

THE BLUE PANCAKE

A teaching on maha ati by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

Maha ati teachings talk of enormous space. In this case, it is not space as opposed to a boundary, but a sense of total openness. Such openness can never be questioned. Ati yana (1) is regarded as the king of all the yanas. In fact, the traditional Tibetan term for this yana means "imperial yana." It is imperial rather than regal, for while a king has conquered his own country, in order to be an emperor he has to conquer a lot of other territories and other continents as well. An emperor has no need for further conquests; his rule is beyond conquering. Likewise, ati is regarded as "imperial" because, from the perspective of ati yoga, hinayana discipline is seen as spaciousness; mahayana discipline is seen as spaciousness; and the tantric yanas, as well, are seen as spaciousness.

Ati yoga teaching or discipline is sometimes defined as that which transcends coming, that which transcends going, and that which transcends dwelling. This definition is something more than the traditional tantric slogan of advaita, or "not two." In this case, we are looking at things from the level of true reality, not from the point of view of slogan or belief. Things are as they are, very simply, extremely simply so. Therefore things are unchanging, and therefore things are open as well. The relationship between us and our world is no relationship, because such a relationship is either there or not. We cannot manufacture a concept or idea of relationship to make us feel better.

From the perspective of ati, the rest of the yanas are trying to comfort us: "If you feel separate, don't worry. There is non-duality as your saving grace. Try to rest your mind in it. Everything is going to be okay. Don't cry." In contrast, the approach of ati is a blunt and vast attitude of total flop, as if the sky had turned into a gigantic pancake and suddenly descended onto our head, which ironically creates enormous space. That is the ati approach, that larger way of thinking, that larger view.

Buddhism has a number of schools, primarily divided into the hinayana, mahayana and vajrayana traditions, and squabbling goes on among all of them. They all speak the language of totality, and every one of them claims to have the answer. The hinayanists may say that they have the answer because they know reality. The mahayanists may say that the bodhisattva is the best person that we could ever find in the world. Tantric practitioners may say that the most fantastic person is the powerful and crazy yogi who is unconquerable and who has achieved siddhis and magical powers of all kinds. Let them believe what they want. It's okay. But what do those things mean to us personally, as students who want to practice and who want to experience the teachings?

The maha ati practitioner sees a completely naked world, at the level of marrow, rather than skin or flesh or even bones. In the lower yanas, we develop lots of idioms and terms, and that makes us feel better because we have a lot of things to talk about, such as compassion or emptiness or wisdom. But in fact, that becomes a way of avoiding the actual naked reality of life. Of course, in maha ati there is warmth, there is openness, there is penetration-all those things are there. But if we begin to divide the dharma, cutting it into little pieces as we would cut a side of beef into sirloin steaks, hamburger, and chuck, with certain cuts of beef more expensive than others, then the dharma is being marketed. In fact, according to Vimalamitra, the reason maha ati is necessary is because throughout the eight lower yanas the dharma has been marketed as a particularly juicy morsel of food. The maha ati level is necessary in order to save the dharma from being parceled and marketed; that is, it is necessary to preserve the wholesomeness of the whole path.

Actually, if we could make an ati yoga remark, all the yanas are purely creating successively more advanced and mechanized toys. At first, when a child is very young, we give him mobiles to look at, rings to suck, and rattles to shake. Then, when the child is sophisticated, we give him more sophisticated toys, "creative playthings," and brightly colored bricks and sticks to put together. We provide even more sophisticated toys as the child becomes more and more inquisitive and sophisticated, and his mind and body are better coordinated.

Finally, at the level of adulthood, we continue to buy toys for ourselves. When we are old enough, we may buy ourselves a set of Encyclopedia Britannica, or a stereo kit that we can put together. We may even build ourselves a house-the ultimate creative plaything. Or we may invent some new gadget: "I designed a new kind of motor car, a new kind of airplane, a new kind of submarine. I built it and it actually worked. Isn't that fantastic?" We feel that our abilities are becoming much greater because not only can we build fantastic toys and enjoy them ourselves, but we learn how to sell them, market them. When we become really sophisticated, we might design a zoo or even an entire city, and be accepted as important people in our society. It feels fantastic, extremely powerful and encouraging. But we are still fascinated by our toys.

According to ati yoga, going through the yanas is similar to that process of collecting more and more toys. The more sophisticated and fascinated we become, the more we are actually reducing ourselves to a childlike level. Somehow we are not yet at the level of maha ati if we are still fascinated by our toys, our occupations, no matter how extensive or expansive they may be. At the maha ati level, those little tricks that we play to improve ourselves or to entertain ourselves are no longer regarded as anything-but at the same time they are everything, much vaster than we could have imagined. It is as though we were

building a city or a zoo, and suddenly the whole sky turned into a gigantic pancake and dropped on us. There is a new dimension of surprise that we never thought of, we never expected. We never expected the sky to drop on our head.

There is a children's story about the sky falling, but we do not actually believe that such a thing could happen. The sky turns into a blue pancake and drops on our head-nobody believes that. But in maha ati experience, it actually does happen. There is a new dimension of shock. a new dimension of logic. It is as though we were furiously calculating a mathematical problem in our notebook, and suddenly a new approach altogether dawned on us, stopping us in our tracks. Our perspective becomes completely different.

Our ordinary approach to reality and truth is so poverty stricken that we don't realize that the truth is not one truth, but all truth. It could be everywhere, like raindrops, as opposed to water coming out of a faucet that only one person can drink from at a time. Our limited approach is a problem. It may be our cultural training to believe that only one person can get the truth: "You can receive this, but nobody else can." But from the point of view of ati, there is "all" dharma rather than "the" dharma. The notion of "one and only" does not apply anymore. If the gigantic pancake falls on our head, it falls on everybody's head.

In some sense it is both a big joke and a big message. You cannot even run to your next-door neighbor saying, "I had a little pancake fall on my head. What can I do? I want to wash my hair." You have nowhere to go. It is a cosmic pancake that falls everywhere on the face of the earth. You cannot escape-that is the basic point. From that point of view, both the problem and the promise are cosmic.

If you are trying to catch what I am saying, quite possibly you cannot capture the idea. In fact, it is quite possible that you do not understand a word of it. You cannot imagine it in even the slightest, faintest way. But it is possible that there are situations that exist beyond your logic, beyond your system of thinking. That is not an impossibility. In fact it is highly possible.

The earlier yanas talk about the rug being pulled out from under our feet, which is quite understandable. If our landlord kicks us out of our apartment, the rug is pulled out from under our feet, obviously. That is quite workable, and we find that we can still relate with our world. But in ati we are talking about the sky collapsing onto us. Nobody thinks of that possibility. It is an entirely different approach. No one can imagine a landlady or a landlord who could pull that trick on us.

In maha ati we are not talking about gaining ground or losing ground, or how we settle down and find our way around. Instead we are talking about how we

can develop headroom. Headroom, or the space above us, is the important thing. We are interested in how space could provide us with a relationship to reality, to the world.

(1.) yana: lit. "vehicle"; stages of the Buddhist path, nine in total according to the maha ati system, of which maha ati is the final.

This teaching was adapted from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche's lectures on tantra at The Naropa Institute in 1974 and appears in Journey Without Goal, from Shambhala Publications.

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