of disapproval. When the sun shines, it looks at you. When the cock cries cock-a-doodle-do, it is saying the same thing. When the motorcar honks, when the telephone rings, they are saying the same thing. There are ironic mockeries taking place all over the place.

It is not that the devil is against you and trying to destroy you. It is not that some magicians have put a spell on you and are trying to get at you. Rather, the world is very powerfully, in its subtle way, trying to remind you that you should remember your fourth moment—the fourth moment.

That is what is happening in vipashyana experience. Experience becomes so real and precise that it transcends any reference point of the doctrine that you are practicing. Whether you are practicing Buddhism or Hinduism, you are practicing life. In fact, ironically, you begin to find that you can't escape. You find that life is practicing you. It becomes very real and very obvious.

Experiencing the fourth moment is an important point in the process of spiritual development. You actually realize that you are on the path, and everything in your life begins

to haunt you. Sometimes the haunting process takes the form of pleasurable confirmation. Sometimes it is painful and threatening. There is the feeling of some kind of ghost haunting you all the time. You can't get rid of it; you can't even call the Catholics to exorcise it. That state of insight and state of being simultaneously haunted is the experience of the fourth moment.

You might feel that you are sitting and camping on the razor's edge, making campfires quite happily, yet knowing that you are on the razor's edge. You can't quite settle down and relax and build your campfire, yet one still does so.

That state of hauntedness is the state of ego, actually. Somebody in your family, some part of your being, is beginning to complain that they are getting uncomfortable messages. In other words, the vipashyana awareness of the fourth moment cannot materialize unless there is a slight tinge of being haunted by your own ego. The hauntedness and the sense of insight work together. That is what creates experience.

Experience cannot happen unless there is both black and white, sweet and sour working together. Otherwise, you are just absorbed into the sweet, or you are absorbed into the sour, and there is no experience. You have no way of working with yourself at all.

I want to reiterate that, on the whole, we should regard our practice and our journey as experiential, rather than being based on programmed stages of development. You may be taking a particular program of practice and study now; next you will advance to another kind of program. On July 4th, you have decided to change your program to something different. On September 2nd, you will go on to something else. You've made it to the first bhumi, and now you will work on the second bhumi. You are doing shamatha training now, but on July 10th you are going to join the vipashyana training. We do all kinds of things like that. However, in reality things don't work that way. A lot of teachers have tried to institute such techniques, and they have failed. A lot of students have tried to poll themselves, so that they know where they are at, so to speak, and they have also failed. We have no way of knowing where we are on the path or how we are doing, as far as some standard computerized demand is concerned. However, we do know that we are on a journey. The journey is taking place, and that journey takes time and demands experience.

We should also be careful when we use the term "experience" to talk about what we are experiencing or we will experience. Conventionally speaking, when we refer to a future experience, we have an idea and an expectation, some pre-warning of what we think the experience might be. Somebody tells you about it; you know roughly what it is and you prepare for it. You wait for that experience. It will come to you. You do as much as you can to prepare. You exert yourself. Then, you have the experience. In that scenario, everything is absolutely predictable.

But here, when we are talking about this experience, the experience of the fourth moment, we are not talking about a programmed predictable experience as such. We are talking

purely about an experience that comes from the unconscious mind. In terms of the underlying consciousness or the unconscious, we are referring to an abstract state of mind, a state of literal thinking that doesn't have logic formulated yet. You just have a sense of ape instinct or radar instinct.

In fact, we don't know where the experience comes from. It just comes. There is no point in trying to trace it back. It might come from God or from Adam and Eve. Of course, from the Buddhist point of view, we don't have a God; we don't have Adam and Eve. You are just you. So it doesn't come from anywhere. It simply exists.

You feel as if you were having a cold shower, and suddenly hot, burning water starts to come out of the tap. It is so instant, so real. For a moment, when the hot water first comes at you, you still think it's cold. Then you begin to feel that something is not quite right with that particular coldness. It begins to burn you. It is unprogrammed experience, simultaneously experiencing hot and cold water, in its own individuality.

The present is the third moment. It has a sense of presence. You might say, "I can feel your presence." Or, "I can feel the presence of the light when it's turned on. Now there is no darkness." The present provides a sense of security: you know where you are. You keep your flashlight in your pocket. If you encounter darkness, you take out your flashlight and shine the light to show you where you are going. You feel enormous relief, created by that little spot of light in front of you. You don't see the whole environment, but you feel the sense of presence and the present. The fourth moment is a state of totality. Basic awareness is taking place which doesn't need any particular reassurance as such. It is happening. It is there. You feel the totality. You perceive not only the beam of light from the flashlight, but you see the space around you at the same time. The fourth moment is a much larger version of the third moment.

Without the experience of the fourth moment, there isn't enough intelligence taking place. You are just accepting things naively, and that naivete may become the basis for spiritual materialism. Naivete is believing in something that doesn't exist, which means that it becomes a sense of ignorance or stupidity. You turn on the cold shower, and you hope everything is going to be okay. You try to make sure that everything will be predictable and okay and then you just give in. You are not prepared for any reminders. Then this little twist of hot water takes place. Whenever there is a reminder, it is part of the fourth moment. If there is a reminder, everything becomes very real. If you don't have a reminder, then you are just at the mercy of chaos, samsara. That is why the sitting practice of meditation is so important. It boils down to that.

Copyright © 2006 by Diana J. Mukpo.