

## **The Secret of life**

Friends, today we'll talk about a subject entitled "The Secret of Life." This secret actually isn't a secret at all. It's strange that we can't see it, although it manifests right under our eyes. Hence it is a secret.

First, let me tell you a story that helps you to relate to this secret. This is a story about Queen Khema, who was splendidly beautiful. However, she heard that the Buddha looks down upon physical beauty, neither praising the attractiveness of the physical body, nor mentioning how pretty a person is. To Him, who always told the truth, one's physical body is impure, impermanent, deteriorating, and destructive. This truth is annoying and unpleasant to someone who doesn't have faith in and can't relate to the Buddha. Such was the case with Queen Khema. She felt uncomfortable with the Buddha and, as a result, she avoided meeting Him. King Bimbisara, her husband, understood his wife's arrogance about her beauty. He secretly prompted many people to compose wonderful poems praising Veluvana (the Bamboo Grove) where the Buddha was currently teaching. The king also ordered artists to sing these poems all over the country. Queen Khema became curious as she listened to these nice comforting songs about the peaceful bamboo forest. She went to Veluvana for more information.

To create an opportunity to educate her, the Buddha used his psychic power to create a magnificently beautiful young attendant to fan Him. The girl was created to be a lesson for the queen. When she arrived, the queen was surprised that a beautiful young girl, comparable to Miss Universe, was attending the Buddha. It was said He never admired physical beauty in a person. The queen's eyes were fixed on those of the beautiful attendant while the Buddha was teaching the Dharma. She paid no attention whatsoever to the words of the Exalted One. Here we need to relate the way the Buddha taught. He gave speeches and He used actions as in this lesson for Queen Khema.

As the queen watched, the Buddha changed the magnificently beautiful young girl into an old, clumsy and ugly woman. Then in an instant, the old woman became a bony bag of skin. Queen Khema suddenly realized that an extraordinarily beautiful person would sooner or later become an old, clumsy, and ugly one. The most important conclusion she drew from the incident was that all things are impermanent, deteriorating, and destructive. We might think that the queen's conclusion was simple and typical. But, friends, in our daily lives, the secret that the queen learned is the true nature of all things. That secret is that all things are impermanent, deteriorating and destructive. Upon discovering this secret, the queen had found a path to total liberation.

Now that we have discovered the secret, have we become Bodhisattvas?

Nancy:

- When we realize the impermanence of all things, we can eliminate part of our suffering.

- That's correct.

When we say we become Bodhisattvas, this means we could go beyond normal daily life. We can eliminate some of our daily sufferings. With that realization, we somehow lead a life that transcends normality. We can't say we are Bodhisattvas. We are able to escape some of our daily suffering; this means we actually have some form of Bodhisattva. We said that understanding the nature of all things was to discover a secret. Is this an exaggeration? Do you think it is actually a secret if it is found and accepted easily by us? Why is it called a secret? If it isn't clarified by wise people, we can't completely get it. Realizing the secret is one thing, but really accepting it is yet another thing.

Let's illustrate with some examples...

In our daily lives, we understand that all things are impermanent, deteriorating, and destructive. Now, suppose we parked an expensive car in a lot. When we return to the car, we see a huge scratch on it? How do we react? Do we feel normal?

We know the car is impermanent. But we consider it a valuable item. If it is damaged, we don't feel comfortable. We can't accept the fact that the car is

scratched. We feel irritated and we might want to find out what happened or who caused the damage.

Let's use another example. We all began our lives empty-handed. If we accumulate a significant amount of wealth, do we readily accept an incident that severely affects or wipes out our assets? Can we stay undisturbed?

Friends, now you see clearly that even if we are introduced to the truth that all things are impermanent, short-lived and not lasting, if something happens causing them to change, we are still agitated. For that reason, the above-mentioned normal and typical reaction isn't that of a wise person. We only understand the truth on the surface. In other words, we hear the issue and understand it, but we do not really have the true wisdom about it. Our Queen Khema, like us, didn't understand at the beginning that our body was unreal and could be sick and dying. The Buddha was clever when he used the young girl to show the transformation of all things. The queen could see the impermanence and decay of her body and she realized the valuable truth. If the Buddha started teaching the Dharma by stating that our body was unreal, impermanent, deteriorating, and destructive, Queen Khema may have left the congregation. She might have paid no attention to the Buddha's teaching. As a clever teacher, the Buddha used a beauty to educate a beauty. When the queen understood the impermanence of her body, the Buddha's teachings of the Dharma lifted her to a

higher level of emancipation. The Buddha continued to shed light on her learning with the following poem.

*Queen, do you see that random composite?  
That impure thing made of elements that  
are dirty, stinky, and sick!  
It's deteriorating at each instant!  
Only the ignorant are passionate  
and deeply attached to it.*

We'd like to elaborate on the wisdom that the Buddha taught Queen Khema. The Buddha, via the first line of the poem, wanted the queen to realize that a person's physical body is merely a conditionally-formed object.

At the end of today's class, you will get used to the phrase "conditionally-formed physical body", which means the formation of our physical body is the result of many conditions simultaneously satisfied. According to an ancient point of view, our physical body is composed of four basic elements: soil, water, wind, and fire. However, according to the modern point of view, it is made of a variety of cells (blood, nerves, muscle, bones, etc.). The conditional formation of our physical body results from the interaction between our father's sperm and our

mother's ovary, in addition to our "transferable" consciousness<sup>1</sup>.

In other words, if the father's sperm or the mother's ovary didn't exist or if the two didn't interact, a physical body wouldn't be formed. Even when a physical body is already formed, if a transferable consciousness didn't emerge into this physical body, there wouldn't be a newly created life.

Are we skeptical about the case of a newly born sheep from a test tube? There are no corresponding parents because it was born by a scientific experiment. Does this experiment invalidate Buddha's teachings?

- What do you think? Does this scientific experiment contradict Buddha teachings?

Bill's answer:

- No, not at all. It was just a shortcut that scientists used. They put the sperm and the ovary together which is needed to form a physical body.

- Yes, we agree with Bill.

However, we want to elaborate further. We said that in order for us to come to this world, many conditions must happen simultaneously. One of which is the existence of our transferable consciousness. Where

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<sup>1</sup>The consciousness which could be transferred to a new body after one's death.

does this consciousness come from? We want to focus on this point.

Nancy:

- That is also my question. What is the nature of this consciousness? Does our accumulated karma lead us to a new life?

- Yes, that's right.

We want to emphasize that prior to the formation of our body, our transferable consciousness already exists. Upon the death of the physical body, the transferable consciousness leaves last. It is the first element to emerge into a new body for a new life. If our present body is no longer alive, the transferable consciousness leaves that body, considered as an old "car" to go to a new one. That is the teaching of Buddha, explaining how we repeatedly go from one existence to another.

Does this make sense?

Nancy:

- Thanks, it has been made clearer.

- Good, please understand that the transferable consciousness mentioned here also includes the karma that Nancy talked about. Also note that karma consists of bad and good and both migrate to a new life. For the sake of completeness, in addition to the accumulated karma, this transferable consciousness also includes our common (judging/evaluating) mind and our Buddha nature.

Let's use a metaphor of a gold mine to better understand this concept. A gold mine consists of gold mixed with a lot of unwanted miscellaneous materials such as dirt and stone. To get the gold, we have to get rid of all these unwanted materials. Similarly, our mind has two elements mixed together: wisdom and defilements. Wisdom itself is composed of two categories. One is the pure wisdom, which is our Buddha nature. The other is our relative wisdom. This is our accumulated learned wisdom not yet reflecting our Buddha nature. The defilements refer to our craving, anger, and ignorance. They are the polluted materials of the mind. When we die, our transferable consciousness, currently not free of all defilements, will emerge into a new body, carrying along our bad/good karma. Upon our death, if the transferable consciousness has good karma outweighing bad karma, we'll ascend to a better life. In this new life, we'll enjoy intelligence, wealth, and good health.

If bad karma outweighs the good one, we'll descend to a lower life which may include poverty, bad luck, and more sufferings. When we practice Buddhism, we'll enjoy two benefits: the inner joy in this present life, and the better future life made possible by good karma accumulated with practice. We hope that by now you have realized the importance of the transformation of our transferable consciousness which has to be transformed for inner joy and wisdom.

Marylynn:

- Master, do you imply that the transferable consciousness of my late husband could choose where to emerge for a new life?

- Yes, he can, but there is a limit. The more purified he is through meditation practice, the more control he has in picking a new life. It's like education. The more educated a person is, the more options he/she has, and thus the more government this person has over his future.

Friends, have you realized the additional secret? We will leave this life for a future life that can be partially under our control. Do you understand it and faithfully accept this truth?

To summarize, the first secret is that all things around us are impermanent, and ultimately destroyed. This is obvious but difficult for us to understand. Once understood, it is still difficult for us to really accept. Hence, although it is obvious, it still remains a secret. The second secret is that our True Mind is the creator, the master of our tranquility and inner joy, not only for this life but also for the next life.

If we are fortunate enough to live compatibly with our Buddha nature, we will enjoy complete tranquility and inner joy. With fewer defilements of mind, we will experience less suffering. If defilements overpower our Buddha nature, we will experience a great deal of suffering. So in this life,

we practice Zen meditation to filter out the mental defilements. If we live with our True Mind (Buddha nature), we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and perceive things as they are without evaluation or judgment. At this moment in class, you can hear me; this means you are currently living with your True Mind which is the essence of wisdom. If we relate to people using our True Mind, we will experience tranquility and inner joy. On the contrary, if we let feelings like hatred, joy, disapproval, approval, greed, jealousy, and anger result from these interactions, we merely encourage mental pollution and unwanted materials for our "gold mine" of transferable consciousness. Present, previous, and future lives all function in the same way.

When we are in the process of dying, how do we cope with this situation? Let's use the moment when we are seriously sick and hospitalized since that is the closest many of us have come to the state of dying. This happened when I had a stroke at the monastery and my sister nuns brought me to the hospital. How did I handle the situation? My friends and relatives worried about my fate. If I would have died at that moment, I would have died with friends and relatives around me who were suffering. Obviously, these people couldn't help me at that critical time.

During a moment like that, we should use two techniques to deal with the situation. One technique is to deeply inhale and exhale in order to facilitate the

working of our heart and arteries. I tried to regulate my breath in an attempt to improve my health. Of course, at that moment, the people who could help me most are the doctors and nurses, but at the same time, I had to help myself too. The second and most important is to prevent our mind from becoming agitated. The mind must be totally free of worries and wandering thoughts. Such a calm and empty mind manifests Buddha nature and helps us to experience total peace and inner joy. I believe that if we would have died at that moment, my death would have been a good one. It would have helped me to experience joy and calmness with my present body. This mental state would have taken me to a better future life if I had been reborn.

The two above-mentioned techniques apply not only to when we are dying but also to any moment in our lives. To review, the first technique is to evenly and deeply inhale and to gently and slowly exhale. This regulates the physical body. The second technique is for regulating our mind. We have to be clearly aware of what is happening around us when we are normal, seriously ill or dying. We have to clearly and directly “see” with our True Mind. If we realize any bonds or attachments whatsoever, we have to decisively cut, detach, and let go of them.

Friends, with a mind that has renounced everything and is totally detached, we can attain complete liberation. Please participate in the discussion. When

you are dying, to what do you think your mind would be attached?

Quang Hanh:

- When affected by a bodily ache, it's hard to mentally focus. We just want the ache to go away.

- Even if we want the ache to go away, will it go away? Or is this just an illusory desire? The actual physical pain is real, but it might be short-lived. When we actively wish the pain to stop, this wish prolongs the pain in our mind. The physical pain may come and go, but if we focus on it, the pain will last longer. We have this experience when we meditate. Our legs feel painful, but not excruciatingly so. The pain is off and on. But, because we are afraid of the pain, it seems to last longer. This is a fact. When we experience it, we see it is true.

I would like to reiterate. When we have a headache, the pain really exists. If we squarely face the headache and accept it, our pain will just come and go on its own and will not become prolonged in our mind. We usually suffer mentally more than we do physically.

I would like to clarify this point further because it is important. When we experience physical pain and we want it to go away, but it doesn't. This causes suffering, and is a manifestation of ignorance. For example, when we have a toothache and we want this

ache to stop right away, is this possible or is it impossible? When we want something that we can't have, are we suffering? This is our normal behavior that causes us to suffer and such behavior is not wise.

How is it wise to deal with our toothache? Wisdom is to live with the awareness of our pain. We are the observer of our pain and at the same time the observer of our awareness of being in pain. The observer who observes our awareness is part of our Buddha nature.

Do you have any doubts about the two techniques for dealing with a toothache before we go on to apply them to the states of near death or dying? The toothache reveals that our physical body is constantly deteriorating. Do you realize that? Our headache or any ache in our body reveals the fact that our physical body is impermanent and will ultimately be destroyed. It is a natural process that any organ of our physical body deteriorates and will eventually cease to exist. To reduce pain is merely a temporary cure, because it is always in the process of deterioration. For example, curing our toothache is a short-term solution for the pain, but our teeth have been continuously maturing and deteriorating since we have had them. In short, we shouldn't let this natural process bother us, because it is inevitable. We should live with our unborn, undying, and permanent "object" within which is our Buddha nature.

If we are able to live with our Buddha nature, we will enjoy true happiness and experience a perfect peace of mind in the present. If we die at this very moment, our clearer and more purified transferable consciousness will emerge into a newly formed body.

We want to conclude our discourse today with an idea from a four-line poem. There is an object that exists before the world and our bodies were formed. This object is formless, tranquil, very intelligent, and is always with us. Do any of you know what this object is?

- It's Buddha nature!

- Yes, you have understood this truth. It is Buddha nature. Buddha nature is most often underutilized by us and is mixed with our consciousness upon our death to emerge into a new body for the next life<sup>2</sup>.

Buddha nature is formless and so, we can't point at it. It's like electricity. We can't show you electricity, but when we flip the switch, the light goes on. Thus, you know that electricity exists. Right now, you can hear the voice of Quang Tri (the translator) from Canada. Do you know what is present? It is Buddha nature.

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<sup>2</sup> Refer to the "transferable consciousness" mentioned earlier.

Let us reiterate. The formless object<sup>3</sup> that we can't see has wonderful and powerful uses. A current of electricity can't be easily seen and thus, exists as a kind of secret. Similarly, our Buddha nature can't be seen and also exists as a kind of secret.

This formless object has two additional traits that we want to introduce to you. First, it is the master of all things. It has the ability to create all things. If we want to build a house, we have to depend on it. To enable someone to smile or to upset someone also depends on it. The ability to bring happiness to us or our family originates from it. Secondly, throughout all seasons and generations, it never changes, and it will stay the same forever.

This is a secret that we all probably understand, but it still remains a kind of secret. I hope that you all are able to truly and constantly live with this secret which is your Buddha nature.

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to "True Mind" previously discussed.