

## **MIND IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM with OLE NYDAHL, Ph.D.**

JEFFREY MISHLOVE, Ph.D.: Hello and welcome. With me today is a Danish Tibetan lama, Ole Nydahl, the first Westerner authorized by the Karmapa Lama, the head of the Kagyupa School of Tibetan Buddhism to teach Tibetan Buddhist meditation practices.

Dr. Nydahl also has a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Copenhagen, and he is the author of a book called *Entering the Diamond Way*, an autobiographical account of his experiences with the Tibetan lamas. Welcome, Ole.

OLE NYDAHL, Ph.D.: Thank you very much.

MISHLOVE: It's a pleasure to have you here. You describe some extraordinary practices in your book. They would almost seem forbidding to the average Westerner. For example, just to begin the practice of Buddhism one has to perform over a hundred thousand prostrations, and things of this sort. Could you talk a little bit about the purpose of this kind of intense discipline?

NYDAHL: Well, the Buddha taught three different kinds of people. He taught ordinary people who just wanted to get rid of their own problems, who just wanted to live better with less problems. He taught those about cause and effect.

Then other people have the need for a rich inner life. They want to feel something, they want something to happen inside. They can't just be satisfied with getting out of trouble; they want something meaningful inside. And those he taught about compassion and wisdom, how to develop these qualities.

And finally, then, there was a group of people who weren't able to see the Buddha as a person or a man or something out there, but as a mirror to their own face, something showing their own potential. And those he taught about their own Buddha mind, their timeless Buddha nature, their all-knowing essence, and so on.

And for these people who want to go that third way, the very quick, direct way, then one of the practices is the use of the hundred thousand belly-flops, or full prostrations, or what we want to call them, hundred-syllable very long purification mantras, and so on.

But it's not something one has to do.

Buddhism is easy. If you have confidence there is an absolute goal, if you think there is a way, and if you think there are friends you can trust on the way, you are Buddhist.

MISHLOVE: It's that simple.

NYDAHL: That simple.

MISHLOVE: Well, then I'm probably a Buddhist myself.

NYDAHL: Most good people are.

MISHLOVE: It's interesting to me, though, the intensity of the disciplines that were developed, particularly in Tibet. We don't have much appreciation for the fact that this is a culture of a thousand years or more, that focused almost exclusively on this intense path, the path of the lamas that you describe, discovering your own pure Buddha essence.

And now this tradition has come to the West. You're amongst the first people to bring it here. And you have a unique perspective on the mind. Basically what you seem to be saying is the degree of enlightenment achieved by the Buddha himself is inherent in all of us.

NYDAHL: In everybody's nature.

MISHLOVE: When we understand who and what we really are.

NYDAHL: The true essence of everybody's mind is open space. Nobody has ever been able to say, "My mind has a certain weight, color, smell, size, or anything."

Awareness is like space -- but not like a black hole, not like a disappearance; like radiant space. We cannot find anything we can call the mind, but there's no ending to the things happening in our mind -- like this situation we're sharing now, you know, and all the things happening everywhere. They appear in the mind.

And finally, we are not limited by what we usually consider our personalities. Our personalities are something we can also do, not something we can only do. I mean, the experience that it's not an either/or but a both/and proposition -- that we can be this and that and that; that mind is like clear open space which can contain all things. This is the essential understanding of Buddhism.

MISHLOVE: So this clear, limitless space, kind of like an experience of infinity or something -- this I presume is what's often referred to as nirvana.

NYDAHL: Yes, this timeless awareness, where you see the seer and not just the thing seen, where you see the space where things happen and not just the things happening in that space, that is a timeless state; that is a blowing out of all suffering. That is nirvana.

MISHLOVE: Well, that's probably a good starting point for our discussion. Most of us, we go through our lives from day to day; we experience anger, we experience frustration, we get caught up in our personalities and our particular dramas. And I gather that the disciplines that you go through -- the chanting and the prostrations and the like -- are ways of helping us to kind of disengage from that part of our life a little bit.

NYDAHL: It's true again; again here there are three levels. Like there were three levels of teaching, there are also three levels of meditations that bring this about. For people who are mainly

egotists, who mainly think of themselves, there is the ordinary sitting, calming meditation, where you just sit down. This gives you so much distance from the things happening in the mind that after awhile you can decide to take part in the comedies and avoid the tragedies. I mean, as you get space around the things happening, then you aren't caught like a little poor puppy and shaken up right and left by the feelings, but you have a distance.

MISHLOVE: In other words, you might still get angry, but you have enough distance from it so that you don't have to buy into it.

NYDAHL: Yes, sure. And the second level of meditation, for those who develop a rich inner life, for those with compassion and wisdom, has to do with beginning the meditation with the idea, "I'm now meditating to be able to benefit all beings," and ending it with sharing all the good feelings, with really a rich feeling of, "May all beings share this happiness."

And for those who want quick enlightenment, who really want to recognize their mind in a very short time, if possible in this life span already, to experience continually this open, clear essence inside -- for those there are methods of visualizing certain forms of energy and light that correspond to our subconscious abilities and potentials and directions, using certain mantras or vibrations to activate it and then dissolve it in light and mix it into ourselves again and again, till he who meditates, the Buddha we meditate on, and the process of meditation become one.

And this is a total state, because it uses our feeling, our devotion, our wishes, our fantasy  
-- everything is involved in it. And for that reason it's very quick.

MISHLOVE: You know, in your book you describe the fact that you began your journeys to the Orient, to Tibet and Nepal, living a very different lifestyle than you live now. At that time it was. I guess, the late 60s, and you frankly admit you were using drugs, and actually having, as you describe them, some very powerful, radiant kinds of

experiences with drugs, as many people of that generation have described. And then -- what you seem to have found in Buddhism, though, is something more authentic, something --

NYDAHL: Something lasting. Lasting is the thing. That's the key word.

MISHLOVE: In other words, you're not denying the authenticity of the drug experiences that you had.

NYDAHL: What I'm saying is that if people have the right kind of preparation through former lives, they may have experiences like that. When tobacco came into the West about 400 years ago, with the Spanish coming back from America, at that time many people were having clear hallucinations from the tobacco. I mean, you will see comic-strip-like characters in the old paintings of that time, with people having little billows, little blocks above their heads, with all kinds of things happening inside -- meaning that they were hallucinating strongly. And I think any drug, any substance, if there is, let's say, a subconscious store of psychological power or energy from former lives, then whatever comes at a certain time will be that which triggers it off. A lot of young people today, who do not have that basis that, for instance, a lot of people of my generation had, they just get drunk when they take LSD. They say, "Oh, I had so much acid," you know; they walk around like that, and the whole spiritual thing is lacking. So I think it builds on former lives. It's what we have along. It's what we have that we can see, and what we don't have we won't see.

MISHLOVE: And perhaps there's something to the effect of former lives in the resurgence of Buddhism in the Western world right now. So many people seem to be drawn to it.

NYDAHL: Yes.

MISHLOVE: You yourself have established many, many centers.

NYDAHL: Well, it's logical. I mean, the mind clearly has two aspects. It has a moving aspect, which are the impressions coming and going; and it has a lasting aspect -- the nonmoving, the real aspect. And that is without beginning and end, without birth and death. It's timeless. When we recognize our mind as timeless, the rest is clear.

MISHLOVE: And in that timelessness of the mind, is there a sense in which there is unity with all of existence?

NYDAHL: Well, this open, clear space everywhere is the same. And the all-knowingness which is manifested by Buddhas, and which my lama, the Karmapa, showed very clearly, when he sat in Sikkim and told me how my old mother was doing in Copenhagen -- I mean, really telling me that, straight out, right? That's she'd sprained an ankle, and so on, and stuff like that. And then I got a letter a week after, saying that. This proves that space energy, space clarity, at all times, is one thing, and that whenever we open up to it, that's it. That is enlightenment, that is timeless awareness.

MISHLOVE: One of the things that most Westerners are familiar with is the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and the idea that the Tibetans have a very detailed understanding of what happens to the mind itself in death. Your lama, the Karmapa, was apparently very gifted in helping people actually using this same psychic ability, you might call it, to pass through that transition of death.

NYDAHL: Wonderful to hear you say that. It really touches me. Goose pimples. I really feel good about it. Yes, it's true. We do have something there. There are many, many cultures in the world where Buddhism and other religions, say, live alongside. Buddhism is tolerant. They see religion as a medicine, and some people use that medicine, and some people want to use another medicine. So Buddhism can exist very well alongside other religions. In places like China, places like Japan, and many other places, Buddhism lives alongside other religions. And when it's a question of holiday and marriage and all the different fine celebrations, very often people go

to the other religions, because they're good at that. And when people die, they always come straight to us. That's because that's what we know about. Death and rebirth, that's really our thing. And there, not only consciously reborn -- we have got maybe a hundred consciously reborn lamas, with more or less consciousness, with more or less awareness.

MISHLOVE: This is a situation where a lama, such as your teacher, before they die will describe the situation in which they plan to return.

NYDAHL: Every detail about their next life. Everything they write down.

MISHLOVE: So you just have to go look for --

NYDAHL: You open the letter, you say, "Oh, that's where he is." And you go. The last Karmapa who died, the fifteenth Karmapa, who died in 1922, left a detailed letter saying, "On the full moon day of the sixth month in the Mouse year in the family At Thub at the golden river in the town of Denkur, the place where the great archer Denma has once been standing, there I'll take my rebirth in the womb of an earthly goddess, and my name will be Bangjung Dorje." I mean, you can't do it better in a country with no numbers on the houses. So they found the kid, and he remembered all the people he'd been with, the things and everything.

MISHLOVE: So the consciousness of this lama, with whom you studied for many, many years -- it's mind boggling, extraordinary, astounding, from the point of view of our Western, day-to-day life, and what we think of as within the realm of possibility. And now this realm has become your day-to-day reality.

NYDAHL: Sure. But to get back to the bardo again a little bit. I mean, somebody who's enlightened lives like that. When we who are not, when people who do not have much control of their mind, when they die, then something very else is experienced. First there is,



while one stops breathing, the energy from outside entering more and more into the center of the energy channel in the body, which is eight fingers behind the original hairline on the top back of the head, to four fingers underneath the center of the body. There's kind of like an energy axis there. And during this time, then one takes three deep breaths, and at that time the outer breath is gone. But there's still an inner breath, certain energies moving inside. We also see in hospitals where they put these electrical things on people's hearts and jump them back into existence again, right? So there's about 20 minutes there, where white energy comes down, red energy goes up, and at that time very clear light is seen. And if that isn't recognized, then there are three to four days of unconsciousness. And then starts the bardo. Then start the psychological transformations, until one is reborn again.

MISHLOVE: As I understand it, the way that process works is that the habitual thoughts that we have cultivated in our mind during our normal life, appear to us in the bardo plane, or the after-death plane as the Tibetans refer to it, as objective parts of outside reality.

NYDAHL: Like in a dream.

MISHLOVE: Like in a dream. So if I'm a very angry person, I might see a lot of demons.

NYDAHL: You won't be happy. If you're very angry you hurt yourself. You will not be happy. If you're loving, if you have good thoughts, this will come as wonderful projections. If you really anger or harm people and so on, you will not be happy.

MISHLOVE: So it would seem, then, that the message of this type of psychology is that for those of us who might have any kind of belief in an afterlife, it's very important for us to discipline our minds now, to create the kind of states of consciousness we might want to have with us if all we had was our consciousness, and not the body.



NYDAHL: That's wonderful, yes. I completely agree. This life offers great opportunities for filling the mind with that which brings happiness, and avoiding that which brings suffering. And it is a moment-to-moment process, it really is. That's true.

MISHLOVE: And the various disciplines that we've referred to -- chanting and other disciplines, in Tibetan Buddhism and other forms of Buddhism, and other forms of mental disciplines -- are for the purpose, then, of really purifying the mind from those things which might interfere with a favorable rebirth.

NYDAHL: Sure, and to be able to benefit others also. Both things at the same time. On the one side we purify; on the other side we develop the power to benefit others. Both are there all the time.

MISHLOVE: The emphasis on benefiting others is very interesting, because I suppose in the Buddhist theory, if one achieves the ultimate state, the pure, limitless clear light, then there is no necessity for rebirth at all.

NYDAHL: That's true. There is no necessity for a personal rebirth, but one will usually take several incarnations to help all those beings that one has made a karmic connection with, a link with, in one's development process. One has been reaching certain beings, going parts of the way with them, and then even when there is no ego to be reborn anymore, there is no idea of a self to attach to any body, anywhere, then still one will take chosen rebirths, like the Karmapa and the Dalai Lama and others. One will take a chosen rebirth, in order to be able to help them the rest of the way. That's why we have these series of incarnations in Tibetan Buddhism.

MISHLOVE: You know, a lot of people are probably familiar with Zen Buddhism, and it seems in many ways almost like an opposite polarity to Tibetan Buddhism, in the sense that Zen seems very pure, with no emphasis on, for example, the various deities and demons of Tibetan Buddhism. How does that contrast look from your perspective?

NYDAHL: Well, there's Catholic Buddhism, that's us; and there's Protestant Buddhism, that's Zen, more or less, right? But we do have all the Zen teachings. We have people who have gone the whole way to enlightenment without ever looking at a picture -- just sitting in a cave, naked, with no ornaments, working with their own minds. On the other hand, there is no doubt that we are constantly being influenced by the world around us -- that everything outside touches us and works on our mind. So filling the surroundings around us with pleasant experiences, which will keep feedbacking, giving back pleasant experiences to our mind, and thoughts of enlightenment, is wise. As the Tibetans say, it's skillful means.

MISHLOVE: One of the characteristics of your book, *Entering the Diamond Way*, is that it's full of miraculous things. Your first teacher was a lama who seemed to have the ability to make himself invisible, to disappear. And you describe many, many kinds of miraculous events, including healings and visions of various sorts. Some forms of Buddhism would suggest that these things are distractions from the path of enlightenment, and people would be discouraged from pursuing an interest in them. I gather that's not your perspective.

NYDAHL: No. For some people, we say that for them it's possibly right. For me, I'm so impressed and so thankful every time I see what the mind can do; I mean, miracles are still with me. They happen all over the place. You know, things fit in; things have meaning; things happen in fantastic ways. And the higher this level of seeing things, the higher the ability to see things becomes, the easier it is to avoid the disturbing feelings, the more natural it becomes to behave like a Buddha oneself, which is the whole trick. The whole trick is to see other beings and oneself all as Buddhas, everything on the highest, purest level. And when one has that view, then spontaneously and effortlessly, one will be doing that which brings beings to that level. So for me, I'm very happy I've seen all those things and that they still happen in my life. I'm grateful.

MISHLOVE: You refer to the term "force field" quite a bit in your book. The various lamas with whom you worked seemed to have a force field, and they could protect you. You mentioned that you used to drive automobiles and motorcycles quite recklessly --

NYDAHL: I still do.

MISHLOVE: Still do? And haven't been injured, because of this protective force field.

NYDAHL: Yes, I was hanging once on a mountain face in South Africa with a hundred meters of free drop under me, and something pushed me against the rock and a little bit up so I could get a finger jam, a finger hold somewhere, and go on. Another place, a picture, a Buddha's picture. I was doing about a hundred and twenty miles an hour up through central Germany one night, in quite heavy fog; you couldn't see very much. I was just going by the center of the road -- blip, blip, blip, the white blips in the center of the road -- and the picture of a certain lady Buddha, a white lady Buddha -- they're very good to me always, white lady Buddhas -- came down just in front of me, from up near where these things against the sun -- what are they called, sun blinders? In your cars, you know, one has that against the sun so one doesn't get blinded. Well, this just came down, and of course I don't put my feet on a picture like that, so I got my foot off the gas, even though I was very busy, and it was uphill, and it was a big six-cylinder motor, so the car slowed down a bit. And suddenly I saw a detour just in front of me, and I just managed to pull the car to one side and just tear up the side of the car and not have a frontal hit. So half the car was gone, you know, but if I'd hit it straight on I would really have been in trouble. And that happens, that kind of thing has happened to me many times.

MISHLOVE: In your book you ascribe these kinds of things to the influence of the lamas who were --

NYDAHL: Yes, We have something called refuge, and refuge is not just a psychological way of tapping, of pressing some buttons inside. Refuge actually means one is protected. It really means that.

MISHLOVE: You know, I have to say frankly, when I read about these things in your book, as many Westerners would I felt quite skeptical. I thought, "Gee, here's a bright fellow, but he's gone a little too far. He's really bought into this stuff."

NYDAHL: Got a little over the edge.

MISHLOVE: And you know, I was feeling this way, and thinking as I was reading your book in preparation for this program. I woke up in the middle of the night, sat down and began meditating, and repeating the mantra, "Om mani padme hum," which is one of the basic Tibetan mantras, which you had explained in your book for the first time -- that each syllable of this mantra --

NYDAHL: Removes a disturbing feeling.

MISHLOVE: Removes one of the different types of disturbing feelings enumerated by the Buddha in his teachings. I began chanting it, and all of a sudden it began going faster and faster, and speeding up until it was going like, "Rrrrrrrrrrr" in my mind, and I felt this radiant energy pouring through my body.

NYDAHL: You got a blessing.

MISHLOVE: Well, I took it that way at the time. I thought, "Gee, maybe he has his reasons."

NYDAHL: No, but it works. It does work. It really does work.

MISHLOVE: It's as if this particular culture in Tibet deserves some attention. And I guess that's what you do. You give it a lot of attention.

NYDAHL: That's what I'm trying to do, because all the other old bonds that we have to the wisdom of former times -- be it the Assyrian religion, be it our culture, be it the Chinese, be it the red Indian, whatever -- they're all destroyed. The only people who have transmission that's still living today is actually the Tibetans. And their culture was destroyed thirty years ago by the Chinese invasion, by the Communist invasion. And right now we have a group of mostly older lamas who have some knowledge, and if we don't pick it up it'll be lost. It'll be gone in twenty. thirty years, because the Tibetans themselves can't hold it.

MISHLOVE: One wonders, if these were so powerful and had such important wisdom, how is it that they let go of their country? Why did they lose it?

NYDAHL: You can't change people's karma like that. I mean, there may be a thousand hooks of compassion and wisdom coming out of space, but if there's no ring to get hold of, nothing happens. I mean, the whole universe is truth, just because it happens. Everything holds together by love, is vibrating by joy. Everything is meaningful just because it happens. Everything happening between us, and everywhere in the world, is actually completely unique and fantastic and radiant, just because it happens. But people don't see it. If they do all kinds of things against this totality, and wrong, suffering appears. And there's no way we can avoid it.

MISHLOVE: One of the other things that struck me in your book is you describe your experiences with the lamas and the wisdom that they seem to impart to you. You mentioned at one point rather casually that about eighty percent of them had tuberculosis.

NYDAHL: That's true. A lot of them had. I mean, they came down, they had nothing. They came over the passes, lots of them wounded, or very hungry.

MISHLOVE: And yet they were able to impart to you extraordinary healing abilities.

NYDAHL: Yes, but that again, that's a karma. You can pass on things, right? You can be able to heal others without choosing or being able to heal yourself. You can easily do that, because again there has to be this ring-and-hook function -- you know, openness of somebody else meeting with your power and your blessing ability. And if you don't think much of yourself, you don't consider your own body at all and you just work with it like that, then you may not do that. You may not do it to yourself. I've seen many, many great, great lamas who'd do all kinds of things, who were very sick themselves. And I saw the Karmapa talk about -- you know, he told us a year and a half before dying when he was going to die, told more or less the date. "Come on the first of September next year," he said. And we came on the first and he died on the fifth. So that was right on the point then. He just used his body as a magnet to suck negativity up from everything. The last year he had, he took every disease around.

MISHLOVE: Now a lot of people are going to have trouble with that notion -- that he would deliberately use his body to suck up negativity.

NYDAHL: Well, you have Jesus in the Christian world. He hanged on the cross.

MISHLOVE: It's the same notion.

NYDAHL: Oh, sure it's the same. It's like you take negativity; you use your body as a tool for taking something negative, and after that there's less of it. It's similar. It's a Bodhisattva idea; it's very similar.

MISHLOVE: Well, I guess when you have a perspective of life, as the lamas do, which totally transcends our secular notion that life ends with death, that all of a sudden one's values towards one's own body would change enormously.

NYDAHL: Sure. I mean, at the best it lasts seventy years, right? And the last twenty, thirty years it's not so useful when one really looks at it. So basically seeing the body as a tool for bringing love and

protection and security and material things to others, is the best way.

MISHLOVE: Then is there a sense that, as you say, every experience is meaningful, every experience is an opportunity for sharing love, or for sharing growth -- that in a certain sense it doesn't matter if you're wealthy or you're poor, or you're sick or you're healthy?

NYDAHL: It's true that everything unpleasant that we go through is a liberation of the mind. It's the mind liberating itself of some negative material, and it's actually a purification. And one should always know, when one has troubles, that it's like a zoological garden -- going out, not in. You're seeing the backs of the animals, not the faces. That one's getting rid of something when one has trouble. And at the same time, when something pleasant happens, one should really think, "This is riches. I'll share that with others. I'll really go out and pass it on. I'll give it to others." This way everything becomes meaningful.

MISHLOVE: Well, Dr. Ole Nydahl, let me thank you very much for being with me on the program. You certainly shared an eloquent and a profound view of a culture that very few people know well, and that I hope more Westerners get to understand better.

NYDAHL: Thank you very much. Thank you for your questions.

MISHLOVE: Thank you again for being with me.