

December 10, 2022

Thaye Dorje, the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa shares the following message regarding the 2022 Kagyu Monlam.

Dear Dharma friends,

This year's Kagyu Monlam will be the 20th since the first Monlam gathering in our time, which was held in 1994 at Lumbini, the birthplace of our historical Buddha Shakyamuni, at the instigation of the late 14th Kunzig Shamar Rinpoche.

I would like to take this opportunity to share a few personal thoughts on the practice of aspirations with all of you.

At a time like the Kagyu Monlam, which is all centered around wishes and aspirations, it seems like this particular spirituality called 'Buddhism' places great emphasis on aspirations so that we might get the feeling that it is very important to make wishes, that we must make wishes.

And then, along with that, we might start wondering about things like "Will they come true? When will they be realized?" We might have thoughts such as, "I have been making wishes long before attending a Kagyu Monlam, long before I even heard about aspiration prayers. I have been making aspirations all my life, ever since I can remember and none of them seem to have come true."

So, is it really important to make aspirations, or should we just let things be?

I would suggest that we might look at aspirations from another angle altogether and consider aspirations a luxury that comes with being born as a human being.

What is an aspiration? What is a wish? No one can really put a finger on it, I imagine.

But what we can see is that there doesn't seem to be any place for aspirations in the so-called natural world—not in the sense that the natural world is 'barren' of the beauty of wishes; but can you see trees and rocks and mountains wishing? Not really, I presume.

In the same way, if we are comfortable with the idea of beings in 'higher realms' such as the god realms, we should understand that they have no real opportunity to make wishes.

Similarly, if we are born in the lower realms, such as the animal state—maybe it's easier for us to relate to them because we are able to see them—we don't see animals praying like we do. So therefore, I feel we can safely say that they don't have that luxury, either. They're always on the lookout for survival; they are living on instinct, not aspirations.

But we, as human beings, have the privilege to wish—we have that luxury. Why? Because we can make use of concepts.

So, my feeling is that Buddhism emphasizes aspirations not because we must aspire. It's more that human beings naturally aspire from the moment they are born. It's in our nature, it's part of our habit. Why? Because humans are the masters of concepts. Aspirations are a part of concepts and so therefore human beings will make wishes and Buddhism goes along with that and says, "Why not?"

In that way, the Monlam aspect of Buddhism shows that Buddhism doesn't deny anything; it goes along with everything.

And so therefore, what Buddhism is saying is that since this time around we have a brief time span as a human being, we don't need to refrain from making wishes. What Buddhism is telling us is, "By all means, go along with this nature of yours, aspire and wish to your heart's content—but make wishes and aspirations that won't confuse you, that won't bring afflictive emotions. Instead, make wishes and aspirations that are beautiful, that are soothing for yourself and for your society."

So that's what Buddhism encourages us to do and that's why Buddhas and Bodhisattvas spend eons thinking of the most beautiful and inspiring wishes. And that's why these wishes are known as perfect speech because none of these aspirations say, "Lie. Cheat. Kill. Steal." Instead, they are all about saying things like "Wish for happiness. Do kind things. Do good things. Do generous things."

In other words, Buddhism simply goes along with our natural inclination as human beings to make wishes, to make aspirations.

And once again, what is an aspiration? It's basically a concept. It's a way of living, it's a way of expressing yourself. It's a way of living out your life to the fullest.

So, dear Dharma friends, let us use these days of the Kagyu Monlam to fully express our human nature by joining in the perfect aspirations of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, without any sense of a mission to accomplish, without any doubt or hesitation, but with whole-hearted enjoyment.

Last but not least, I look forward to finally meeting all of you again in person next year, be it in Europe or in India. In the meantime, practice well and take good care of yourselves.

With prayers,

—Thaye Dorje, the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa