

# GOING BEYOND BIAS

## A Talk by Sangyum Agness Au

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Last night, I wanted to think about this talk but realized that I was holding the contents of 12 hours of meetings and would need to make a transition. So, after returning to the Ranch House, I changed my clothes and went outside for a few moments, to soak in the landscape. The almost full moon was clearly delineated, the sky was lucid and crisp, and I heard the howl of, I think, coyotes.....*yip yip yip yow, howl, how –o-oo-oooo.....*

In an instant, the 12 hours of content dissolved. I reflected on how simple nature is; although it's very complex, it's also extremely simple, in contrast to our human society, the millions of issues we've been hearing about and discussing these past few days. The topic of "going beyond bias" pertains to the diversity of human society and the resulting complexity of our issues. Even though we have the highest intelligence of all the species, we're also capable of creating the greatest amount of bias.

In the modern world, diversity awareness has become a fundamental and basic skill that is necessary for all leaders, in particular leaders who have been entrusted with the vision of enlightened society, within a growing multicultural community that has become more and more diverse. It's an ongoing discipline. Each layer of bias we uncover will point to another layer and another layer.

I assume that everyone here is very open to the subject of diversity, is sensitive to diversity issues, and has great intention to support this policy of "no bias." I wouldn't

question anyone here about that intention. But we continue to discover layers of bias, in our own practice – don't we? *[laughter]* – I hope. It's an ongoing process of discovery, encountering more subtle layers of bias as we go. So I thought it might be good to review, from the dharmic standpoint, what is "no bias."

Yesterday, Mrs. Haspray mentioned the cosmic mirror as a principle of no bias, that it reflects everything. I wonder if anyone would like to offer other dharma teachings that work with "no bias."

AUDIENCE: I thought about this yesterday in one of our discussions. I actually think that no bias from the teaching point of view would fundamentally be seeing everyone as possessing basic goodness or just being confused, as opposed to "us" and "them"...sacred mandala....

AA: Right, right. Anyone else? Examples of "no bias," in terms of our dharmic principles, like shunyata?

AUDIENCE: The bodhisattva vow and the whole idea of putting others before oneself...

AA: Right. No separation between "I" and "other."

AUDIENCE: ...just that exchanging, putting yourself in the other's place...or choosing the position of less status?

AUDIENCE: When I think of bias I think of spiritual materialism, which means that you could have a reference point on physical things or concept of physical things or trying to rest in some kind of intellectual point of view, or trying to rest in a spiritual point of view. So being beyond bias is beyond any kind of reference point at all. It's just resting in a situation and seeing it clearly.

AUDIENCE: Emptiness, not being carried away by thought.

AUDIENCE: It seems like it would be the first instruction we receive when we come to the center and sit down, working with whatever arises without bias.

AUDIENCE: One of the teachings on ego is that ego actually defines itself against other; so the whole process of ego is one of bias.

AA: Right, right. Thank you, thank you.

### **Absolute and Relative Ashe**

Since we already have these teachings as the basis of our path, it seems like we don't really need to talk about this [*laughter*] at all. However, it's always good to review the principle of "no bias," as the practice is so multi-layered and subtle. After the Rigden Abhiseka, the Sakyong's teaching on the Ashe principle described the *A* as the unconditioned aspect of reality, and the *she* as all the conditions of reality. How can we

as leaders, bring the *A* element to our work with the actual diversity that we encounter, the *she*? How can we combine the view, in our work with all the diversity that exists; of race, gender, different cultural backgrounds and capabilities – so forth, as an ongoing discipline, seeing the unfamiliar as – “Oh, a new *she* today! – I’ve not dealt with this before.”

So if we can keep the *A* element within our practice, the Absolute Ashe element, the unconditioned element, the no-separation element, then we can incorporate the *she* into our work in a more balanced way, without going to the extreme of confirming every diverse situation that we meet, in a so-called grandmotherly compassionate way, to include just for the sake of not letting other people feel uncomfortable – that’s not the point at all. Do you understand what I mean? We provide no bias, but that does not mean confirmation per se.

“No bias” is a situation of openness – not filling in the gaps. We extend warmth and openness, but it doesn’t go as far as “right, right, I know exactly what you’re talking about, isn’t this terrible?” That’s a conventional way of working with bias. As soon as we do that, we’ve already created a separation between those *with* bias and us so-called *no-bias* people. From a dharmic point of view, that in itself is bias.

The basis of our path is non-dual; that’s the vision – the heaven – of how we maintain no bias. Whenever we experience separation in any form, look at it and try to understand it. How can we *include* our feeling of separation into our practice? What is there about that other situation we want to separate from, and what can we learn from that? The goal is not to homogenize everything. Everything has its distinct, vivid, diverse quality. How can we just accommodate all of it – “accommodating” meaning “to allow

space for” – and still maintain the view, to allow space for whatever we may encounter, be it setting sun or Great Eastern Sun, confusion or wisdom?

### **The Three Poisons**

In our path, we’ll notice bias as an obvious display of fear, when we separate ourselves from that which is unknown, which is threatening or different. We habitually react to the fear with a type of aggression, by pushing away. This behavior is at the root of the majority of what is conventionally known as bias.

A second category – I’m basically talking about the three poisons – is the bias that’s caused by hope or passion, the wish to join the “with-it” crowd, the cool scene. Then instantly, we have bias towards the “out” crowd. This can happen in the very simplest ways, like when we enter into a new situation – a new school, new job, any society we’re joining – we have that particular hope of belonging. As practitioners, looking for something better, we tend to create a separation from those not on a search, as we want to be identified with those who are seeking realization, enlightenment, whatever it is. This is where spiritual materialism comes in.

The last category of bias is ignoring. This is actually the most prevalent form of bias: what we ignore. In working with the feminine principle, it became immediately apparent that the feminine principle – the Buddhist metaphor for space – is the most ignored element of our modern society. Our orientation is toward activity, energy, what’s going on, what’s in the forefront, what is visible, what is tangible. Therefore, we tend to ignore what is intangible, in the background, the space itself. These poisons are pointed out in myriad ways, in the teachings. Our path is to recognize feelings of separation or

bias, from the more discreet instances to the heightened situations where someone scared us or really pissed us off, due to differences.

We decided to do this [diversity awareness] workshop in-house, because we felt the dharmic understanding of bias encompassed both the gross and the most subtle forms. By incorporating the teachings, we could join our leadership work within our individual communities and the greater community with the essence of the path itself. We have so much to learn and work with, in this area.

### **Basic Goodness and Prajna**

The teachings tell us who we are, who we actually are in a very “lha” heavenly way – that we already possess enlightened possibilities, so the path becomes one of noticing the dichotomy between this fruitional description and our normal experience. We came to the path with all kinds of assumptions of who we were and misunderstood “basic goodness” to mean “good vs. bad.” We go back and forth between the dichotomy of what the teachings say and what we actually experience.

But slowly, in glimpses we begin to see – “Ah I see, basic goodness is neither good nor bad, and the protection principle is about *overcoming* aggression” – all these basic flips that we work with, all the dichotomies of the path, even the subject of bias itself. When we say no bias, does that mean no discrimination? This is a key point for sangha leaders, to understand how the word “discrimination” is used in the dharma. In conventional usage, the words “discriminate” and “bias” are closely linked.

The teachings tell us that we need to discriminate. That *prajna*, or insight, is the ability to see things as they are – the complexity of phenomena, distinctly and vividly. Discriminating awareness in its wisdom form perceives clearly, without developing bias towards our own liking, disliking, or ignoring of the vividness.

This is very subtle; this confusion often comes up during questions and answers. Frequently I hear, “Well if this is supposed to be enlightened society, why do we have all these issues?” That’s the basic dilemma, that’s the dichotomy we’re working with – the absolute view and then the relative reality. How do these join?

It’s clearly defined in the Rigden thangka we use for Werma practice – he’s holding a sword in his right hand, the sword of *prajna*, which symbolizes the knowledge of what to accept and what to reject. And the three jewels in his left hand, what do they represent?

AUDIENCE: Buddha, dharma and sangha.

AA: Right, and also the inseparability of wisdom and skillful means. We can easily discriminate and recognize differences, yet we know that space can accommodate all the diversity, as a part of the whole – that’s union. As leaders, when we’re dealing with divergent and challenging situations, our aim is to arrive at a “win-win” for the benefit of the whole, to join the dichotomy of the absolute and the relative, of heaven and earth.

In the book, *The Sanity We Are Born With: A Buddhist Approach to Psychology*, the Vidyadhara says, “Shila is the ground of meditation and samadhi is the actual path of the practice. The fruition is prajna, or the insight that begins to develop through one’s meditation. In the experience of prajna, one begins to see directly and concretely how the mind functions, its mechanics and reflexes, moment to moment. Prajna is traditionally called discriminating awareness, which does not mean discriminating in the sense of developing bias. Rather, prajna is unbiased knowledge of one’s world and one’s mind. It is discriminating in the sense of sorting out confusion and neurosis.”

When we think of the Shambhala principle of Relative Ashe, we tend to think of it as a “good” thing, but going deeper, we discover that it’s actually neutral, like co-emergent wisdom. In the root text of *The Golden Sun of the Great East*, the description of the Ashe in human hearts, says:

“From this humans break the law; From this humans obey the law.”

Meaning that from the power of Ashe, every sort of activity is possible, but only through the warrior’s intelligence, the prajna that sharpens Relative Ashe, will we be able to discriminate between Great Eastern Sun vision and the setting sun.

### **Justice**

Another relevant teaching from the root text is the discussion of the qualities of Absolute Ashe, which are Profound, Brilliant, Just, Powerful, and All-Victorious. On the quality of Just, it says “Such justice is free from extremes of both just and unjust.” What does that mean, to experience justice that’s beyond conventional ideas of just and unjust? I think this principle is very important for leaders because we *do* have to make calls, we

*do* extend a level of judgment about what is acceptable and not acceptable, so contemplating this is key to arriving at a “win-win.”

AUDIENCE: This kind of gets me....just and unjust...if something has happened that is unjust, how does a leader help that be a win-win for the individual group that experienced injustice?

AA: Well there're two sides; for us to simply say that this one is just and this is unjust wouldn't be the whole picture. In order to work out a win-win, we try to see the view from here and we try see the view from there, between the two divergent views. We hold the middle. Where is the meeting point of the two views? I find that to reach a win-win, both sides should be able to keep some face, feel that the outcome is just, and share in acknowledging the confusion as well.

AUDIENCE (follow-up): We might say that on any scale of human viewing, the holocaust in Germany was an unjust situation. Nearly all humanity would judge it as unjust – but if it's after the war and we're trying to now relate to individuals who are still living and had a part in that, this is a bigger view, so that we could tell they were really confused but we can see what they were trying to do. And we won't judge it but we'll go forward from this point?

AA: It's not simply that we won't judge it, but the willingness to see the cause and effect. Although karma is supposedly only seen from an enlightened point of view,

we're trying to develop, study and understand cause and effect altogether, which is beyond conventional ideas of just and unjust. This is a big, big, big challenge, and perhaps if we can work from that point of view with smaller issues, we can begin to drop our attachment to the idea of justice as we conventionally know it. I find that for myself, it's one of my spiritual materialisms, to quickly react to injustice and feel that things are "no fair." Of course, then immediately I have a view, a bias. I think that's common for many of us on a spiritual path. We want to establish what's right and what's wrong so the path is clear and easy to follow. But in the absolute sense, in the ultimate sense, it's a partial view – not the ultimate sense of justice, as I understand from the root text.

AUDIENCE: There's an example of what you're saying, in a brief article in the most recent issue of *Elephant* magazine; it's the story Thich Nhat Hahn tells of pirates off the coast of Vietnam who used to seize other boats in the sea, steal from them, and rape the women on them. The striking thing about the article is that the story is told from the perspective of the pirate, revealing all the conditions of the pirate's life that had brought him to such a state in his life. When Thich Nhat Hahn himself took that perspective, his compassion, which had been directed toward the raped women, shifted to the sad, samsaric situation that had created the pirate and his perceived need to steal and rape. Through this contemplative exercise, compassion broadened to the whole samsaric situation, rather than remaining simply with the victims. The result was a bigger heart toward the whole situation, without bias.

AUDIENCE: From the *Auto-Commentary* [*The Tiger Lion Garuda Dragon Glory: The Auto-Commentary on the Text of the Golden Sun of the East*], about how you can't just trust justice, you have to trust injustice...several years ago that jumped out at me after a retreat, and that's kind of been the gateway for me into the work that arose in the [Shambhala] Congress and talking circles. I have a strong sense of what's fair and what's right, and that passage penetrated that... it's one of the most profound teachings in the *Auto-Commentary*. And thank you for bringing it out this way.

### **Windhorse and Enlightened Society**

In the past, when we've perceived obvious bias of some kind, let's say, the injustices that our country brought about, like slavery for instance, it seemed the rationale was that we needed the energy – the windhorse – of others so that the new country could rise up – at the price of oppressing others. What I would like to suggest, in working with no bias, is that when we are not caught in the dualism of bias, our windhorse becomes liberated, and perhaps that is actually how enlightened society can manifest, with citizens who have liberated windhorse and therefore, are free of dependency on the energy of others. We'd have the energy, the ability to see clearly, with confidence the best way to move forward. When we're faced with conflict, we hold the view of justice as beyond the extremes of just and unjust, and that releases us from the conundrum, the pain, the suffering of not knowing what to do with the feelings of separation and situations of conventional injustice.

If we can liberate all that energy and no longer need to ride on the backs of others, on those that we've rejected in order to feel some sense of false or conditional

confidence, we begin to understand unconditioned confidence and develop sufficient windhorse to bring about enlightened society, a society that brings awareness to their challenges. Rather than blaming people who have challenge, we work to understand what is their experience. What is the challenge of diversity, the experience of mental or physical disability, what are the challenges of addictions?

This society is not a *perfect* society - enlightened society means that we work with challenges in an enlightened way, in an unbiased way, in an unconditioned way, and in the tradition of best practices, we build on what works and share it with the rest of society. We shouldn't throw away a single piece of challenge because the experience from that work becomes the steppingstones for others to enter enlightened society.

That means we should be very willing and diligent to see challenge for what it is, as workable and containing a wealth of teaching, wealth that can be shared with others. We have an endless variety of challenge, as everyone brings their own mix and displays of diversity, but there will be plenty of overlap, and that we can share. Opening in the face of challenge, we face forward; it's windhorse, windhorse and more windhorse.

### **Addiction and Abuse**

AUDIENCE: Where I keep being stuck, the process that you just put us through was very soft and gentle and all that, working with all these energies, and opening, and I think – drug addicts – I've got no space and time for dealing with that...how you have to deal with people who are addicted to drugs, and issues connected with that situation in the [Shambhala] Center, where there's been some sexual offense and you have to protect

one party, and you have to decide if the other party can even be in the same room...some of the things that just shut you right down.... Those two issues are like rocks...

AA: With any addiction – if we can help the addicted person bring the addiction to the path, to actually have the discipline to maintain awareness of one's addiction, that's the main practice we can offer. We can also offer awareness to, let's say, a victim of abuse. How do they work with having been abused? Where is the path that's available to them for their situation?

I'm presenting a best case, that the addicted person can bring their challenge to the path and subsequently, be able to offer their particular experience of this or that addiction, and the history of how the challenge was worked with or overcome. As a community, we're trying to provide a safe space, a situation where addiction can be seen for what it is, without blame, so that hopefully in an open situation, the addicted person can also feel enough space to work with it, rather than the cycle of addiction and deception, more addiction and greater deception – which keeps the addiction underground and active. The addicted person is working with two things: the addiction itself and the deception to hide and ignore the fact.

At the same time, for the people who want to help, there's a tricky, razor's edge element in trying to maintain privacy for the addictive or abusive person, while not contributing to the deceptive tendencies. We have lots to learn. I feel this is newer ground than most of society works with. Can we talk about our challenges with awareness?

If our society is truly open to discussing issues, there would be less of a problem for the addicted person if they do not have to hide [the addiction] – to bring problems into the sunlight so they can be worked on.

AUDIENCE (follow-up): So our challenge is to keep our prajna sharp enough to not be idiot compassionate so that it doesn't suck you right in.

AA: That's right, totally right. Separation is the predominant warning, the red light--when we separate ourselves from the addicted person, from the abuser in any sense, then immediately we'll have a partial solution. If we are too fearful of getting up, right next to the problem, we won't come up with a solution that reflects the "now" of that situation. We have to stay there, not be afraid of the addiction, not be afraid of the suffering that the addiction or the abuse may have caused.

OK, shall we move on?

*--Talk transcribed by Linda G. Francis*