



Djetsün Gampopa

Awakening to Sanity (letter 12)

Basic reflections

Dear friend,

Today I shall present some very basic reflections following the opening section of Gampopa's famous "Jewel Ornament". His words can be freely rendered as follows:

"If we look at life in the most general way, we can differentiate two basic modes of experiencing life. The first way life is characterized by varying degrees of tension and the other one is completely free of tension. In Buddhism we call them samsara and nirvana.

The basic nature of samsara – life experience accompanied by tension – is ungraspable being without any solidity. Its signs are confusion due to erroneous assumptions about life experience and suffering. And the basic nature of nirvana – life experience completely free of tension – is the same, it is also ungraspable being without any solidity, but it is completely free of confusion and suffering. So, although their basic nature is identical, they are opposite ways of experiencing: one is tension and suffering, the other is freedom and happiness. How come?

All human beings and all other sentient beings – wherever they may be – will experience confusion in as much as they are caught in emotional patterns and erroneous assumptions about life. They are confused about the real nature of life experience; they are not aware of its ungraspable nature but believe that it has some kind of lasting existence. The reason is that they lack that clear, all encompassing awareness that would allow them to see life as it really is; they do not experience life with full presence of mind and their perceptions are distorted by assumptions about reality.

The confusion of humans and other sentient beings shows in the way they experience life: hope and fear, attachment and aversion, all kinds of identifications, all the time searching and clinging, and not being able to find any lasting happiness. They lack awareness like

someone being deeply asleep and they cling to their confusion like someone believing in the reality of a dream. And this confusion and unawareness is going on all the time everywhere: confusion shows wherever life experience is accompanied by grasping.

The problem with confusion is that it leads to continuous gross and subtle experiences of tension and suffering. Those who do not want to experience tension or suffering should find a way out of this profound confusion. But it only finishes with Awakening, when mind opens completely into timeless, aware being. But don't be fooled: this will not happen just by itself! For as long as life experience is not freed of emotional patterns and assumptions about reality, confusion will continue and be the source of suffering. That's why we should direct our whole being towards complete Awakening – from now on."

This is a free rendering of Gampopa's opening stanzas. I hope that they are helpful and inspiring to you. For me it is an exercise of staying close to the tradition and yet writing in an accessible language. It probably does lose a little of the liveliness of spontaneous language but it has the advantage of not just being the imaginations of my limited mind.

With the best wishes for a beautiful day, Tilmann Lhundrup

(seen through by Andy)