



Ancient Wisdom for Our Modern Society



Lama Phurbu Tashi Rinpoche

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One

Addicted to Distraction

There's a huge difference between ancient human society and our current modern world. In the old days people had fewer mental afflictions than we do now. There were fewer causes and conditions of mental afflictions in ancient times. Now our society is filled with so much information, competition, fear, obsession, prejudice and so on. These are the causes and conditions of mental afflictions.

It's said that people in the old days were smarter and greater than us. They could achieve great spiritual accomplishment; one person could write hundreds of famous books. While true I can't even imagine how that could be done. Many early scholars as individuals did all sorts of things professionally. They were artists, musicians, poets, translators, physicians, philosophers and highly accomplished yogis and meditators. Good examples are Nagajuna in India, Lodo Thaye in Tibet, and Leonardo da Vinci of Italy.

I don't think these scholars had more ability or were brighter than people now days. The reason for their accomplishments was fewer chaotic preoccupations and mental afflictions. Even these ancient scholars, strongly recommended that people keep away from chaos and distractions to find peace and sanity. This is also important in modern times. The point is to give some time to ourselves. Give ourselves time to be with a sense of wakefulness, mindfulness and awareness of the present moment. We need this time because our heart, brain, and habits are disrupted by tremendous negative emotions, misinformation and harmful addictions. We need time away from distractions.

Distraction is very tricky and controls us so many different ways. Distraction can cause us to be unable to move forward when we have important tasks to accomplish. Let's say for example that as a student we can't focus on our studies. We don't feel joy in our studies. We don't feel studying is important. Things we memorize aren't recalled later. All this

happens because we are not in the present or we are not really alive most of the time.

Distraction has an incredibly powerful control on our mind. The amount of distraction allowed to enter the mind weakens and obstructs that same mind by an equal amount.

When the mind lacks awareness of itself and it becomes fully dependent on objects, this is what we call distraction. But in meditation, distraction is something more or deeper than this. In any situation when our mind lacks self-awareness, it is distracted. In this case, the mind is not only depending on the object but also depending on mental projections such as our thoughts and fantasies. It is said that “non-distraction is the body of meditation.” We train our mind to not be dependent on distractions and being self-aware is itself the meditation. When our mind is free from distractions and aware of itself, this is called the present moment of freedom or being fully alive. At that time whatever things we see, hear, smell, taste,

feel and think are realistic and natural. As long as our minds are not distracted, we become free of dissatisfaction and negative emotions.

We are very rarely aware of ourselves and rarely in the present. Our mind is so easily distracted and gets addicted to distraction. Deep in our heart we know this distractedness is not really the right thing to do, but we repeatedly do it. Finally all this causes fear, anxiety, and destructive emotions, causing the things we want to achieve to remain as dreams. To have a peaceful, happy and successful life depends on us and we should not be controlled by distraction and destructive addictions. This obviously anyone can understand. It's needless to talk at length about what we should not do.

Two

The Magic Word

So, now let's talk about what we should do to get rid of these problems. There is an essential point to change our whole situation in a better way. It is an uncomplicated thing and can be expressed in one or two words. But first thing we should know one thing. The Buddha started all his teachings with this sentence. "Listen well and carefully, hold them in your mind, and I will teach you." There are three verbs "listen well, carefully, and hold." It sounds like repeating the same things over again. But it is not repeating the same thing three times. Each of these three words carries separate profound teachings. Think of the analogy of a teapot. The pot cannot have any defects in order to do its job well. The pot must be right side up for the tea to enter. It must be clean so the tea doesn't become poison. It must have no holes in its body to hold the tea properly. Here is how the Buddha's words correspond to this example. The verb "listen well" indicates the mind must have an opening for the dharma to enter. The verb "careful" indicates the mind must be careful to understand well. If we understand the wrong way the teachings

become poisonous. To "hold well" indicates the mind must remember the teachings.

It is same thing with this magic word. Listen well and comprehend it clearly and practice it in your daily life. It will change your whole situation in a better way. It will remove your stress, anxiety, fear, dissatisfaction and give you tremendous strength, exhilaration and inspiration. It will bring you peace sanity and smartness. The magic word is "be present" or "be alive." Try your best to bring yourself into the present; be aware of yourself. Being in very moment now rather than being in the stories of the past or fantasies of the future. Living in future and past is the main source of our emotional, psychological or mental problems.

When you are depressed, unhappy, and discouraged to move forward, most of the time you don't even ask, "Why am I miserable?" You continue forward in your misery and you think you know the reason. For example you may give your personal explanation, "I've failed" or "I am a loser". This is not the main reason. The reason you are not happy is because you are living in

the past. Past is past it never comes back and there's nothing you can do to change it. But it certainly causes you tremendous problems and misery in your mind. Maybe that is the reason you failed or you are a loser!

This misery means you have not been aware of the present. Past thoughts are so distracting that they caused this present misery. Instead of thinking about the past, be present with a sense of awareness of this very moment. Here in this very moment you will find inner peace and encouragement to step forward with a clear view.

Another distraction from the present that causes stress, worry and fear is living in the future. I'm sure you have plenty of reasons to think about the future but none of them are real. They are just your fantasies. Your future fully depends on your present moment. Especially in this case it's so important to focus on the present. You may have wonderful fantasies; "I am going to be a superman", "I will be famous, rich!" and so on. This is also not real and not good. You fool yourself. So many people are having this kind of fantasy and not paying attention to the present moment. In the end people

end up with nothing. It's like smoking marijuana and never getting anything accomplished. To be a great person requires the coming together of causes and conditions. The actions required for this coalescence are up to you and your present moment. You take the continuation of the present moment into the next moment and the next and so on. Not only thoughts and fantasies but any other distractions are also not good.

Not living in the future doesn't mean we can't make any plans. To have a plan for the future is always a good thing and the plan itself doesn't cause a problem. We have to realize that distractions and preoccupations prevent our inner peace and strength. So the point is to familiarize ourselves completely with our own awareness.

When I was young I had a big problem speaking in front of crowds. It made me nervous and shy. Because of my nervousness my heart beat fast and my voice got shaky. This led to embarrassment and then I could not remember what I was going to say correctly. I tried several ways to get rid myself of this problem. I tried to think that everything is emptiness. "All

these people don't truly exist. So why am I afraid of them?" This method didn't work. One day a teacher suggested imagining the audience as donkeys! Donkeys know nothing. This helped a little bit, but did not solve my problem. I was still nervous with public speaking. I continued to try other methods for relief; nothing totally solved my problem. I started to think why are these methods not working? I discovered it was because I was not being present. I was not being aware of the reality of the moment. The fear and worry caused my nervousness. The fear and worry came from living in the future and distractions about what might happen in the future. My thoughts were on how people might laugh at me and how stupid I might sound. That's what made me depressed and discouraged. That's what caused the fear and worry. Now instead of thinking what other people think or what is going to happen I just keep myself in the present. My mind is in a natural way and focused on what I am doing now.

Once in Singapore I was asked to help a woman. She was expecting to receive some helpful advice from me. So she came to see me with her 12 year

old son. She introduced her son and briefly told me about herself. I thought, “She must be happy with her life. She has a nice son, a good job, and looks very healthy.” Then with a long breath she changed the subject of conversation. She said, “Several times I’ve thought about killing myself, but not anymore. I realized that to commit suicide would be a stupid thing. Now I want to drink his blood.” With this she burst into tears. I noticed from her expression that she was holding an extremely strong hatred. There was depression and anger inside of her at the same time. “I just want to drink his blood,” she said again. I asked, “Who is he and why are you so angry with him?” “He’s my ex-boyfriend and for him I left my husband.” She then went on about the multitude of problems in her life.

Now I had to take a long breath as well. I told her, “His Holiness the Dalai Lama said, ‘Pleasure and pain in a general sense do not arise only from external factors but from internal factors as well. In the absence of the internal response no amount of external stimulation can affect pleasure or pain.’ I think it would be helpful if you bring back your mind to yourself and

focus on the present moment. Be alive in the present with a sense of awareness and reality. Focus on what exists in your life: your son, a good job, good health, fantastic weather, and this wonderful day. This is your reality. The past, future and other distractions are merely a creation of your mind to destroy your happy present moment and your life. Today is your life. Today is the whole existence. And this day is the most important. Every one of us has different todays. Your today is totally different than mine. We see differently, we smell differently, we feel differently, we taste differently and we experience differently. That means you live in your world and I live in my world. You don't know my world and I do not know your world. Even when we look at same object at the same time, one of us may see it as attractive and the other may not."

"We make judgments of others all the time. The reality of these judgements is made from our own assumptions and assumptions mostly take us to negative places. My point is that the idea you want to drink your ex-boyfriend's blood is not correct. First he loves you; then he hates you because

he wanted to do this and that and so on. These are your assumptions. His world and your world are totally different. Holding the idea (of drinking his blood) inside of you is punishing yourself. The anger is extremely painful and a disruptive emotion. You carry this anger around with you but the other person may not even know you are angry! On the other hand, with this anger you are supporting your enemy. Your enemy wants you to suffer and you are doing it. No matter how much we think or talk about the past it is only a waste of time. Thinking about the past creates more confusion. Living in the past or future and not being aware of the present moment is like being blind with both eyes working perfectly. You asked me my advice and I'm going to give you my advice briefly."

"Here's that advice. 'Come back to your present. Come back to your existence. Come back to your real life. Maintain the awareness of the present moment. And deal with the reality in front of you.'" When I finished speaking she was weeping with relief. She had an expression of tremendous joy on her face.

Her reply to my advice was, ""Thank you, I had many questions but no more. This answers all my questions, thank you."