

Benefits of Having Courageous Confidence and the Faults of Lacking It

Seeing the great importance of having confidence, whether in the realm of spiritual or worldly endeavors, today I am writing my blog on this subject. Generally speaking, in Mahayana Buddhism, we cherish others more than ourselves, offer all profit and victory to others, and accept all loss and defeat upon ourselves. Apart from pure Dharma practitioners, such an attitude is very rare in society during these viciously competitive times in which we live. However, while it is true that we should abandon pride, jealousy, fighting, and abuse of others in order to try to gain some kind of victory for ourselves, I have never seen a scripture or heard any lama say that courageous confidence is useless for the attainment of Buddhahood. Pride and confidence are different. The causes of developing pride may be family lineage, wealth, good looks, education, and so forth. Arrogantly exaggerating some slight good quality that we have, we think we are really something! Thus, pride develops out of a mistaken view of ourselves.

Fearless confidence, on the other hand, is a real antidote to laziness. As long as we are lazy we will not accomplish anything worldly or spiritual. The essence of courageous confidence is the attitude that we can accomplish something, and that we will never give up until we do. In particular, among the many special characteristics of Buddhist Tantric practice, confidence is especially important. No one attaining Buddhahood or Arhatship these days as in ancient times, or if they do, our not knowing or hearing about it, is because we practitioners lack the confidence which is that special quality of tantric practice. People must have had stronger belief in Dharma when Buddha was alive! In any case, we can clearly see that they had great confidence. By just hearing Dharma teachings one time they saw the true nature of reality. At the same time they even dared to say, 'I have seen the truth!' and others accepted and acknowledged it. If someone these days said, 'I have seen the truth!' everyone would probably think they are crazy!

Having gone to Bodhgaya, before sitting under the Bodhi tree, Buddha said, 'After I sit on this seat I will not rise before attaining complete enlightenment, even if I die!' He sat down with such a firmly decisive determination and great confidence that he could attain Buddhahood. Another example of this in Tibet was Milarepa who made the promise that he would not emerge from his meditation cave before completing his practice even if he were to die. Again, this was a sign of his courageous confidence. We would never dare to make such a promise! That is because we don't have such confidence.

That lack of confidence is, in short, connected with a lack of belief. An example is the statement in some tantras and oral instructions that, if you do certain practices, even if you are someone who has committed the five 'heinous crimes'¹ you can attain enlightenment in this very lifetime. Although such statements exist, many of us think they were just made for some special reason, or just for some especially exalted

¹ killing father, killing mother, killing an Arhat, causing schism in the Sangha or, with an evil intention, trying to harm a Buddha

person, but we don't really believe that someone like ourselves could possibly do that.

In Shangpa Kagyu Mahamudra Commentaries there is a listing of the worst difficulties for realizing the mind to be Mahamudra. One of those is not being able to believe it because it seems too easy! For instance, when a lama says, your present moment of awareness itself, left unaltered, is Buddha! they can't believe it because they think it is too easy. I think this is at the very crux of the matter, a very important point. Many of us hope and pray to realize the nature of our mind but, since we don't feel confident, we would probably find it hard to believe that we had realized it, even if we did!

If we think about Milarepa's life, he knew there were many great lamas in Tibet, but one of the reasons for his special great faith in Marpa was because Milarepa's main intention was to attain enlightenment during his lifetime, and no one but Marpa claimed to possess instructions which could accomplish that; I don't think there were many others.

When Milarepa first met Marpa he said, 'I am a criminal from western Tibet. Please give me instructions so that I can purify all the bad karma and obscuration I created in the earlier part of my life by killing thirty-five people and their horses, and so that I can attain Buddhahood in the time I have left.'

Marpa replied,

I do have instructions for attainment of enlightenment in a single lifetime. Not only that, for a person of good fortune with the karma, if they meditate according to my instructions in the morning they'll attain enlightenment in the morning; and if they meditate in the evening they'll attain enlightenment in the evening! If they have the karmic connection, I have instructions that will liberate them just by hearing them, without even needing to meditate! Whether you can attain enlightenment in this life or not depends entirely upon your own effort.

Because both lama and disciple had extremely great confidence, Milarepa was able to completely purify all the bad karma he had created in his early life and, as he had asserted with great confidence, he attained enlightenment in the latter part of his life.

I feel that our lack of confidence springs from our lack of stable faith and conviction. Lack of stable faith will also cause lack of effort. If we lack perseverance, even if we get the opportunity, it is sure to go to waste.

For these reasons it is important to have confidence in ourselves. Some tantric commentaries teach the importance of having confidence in our view, confidence in our meditation, and confidence in our conduct. In Buddhist Tantra, faith is held to be extremely important, the great dispeller of doubt. I think that this is why it is so important. If there is doubt or lack of faith, it is impossible to have confidence. If we have faith without doubts, from then on we can have pure confidence. If we have pure confidence we can put forth the effort to realize our full potential. If we can put forth the effort the result will be attained. Therefore, it is essential to have confidence in ourselves.

For these reasons, in many tantric scriptures, being endowed with faith is identified as the most important quality for a disciple to have. Limitless benefits come

from any kind of tantric practice 'except,' as it is said, 'for those with doubts.' The practice of a person who has doubt will have no results. Some might think that is problematic, but on the other hand, it is difficult to accomplish any activity without confidence. When you realize this latter point, you can understand why it is said in the tantras that one who practices doubtfully cannot accomplish results.

Well then, what is it like to practice tantra with confidence and how is it applied? Purification of negativity, for example, in the sutra system is not easy, but in tantra, when you practice the meditation and recitation of Vajrasattva you first meditate on Vajrasattva. Then you recite the mantra for several rounds of your mala. At the end, Vajrasattva says to you, 'Child of the family! Your bad karma, obscurations, faults, and downfalls are all purified!' Meditating on this, we are taught that we should believe this from the depths of our heart. Even though it is difficult to say how much un-purified karma we still have, it is very beneficial to hold the feeling that we are completely purified. Likewise, when we receive tantric initiation and the lama introduces the meaning of the initiation to us, at that moment we should feel that we have actually realized the correct view of emptiness.

Therefore, confidence is one of the most important points for the practice of Buddhist tantra. Terminology refers to sutra as 'taking the cause as the path,' and tantra as 'taking the result as the path.' For example, generating bodhicitta in the sutra system, you generate bodhicitta, by contemplating many causes and conditions. It involves many different meditated objects and we may worry that we can't do it. When bodhicitta is generated in the tantric system, however, as soon as you take bodhisattva vows you think, 'I have generated bodhicitta in my mind.' It is incorrect at that point to doubt it. In my opinion this essential point makes a big difference. For instance, if we think, 'I'm going to be happy!' and work hard for it, it is not easy to be happy. If, on the other hand, we think, 'I am happy!' our mind will immediately naturally feel happier. Similarly, doctors say that whether a patient believes they can be healed of a disease or not makes a big difference on whether they are healed or not; it has a very strong effect one way or the other.

If confidence makes that much of a difference in our daily life, no wonder it makes such a difference in Dharma practice! It is clear that Dharma practice depends primarily on the disposition of our mind. Therefore, when practicing tantra, whatever you are meditating on, you meditate that you have now attained the results of the practice. You don't just hope and pray, 'May I attain it someday!' That is not the mindset. By doing this it is easier to develop experience and realization. We can recognize this development, can cultivate its continuation, can expand it, and so on. There is no doubt that it makes a huge difference. Even though you do not attain the state of Vajradhara just by thinking that you have, if we recognize the essence of Dharma to be subduing and pacifying our mind, we can see that the path of tantra is very important and very powerful.

Speaking this much about confidence may not seem so essential to some, but in my opinion, too many people in our society have too much belief in bad things, and too little confidence in good things. I see this as a big problem. For instance, I once had a conversation with an old ex-monk in India. He said that he made several

circumambulations of the temple every day. He said he didn't know if it was purifying his bad karma or not, but that he was circumambulating again today because it was what he always did. I said to him, 'You started circumambulating because you felt strongly that it would purify your bad karma. If you believe so strongly that you have bad karma, why do you not believe that circumambulation will purify it?' He had no answer for me.

I feel such a way of thinking is very strange. The existence or purification of bad karma is a hidden phenomena. The two are explained from a spiritual perspective but we can't see them directly with our eyes. Even so, many people strongly believe that the things they have done are very bad karma, and even though they believe strongly that they have huge bad karma and mental obscurations, they don't really believe that purification practice will purify their karma. I don't know how this way of thinking arises. Yet many of us have this mistaken way of thinking.

When this is the case, if it is said that we go to a Pureland Buddhafield by reciting a mantra, we don't really believe it, but if we are told that we will go to hell by committing some misdeed, we believe it very strongly. From one point of view it is not easy to go to a Pureland, nor that easy to be born in a hell, yet we always have this feeling that we are about to fall into hell. To me this seems to be a problem of having too little confidence in good things and too much belief in bad things. That is why I have written here at some length on the subject of confidence.

When I think about confidence and belief there is a short story I can never forget. In ancient times, in a village in India, people were very distressed because they had not received any rainfall for a very long time. One day hundreds of thousands of the people of the area, who were Brahmins, gathered at the site of a local deity of the country to make offerings and propitiate for rain. If they really believed their prayers would be successful, they would have brought umbrellas, but there was only one young child who brought an umbrella! He was the only one who believed it would happen!

I think it is very important to have genuine belief when you practice Dharma. First you need belief. Belief brings confidence. Confidence causes joyful effort to arise. In dependence upon effort the result will come; that is just the nature of things.

One who believes but lacks confidence
Is like a meek fox among wild animals.
One who believes but lacks effort
Is like a pig who likes to sleep.

If one has all three: belief, confidence, and effort,
ones power is perfected, like that of a lion.
For wise ones who aspire to that which is good,
These three are their armor.

On a ground of stable conviction is a garden
Of beautiful flowers of confidence.
Nurtured by the soil, warmth, and water of effort,
may glorious fruits ripen before too long!

These days many people have belief but lack sufficient confidence and courage to be able to practice; or they have the courage and confidence but have fallen under the sway of laziness distracted by meaningless activities. They therefore lack perseverance and, because of this, do not succeed in getting the results of their spiritual or worldly endeavors. For this reason, I, Khenpo Karten, wrote this on the importance of courageous confidence on January 1, 2019 at Manjushri Dharma Center at the end of the morning meditation session.

Tibetan: Tashi Deleks!

Sanskrit: Sarva Mangalam!

May all be well and auspicious!

(I'd like to remind everyone that I write in Tibetan which is then translated into English, so please keep in mind that I am expressing myself from an Eastern and Tibetan point of view, and it is quite possible that my perspective, references, culture, poetic devices, and so forth, may seem different than a Western way of speaking and thinking. If it seems awkward at times, that is the reason, but there is no need to change it, except for spelling and grammar, of course. In any case, please make use of whatever resonates with you, and with whatever you find to be useful and beneficial. Thank you.)

translated by Jampa Tharchin