

CENTER OF YOUR MANDALA

by Ani Pema Chödrön, August 2004

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A very long time ago I heard a teaching by a Tibetan teacher, not the Vidyadhara, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. He asked, “What is at the center of your mandala, the center of your personal mandala?”

This was a Vajrayana teaching being given about our personal environment, the outer environment being a mandala. As Vajrayana students, at a certain point, when we start sadhana practice, there is a deity at the center of the mandala. This teacher used this image for everyday life saying that what's at the center of your life mandala will decide how your whole life goes. He spoke to lay people, “If career is at the center of your mandala, then everything you do is going to be influenced by your wanting to get ahead with your career.

If family life is at the center of your mandala, then everything you do is going to revolve around that, the way you spend your energy, your actions and words, everything. Somehow that will be the focus of your life, or the most important thing.”

For a Dharma practitioner, your desire to attain enlightenment is at the center of the mandala. Then, your family life becomes the path to enlightenment, your career becomes the path to enlightenment, your schooling becomes the path to attaining enlightenment.

Using this metaphor, at the relative level, yes, I feel that we should develop the monastery so that it is a rich life for people, whatever someone's heart desire is, in terms of and in accord with monastic life. Whether your desire is to learn Tibetan, or be a teacher, or be socially engaged as a hospice monk or nun, etc. If that's at the center, it's not going to work. But if what is at the center of the mandala is the desire to attain enlightenment, to wake up fully from the samsaric mind set, then everything is a support for that.

These things are not in contradiction because we get up in the morning, we live our day and go to sleep at night. Is that day a path to enlightenment or is it just a regular samsaric day? Definitely, wearing robes and living in a monastery does not turn it into a path to enlightenment even though it is meant to support it in every way.

Even though I want to talk of commitment to attaining enlightenment, I wish to include the mundane aspects of our lives. I thought of putting at the center of my mandala a pithy phrase, “Going beyond bias.” Yours could be different. If you said that everyday you will have renewed your commitment to spending that day going beyond bias. When you fall asleep, if possible, you say, “I can remember going beyond bias in my dreams”. Then 24 hours a day are covered. You wake up in the morning and recommit, because this talk is also about the importance of commitment.

Sometimes this is talked about as intention. It has so much power if you are clear about what your intention is. It really ripens! It's like watering positive karmic seeds if you are clear about what your intention or what your commitment is. ~