

Direct

Expressions

Lama Thubten Namdrol Dorje

© Lama Thubten Namdrol Dorje (Lee Kwong Wai, Felix 2008)

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted , in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the copyright owner of this book. Enquiries should be addresses to the publisher.

First published in Singapore, Feb 2008 (1000 copies)

Revised edition published in May 2008 (2000 copies)

Second reprint, Jan 2009 (2000 copies)

Third reprint, Dec 2010 (2000 copies)

Published by : Thekchen Choling (Singapore)

2 Beatty Lane Singapore (209945).

www.thekchencholing.org

Tel: +65 6466 3720 Fax: +65 6465 6736

ISBN: 978-981-08-2266-8

May anyone who sees, touches, reads,
remembers, talks or even thinks about this book
be blessed with the Buddha's teachings and
never be reborn in unfortunate circumstances.
May they always be able to meet with perfectly
qualified spiritual guides, be able to listen and
practice the Dharma in favourable conditions.

May they quickly develop Bodhicitta and
immediately become enlightened for the benefit
of all sentient beings.

Contents

A Brief Biography of Lama Thubten Namdrol Dorje	1
Acknowledgements	5
Preface	6
Chapter 1: Buddhism in Perspective	11
Chapter 2: The Essence of Buddhist Practice	23
Chapter 3: What Spiritual Practice is all about	41
Chapter 4: The Three Principal Aspects of the Spiritual Path	73
Chapter 5: Rediscovering Yourself through Meditation	95
Chapter 6: Practical Dharma Lessons	104
Chapter 7: Being Mindful	146
Chapter 8: The Difference between Dharma and Samsara	164
About Thekchen Choling (Singapore)	179

A Brief Biography of Lama Thubten Namdrol Dorje

Lama began studying Buddhism at the age of seven to fourteen from a Thai monk, Venerable PhraMahathongkum. A year before his death on 8 August 1988, Venerable PhraMahathongkum predicted that in this life, Lama's teachers would be monks in red robes. Then, Tibetan Buddhism was not as widespread as it was today, so the idea of 'monks in red robes' was quite foreign. For the next two years, Lama studied Chinese Mahayana Buddhism in Ampang, Kuala Lumpur. During this time, he learnt the essence of Mahayana Buddhism as interpreted in different cultures.

In 1989, at the age of fifteen, a Buddhist master appeared in Lama's dreams and instructed him to fulfil the vows of his previous life which was to teach those who did not have teachers. Following the instructions in his dreams, he was brought to Nepal by Venerable Sangye Khandro. Upon his arrival,

Lama first met Lumbum Rinpoche in Swayambhunath (aka Monkey Temple) and made light offerings at the temple. Then, the Rinpoche told him, “We have been waiting for you”. It was later revealed that the Buddhist master who had first appeared in Lama's dream was in fact the great Buddhist saint, Guru Rinpoche.

At Kopan Monastery in Nepal, Lama met the abbot of Kopan Monastery, Khen Rinpoche Geshe Lama Lhundrup Rigsel, and Geshe Lama Konchog, both of whom became his root Gurus. Together with the other monks in Kopan, Lama studied philosophy and tenets of the Gelugpa tradition from Geshe Lama Lhundrup. Geshe Lama Konchog taught him tantric practices but Geshe emphasized the importance of actual Dharma practice over rituals. Lama Zopa Rinpoche is also one of his teachers who kindly refer to Lama as ‘Rinpoche’ even though he has no interest in being officially recognised as a tulku, or reincarnate Lama. Lama’s main focus was

to propagate the Buddhadharma to benefit all sentient beings.

Lama was advised by his Gurus that he could benefit more people if he did not take monastic vows and remain a lay practitioner. So he was ordained as a Ngakpa (lay) Lama and is now married. Lama was trained as a chef and he owned a restaurant which was popular. However, he was advised by his Gurus in 1998 to give up the business and to focus on spreading the Dharma. Geshe Lama Konchog also entrusted him with the task of setting up a Tibetan lay monastery of the Gelugpa tradition. Geshela envisioned that the mission of this monastery is to change the existing mindset of people – that one needs to become a monk or nun to practise Buddhism. Heeding his teachers' advice, Lama closed his restaurant business and in 2001, formally registered the temple 'Thekchen Choling' - a name meaning Great Mahayana Dharma Temple, as bestowed by Geshe Lama Konchog.

As a lay Lama, Lama's personal life experiences allow him to relate to and offer incisive insights to those who seek his counsel for problems they encounter in their daily lives. Behind Lama's unassuming demeanour is a highly accomplished lay practitioner who is well-versed with the three vehicles of Buddhism - the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana.

While remaining true to the traditional teachings of Buddhism, Lama is very modern in his outlook. He teaches the Buddhadharma, in English and Mandarin, not just by scholarly discourse but by turning everyday experiences into Dharma exercises, transforming minds and making this age-old spiritual tradition come alive. It remains his objective to educate people of all ages, races and religions on the dynamism of Buddhism and its relevance to modern day living. Today, Lama serves as the resident Spiritual Director of Thekchen Choling (Singapore).

Acknowledgements

Thekchen Choling (Singapore) would like to acknowledge the assistance of all who made this book possible. Especially Mr Lim Ho Beng, Mr Dorje Tenzin, Mr Richard Pang, Mr Wilson Kee Meng Hua, Ms Sharon Morris, Ms Catherine Wee, Ms Christina Choh and Ms Claris Lim who had helped to compile and edit this book.

Also to Mr Donald Soo of DonChris Graphic for all the design and graphic work rendered for this publication.

Through the merits of having contributed to the spread of the Buddha Dharma for the sake of all sentient beings, may all our benefactors and their families and friends have long and healthy lives, may they have all their needs fulfilled, may all happiness be bestowed on them and may all their Dharma wishes be instantly fulfilled.

Preface

As I started writing this book, I recalled my early teen years in the early 1990s. Then, I was trying my best to pay attention and remember the lessons on Buddhism. At that time, I was learning the Dharma from my root Gurus (principal teachers), who had instructed me to do a retreat involving a 3-week stay in a room all by myself. Devoting myself to praying, meditating and digesting whatever Dharma I had learnt, I began to ponder over whether Buddhism was a religious practice, a philosophy, or a way of living our life.

These were the simple thoughts that became the basis of my first meditation retreat. At that time, I felt the retreat was most difficult. I could not leave my room until I had completed all the required practices and recited several hundreds of thousands of *mantras*.

Even though I had started my study of Buddhism learning the philosophy and rituals of Theravada and Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, I was pretty much still a teenager

brought up with a Western-style education, and not used to giving much thought or reflection on the Dharma. Most of all, I felt that I already knew everything there was to know about Buddhism and did not see the point of having to do a retreat, much less meditate. Looking back, I realise that I was filled with conceit, self-righteousness and laziness, which made my retreat extremely difficult. I also remember harbouring thoughts to cheat on my *mantra* recitation. Fortunately, I gave up that thought!

My retreat room was locked from the outside since I was not supposed to leave until I had completed the entire retreat. Even though the room was equipped with the basic necessities like a toilet and a cupboard, I felt like a jailbird. I may have been physically confined but my mind was flying around the world! I thought of my family and friends, as well as the life I had led before the retreat. I had a million other thoughts of everything and anything, all except what I was supposed to focus on for the retreat.

Fortunately, I was eventually able to rein in my unruly thoughts and focus on the meditation. I remember reflecting on the kind of lives people in this world were living and whether they were truly happy.

I remember that the retreat started just a few days after the beginning of the Gulf War. As I thought over the events that had occurred and the tragedy of war, I realised that there was absolutely no reason why one could not incorporate the practice of spirituality, love and compassion into one's life. Indeed, this was essential.

People often ask me whether Buddhism, religion and spirituality are still relevant and applicable in this fast-paced, hectic Internet Age. I find that most people nowadays do not really know very much about religious philosophies, let alone the true meaning behind religious rituals. As a result, the practice of religion can range from the extremes of intellectualisation (seeking knowledge for its own sake) to superstition and over-reliance on rituals.

In this book, I would like to present Buddhism in a very direct way using modern-day language. The teachings of Buddha Shakyamuni, which are over 2500 years old, are as applicable today as they were then, simply because everyone still wishes to be happy and not suffer.

Till now, science has focused primarily on the study of external phenomena, whereas Buddhism has focused on the understanding of internal phenomena of the inner workings of the mind.

Many people who embark on the Middle Path find that integrating spiritual practice into one's daily life is very difficult, and some even find it to be near impossible. This is, however essential for one to be truly happy. Based on my own experiences and that of my teachers, I am convinced that it is possible to integrate spiritual practice with our daily life but one cannot expect miracles. The benefit of any spiritual practice can only be apparent after years of consistent practise. But with effort, I assure you that your life will change and when you look back, you will

be amazed at the transformation of yourself and of those around you.

I hope this book will give you a basic understanding of Buddhism. Regardless of your race or religion, you can integrate these principles into your daily lives. The practices described here are not rituals but simply advice that will help you to transform your mind and actions so that you can be truly happy without relying on good external conditions as your main source of happiness.

By doing these practices and following in the same footsteps as the great Buddhist practitioners of the past and present, I hope that you may find true happiness and discover the joy of living!

Lama Thubten Namdrol Dorje

Spiritual Director

Thekchen Choling (Singapore)

Chapter 1: Buddhism in Perspective

Every sentient being is equal in that they desire only happiness and detest suffering.

Buddha Shakyamuni taught in different aspects to suit various people to benefit all beings. He was like an experienced doctor who could cure people of their ailments based on their needs.

At the basic level, Buddhism is a way of life based on the understanding of the Four Noble Truths as taught by Buddha Shakyamuni.

These Four Noble Truths are:

1. The Truth of Suffering
2. The Truth of the Cause of Suffering
3. The Truth of Happiness, and
4. The Truth of the Path Leading to Happiness

All this talk of suffering may seem depressing. The Buddha himself contemplated upon suffering in the same

way a doctor examines the symptoms of an illness. Having understood the cause of the illness, he set about to find a cure to achieve everlasting happiness. Thus, the point of the four noble truths is not about pessimism but the exact opposite - optimism. Buddhism is about the teachings of Happiness!

These four noble truths form the foundation of Buddhism. They help us to develop within our own minds a very basic yet very important realisation that all sentient beings are equal. This is something that most people have forgotten. Every sentient being is equal in that everyone, regardless of age, race, religion, culture, social status, whether one is a human being or an animal, desires only happiness and detests suffering. Few beings look forward to dying and suffering. While some people may argue that there are masochists who are willing to be beaten or hurt, we must not forget that masochists derive happiness from physical pain. In their minds, pain is pleasurable. Similarly, people who commit suicide are also trying to escape from suffering. For these people, death is seen as being a happier state than living.

Most of us are taught from a young age to look out for ourselves. We continually strive for success. We spend our lives competing and working for more. We desire the best education, dream girlfriend or boyfriend, dream car, best job, nice house – and yet we achieve them, we are quickly dissatisfied. The education we receive becomes outdated, the girlfriend puts on weight and nags, the job gets boring and the house needs extensive repairs. We then think: “Oh no... I am no longer happy. Maybe it’s time to look for new things to make me happy.”

So the causes of suffering are often the things that in the past you once thought would bring you happiness, but in actuality only lead to suffering. By contemplating on the impermanence of all things and phenomena, we should learn to become mentally flexible. This does not mean that we can become lazy and make no effort at what we do using the excuse that it is all temporary. Understanding ‘Impermanence’ means that we become more relaxed about our lives, and we come to understand that our happiness does not depend merely on material or worldly success. There is more to life and true

happiness ultimately lies in our healthy and happy mind. External conditions are not a prerequisite for internal happiness. With this realisation, we do not become overly upset when we do not get the things we want. Devoting our energies to activities that bring us temporary happiness is not true happiness. Some people devote their whole life to activities that can help them accumulate wealth and power. Such activities can only bring them happiness temporarily and at most for the length of this one lifetime only. Rather, we should devote our effort and zeal to engage in spiritual cultivation, because true and lasting happiness can only result from the development of a virtuous and controlled mind.

For most of us, happiness is about **me, my** family and those **I** know. We have no real concern for others and any compassion we have is only momentary and fleeting. For example, we feel sympathy and compassion when we see a picture of a starving baby in Africa but this feeling of compassion does not stay with us for long. We acknowledge this feeling but we choose to let it go as we will often think: “How can I possibly make a difference

and help others? How can I do this by myself?” However, individually and collectively, we can make a real difference in every single minute of our precious human lives. Why do I say this? All our actions and inactions have a great effect on circumstances or what Buddhists call causes and conditions.

Buddhism is based on the workings of the mind. It is through a subdued and liberated mind that we achieve happiness. Buddhism differs from all other religions because it is the only religion that says we are the result of our own actions, and that we are not created by any ‘God’. What we are now, and what we are and will experience is due to the law of cause and effect or Karma. In a nutshell, the law of Karma means that we reap what we sow. Our life is in our own hands. Anything that happens to us is created and caused by ourselves, and not by some external power. Whether we are happy does not depend on anyone but on our own actions - actions for which we alone are responsible for.

From a Buddhist perspective, the September 11th attacks

happened not because God works in mysterious ways. They happened because the seeds of violence had already been planted through actions committed in the past. Could they have been avoided? Yes, by not creating the causes of these acts. We may say, “But all that was in the past and now new events are unfolding and there’s nothing that can be done.”

In reality, everything is created by the law of cause and effect. Even a famine in Africa is due to actions (or inactions) we have done in the past. Think of it like this, if we drive cars, we are responsible for creating the hole in the ozone layer. The gas released from our air conditioners and hair sprays also has an impact on the ozone layer. It may not have caused the hole on its own but in its own way it contributed to the overall effect. Similarly, small things that we do may end up with large results. When we plant a small acorn, it will become a huge tree one day. This idea that everything depends on causes, is one of the Buddha’s most important teachings.

But we should not just accept what the Buddha taught.

Instead, we should contemplate on his teachings and reflect upon them based on our daily experiences. The law of karma applies to all beings whether Buddhist or not. Based on the idea that we are responsible for our actions, Buddhism sets out a logical framework of actions that we can take to change and improve our life.

Buddhism does not subscribe to the idea that the Earth was created in seven days or that the universe was created by God. In one of the Buddhist scriptures, it was recorded that the Big Bang and Big Crunch have occurred in numerous times in the past. There is no one point in time where everything came into being for the first time. The concept of time in Buddhism is beginningless, sort of like the concept of infinity. Regardless of your beliefs, it is far more useful in life to focus on the teachings of compassion. After all, compassion is the foundation for all religions.

A Buddha does not grant favours in return for homage and offerings. So what is the role of the Buddha? Is the Buddha's role like a fairy godmother that grants wishes to

whoever that prays to him? Or does he give out prize winning lottery tickets to those who pray to him? Why do Buddhists even pray to him?

These are certainly not the roles of the Buddha. The Buddha is the Enlightened or the Awakened One. When a Buddhist prays in front of a statue, these prayers and offerings are not gifts in return for some favours. Buddha does not change circumstances or solve our problems through some miraculous feat. Prayers are actually requests for inspiration. As we pray, we should feel Buddha's kindness and contemplate on his teachings. We should request for inspiration to become enlightened like him. We should also pray for wisdom to be able to contemplate on his teachings and to cultivate the path of enlightenment. For the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools of Buddhism, the motivation to become enlightened is to benefit all sentient beings, regardless of whether they are Buddhist or not. This is often likened to the sun which shines on all. Buddhism explains the Truth, and we should view the Buddha's teachings as a mirror which provides a glimpse into reality.

Now, most people do not like discussing death. We find it morbid and depressing. So we spend most of our lives thinking that we are going to live for a very long time. We all have to face the inevitable journey. What seems more frightening is that death can happen to anyone, anytime. This is why the outbreak of SARS, bird flu or the terrorist attacks of September 11th caused so much fear. They happened so suddenly and no one was safe from it.

We should transform our lives into a constant stream of meaningful activities and adopt an attitude of always being aware of the possibility of death. Only then will we be able to make the most out of our days and transform our fear of death. A constant awareness of our mortality does not cause us to become morbid; rather, it helps us accept death with less fear and greater courage.

The Buddhist viewpoint is that unenlightened beings, through the force of actions done in the past, will be reborn in one of six realms of existence after death:

- a. Three higher realms where considerable happiness exists:
 - Celestials, Semi-celestials and Humans
- b. Three lower realms where suffering is rampant:
 - Animals, Hungry Ghosts and Hell-beings

In Buddhism, committing evil deeds will lead us to a rebirth in the lower realms, whereas performing meritorious deeds and developing wisdom and compassion will lead us to rebirth in the higher realms. It may seem to some that rebirth in a higher existence as celestial being is desirable, but according to the Mahayana¹ teachings, it is a mistaken viewpoint. A life of great wealth and comfort is still under the influence of physical and mental sufferings, old age and ultimately death.

We have been enjoying life and thus our experiences are

¹ *There are three schools of Buddhism namely: Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana.*

similar to the gods in the celestial realm. They enjoy their lives with wondrous and endless pleasures of the senses. However, just before they die, fear arises as the radiance of their bodies fade. Other celestial beings fear and avoid the dying god. Being rejected by the other gods, this dying god retreats to a corner to await a painful end. In living their opulent lives, they had expended their store of merits. Thus, when signs of death appear, they suffer from great fear of not knowing what happen to them at death. Fears of suffering in the hell realms permeate their mind stream as they have not cultivated themselves spiritually, and have neither received refuge from the Buddha nor accepted his teachings.

We have talked about suffering and some of the causes of suffering. Clearly, the main point is to find a way to derive happiness in the midst of problems we are facing. Buddhism is based on equanimity, love, kindness, compassion and wisdom. There is no being in this world that does not appreciate kindness. Even animals

appreciate kindness and gentleness, and they too possess qualities like love. So how do we transform our daily activities to be continually filled with a genuine sense of care and love for all other beings? How can we truly benefit others? And why do we need to do this? In what way does developing this attitude help us to become happier people? And is it realistic to think this way?

As we go through our lives, we should reflect upon these questions.

Chapter 2: The Essence of Buddhist Practice

Buddhist practice is about practising the transformation of our thoughts throughout our daily life.

Buddhism emphasises 'Mind Transformation'. Each spiritual tradition has its own specialty and will appeal to different people. Buddhism also focuses on the science of mind. From the aspect of mind, the three main problems in our lives are our ignorance, hatred and attachment. Do you agree? Maybe not, as most of us think that the biggest problem in our lives is the lack of money, comfort or whatever we happen to be deficient of at that time.

Why is ignorance a big problem? We spend our lives not knowing why things happen. Some think it is God, some say it is spirits, and some say it is luck or chance. Most of us do not even bother to think about this or even about what we should be doing with our lives.

A good understanding of the teachings on karma (karma literally means 'action' but has become a very misunderstood word) explains why bad things sometimes happen to good people. Every single thing that we experience is a result of the ripening of our karmic seeds. So if we wish to prevent problems, we need to know what has caused these problems. For example, why are some countries dirty and corrupted, while the country just next to it is clean and prosperous? Some may think, "The prosperous government has a good government." Why does it have a good government? Some may say, "It has a good government because the people voted them in." But why were these good leaders born in this country and why did they take the actions that resulted in benefiting their nation and people? If you keep asking 'why', you will quickly realise that you lack the answers. The answer is karma.

The doctrine of karma makes logical sense. None of the other possible reasons, such as things happening due to chance and fate, can adequately answer our many questions about life. The Buddha advised that we need to

think carefully and critically about our beliefs. The Buddha even advised us to critically examine his own teachings before accepting them, and not accept Buddhism simply with blind faith. Karma is not an easy topic and accepting this idea takes some time. Our ignorance blinds us and leads us to think and behave in ways that result in more suffering.

One should deal with the mind through examining the idea of ignorance. Buddhism employs logic and reasoning. To improve one's mind is to think logically. Most of us are not able to think logically. The so called 'logic' that an average person uses is typically just a biased perspective that stems from our ignorance.

Why do our minds function in this way? It is not because we do not have the knowledge. Instead, it is due to our biased thoughts, emotions and mental obscurations that influenced whatever we think. For example, if a particular viewpoint agrees with our opinions, we claim that this viewpoint is a logical one, even if it is actually illogical. When people are arguing, each side believes that their

own arguments are the 'correct' and 'logical' one. But how can both sides be correct? Even a coin has three sides to it – top, bottom and the middle rim! The point is that when we are consumed by our own viewpoint, it “clouds” our perspectives such that we are no longer objective and cannot think in a truly logical manner. This is similar to wearing a pair of orange tinted sunglasses and seeing the whole world around us in an orange hue.

Some people may claim that they do not have hatred. However, through self introspection, we will realise that we have very strong dislike for enemies or for those whom we think are against us. Sometimes, we may even dislike a person whom we do not know. This person may look or act 'funny' and does not 'suit' our criteria for friends. This attitude of discriminating causes so many problems in the world. We treat those we like as special and ignore those who do not 'suit' us.

'All beings are equal.' Now many people will disagree with that. The Hindus during Buddha's time had challenged this as a result of their adherence to the caste

system. Why did Buddha say that all beings are equal? This is because everyone, human or animal, wants to be happy and does not want to suffer.

What does attachment mean and why is it a major problem? First of all, if we are not attached to anything, then we need not worry about having insufficient possessions. Good things will naturally come to those who focus on their spiritual practice and who are not consumed by attachment to their possessions.

We must be honest with ourselves and reflect upon the objects that we are attached to. Do we possess an object or does the object possess us instead? If we are not truly attached to an object, then even if it is precious and someone steals it from us, we will feel fine. Being attached to a can of soda or to sexual pleasure are both attachments. Lust, desire or attachment is the same whether the object of attachment is an attractive person or a can of beer.

What then is the antidote to attachment? It is by letting go

and accepting whatever comes our way. This does not mean that we become passive and lazy. It means not obsessing about and getting upset with whatever unfavourable situations we find ourselves in. Let's say we are invited to a meal, being non-attached means accepting whatever is served to us. Suffering from attachment would mean having a strong desire to only eat particular dishes, dishes that we like and really want. If we do not have attachment, we are not particular or 'choosy' with the food we are served.

We need to transform our mind to rid it of ignorance, hatred and attachment. Transforming our mind means that even if we are in a very difficult situation or place, as long as our mind is happy, everything will be fine. Does that mean that we fool ourselves into saying that everything is okay and pretend to be happy? No. We should acknowledge and accept the difficult situation, and treat it as a wonderful opportunity for us to put into practise the teachings of Buddha. This mindset of transforming our mind to be able to deal with any circumstances is known in Tibetan Buddhism as 'lo-jong'

or 'mind training' practice. Through 'mind training', we can truly free our mind from self-limiting thoughts. We will be able to transform any adverse conditions into new possibilities.

Whether you are happy or not depends totally on your own mind, and not on external conditions. If you were attending a big and joyous party and someone were to upset you through his words or actions, would you be able to remain happy and still enjoy the party? You could, if you controlled your mind and did not let it get tossed about by external events and your fluctuating emotions.

Also, consider whether you would be happier eating in a hot and stuffy hawker centre or in a cool, air-conditioned, and expensive restaurant? If your mind was happy while eating at the hawker centre, you would still be able to enjoy your meal and remain contented and happy. However, if your mind is distressed and upset, even if you dine in the finest restaurants, you will not be able to enjoy your meal. That is why Buddhism deals with the

mind, because the mind is truly the forerunner of all things.

Transforming our mind is the practice of Buddhism. Buddhism is all about the transformation of our thoughts. If we practise thought transformation successfully, there will be no more problems in our life, because we will have the attitude and wisdom to accept whatever happens to us without being overcome by negative thoughts and emotions. By transforming our mind we will not be overcome by unhappiness.

Is Buddhism trying to brainwash us or is Buddhism just plain unrealistic? You can examine the facts for yourself. When the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan were destroyed, did Buddhists protest or fight? No. There could have been violent reactions but what benefit would that bring? Even when America wished to attack Afghanistan, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and other Buddhist leaders advised non-violence. So Buddhism is not just all talk and no action; Buddhism is about practising what is taught. Remember what we said about

impermanence and the seeds of karma in the first chapter? If we understand impermanence and the law of karma, we will realise that there is nothing to get upset about because everything happens due to causes and conditions. Nothing happens to us by chance.

Hence, all of us, animals included, are equal in the sense that we all do not like to suffer. We would not like it even if we have the slightest suffering of a headache. One of my students, while on holiday in India had severe diarrhoea till his legs were so weak that he had difficulty walking. A person who had not trained his mind would think that he was so unlucky to have sickness or suffering fall upon him. However, a practising Buddhist would view any suffering that he was going through as purification of his own negative karma. Two persons can experience the same illness but their suffering would be very different depending on their attitude towards the disease. Research has shown that people who pray, meditate and adopt a positive attitude towards their problems tend to survive illnesses better.

In Buddhism, we are taught to transform our mind to handle the situation. However, some people would label this thought transformation as 'brain-washing' or 're-education'.

Re-educating the mind to improve it and make us wiser is important. However, before we can re-educate our minds, we need to clean out all our old, harmful ways of thinking. Cleaning up the mind to prepare it for 're-education' can be challenging. For example, if we have a cup of black coffee, there are two ways to turn the cup of coffee into a cup of milk. One method is to get a cow and squeeze her milk into the cup daily until all the coffee from the cup is eventually displaced. This may take many days before we can actually displace the coffee with pure milk in the cup. Furthermore, there will still be some residue of coffee left in the cup.

The other method is to throw the coffee away and scrub the cup clean before pouring the pure milk in. The scrubbing, which is the most painful part, is called the 'Preparation for Re-education'. The actual re-education is

the pouring of fresh milk inside. No milk is wasted, no time is wasted. Thus, this method is proven to be fast and effective. However, this method is more painful in the short-run. Why is that so?

Throwing the coffee away is letting go of all that we previously held so tight in the past and scrubbing the cup clean is to face our own mind. We should spend some time to meditate and watch the movement of our mind daily. We will discuss the idea of meditating a little later. As you read, contemplate and apply these ideas to your daily life you will recognise your own shortcomings. Frankly, this is an uncomfortable process and most people will think of escaping back to old sources of comfort.

Perhaps, it will be more comforting to drown ourselves in work, visit pubs and clubs, have a one-night stand or even take up some healthy hobbies, as forms of escapade. Yes, though healthy hobbies such as jogging or cycling are good for our bodies, but they do not do very much for our mind. Nowadays, there are so many

fads to drown ourselves in and waste our precious human life. Most people do not even ask the most important question in life – what is the purpose of my life?

All of us definitely will encounter problems in our lives. Is there anyone who can confidently say that his or her life is free of problems? Big or small problems are all problems. Thus, it is important to start training our mind now. For married people, usually they have even more problems because of their many marriage-related responsibilities. One of my students once remarked that he would thoroughly recommend Buddhists to get married because it would be a good opportunity for “purification”!

We must train our mind to the extent that when difficult situations arise, we can transform our mind. Both happiness and unhappiness comes from our mind. Our mind reacts to and responds to situations that affect us. We all want our problems to dissolve and disappear, just like taking medicine to cure all our illnesses. However, we

know that all medicine contains some level of toxicity. To be precise, 30 percent of medicine has poison. As such, we are actually using poison to counter poison.

If we do not guard our minds well, we will be gradually poisoning ourselves by allowing our minds to run wild. If we do not control or nourish our mind properly, and do not relax our mind, we will get so stressed up and become crazy! We may even lose our lives from severe damage to major blood vessels or from a heart attack. People become sick because they are mentally unhappy. I know of a person who has lost five kilograms within two weeks as a result of stress.

We must all actively try to control and transform our mind now. At the end of each day, before we sleep, we should ask ourselves, “Have I lived a fulfilling life today?” Perhaps we could write this down as a slogan and stick it somewhere prominent. When we wake up each morning, ask ourselves this, “If today were the last day of my life, how would I live it?” We should also always think about how much of our time is spent doing something truly

meaningful? Doing something meaningful is neither just about providing for our family nor doing our best for our job. What is meaningful to you may be different from mine. We need to find the purpose in our life, to find out what is meaningful for our lives.

We do not know when we will die. At the time of death, we will all be feeling flustered and will be at a loss of what to do. One of my students had a close brush with death recently. In the past, whenever I saw him, before I could even ask him anything, he would tell me that he practises and prays everyday and that he has been a good person. However, when he got very sick and was hospitalised, he said he felt like dying and had given up all hope of living. He told his sister not to try anything further since he was going to die. However, after his recovery from his illness, he told me that those moments when he thought he was dying, he gave up all hopes of living. The thought of Buddha never appeared in his mind. He had no thoughts of his Guru, Buddha, God, or of anything spiritual at all! However, the thought that did occur in his mind was: “I

have not done this...I should have done that instead... there is this thing I have not tried... there is so much I have not done yet ... and I am going to die!” In fact no matter how long we live, we will always want to get more or have some new plan that we want to engage in. We spend our lives planning for all the tomorrows of this life, but forget to plan for our future life.

The same will happen to us if we have strong attachment to this life. We will be very fearful when we die. We will be nervously wondering what will happen to us in our future life. We have talked so much about future lives, but is there truly an existence of future lives?

I asked a person, “Do you believe in future lives?”

He replied: “No, I do not.”

“But after you die, won’t you go and wait in Purgatory?”

“No! I’m going to Heaven.”

“Are you sure?”

“I think so!”

Then when I asked him why he was so sure, he replied that it was because he had faith in God. So I asked him whether he remembers God in his life at all times. He told me honestly, “I try to.”

When people die, they are worried and frightened of going to Purgatory because that is the place where they wait for the final judgement from God. They do not want to wait for judgement; all they want is to go straight to Heaven. They want immediate happiness.

However, looking at the way we lived our lives, would we have done enough good deeds to guarantee us happiness in the life after this one?

There are some essential practices that we can do daily to help us lead a more meaningful life. Similar to what I have talked about earlier, at the start of each day, we should ask ourselves, “If today is the last day of my life, how will I live it?” At the end of each day, we should ask ourselves, “Have I lived a fulfilling life today?” These practices are important because they prompt us about

the fragility of this life and remind us to live every day purposefully. These practices also help to spur Buddhists to fully utilise whatever precious time they have got to engage in Dharma practice.

For Buddhists, it is important that we do our daily practices until it is second nature to us. When death is near, our mind will automatically be engaged in doing our practices. It will not falter and wander aimlessly in chaos. It is mentioned in the “Amitabha Sutra” that to recite “Homage to Amitabha Buddha” just ten times at the point of dying will enable you to be reborn in the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha.

This may sound easy but it is not. It is virtually impossible to do any practices when death is near! When we are dying, our fear of dying and losing everything is so great that we will forget how to pray or do our practices. Just like the student I had mentioned earlier who had a close brush with death. He had no thoughts of his Guru, the Buddha, or of any God as he was overwhelmed with fear.

With the fear came regret, the regret of not having lived a fulfilling and worthwhile life. That is why daily practices are important - it prepares our mind when death arrives. If our practice becomes second nature to us, then when things go bad or when we are facing death, taking refuge in the Buddha will be very easy for us.

In Buddhist teachings, the state of mind at the point of death is very important and plays a very important role in determining our next rebirth. Even if we do not accept rebirth, practicing the ability to calmly accept the coming of our own death will definitely be beneficial to us.

Now that we know that the essence of Buddhist Practice is that of mind transformation, the next chapter defines what Spiritual Practice is? How do we actually engage in mind transformation practices? How do we make our lives meaningful? These questions are important not just for Buddhists, but for everyone. You can be a sincere believer of any religion and find that these teachings make sense because they are universal ideas.

Chapter 3: What is Spiritual Practice All About

If we perform every action with the thought of benefiting others, our whole life will become our spiritual practice.

Now we come to the heart of the subject. This is very important. The purpose of spiritual practice is to be happy. But if we are always unhappy, then it means something is wrong. We are not practising Dharma. Maybe we are practising drama!

Some people think that spiritual practice means circumambulating stupas or meditating while sitting down in the lotus position with legs crossed and eyes closed. This is not necessarily so. If we have Bodhicitta, the wish and actions to attain enlightenment and become a Buddha to benefit others, and have thoughts about having a purposeful future life, then every moment of our life becomes meaningful. As Buddhists, if we think in this

way, every moment of our life becomes Dharma practice for us.

Spiritual practice requires constant effort and takes time to perfect, so we cannot be impatient. Many people read a lot about Buddhism, but somehow they simply do not practise what they have read. What they have read becomes mere intellectual knowledge of what the Buddha has taught. You can read all about the Dharma and philosophical viewpoints concerning the nature of reality, but these will be useless if you treat them as mere mental and intellectual gymnastics or as a kind of amusement. Dharma is meant to be practised and applied into our daily lives.

Reading about Buddhism, about what to do and the path to follow, is like collecting knowledge on how to grow a plant. Dharma practice is about changing our behaviour, speech and thoughts, and developing a good heart. We also need to rely on prayers, confessions and accumulation of merits. It is likened to preparing the soil,

planting the seed and cultivating the plant. We may know all the ways to help a plant grow taller and healthier, but if we do not actually roll up our sleeves to take concrete actions to plant the seed, no results will be achieved. On the other hand, for a person, who does not know how a plant actually grows, but nonetheless diligently plants the seed, waters it and takes care of the plant with some basic gardening knowledge, his plant will definitely still grow. What this means is that if we diligently put our basic Dharma knowledge into actual practise, we will definitely be able to produce benefits for ourselves and others. Having tons of Dharma knowledge but not putting them into practise will not reap us any good results.

A man will accomplish nothing if he simply sits back and is contented with just having intellectual knowledge and not applying any of this knowledge to his life.

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama himself commented that using Dharma as mere intellectual knowledge is one of the gravest mistakes. It would be like trying to save ourselves from a tsunami by packing sand together to

form an embankment – because no matter how much sand we pack together, by its loose and non-compact nature, the sand will disperse and get washed away by the tsunami. But for one who mixes the sand with cement, the resulting concrete base better ensures his safety. This is similar to a person who may not know much Dharma intellectually, but who applies diligently what little he does know about the Dharma to his life.

As my Guru, Geshe Lama Konchog once said, “Even if you know just a simple practice and you put your body, speech and mind intensively and sincerely into it in your daily life, it is much better than knowing a lot intellectually but not practising at all.”

It all depends on our motivation. We have to be brutally honest in examining our motivation. Our egos and intellect are very good at deceiving us into thinking ‘logically’ that what we are doing is good. Generally, we think that we are good people. It is always other people that are being difficult. Even when we behave badly, we

always find ways to justify our behaviour. If we examine our thoughts, actions and speech very carefully, and really check why we did some things, we may be surprised to find that usually our motivation is selfish. The simple act of putting ourselves into someone else's shoes, especially those of someone we dislike, will teach us a lot about ourselves. We will realise that almost everything we do is for our own benefit and not really for benefiting others.

Use your intelligence and apply the motivation of wanting to benefit others in every action you do. At the start of the day, we should think, "I am going to benefit others in any way that I can today." We can put our thoughts to benefit others into our daily actions such as when we are eating. We should think that we are eating to be healthy so that we have the energy to practise Dharma and help others. When working, think that our work is benefiting others, helping the economy and bringing happiness to people. There is no such thing as a job having no meaning!

We must practise consistently until Dharma practice becomes second nature to us. We must put effort into our practice; otherwise we will die with regrets. Be honest with yourself: Based on your actions in this life, do you think you will be reborn in the higher or lower realms after death? Do you think you will come back as a human? Even if you only believe in heaven and hell, do you think you will go to heaven or hell? If you do not believe in that, think at the least, how do you wish to be remembered by friends and family after you die?

We are always preparing for our retirement, thinking of what we will do or whether we will have sufficient money to spend when we stop working. But do we prepare for our after life? Before death strikes us, we must confess the harmful deeds we have done and develop genuine regret for our negativities. Do not say that you have not done any bad deeds. Have you ever killed anything? It may be an ant, a mosquito or even a cockroach. Have you scolded or cursed someone before? All these are negative actions. We must first be honest with ourselves

and confess our negative actions; our future lives will then be better.

A thirty-year old student once asked me why despite studying Buddhism, she still felt very susceptible to her delusions, and she had yet to conquer her negativities, such as anger. I replied that she had only started studying Buddhism seriously for one, or at most two years. How could she expect to conquer and undo thirty years of negativities so easily?

The root cause of our problems always lies with our own mind because we have not tried to be gentle with our mind and look after it. These days, people fall apart when things start to go wrong for them. This is the result of being conditioned to believe that we are always in control. We have a big ego and think we are very powerful and are able to exert considerable control over the events in our lives. In reality, there are many things beyond our control. For example, one of the most common woes in the world these days is financial

problems. We hear of many big firms going bankrupt. Many former bosses are forced by circumstances to give up their managerial positions and become employees instead; often they cannot take such humiliation.

When things fall apart, we suffer because we feel a loss of control. We also suffer because of the humiliation that comes with it. This humiliation is due to our own mind believing that as long as everything is done our way, things will be fine and under control. However, life is seldom clear cut and easy to handle. Things invariably fall apart, and when they do, our mind suffers because of our big ego and our resistance to change. This kind of suffering is due to being attached to the eight worldly concerns.

The eight worldly concerns are:

1. Being happy when acquiring material things
2. Being unhappy when not acquiring material things
3. Wanting to be happy
4. Not wanting to be unhappy
5. Wanting to hear interesting sounds

6. Not wanting to hear uninteresting sounds
7. Wanting praise
8. Not wanting criticism

The eight worldly concerns are essential practices of Buddhism. To have a peaceful state of mind, we should always be mindful of these eight worldly concerns and try to rise above them. Let me explain further:

Point 1 and 2 refer to the problems that materialism brings. Much of the society is devoted to the worship of materialism and we feel happy when we accumulate material goods. At times, when our business fails or when we lose money, we are unable to maintain the same level of material gratification as before. Hence, we start to feel unhappy. Does this mean that we should stop buying everything and retreat into a cave? No. It goes back to practicing renunciation and being contented with what we have. Reflect upon our needs and wants, such as food, shelter, and many things in life - know what we require and why. Do not pursue them as the purpose of our life.

What is important is to be careful not to tie our emotions and happiness to these external things.

Point 3 and 4 are more general and refer to an over-reliance on external conditions for our happiness. For instance, we are very much attached to domestic comforts. If we were forced to live in an old, dilapidated hut, we would surely complain and feel unhappy. This is what it meant by 'not wanting to be unhappy'. Mental unhappiness, like depression and sadness, which stems from events like losing a loved one or one's job, can also be included under point 3 and 4. So long as we are unable to derive the kind of happiness that is independent of external conditions, we will forever be under the influence of clinging on to happiness and having an aversion to any difficulties that could arise in our lives.

One of my students was once very wealthy and had everything going well for him. His business was very successful and he was also extremely good at golf. He

even went to the extent of telling others to pray to the 'Golf Ball God' if they wanted to beat him. When others got upset because they could not play as well as he did, he would tell them, "Your poor golfing skills might be due to you having offended the naga (dragon) gods. However I think the main god you have offended is the Golf Ball God!" He was even so mean as to suggest to them to take a golf ball and perform prayers to it, so that they could get a higher score than him.

Later, his business ran into many problems and his fortune changed for the worst. This led him to seek advice from me. My advice to him was to learn the Dharma. He did as he was told and he is paying closer attention to Dharma teachings these days. He managed to revive his business and he has become more humble now. Looking back, he said that he would not have come to listen to the Dharma if everything in his life had gone on smoothly. Maybe, it's a blessing in disguise for him after all.

Point 5 and 6 refer to our obsession with pleasing sounds. We may think that a Western opera is beautiful while pop songs are awful. We may be turned off by certain noises while being attracted to other sounds. A crude example is to feel disgusted and mentally disturbed when someone burps loudly in our presence!

Point 7 and 8, 'Wanting praises and not wanting criticism' is perhaps one of our biggest problems. We love to be spoken highly of, but absolutely detest people from chastising us or bringing up our flaws. This is due to our big egos. We only want to hear good things about ourselves.

Almost ninety-nine percent of the people in this world would fall under the clutches of the eight worldly concerns. Therefore, we must free our mind by transforming our mind through understanding causes and effects.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in order to be free from our suffering, there is a need to transform our mind. This entails dealing with non-virtuous thoughts. What are non-virtuous thoughts? At a basic level, these are thoughts that cause harm or unhappiness, and which disturb the mind or body. If we only live our lives thinking about me, myself and I, whatever we do will only revolve around ourselves. As a result, our ego and pride will grow. The slightest thing that disturbs our mind will then provoke our ego and pride, causing our mind to become unbalanced. This is how things begin to fall apart and go wrong for many people.

Examine yourself: Have you been thinking about how you have lived your life? Is it the way you want it to be? What is your motivation for performing your job? Was it to benefit and contribute to the society? Or have you been thinking only of finding a job that commands a high salary so that you can lead a comfortable life? When we read the newspaper's classified ads, don't we look out for jobs that we like? And when we apply for a job at any

company, our first question would be, “what is the salary scale?”

While it is true that life without money is difficult, has it ever occurred to you that you may have a lot of money, and yet still be unable to enjoy life? Think of people who met with sudden death. I have heard of a friend’s father who had just finished his dinner, sat down on the sofa, raised his legs, and was about to have his cup of tea but passed away suddenly. He did not even have the chance to sip his tea! Death can strike without warning and catch us unprepared. Thus, we must seriously question ourselves, “Are we living our lives wisely?”

As a starting point for Buddhist practice, there are ten non-virtues that we should avoid, similar to the Judeo-Christian’s Ten Commandments. These non-virtues, if engaged in, will result in bad experiences both for ourselves and those around us. Buddhism does not have a concept of sin. Buddhism also does not believe in making us feel guilty about ourselves.

What Buddhism teaches is very practical: We must avoid negative actions not because we are ‘sinning’, but because these acts hurt ourselves and others. The essence of Buddhism is to live a meaningful life, and an important step in achieving this goal is to avoid negative actions.

Lama Dromtonpa once said to a monk, “Good to do prostrations but better to practise the Dharma. Good to circumambulate² holy objects, but better still to practise the Dharma. Good to recite Dharma texts but better still to practise the Dharma!”

The monk got upset and said, “What should I do then to practise the Dharma?”

Lama Dromtonpa replied, “Forget this life.”

Actual Dharma practice means that in whatever we do,

² *Circumambulate means going clockwise around holy objects, a popular practice in Buddhism.*

we do it in order to have a better next life. This is Dharma. Even prostrating for the sake of improving this life is not Dharma. Circumambulating stupas and turning prayer wheels, if done all for the purpose of this life, is not Dharma. Many people have the misconception of what Dharma practice is. Some think it means going to temples to pray to the Buddhas so that they can become rich or win the lottery.

You must understand and realise what Dharma really is. Is your idea of Dharma based on worldly Dharma, which is clinging on to the happiness of this life only? Are you just a casual believer of Buddhism? Does your spiritual practice appear to be religious practice on the outside, but in fact you are only paying lip-service to Buddhism?

Does your spiritual practice include extending a helping hand to a Muslim or a Christian? Does your spiritual practice entail caring for others, and showing love and concern to all sentient beings regardless of who they are? Do you strive to offer your service to all beings with

the wish that all can be influenced by Dharma teachings and practise well?

Having these thoughts and actively engaging in them is better than circumambulating stupas and turning prayer wheels for the sake of this life only. Sincerely helping a Muslim, Christian, or Hindu would be considered Dharma practice, whereas circumambulating stupas for worldly gain is not considered Dharma practice.

Many people do not know the difference between Dharma and non-Dharma. Anything that is worldly is not Dharma. Anything that seeks only the gratification of this life or even the next life is not Dharma. Dharma teaches us happiness and is the antidote to all suffering.

Whenever things go wrong and unhappiness arises, it is basically due to our own self-cherishing mind. So long as something does not suit our minds and does not go the way we want it to be, we become very upset. We may even go to the extent that we cannot eat or sleep properly. Would you want to live your life in this manner?

If we were constantly getting angry and upset, people around us would also be affected by our negative energies.

Thus, the root of the problem always lies within our mind. We have not been gentle with our mind. We must treat our mind like a baby and nurture it with love, compassion and kindness. In the same way that we constantly care for our baby, and protect them from danger, we must look after our mind and be kind with it and not hurt it by becoming upset or angry. Only then will our own body and mind be able to relax.

The reason for me to say this is because there are many hypocritical people, or people who do not know how to be true to themselves. If I were to ask you, “Who are you?”, you may not be able to answer and may find yourself lost for words. You may start asking yourself “What do I really want?” or “What have I been doing all these while?”

We are so used to being conditioned by others. We

sometimes follow blindly what our family, friends and relatives tell us to do instead of what we like or dislike. Therefore, we become conditioned like a bonsai tree. It has a stunted growth as a result of being pruned and conditioned by external forces. It does not grow naturally. Regardless of how the bonsai tree tries to resist our conditioning, the regular trimming and shaping it with copper wires will cause the bonsai tree to become the way we want it to be. It is similar with our mind and life. We need to pause and ask ourselves, are our lives turning out the way we want it to be? Are we in control of our life, or is our life being shaped by others?

Often our lives are not the way we want it to be. We frequently indulge ourselves in watching movies since this allows us to live in a world of fantasies and dreams. We deceive ourselves by vicariously experiencing the happiness of the characters in the movie. For the duration of the movie, we escape into the movie's make-believe world where things are good and happy.

People act in this way because they do not know how to get out of the unhappiness that they are experiencing as a result of the fear of change. Changes are often painful. We are so attached to whatever we have accumulated throughout the years, that these tangible or intangible possessions, memories or habits are the things we identify ourselves with. Even when we find these possessions undesirable, we refuse to change because we fear the challenges of changing and leading a different lifestyle. It could be a fear of adapting to a new environment or fear of what other people might say or feel about us. Being overly attached to the status quo and fearful of how changes could jeopardize our lives is the suffering of change.

We find ways and means to numb ourselves because of this fear of change. People want to numb themselves because they generally have forgotten how to be happy. I find it very sad because happiness is something that is free and yet we do not know how to draw onto this abundance of happiness. Instead, we have to spend money to be happy. We pay to go to the cinema, watch

performances, and tune in to reality TV shows, all just to derive a short-term high!

I reckon it is crazy how people watch these actors and actresses, and then seek to imitate the way they dress, talk and act. As more and more people come to view this behaviour as trendy and fashionable, they soon jump onto the bandwagon to imitate the lifestyle and be part of the 'in crowd'. These celebrities instantly attain divine status! We work towards the goal of being like them with the hope that life will become better for us. We think that by finding a new identity to be different from others, we become better than others. In our mind, we start to discriminate people based on these fabricated standards of 'desirable lifestyle' and 'undesirable lifestyle'. We begin to think that those people who do not watch the latest popular television hits are out-dated. New cliques of people are formed around this common set of beliefs and norms. People go to cafes and talk about celebrities. The other day when I went to buy a cup of coffee, I overheard some people sharing their opinion of the last episode of

some television program and how much they wanted to emulate the characters' lives.

Anyway it is this hope to be like a celebrity that creates more problems for people as they start dyeing their hair, going to slimming centres and changing their hairstyles and clothes. Imagine how these people are willing to spend huge sums of money on these activities, all in an attempt to numb and distance themselves from the emptiness and bitterness that they feel inside. If we were to examine carefully, those who like to look good and purchase expensive items for showing off are generally insecure and vulnerable. This reflects the state of their minds. They are immature and thus need something external to cling on to and identify themselves with. This often creates more problems.

Anyway what should we do when problems arise? How should we solve a problem before everything starts falling apart? It would be much easier to deal with a problem at its early stage rather than trying to remedy the situation

after things have fallen apart. It is easier to mend a crack on the wall than to build a new wall after it has collapsed. This is an excellent example to remind us to exercise mindfulness, and be aware of problems when they arise. At the end of the day before we sleep, we must always reflect on what we have done during the course of the day. You may think this is unnecessary because we will not be able to reverse our actions. Nevertheless it is important to do some reflection so that we can learn from our actions and gradually improve ourselves. Even after we have eaten our meal, we can reflect on the food. Did our piece of chicken or vegetable spontaneously manifest itself? How did it come about? It is not merely a case of praying for food and magically having it appear. Rather, it is about developing a sensitivity and awareness of how things come about and how dependent we are on so many factors. In the same way, by reflecting on our day, we learn to be more aware of how things come about, and how our actions and thoughts affect others and ourselves. Thus, we can improve ourselves.

How can we go about being mindful of our life? Let's say

we have a lifespan of eighty years on an average, which is a very optimistic estimate, isn't it? With so much daily stress, most of us will live less than eighty years, though some may live longer. Anyway, out of these eighty years, about forty will be spent sleeping. Think of all the sleep during the night and all the naps during the day from birth till now. They add up to a lot of hours!

This leaves us with forty years. With twenty years channelled into our jobs and five years devoted to our love for shopping, we will have fifteen years remaining. Of which, we would have spent at least ten years gossiping and chatting. Four years would probably be spent in the toilet to keep our bodies clean. This leaves us only one year, which we will probably have spent much of it day dreaming.

Hence, if we have a lifespan of eighty years, we are likely to have wasted it very, very easily. If we were to ask ourselves, "Have we lived a fulfilling life?", we probably cannot face ourselves and answer this question truthfully and comfortably. It would be much worse if we spent

most of the eighty years being argumentative and causing suffering to others and ourselves.

Thus, we must ask ourselves how much time in our lives we spend on prayers, self reflection and meditation to calm our mind. It seems almost impossible to find moments in our lives when we engage in such meaningful activities. If we do not make an effort to take some time off from our busy schedule to practise Dharma for others, it will be impossible to derive any real meaning from our lives. Hence it is essential to reflect and try to meditate so that we can understand ourselves and others. In this way, we will be able to live harmoniously with ourselves and others too.

To make our lives meaningful, we must turn our minds to the Dharma and always have the thought to benefit others. It is important to learn to love others and appreciate their qualities rather than to focus and magnify their faults. Only then will we be happy. We are aware of others' negative traits and habits, however, we must realise that we are not perfect as well. It is inevitable for

people to have faults, otherwise we would have become Buddhas!

If we realise that everyone wants happiness and dislikes suffering, we will come to see that everyone is equal in that sense. Even animals want happiness and dislike suffering. There are some chickens outside my temple. At times, when these chickens approach people and rub against them, some of them would become frightened. They find the live chicken repulsive, and yet when the chicken is dead and cooked, they love it! This is ridiculous! Why do they dislike chickens when they are alive? Chickens too are sentient beings.

Sometimes these chickens would like to come up to me and rub their feathers against my robes. If you are practising Buddhism and trying to extend your love to all beings, when a chicken comes up to you and rub against you, allow it like I do. After all, why should I be so attached to my robe which is just a piece of cloth? I can easily wash my robes. If you truly treasure other sentient beings, your actions must reflect this at all times.

Within our minds, it must be very clear that, “I am here for Dharma and to make a difference in my own and others’ lives.” Otherwise practising Dharma is not real Dharma. It is paying lip-service to the Buddha. From our mouths, we say, “Oh, I must benefit all sentient beings.” But if we do not practise what we preach, it becomes nonsense. We must make a difference. The act of non-killing will save the lives of many beings. When we kill one chicken, we are not only killing that chicken’s life. We are also killing all the other beings, such as the micro-organisms, living in the chicken’s body. We must avoid accumulating such negative karma at all times. Therefore it is essential to integrate Dharma into our lives. When we say we want to benefit other beings, we must try and live up to what we say.

We eat the flesh of other sentient beings without any hesitation. For example, consider the huge tiger prawns that Singaporeans love to eat. Some people love to eat several big prawns with a plate of noodles. Some even love to eat the live prawns that have just been caught

straight from the water. They pour alcohol on them, cook them and eat them till there is a mountain of prawn shells in front of them. Unbelievable but true! Have we ever considered how long a shrimp takes to become a prawn? To grow to a considerable size, it takes nine months. We forget to cherish the lives of others. For the sake of our attachment to the sense of taste, we have eaten an inordinate number of lives in just this present life.

When we see prawns, we think of them as food. When we see other animals, do we see them as food too? Would you eat dog meat? Why not... since they are animals too? Then why is it that only prawns, squid or fish are edible? Why not whales, giraffe or elephants? Would you eat them? Hippopotamus? Why not? Don't you think we are inconsistent in saying that animals are food as we eat only some and not all of them? Humans rear animals to reproduce so that we have food. Some even like to eat the young of animals, like the Chinese delicacy, suckling pigs. The mother animal would love her baby in the same way as any human would love their own child. Would anyone, even an animal, eat their own

baby? Or would we eat babies of other humans for that matter? I do not think so. Why? It is important to ponder over why we would eat some but not others. I am not advocating that we start trying to cook all forms of meat but rather to examine our actions. We must train our mind to adopt a flexible view from many angles and evaluate our current habits and actions. This forms the training for thought transformation. We need to look deeply into our mind to reflect on our speech, thoughts and actions. Through these reflections, we will be able to change our negative attitudes and thoughts.

If we truly work selflessly for other sentient beings, Buddha will know. Do not be short-sighted and become obsessed only with material things in life. To make our lives meaningful, we must turn our mind towards the Dharma and benefit others. If we really try to practise, all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas will give us signs. It may come in the form of dreams or perhaps appear in real life. There will definitely be signs of realisations if we sincerely practise. But do not expect some ability to predict the future or read people's minds as the signs of successful

spiritual practice. We should not expect or seek 'special' powers for spiritual attainments.

In the pursuit for happiness, we are overwhelmed by our own actions and emotions. We forget to consider how our actions will impact others. We always try to search for ways to exploit others or to gain some benefit from them. When I was at the Underwater World in Sentosa, the people around me were pointing at the fishes identifying which were edible and which were not. There I was, reciting prayers hoping that the fishes would become liberated from suffering while these people were thinking of eating them. Maybe they would think that I was acting strange when they heard me reciting the prayers softly. The point is: we must love others and have a mind that seeks to help them. We should not be obsessed with thoughts of extracting benefits from others for our own gains or pleasures.

Of course, we will still experience difficulties in life as we practise the Dharma. We need to train our mind to see the positive side of the situation whenever we encounter difficulties. For example, if you were to lose your job or if

you were scolded for something you did not do, think of this as a cleansing of your negative karma, and as purification.

Everything happens because of karma and conditions, and most of them stem from acts done in our previous lives. So when we suffer, we should try to see it as something positive. It exhausts our past negative karma and we will not experience its negative effects in the future. We should be thankful that the karma ripens in a form that we can endure and not manifest itself in a more painful way.

If we were to come under the power of negative emotions like anger, instead of becoming angry, we can visualise bright lights coming into our bodies from our Gurus and we can recite mantras to calm our mind. At the same time we can meditate on the kindness of the person who is causing us trouble. He or she is giving us a chance to practise patience and kindness. Meditate on the faults of anger or any other negative emotion we are

experiencing. This will help reduce the effect of the negative emotion.

When the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree, Mara³ challenged Buddha by saying, “Though you are perfect and I cannot harm you anymore, I will harm and challenge those who practise your teachings!” Instead of becoming angry, the Buddha felt compassion for Mara and replied, “Thank you, Mara, for challenging my students, for only then will they be able to practise what they have been taught.”

Mara was so surprised by this display of love and calmness that he could not stand it and crumbled to dust. In the same way, we must learn to see that people who cause us difficulties are giving us a chance to practise. There is no point in getting angry at them because they are also victims of their own ignorance, attachment and aversion.

³ *Mara is the personification of evil or the equivalent of Satan in Judeo-Christian religions.*

Chapter 4: The Three Principal Aspects of the Spiritual Path

The whole spiritual path to enlightenment can be summarized by these three essential points: Renunciation, Bodhicitta and the Right View of Emptiness.

After his great awakening, Buddha spoke of the Four Noble Truths:

The first Noble Truth, the Truth of Suffering, is about Samsara. In Buddhism, Samsara refers to the uncontrolled cyclic existence of beings in the six realms of existence. All beings will be reborn into one of the six realms of existence based on their karma as mentioned in Chapter 1.

The nature of suffering in Samsara is the same for all beings; this is the Truth of Suffering as taught by Buddha. So what do I mean by this? For example, if I say I am

suffering from a headache, you would be able to understand what I am going through as you have somehow experienced it before. Since everyone shares the same nature of suffering, we are all equal. Also, everyone wants to be happy and dislikes suffering. So how can one be truly free from suffering?

All sentient beings will experience suffering as long as we are not enlightened. Suffering can take various forms. In Buddhism, we speak of three types of suffering:

1. The suffering of suffering
2. The suffering of change, and
3. The suffering of conditioned phenomena

The suffering of suffering refers to gross levels of suffering like the pain of illness, of dying, and of aging. These are very real and painful. There are many terrible diseases like AIDS and cancer that ravage our bodies and cause unbearable suffering. Also, the suffering of suffering includes mental disturbances like anger,

jealousy and sadness which we are very familiar with. Being unable to get what we desire and being forced to be with people we dislike is also suffering.

The suffering of change is more subtle. This refers to the fact that life is impermanent and everything changes. Happiness is not constant and so there is no guarantee that happiness will last forever. The rich can become poor, families break apart, reputation gets ruined and so on. In essence, even happiness is considered part of the suffering of change because it does not last. Even if you are happy throughout your life, death will ultimately separate you from your spouse, possessions or whatever your cause of happiness is.

The suffering of conditioned phenomena refers to the fact that everything is the result of causes and conditions. All phenomena are not permanent and are always changing. As a result, we cannot cling to anything as being stable and dependable because everything is in a state of flux and change.

The truth of suffering brings with it the understanding that since we are all suffering, all of us also want happiness. It is an undeniable fact that everyone wants happiness and does not like suffering.

Why do we suffer? We suffer because of ignorance and because of self-cherishing thoughts. We lack Bodhicitta, that is, the wish to become enlightened so as to liberate all sentient beings from the cycle of existence. This is the Truth of the Cause of Suffering, which is the Second Noble Truth.

The Third Noble Truth is the Truth of Happiness. This means lasting happiness which is the happiness of becoming enlightened, of becoming a Buddha.

So how can one reach the state of lasting happiness? The Fourth Noble Truth teaches us the Truth of the Path leading to happiness. To be able to reach the state of lasting happiness, we need to reflect on and practise the Three Principal Aspects of the Path. The Three Principal Aspects of the Path are Renunciation, developing

Bodhicitta and practising the right view of Emptiness. If we can contemplate and realise these Four Noble Truths and practise on the Three Principal Aspects of the Path, we will be able to have lasting happiness.

Renunciation

In Buddhism, we speak of ‘renunciation of faults’. We must first acknowledge and accept that being angry or jealous, etc are faults. Only when we can recognise these faults, then we will know what to renounce. At the moment because of our self-centred view, we take all our actions as generally being positive. From the basic human values, we practise ethics and moral discipline and learn to work on our faults.

Having renounced our faults, we move to external renunciation, which does not mean just lying there and not doing anything. Neither does it mean stopping all our activities. For example, renouncing coffee does not mean that we are not permitted to drink coffee any more. It means that we are giving up our attachment or addiction

to coffee, so that we will not be upset if somehow we cannot get our coffee. We understand that it is all right and it does not really matter; whatever will be, will be. This does not mean that we do not make efforts for everything that happens and we blame our karma, as if everything is predestined. This fatalistic attitude is a mistaken viewpoint and a good example of the dangers of little knowledge. It is very important to think carefully about what renunciation really means.

Renunciation means to give up our obsessions and attachments with things or habits. True renunciation does not mean giving up our involvement with life. We can have a big house, cars and all the luxuries but at the same time have renunciation. With renunciation, we become flexible and go with the flow of life. We accept things as they are. We do not get upset when things change, because change is the nature of Samsara. However, while accepting things as they are, we must put in effort in our spiritual practice; transform our thoughts, speech and actions so that they serve to benefit all

beings. This is what we must pursue with great enthusiasm.

So we understand that wallowing in Samsara is not a meaningful way to spend our life. Would you want to go from the hell realm to heaven and then back to hell, and repeating this cycle again and again? Would you want to suffer the painful cycles of illness, old age, death and all the troubles that plague you, life after life? To be free from Samsara, we must always prevent ourselves from dwelling in negative emotions. Whenever a negative emotion arises in us, we should tell ourselves, “I recognise this, and I want to stop the vicious cycle. I want to get out of Samsara!”

But how do we get out of Samsara? The only way to happiness is through cultivating Bodhicitta based on the right view of Emptiness, which is the mind of wanting to become Buddha to benefit others. We can run anywhere in the world but we will never be truly happy. This is because it is our mind that makes us happy or unhappy,

and not the external conditions. It does not matter wherever we go. If we are grouchy or grumpy, we will always think badly of other people or of our situation!

Bodhicitta

So what is “Bodhicitta”?

Bodhicitta can be defined as the mind wishing to attain enlightenment for the benefit of others. From renunciation, we first must realise that others are the same as us, such that they also wish to be happy. As we realise that we are only one being and there are billions of other beings in the other realms, our aspiration to benefit others will begin to sprout like a seedling. Our compassion will arise for the suffering of others. As we cultivate Buddha’s teachings and progress on our path to enlightenment, we will actively take steps to benefit others. We must do this with the aim of becoming enlightened as it is the only way to truly benefit the countless sentient beings around us.

Bodhicitta is the essence of Buddha's teachings. It encompasses the thought of love, compassion and the willingness to reach out to help others. With the thought of wanting to become a Buddha to benefit others, we can transform every act, even something as mundane as eating or going to bed, into Dharma practice.

We must have constant mindfulness of this Bodhicitta motivation, twenty-four hours a day. In this way, the whole day becomes Dharma practice. With this constant thought of trying to transform everything into Dharma, into a means for helping others, we also prevent ourselves from being clumsy due to the lack of mindfulness. Mindfulness of Bodhicitta is the key to transforming our life into Dharma. Even when we sleep at night, think that we are sleeping to recharge our body, so that the next day we will be able to work more efficiently for the benefit of other sentient beings. If we live our whole life only thinking of ourselves, only for our own self-cherishing thoughts, our life will have no meaning. Even if we can only benefit just one other person in our entire

life, that is much better off than not benefiting anybody else at all.

Sometimes, I am asked how to keep the thought of Bodhicitta firmly in one's mind. Most people find that sometimes they do have the thought of Bodhicitta but that thought evaporates very quickly. Let me pose the following questions, "Do you feel bad when someone gives you a big scolding?" and "Does that feeling stick with you for a while?" Yes, I am sure those feelings will stay with you for some time. They really affect you inside.

If you really have the feeling of Bodhicitta and the thought of love and care towards others, do you think this feeling will fade so quickly? Of course not. So it makes me wonder what kind of Bodhicitta you are generating. Perhaps it's 'bird Bodhicitta', Bodhicitta as small as a bird's heart!

Bodhicitta also bring about the feeling of a strong sense of responsibility and a thought that "others are suffering and it is up to me and me alone to save them, especially

if I can help them". It is up to you if you want to help others. If we were to go back a few centuries, perhaps you had three hundred slaves then and circumstances were such that you would not need them ever again. Would you have freed them then? Well, if you did care for others, you certainly would have done so. It would be a wonderful thing to do, isn't it?

Similarly, if we know that by doing our practice and by reciting mantras, prayers and engaging in virtuous deeds, we can benefit and save other sentient beings. Wouldn't we then engage in these acts so that others can be relieved from their suffering? If we have Bodhicitta, we would engage in these acts without hesitation.

Life these days has many enjoyments and distractions which make it unlikely for us to have much interest in practising Dharma. It would seem to be easier to practise the Dharma in the past than now. The effect of reciting just one mantra of the Buddha of Compassion (Lord Chenresig), Om Mani Padme Hum, these days would be equivalent to a person reciting 10,000 times of them

during the olden times! Why? In olden days, people had more faith and were more willing to do Dharma practises like reciting the mantras. These days, people are very sceptical and doubtful about the benefits that mantra recitation would bring. It is very difficult to have someone recite just one Om Mani Padme Hum. Nowadays, there are also more efficacies in doing practices like reciting mantras since most people simply are reluctant to practise or they do not have the time to do so. Therefore, the circumstances to practise Dharma in this present time are more challenging as compared to the past.

Bodhicitta is a heart-felt feeling that cannot be verbalised. No words can fully and effectively describe it. It is a feeling that comes from deep within us, a feeling of wanting to become a Buddha to benefit others limitlessly. I remembered going to Sera Monastery to listen to a teaching by His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama. His Holiness the Dalai Lama said that there is no way one can express Bodhicitta in words. When he was sitting on

the huge vajra throne giving the Bodhisattva⁴ vows to the people, he actually cried! At that moment, I could feel the love and compassion that he has for all beings. He truly expressed the feeling of Bodhicitta during his teaching and this really left a deep impression on me.

Bodhicitta is not something that is generated easily. If we do not continue to maintain it, we will lose it very quickly. To develop Bodhicitta, we need to always meditate on Bodhicitta and sincerely change ourselves. We need to make constant efforts to keep Bodhicitta alive in us all the time. We must be mindful that pity and situational compassion, for example the compassion when we see some extreme suffering, is not Bodhicitta. These feelings are just that of any normal human being.

In many ways, we are indebted to the kindness of countless sentient beings. Why is that so? Have we ever wondered where our clothes come from? Or where does

⁴ A Bodhisattva is one who seeks enlightenment for the benefit of others. They dedicate their lives on the path to enlightenment and to work to benefit others.

the food that we eat come from? I remembered going to a supermarket and overheard some children saying that chicken meat comes from supermarket. This is funny but ironic. Nowadays, children only get to see dead animals from the supermarket. They forget that the chicken meat that they are eating actually comes from the live chickens that are reared and slaughtered in the farm. It is through the kindness of the chickens, the farmers, the butchers and the supermarket owners that provide us with the chicken meat. Thus, whatever we wear, eat, or use are due to the kindness of other beings. We may get angry with someone on the road and not realise that he is the doctor that may operate on us in the future and save our life. Bodhicitta is all pervasive compassion to all, at all times.

Right View of Emptiness

From the time we were born, we see ourselves as if we are the centre of the world. We label all that happens in relation to how it affects us, as good or bad. As we release this tight sense of 'I', we start recognising that the

viewpoints and the things that we see and experience are all described in words – labels that are relative and have no fixed standard. For example, do ‘gold’ and ‘dung’ have the same value? If a human and a dung beetle in a jungle see a bar of gold and elephant dung, what would you think their reactions would be?

The human will value the gold. However, for the dung beetle, the elephant dung represents life and the shiny gold bar has no value to it. Both the gold and dung are empty of any specific value. The value is only in relation to how it is viewed.

To begin to explore and develop the right view of Emptiness, we must first understand ‘Interdependent Origination’. Another aspect of the right view of Emptiness can be described with this example - let’s say you are admiring a beautiful stupa in front of you, do you think the stupa you are seeing existed before you saw it? Do you think it appeared out of the blue and on its own accord? No! Someone had to place an order for the stupa to be made, perhaps go to the factory, order some

people to obtain the materials and to work on completing it. This is an example of 'Interdependent Origination'.

Similarly, have you always been as you are today? Are you always calm and stable in terms of your thoughts? I am sure there must have been ups and downs before you reach this point in your life today. Things do not spontaneously come about. They require causes and conditions to materialise. Our situation today is the result of our many actions in the past.

Therefore, all things, phenomena and situations arise as a result of causes and conditions. With Interdependent Origination, things do not just happen by chance. Nothing can happen by magic. Interdependent Origination is not an illusion. We must understand that Interdependent Origination is very real. To think that things happen without causes and condition is but a hallucination and dream!

Another aspect of Emptiness is similar to the ideas on the structure of matter as studied in the field of Science. We

are all made up of individual cells and atomic particles. If I throw a cup onto the floor, would it break? Of course! But once it is broken into pieces, can it still be called a cup? No! But it is called a cup before it is broken, right? Just because I threw the cup onto the floor and it shattered, it is no longer a 'cup'. But it was called a 'cup' before it broke into many pieces.

Therefore, it is very clear that the cup is empty of being really there, empty of being permanent and unchanging no matter what happens. It is impossible to 'catch' its permanent nature. Are you able to catch birds? It would be difficult since the birds would fly away quickly when you advance towards them! In the same way, you cannot find the permanent nature of anything.

Therefore, the right view of Emptiness is that things are not permanent – they are labelled. They are dependent on causes and conditions, and made up of parts. These parts are interdependent. In examining all around us with this viewpoint, when good tidings arrive, we are not totally happy; when bad things happen, we are not totally

unhappy too. If we appreciate causes and conditions, interdependent origination, of things being empty when they are actually there, we will see that there is no need for one to be overwhelmed by emotions since the appearance of emotion is empty. That is why those who really understand Emptiness actually have no necessity to be happy or sad, just a state of clarity, a state of emptiness. It is all about being very clear about the fact that everything is empty.

The Chinese saying “kan puo hong chen” (看破红尘) means being disillusioned with the material things we strive for. It is the view that understands that everything is empty; all things will be gone sooner or later. Another saying also illustrates the impermanence of things: “tian xia wu bu san zhi yan xi” (天下无不散之宴席) which means there is no joyful banquet in the world which will not end in farewell.

We are protecting our mind by understanding the nature of phenomena - everything is empty and nothing is

permanent. Everything happens through karma, causes and conditions.

Try to apply the understanding of Dharma to everything we do. Link whatever happens to us to our understanding of Dharma. When suffering occurs, know that it arises out of causes and conditions. Gradually, we will see our life change. Then you will see that our mind becomes clearer. This is the way we must practise: we must have the right view of Emptiness, that everything is not permanent, that all things are not definite. Everything is subject to causes and conditions. As long as Emptiness and Interdependent Origination seem separate to us, we have not realised the thoughts of the great Buddha!

What I have explained is the right view of Emptiness and Interdependent Origination. Emptiness comes from understanding Interdependent Origination. For example, we can only get coffee from coffee powder, right? We cannot get tea out of coffee powder. Neither can we get coffee out of tea leaves.

Hence, we must understand the thought process of the Buddha. If we can understand his correct view, we will understand the Buddha's teachings as follows:

1. We must guard our mind by understanding that Samsara is not beneficial, so we must renounce it.
2. We must develop Bodhicitta to live our life for others, so that our life becomes a life of Dharma.
3. We must see everything as impermanence, like bubbles flying in the wind.

Do you know why Maitreya Buddha manifested as 'Ha-shang' (Laughing Buddha) in China? He is actually laughing because humans are like silly little children. Humans are suffering but they do not know they are suffering. They do all sorts of things to make their life better, but the more they try, the more they suffer. Some want happiness by wearing silk since they think that is the best material for clothes. Little do they realise that silk comes from worms, silk worms! Do you know how many worms would need to die for a piece of silk cloth? Their craving for the comfort of wearing silk and showing off

their silk garments unwittingly cause many worms to die. Is this not the cause of suffering?

So Lord Maitreya appears as Ha-shang to laugh at us! Therefore, whenever we see Maitreya as Ha-shang, we must realise that he is laughing at our ignorant minds.

If we understand that all sentient beings are suffering, we will realise that there is nothing to be happy about. That is why my teacher, Geshe Lama Konchog pointed out that many Bodhisattvas are very serious and do not smile. They are always so sad, sad that all beings are suffering and do not know how to be happy. The Laughing Buddha and the serious Bodhisattvas may seem to contradict each other in this example, but their laughter and sadness are both as a result of compassion towards all beings. However, due to our self-centred attitudes we may not like the idea very much that the Laughing Buddha is laughing at our ignorant minds. Remember that the display of emotions by these enlightened beings is empty and is only manifested as a means for helping all sentient beings who are suffering.

Bodhisattvas want us to be happy. Our happiness and our clear state of mind will be the cause for all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to be happy. If we want to please them, we must then practise what they teach; then they will be happy. So, if we practise Dharma, will we be happy? Of course, because we are doing the things that result in happiness! So when the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas see that, they will definitely be pleased too!

Chapter 5: Rediscovering Yourself Through Meditation

***We need to learn to love ourselves by
reconnecting with ourselves.***

Many people are afraid to meditate in this modern age. They think that meditation is something only people of the past did, or that it is some weird New Age phenomenon. For the people who meditate, it seems to be just breathing exercises. While this has some benefits, meditation in Buddhism has a specific purpose.

We must generate love for others by meditating on the Buddha's teachings. Meditation does not necessarily mean sitting in the lotus position with our back straight and eyes half-closed. Meditation means thinking deeply about the truth. We can meditate while sitting down to drink a cup of coffee or when we lie down. Meditation can also mean debating or discussing Buddhism with others. It is important to think about the teachings of the Buddha. We should not think that "Oh my practice is so weak! I

have so little compassion and Bodhicitta! I am insignificant in bringing happiness to others!” This is a mistaken way of thinking. In a huge field of green grass, a little yellow flower will stand out among the green. In the same way, as long as we practise, even if we think we are a ‘small practitioner’, we will be noticed by others and we will light up their lives.

We need to do analytical meditation. This sort of meditation can also mean sitting down at our desk and writing out the arguments for and against the topic we are analysing. There will be some points that are not really convincing, and these may be the ones that we must face. When we have understood these points, we will see progress. It is when we are in an uncertain state that our ego and self-cherishing attitude will arise. For example, let’s analyse the fault of getting angry: According to Buddha’s teachings, one reason why we should not get angry is because it destroys our peace of mind. If we cannot accept this point, we will not be fully convinced of the need not to get angry. We will be unsure and uncertain about this particular point as we may see

aggression and anger as necessary for survival. Then at the end, we will still not be convinced that anger is bad. That makes us not want to face it as we do not want to recognise that we have the fault within ourselves. We try to rationalise the negativity and assume that it is all right to be angry. Thus, analytical meditation is the first part of Dharma practice – the preparation stage.

Based on my experiences, before we sleep, we should pray to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and ask for blessings, and the removal of obstacles. If you are not a Buddhist, you may pray to Jesus or Allah instead. Though they have omniscient minds, we must always request for what we need in our prayers. Would you give food to some hungry children who approach you for food? Or would you give the food to some bystanders who are not hungry but are just looking at the food in your hand? I am sure you would give the food to the hungry children who have requested you for it.

For practitioners of Mahayana Buddhism, the teachings of the Buddha are manifested in the form of the qualified

spiritual master or Guru. It is written in the Vajrayana teachings that our Guru is the quintessence of all the Buddhas. They are kinder than all the Buddhas, for without them, we would not have heard the precious Dharma.

Thus, we seek the blessings and inspirations of our Guru to be like him. We must ask for blessings, so that we will treasure them. We must request for the removal of obstacles, so that when obstacles get fewer, we know that it is blessings from our Guru. Some people pray to many deities and when they do get some benefit, they would not know who has given it to them. Therefore, for Buddhists who have found their Gurus, they must know that their prayers that have been 'answered' are actual blessings from their Gurus.

The next part of the analytical meditation is to tell your subconscious mind, "These are the faults that I recognise and I want to remove them. I want to stop such negative habits." Nowadays, many of us find ourselves lost and overwhelmed by the demands of life. We want inner

peace and happiness, but we cannot seem to get them. Meditation is a means to making peace with ourselves and learning to be gentle with ourselves.

Meditation at a basic level is simply a way to enable our minds to rest. These days, many problems relate to stress: stress from work, relationships and family. Our minds get so stressed up that, as a result, even our bodies get stressed up, leading to many illnesses. If a person is constantly under stress, his body would frequently be in pain. His muscles may be all knotted up and he may suffer from aches and pain. Meditation is a good way for people to relax, to let their minds rest and to allow them to take a 'breather' from the pressures of life.

What kinds of meditation should be practised? Some methods are used to calm the mind while others are employed to develop qualities like love and wisdom. It is really up to the individual to decide which form he wants.

The most basic way to meditate is to sit comfortably, close your eyes and just enjoy the wonderful feeling of

simply breathing in and out. Feel the coolness of the air you breathe in and feel the body taking in the oxygen before breathing out naturally. If the mind starts to hop from one thought to another, gently push these thoughts aside and return to being conscious of your breath. Focusing on our breathing helps to dissolve the solidity of our thoughts and our preoccupation with life's ups and downs. The conscious breathing of "in and out" helps us to be aware that whatever we believe to be real and concrete in our lives, can actually be dissolved, simply by breathing "in and out" and letting go. This will help us rediscover and develop our state of mental, physical and spiritual health.

An alternative method of meditation is to focus and concentrate on a visual object. This method is useful because our minds are easily attracted to what we see. It may be easier for some people if they focus on a visual object instead of their breath. The object can be a picture of a loved one like your mother or Buddha, Jesus Christ or Mother Mary. Whatever the object chosen, it should be

one that invokes in you the feelings of love, compassion and kindness.

Meditation is a means to reconnect with the love within us. It is about reconnecting with our innocent and carefree childhood days, when we lived and basked in the glow of our parents' and relatives' love. It is so important to relive and reconnect with this love, because only then can we pass this same love to others. Of course, if you did not have a happy childhood, think of times when you were happy, for these too will bring back the positive feelings.

In the course of your meditation, you may find stray thoughts arising in your mind. You may be trying to focus on your breath but find yourself lost in thoughts of tomorrow or of the terrible day you had at work. When this happens, most people will become frustrated and develop an aversion to stray thoughts and start to think that, "Oh, I'm not fit to meditate. I'm lousy and therefore I shouldn't meditate..."

Why does this attitude arise? This attitude arises because we are so used to criticising others that we even become harsh with ourselves. This attitude spills over into our meditation, and when difficulties arise in our meditation, we start to chastise ourselves and put ourselves down.

We must understand that it is only natural for wandering thoughts to arise in our minds. It is important for us to be gentle with ourselves, because as we do so, we will also become gentle to others. If you make a mistake, do give yourself a chance and encourage yourself. Soon, you will be forgiving toward others for their shortcomings.

A student once asked me, “How do we overcome the power of negative habits?” You need to renounce them, recognise how the negative habits bring no benefit to anyone, and how it is harmful to others and yourself. Recognise that these bad habits do not help others and you are motivated to give them up for all beings. However, negative habits have to be gradually eliminated. Do not be too harsh on yourself and try to

stop to do all negative things at one go. With an understanding of your negative habits, overcoming them will become second nature to you.

Remember to give yourself a chance!

Chapter 6: Practical Dharma Lessons

***If we work with the intention of wanting to
help others,
our jobs will become meaningful.***

You should try thinking about the motivation of helping others at the beginning of your day at work. It may sound crazy to you if you are asked to go to work today so as to benefit other people. Most of you will respond, “No way! I want to benefit myself and my wallet at the end of the month!”

Let’s say you are in some kind of business. All businessmen would like their businesses to be profitable and make lots of money. It is likely that your motivation when you first make the business deal is to target at some profit margin from the deal. When you are performing the job, you would then cut costs to meet your targeted profit margin. And when you finally complete the job, you would like to receive the profits that you have targeted and worked for. If you realise, your motivation

from the beginning to the completion of the business deal is to make profits.

Notice that even the simple act of working can be broken down by analysing the motivation at each step of the process. To further explain, the initial motivation is set when you first make the deal. The middling motivation is when you are performing the job and the end motivation is when you complete the job.

We usually work to benefit ourselves alone. However, if our motivation is to work to benefit others, our job will become meaningful. It is insufficient to have the motivation of wanting to benefit others before we actually go to work. We should constantly keep in mind this motivation of wanting to benefit others throughout our working hours. Only then will we not fall into the trap of getting angry, upset or irritated.

Have you ever become so frustrated at work that you curse the people at work? Maybe you did not verbally express it out but you may have such thoughts in your

mind, isn't it? So if you maintain your motivation of wanting to benefit others, you will not succumb to the power of negative thoughts.

It is important to maintain our intention to be of service to others. For example, if you own a logistics company, your initial motivation should be to provide assistance to people in transporting their wares and goods to their destinations. You should think that since you have this ability or skill, you will try to help people in this area. For the middling motivation, think of "Now that I am in this business, I will try to make people happy by relieving them of their burdens, providing a service that will be useful for them". The ending motivation should be to understand that your pay is the result of bringing happiness to others. In this way, you will transcend beyond thinking of 'here and now' and that everything is just about money.

There is no such thing as a job that does not have meaning. Your job does have meaning. You must transform your job into Dharma practice. Make the

meaning of your job Dharma! If you spend eight hours each day sleeping, make it into a Dharma practice. Similarly, if you work eight hours, make it into a Dharma practice. How long do you think you will spend on Dharma practice? Maybe even a minute per day is difficult for you to do! So when you die and you are brought to see Lord Yama, the Lord of Death, he will ask you, "What have you done with your life?" Your reply is likely to be, "Err ... I tried to do lots of Dharma practices." And Lord Yama would reply, "Yeah, you tried, but you didn't actually do it!"

Therefore we must take our job as a Dharma practice so that it becomes beneficial. We must look into the nature of our jobs and think of how our jobs can benefit others. Bodhicitta is the thought of wanting to become a Buddha so as to benefit others limitlessly. If we perform our job with the motivation of Bodhicitta, then we are actually performing the deeds of a Bodhisattva.

For example, if you were a teacher think that, "For the sake of all beings, I want to be a teacher so that I can be

of benefit to my students and all beings. I want to teach my students well, so that they become educated and have the ability to help others.” If you are able to maintain such thoughts, even when the students irritate or upset you, you will not get angry and scold them. Imagine an unhappy and grumpy teacher who likes to scold his students... Eventually, all his students will dislike him or even hate him, and they will not listen to his teachings. It is impossible that this teacher can benefit his students with such an attitude.

I used to have a teacher in school whose voice sounded like Mickey Mouse’s! Within half a year of teaching, her hair actually turned all white because she had frequently lost her temper. She would get upset and unhappy while teaching us. It was incredible that a class of thirty students could turn her hair all white within half a year! The moral of the story is that if one does not think about benefiting others, then one will always be unhappy with one’s job. The end result will be ‘panda-eyes’ (dark eye bags) with ‘silver hair’!

Do maintain the thought of doing your job to benefit others. Even if you are upset and do not have that thought of benefiting others, calm yourself by thinking that “the reason I am working today is to be of benefit to others. By doing my job well, other people benefit. The immediate people who benefit are my colleagues and my boss. The benefit will extend further to the suppliers and the customers. Then the economy benefits and everybody will prosper and be happy since they have money to spend.” So by doing your job well, you realise that actually everyone benefits too!

If you always maintain the thought of wanting to help others, even if you lose your job during tough times like this, it does not matter. You can always find another job to be of benefit to others.

Using What We Encounter to Grow Spiritually

Whatever we encounter in our daily lives, we must try to use it to deepen our understanding of Dharma so as to help us grow spiritually.

Some time back, I went to a chicken farm at Lim Chu Kang to buy some chickens to release them. At the farm, thousands of chickens were cramped into huge chicken coops which were dark and dank. They could hardly move.

When I picked up the chickens from the coops, their hearts were beating very fast and I could feel the total surrender in their hearts! Somehow, they knew that they were going to die and had given up hope of survival. Imagine their fear whenever the farm-worker enters the coop! They probably would not dare to look at him and wished that they were never taken away from the coop. However, when I entered the coop, the chickens stared at me because I was something new, something different.

It is important to use the experience of entering such a chicken coop to visualise the hell realm since the chicken coop is filled with darkness and endless suffering. When the chickens are unable to keep up with the required levels of egg production, they would become curry chicken. Consider the purpose of their existence: to eat,

drink, lay eggs and finally being slaughtered for meat. Their eggs were all taken away from them too! Even if some eggs were allowed to hatch, the male chicks will be killed upon birth just because they can never lay eggs and thus have no real economic use.

If you want to develop compassion, you must use such an opportunity and make a visit to the chicken farm to think about the suffering of sentient beings. If you never have the experience of many people looking at you with fear and desperation, enter a chicken coop and all the chickens will be looking at you! They will not make the usual “cluck cluck” sound. In fact, they are crying with a moaning sound! Just imagine the whole coop being filled with this terrible, sad sound. Just by experiencing the fear and desperation of the chickens, one can feel the true suffering of sentient beings and develop compassion for them. One will also realise that there are endless sufferings for beings everywhere!

There is one meditation which you can do to help you develop love and compassion. Find a quiet place to sit

and relax. Close your eyes and bring to your mind the image of the hens in the chicken coop. Recite “Om Mani Padme Hum” and visualise white light from Lord Chenresig showering on all the chickens and blessing them. To expand the feeling of love and compassion, visualise all the chickens reciting this mantra together with you. This will also help you to develop the feeling of equanimity for all beings. For those of you who are not Buddhists, you may do the same meditation but you may replace Lord Chenresig with the god of your religion.

You should always contemplate and utilise all that you have experienced and seen, as an opportunity to practise mind transformation. Only then will there be of some benefit. For example, when you are filling your car with petrol, think that you are doing this so that you can drive and fulfil your duties to help others. You can also be of service to those who need a lift from you. Even if you are a petrol pump attendant, you can still think along this line too. Even playing golf can become Dharma practice. Think that the ball is your mind, and the holes are the minds of all other sentient beings. The golf course

represents the obstacles encountered when helping others. Your aim is to hit the ball into the hole as this means making your mind as one with that of others, so that you can help them.

Hence, whatever we encounter in our daily lives, we must try to use it to deepen our understanding of Dharma; this will help us grow spiritually. In this way, our lives will be enriched and become meaningful. However, we should not brag about this though. While transforming our mind, it is also very important to be mindful of our intention and our external behaviour. Some people behave in a 'spiritual' manner so as to receive recognition from others, about how good they have become. Many people fall into this trap of appearing 'spiritual'. However, this is just one of the eight worldly concerns. Continually keep in mind the motivation of why we are engaging in Dharma practice; this will guide us in our spiritual practice. Remember that we are not engaging in Dharma practice in order to have others praise us for our great qualities. As we practise, we should become more humble.

Praying to Take on the Difficulties of Others

In our Dharma practice, we should pray that difficulties and the suffering of others ripen upon us. We should pray to take on the suffering of others. Khen Rinpoche, Geshe Lama Lhundrup Abbot of Kopan Monastery, said that when we pray for suffering to come upon ourselves, we will actually not experience suffering. The more we think about and care for others, the more we wish for them to be happy. Just like a mother, who will rather take on the suffering of her sick child.

If you reflect upon yourself as compared to the innumerable number of beings in this world, and you truly contemplate on the sufferings of others: would you rather suffer alone or have all the other beings suffer with you? When you are suffering, if you think that it would be better for you to take on the sufferings for others, as you do not wish to see them suffer like you, then you have the mind of a great Bodhisattva. Trust me, if you have this kind of mind, you will not suffer because negative conditions will not come to you. This practice of praying to take on the

difficulties and suffering of others is a very powerful purification process. By taking on the suffering and negative karma of others, our own negative karma will be exhausted very quickly. We are always praying to strike lottery but yet we never win! So, why not pray for suffering to ripen upon us instead? This thought transformation will help us transform all our difficult problems in life into something useful.

So if you pray to suffer, suffering will not come because you are shielded by your compassion. In praying in this way, actual harm will not come. But I know in your mind, you do not really want to pray for the negative karma of others to come unto you! When any prayer contains the words “May the suffering of others ripen upon me”, you are very reluctant to recite these lines out of fear of the bad karma coming to you. But whenever you have to recite “May happiness and good conditions come to me”, you would recite it very loudly! I have seen many people with this behaviour. In pujas, I noticed that when the line of “May suffering come to me” is reached, some people’s voices immediately become softer!

When we pray for the sufferings of others to ripen upon us, we are actually practising mind transformation. If we pray to take on the sufferings of others so that they will not have to suffer like us, our mind actually becomes stronger during the difficult period of our lives. We become more courageous to take on that suffering as we feel that even as we suffer, we are able to help others by alleviating their suffering. This transformation ensures that our mind is protected as we view these difficulties through the 'sunglasses of compassion'.

Does this imply that prayers do not work? No, remember that what we experience is due to karma, and causes and conditions. So in reality, in requesting for problems, it does not mean you will have these problems. In the stories of great masters of Tibet, at the time of death they prayed to be born in hell to help suffering beings but due to their compassion, all the signs they had at the time of death indicated a favourable rebirth. For instance, while Lama Serlingpa, who was Atisha's teacher, prayed out of his great compassion to be reborn in hell for all sentient beings, he was not reborn in hell! Instead, he kept

returning to the human realm as great Buddhist saints to help the beings here.

Making Prayers Effective

I am impressed with how the Christians have little prayers for all the things they do in their daily lives. They can do so because they have found 'God' and kept him in their hearts. On Sundays, Christians spend time going to Church to pray and listen to sermons. They return home feeling recharged and fulfilled. Many self-professed Buddhists go to temples to pray only when they meet with difficulties in their daily lives and want some divine miracles to solve their problems. Perhaps these people should visit David Copperfield instead. He will probably show them a miracle or two!

What makes prayers effective? The answer is understanding and faith. If our prayers are done with proper understanding and strong faith, then they will be effective in bringing about what we have prayed for and transforming our minds.

Why do many people go to Theravada monks for blessings? And why are these monks able to give blessings that help those with sincere requests? These monks may have very strong conviction and understanding of the Buddhadharma. Their faith is based on their unyielding practice. As they practise continuously, their faith in the effectiveness of Buddha's teachings increases, and their practice grows and deepens. Hence, their prayers and blessings for others appear to be very effective. It is like a doctor being able to diagnose a sickness well and able to dispense exactly the right medicine. Does this mean that we can solve all our problems by paying someone to pray for us? Some people in these times seem to think so. It is not the case. Many powerful people have all the money but somehow may never be able to have someone pray on their behalf. Even having others willing to pray for us is dependent on our karma.

A prayer is not merely the mouthing of words. A sincere prayer comes from the heart. With sincere motivation, make your prayer genuinely from your heart. Link it to the

view of renunciation, Bodhicitta and the right view of Emptiness, so that it is not just a selfish prayer demanding something for yourself alone.

Thus, faith in our Gurus, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha⁵, opens the door to our realisations. Without faith, we will have no confidence in the teachings of the Buddha and we will not be motivated to use the teachings to improve our lives. The stories of all the past Buddhist masters revealed that all of them followed the same path of Dharma and attained the result of enlightenment. This shows us the truth and efficacy of the Buddhadharma. We must develop faith in this tried and tested path that will lead us to Happiness.

Building and Circumambulating Holy Objects

Why do we build holy objects like stupas? Is it to become famous? No! We build it so as to benefit all sentient

⁵ Sangha is the spiritual community of Buddhist practitioners. These practitioners may be monks, nuns or even lay people. Lay people are Buddhists who engage in Dharma cultivation without entering monk or nun hood.

beings. If our motivation to build the stupa is to benefit other sentient beings, then there is some meaning to building the stupa. Otherwise, building the stupa could become our downfall and our suffering. If we think of building the stupa for our own fame, thinking that “Oh I built this stupa. I donated money to make this stupa. I helped to build this temple!” and etc, we will be overwhelmed by our own ego and pride.

Also, if we pray that, “May anyone who sees this stupa, think of it or even hear of it, be freed from all problems and may they meet with the pure Buddhadharma immediately.” If you pray like this with strong refuge in your Guru and the Buddha and with Bodhicitta, this prayer will become very powerful.

Circumambulating holy objects like stupas or Buddha statues also bring an incredible amount of merit and purification. No matter what holy objects we circumambulate, it is the mind of faith that matters most. If we circumambulate the holy object with faith in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, then going around the

holy object will bring great benefit. It is said that if we circumambulate a stupa forty-nine times, we will get a perfect human rebirth. A perfect human rebirth is one where we have all the opportunities and abilities to fully practise Dharma. Depending on our karma, we may not get this perfect human rebirth in our next rebirth. However, if we pray hard with a mind of Bodhicitta, then we will definitely get a perfect human rebirth in our next life.

Purification and Confessions

For those of you who feel that your good karma is dwindling and that you are facing lots of suffering and hardships, you should start to do purification and confession practices now. You should confess for all the times you have taken life for granted and confess the times when you did stupid and silly things. The Buddhist idea of confession is actually the four activities that are referred to as the four opponent powers. It is not enough to just have remorse at a non-virtuous act and say blah-blah-blah, I will not do it again. Your problems will not be

resolved just like that. It will also be worse if you confess and then go back to the same negative habits again.

For Buddhists, confession must include the following four opponent powers:

1. The power of support.

In Buddhism, the Triple Gem refers to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Taking refuge in the Triple Gem is the power of support. To take refuge in the Triple Gem is to rely wholeheartedly on them so that they become a source of strength for us. When we take refuge, we are committed to accept Buddha as our teacher, and are committed to listen and practise the Dharma to overcome our deluded mind. We must also respect the Sangha community and train in accordance with their example. Having generated this faith in the Triple Gem, our confession will become more powerful as we are aware of who are teacher is and we know that the advices given by Him will help us overcome our deluded mind. We should also generate the mind of Bodhicitta when we

confess, so that our confession practice is not just beneficial for ourselves but for others too.

2. The power of knowing and acknowledging that you have engaged in negative actions.

This is not about feeling excessive guilt or some ego-filled state of feeling that you are a bad person, or etc. You must recognise clearly that what you did was wrong, either based on your own conscience or based on the effect it had on others.

3. The power of restraint.

You make a firm resolve not to do it again. Be realistic. If it is a bad habit, take small steps to try to overcome this habit. Do not try to lie to yourself that you can stop this habit immediately and then go round on a guilt trip when you cannot. Set a firm resolve on how you will reduce your tendency to do something non-virtuous. If you make a promise to yourself and then break it, that becomes lying and so that will not be useful in this case.

Having the firm resolve not to do it again protects and liberates you from your deluded mind. No one can save you because you have brought the suffering upon yourself. If you have no intention to kill, would you kill just because someone hands you a knife and ask you to do it? If you do not want to drink chilli oil, will you drink it even if it is placed before you? Actually you do have a choice. You are what you are because of your own choice of actions, thoughts or beliefs and your own mind. Through past conditions, you have become what you are today. Therefore, your suffering arises from past causes, and hence it is empty.

4. The power of the antidote.

This is the actual confession and purification practice. In the Buddhist tradition there are several means to purify our negativities. We can do purification practices through mantra recitation, prostrations, prayers, contemplation and meditation. We can even perform practices of generosity such as food charity practices and also animal liberation. All these practices will help us reaffirm our positive attitudes and overcome our negative habits.

Dealing With Difficult Situations

*If we cherish others, and when problems arise,
we will not view them as problems at all.*

Most of us tend to react very strongly and emotionally when something bad happens. We would immediately get upset and curse at others. However, after some time, we would regret our reaction.

People often ask me how to deal with this, as they find it difficult to be mindful and prevent negative thoughts and feelings from arising. One student told me that while he is driving, if someone suddenly cuts into his lane, he would curse at the driver immediately, but he would later wish he had not done so.

How do we go about developing good thoughts when difficult situations arise? If you plant a good seed, a good tree would then grow. When you wake up, start the day with Bodhicitta, so that no matter what happens, you plant the good seed by thinking “I am going to live my day today for the benefit of others. Whatever I do, I will

try to do it so as to accumulate merit to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.”

You start and end the day with Bodhicitta. As a result of doing it often, this aspiration becomes a part of you. And I do not mean you do it by merely mouthing the words “For the benefit of all sentient beings I must attain enlightenment ... blah-blah-blah...” Doing this superficially is of no use! If you just chant this Bodhicitta prayer in Tibetan without understanding, it is just mere lip-service, and you will not attain the desired results.

It is also important to start the day by thinking that you are so fortunate to be still alive and rejoice that you did not die. Think “I can open my eyes and move my toes, and I am alive!” However, this does not mean that you are going to be alive the whole day! So immediately, since at the moment you are still alive, think of your own Guru and immediately take refuge.

However, when you wake up, you do not immediately open your eyes and spring out of bed, right? You would

usually laze in bed for a while and think “Oh, I want to sleep for another five minutes.” You should at least take refuge while lazing in bed by thinking, “Due to the blessings of my Guru, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, I am still alive today. I may have died last night. I take refuge in the Guru, Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.” Your body is lying down but your mind should be thinking of refuge.

It is very important to do so when you just wake up, even before you get up to urinate! Most of you would just wake up and be thinking, “I don’t want to get up! I just want to lie here... Just let me sleep for another five minutes.” After five minutes, you would think “Just another five more minutes...” After that, you will go “I won’t eat breakfast. Let me sleep longer!” Then you will be late and need to run after the bus! I know how you think, because I was like that before! We should all remember to start the day by rejoicing that we did not die, and then take refuge and generate Bodhicitta.

As you laze in bed after taking refuge and generating

Bodhicitta, you should recite some purifying mantras like the Vajrasattva⁶ mantra. Why? Because when we dream, our minds work, and sometimes we have bad dreams where strange things happen! We might have dreamt of somebody wanting to kill us, and so we fought in response. Or we might have dreamt of being chased by spirits, or we were provoked and wanted to beat someone up. Since bad dreams cause us to accumulate bad karma, we must purify when we wake up by reciting the Vajrasattva mantra.

As we start our day, it is very important to think as though “tonight is the night I will die!” This way, you will force yourself to think that no matter what you do, no matter how tired you are, you will force yourself to try and do something for somebody. If someone were to come to you for help, you must try to help him. Everything you have to do, you must do it and not procrastinate any longer. If there is a practice to be done, you will try your

⁶ Buddha Vajrasattva is the Buddha of Purification. It is written in the Buddhist scriptures that just by reciting Vajrasattva 100 syllable mantra, one can purify one’s negative karma.

best to complete it. There is no time to waste. Even if you do not fully understand the practice now, you should try to do it to the best of your capability.

Before you sleep, generate a good motivation by taking refuge and think “I am going to rest for the sake of all sentient beings. I am going to sleep so that I can recharge myself and have more energy tomorrow to practise Dharma for all sentient beings so that I can become Buddha quickly. The sooner I can attain enlightenment, the better!” If you could think like that before sleeping, then throughout your sleep, whether it is eight or ten hours, you accumulate good karma. Sleeping then becomes a form of yoga too. If you develop this stable motivation of ‘sleeping for the sake of benefiting all sentient beings’, you are sleeping with Bodhicitta. As you fall asleep, recite “Om Mani Padme Hum” till you fall asleep. Then as you sleep, you are reciting “Om Mani Padme Hum” with every breath you take. Automatically, you are reciting that mantra while you are asleep!

When we recite “Om Mani Padme Hum”, most of us are usually focused for the first two minutes. After that we start thinking, “Om chocolate cake is very nice! Chocolate cake is very nice!” Then we think we need to visit the toilet. After a while, our stray thoughts would make us forget what we are chanting.

When you are reciting one rosary of “Om Mani Padme Hum”, maybe you can only stay focused on visualizing Lord Chenresig for the first couple of beads. However, after a few beads later, Lord Chenresig disappears! You forget about all other sentient beings too! Later you will recite “Om Mani” and then before finishing the mantra, you forget what you are reciting. I have seen people getting distracted like that. If you ask them about their practice, they would say, “Oh, I recite one mala of Om Mani Padme Hum every day.” Is this not crazy? You must not cheat yourself. It is not good for you to get distracted and yawn while reciting the mantras. If you believe Lord Chenresig is in front of you, would you yawn and scratch yourself or even dig your nose while reciting mantras?

We get distracted easily because we have not kept a stable visualisation of Lord Chenresig in front of us.

Now it may seem funny that some of you may recite your mantras while watching the television. If some disco song were to be played, you start singing “Om Mani Padme Hum” to the disco tune! I know because I have seen some monks reciting mantras while they were watching the television. When I asked the monk what he was doing, his reply was, “Oh, I’m on holiday, so I am reciting in front of the television.” This is humorous, though we should not be making fun of monks and nuns. They are also trying to renounce worldly life and devoted themselves to practice, so we should give them our support. They are humans too, just like us.

What is important is to transform our daily activities into Dharma practice. For example, besides sleeping, eating can also be a form of Dharma practice. We should think that we eat to stay healthy so that we can do our Dharma practice and become enlightened very quickly. Before we eat, we can offer our food to our Gurus, Buddhas and

Bodhisattvas, and recite some prayers for the animals who have died and become food for us. Feel that the food has transformed into nectar⁷ after it was offered to our Gurus, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. This is important so that we will not be choosy with the food we consume. We can eat whatever food that is available as they are all transformed into nectar.

Examine yourself: Do you eat meat only if that meat is what you like? If you like only a particular kind of cooked chicken, then you are being choosy with your food. What if I ask you to chop some of your own meat for your own consumption? Would you be willing to do it? And yet we are ever so willing to chop other sentient beings' meat to eat! Do you feel pain when you eat the meat of others? No.

But if you were to eat your own flesh, would you feel

⁷ Nectar is the essence of flowers. It is derive from the essence of the earth and the plants. The plants extract the essence of the earth and together with its own essence, create nectar. This is also the purest form of food. Bees extract nectar from flowers as food and honey is the by-product of nectar.

pain? No, because eating your own flesh would not hurt any more since the meat is already cut off. Actually only the chopping of your flesh would hurt! So if you claim that eating your own flesh is painful, it is because of your self-cherishing mind. Perhaps one day you should try using a small knife to cut yourself and collect some blood. See, even this thought would seem ridiculous to you! “Why do I want to hurt myself?” you would exclaim. And if you were to drink your own blood that you have collected, you would feel pain mentally because you are thinking that, “Oh this blood is mine.” In actual fact, there is no pain from the mere process of drinking your own blood! So what is the cause of your suffering? It all boils down to your self-cherishing mind. Suffering comes from self-cherishing. Therefore we must get rid of the self.

There is no immediate answer to how we can prevent anger and unhappiness from arising. It is a step-by-step solution. For example, if someone upsets you, your immediate urge will be to react with anger. What you could do is when that situation occurs, first take a deep breath and recite “Om Mani Padme Hum” instead of

retaliating with insults. This will be difficult to do initially. After a while, you will come to view things with equanimity: whatever happens, it does not matter so much. The more you train your mind, the easier it is to prevent anger from arising.

It is not easy training the mind, but you must do it. When encountering difficult situations, take a deep breath and think, “Oh, this person is so kind, he is helping me to recognise my self-cherishing mind.” Self-cherishing creates problems. If you cherish others, there will be no problem. Whatever others do, it does not matter. Even if they hurt you, you are not upset. Think of it as “This is great for my practice. I have a chance to develop compassion for them.” No matter what happens, you transform it into practice.

Enjoyment is not permanent. Even suffering is not permanent. So use all possibilities to enhance and deepen your understanding of Dharma. Everything you see, apply some understanding of Dharma. You do not need to keep talking about it and behave like some

fanatical person. The transformation is inside you and is an inner experience which is indescribable. And it is not about showing off how good you have become.

The following words are written in Kyabje Pabongka Rinpoche's text, *Liberation in the Palm of Your Hand*: "You must make Dharma a part of your life". Whatever we see, we should link it to Dharma. Just like whatever we cook or eat, we add some salt and pepper, right? If we want to sweeten our drink, we add some sugar to it. It is the same for Dharma: for all phenomena we see, experience them and add the flavour of Dharma into them!

When we see others get upset, we should remind ourselves that it is easy for people to get angry if they do not practise Dharma, and do not have Bodhicitta or compassion, and do not have Guru devotion, and etc. If we do not blend Dharma as one with our mind, we can easily become unhappy and get upset with others too.

We should blend the milk of Dharma with the water of our

own mind. If water is mixed with milk, can they be separated? Not possible. Therefore, when studying Dharma, we must put it into practise, just like mixing water with milk. When we see good deeds being performed, we should rejoice. When we see others benefiting others, we too should rejoice in their virtues. It does not matter whether these people are Christians, Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists. As long as they are of benefit to others, we should rejoice and be happy.

So what is the purpose of practising Dharma? When I posed this question to my students in the past, two of them answered me. The first student's answer was "To change my mind and make it more peaceful." The second student said, "To save all sentient beings and liberate them."

The first answer stems from the wish for the mind to be at peace. This is not wrong. The second answer is the wish for liberation of all sentient beings. This is better but still it is not good enough. The best answer is: we practise the

Dharma to become enlightened like the Buddha so that we can help sentient beings in limitless ways.

If you do not want to become a Buddha, why practise the Dharma? Can you help all sentient beings at this point in time? No, not possible! However, while you may not be able to help all, you can help some; and if you cannot help some, you can still help one sentient being, right? At least, while walking on the road filled with ants crawling on the floor, you do not step on them on purpose and kill them. Instead, when you see ants, you avoid stepping on them. You cherish others, regardless of whether it is an ant, a fish or a human being. That is the purpose of practising Dharma. If you cherish others, you will not see them as problems even when they pose as a possible threat to you.

There is no immediate solution to the car-driving problem mentioned earlier, or when others make things difficult for you. The only way out is you must have Bodhicitta, which is the key to the door of happiness. It is the best sports

shoes you could find! With it, you can walk or run and manoeuvre in any difficult situation.

Therefore, Bodhicitta is the best because Bodhicitta works not only for this present life but also for all our future lives until we reach enlightenment. Now there are going to be one thousand Buddhas in this eon. We can all strive to become these Buddhas. Really! It is only a matter of whether we want it or not. We must try to pray and practise well.

Avoid being so obsessed with yourself and constantly thinking “Oh I am suffering! I am suffering! I’m going to lose my job!” and other such thoughts of this self-cherishing nature. When suffering comes, our minds will think of all sorts of ways to run away from our problems, right?

Let me tell you the story about the “Carrot, Egg and Coffee”. After the story, decide whether you want to be a carrot, an egg or coffee powder. Let us put the carrot, egg and coffee powder in boiling water for ten minutes.

The carrot was very hard initially but becomes very soft after cooking it. On the other hand, the egg becomes hard, while the coffee powder becomes a drink with a nice aroma. The boiling water represents problems or difficult situations that we face. For example, they are situations when people scold us or make things difficult for us. A carrot is like someone who cannot handle sudden and difficult situations. When he is faced with a difficult situation, he becomes very soft and does not know how to resolve the issue. He will think, “Oh, I cannot take this anymore. What should I do? I need help! Can someone please help me?’ Many people are like the carrot. They will come to me crying and they will say, “Oh Lama, please help me.”

As for the egg, it is very easy-going when there are no problems. However, once problems arise, the egg becomes very hard. They are hardened after going through many problems. They lose their softness and become unfriendly, cold and not fluid. If change is needed, they cannot take it because they have become hardened and inflexible.

We must be like coffee. When boiled in hot water, coffee powder changes the nature of the hot water and the water takes on a pleasant fragrance. When a difficult situation arises, we take that situation upon ourselves. Just like the coffee, we become a nice and fragrant drink that everyone likes. In this way, we will be of benefit to others.

So if you want to become a Bodhisattva, you must become like the coffee powder. People can also take coffee in different forms: with milk or just plain black, whichever suits their taste. Thus, coffee is a versatile drink for all. If you are versatile like coffee, people will like you too. Remember this story, so that whenever difficult situations arise, you should think “Oh, I must be like coffee!”

Let me teach you a trick that always enables me to win prizes at carnivals. There is this game where you must throw a ball into a ring. I will pray with Bodhicitta that may the ball be my mind, and all sentient beings be the target. My aim is to go into the heart of all sentient beings to

benefit them. I would then take the extra effort to aim and consider the angle to throw and etc, all for the benefit of other sentient beings. I would think that I am using the skilful ways of Dharma to shoot the ball (which is my mind) into the target (which the hearts of all sentient beings). Thus, 'Aiming and throwing the ball towards the target' is engaging in the Bodhisattva's way of life, and "getting the ball into the target" is doing the Bodhisattva's job. This then becomes a form of Dharma practice for me. The ball goes in most of the time! Really! You could also pray like this, "Oh with Bodhicitta thought, may all the guardian deities come and put the ball into the hoop!"

For generating the thought of Bodhicitta, you may get a present: Winnie the Pooh or something else.

Alternatively, you could think that the target board is your self-cherishing mind and the ball or whatever you are using to hit it, is Lord Manjushri's⁸ flaming sword of wisdom. You aim and throw to destroy your own self-

⁸ Lord Manjushri is the Buddha of Wisdom.

cherishing mind.

Dealing with Difficult People

People who often criticise others are, by nature, fault-finders. However, we must have compassion for them. Those who want to criticise others are by nature, the kind of people who like to find fault with others. For them, fault-finding is a habituation, like farting! They just like to criticise. It is in them. They want to criticise for the sake for criticising. They just want to create 'hoo-ha' out of nothing!

In the past, my Guru, Khen Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup, related to some of my students how people had criticised me. Some of these people even threatened my life! Some said they wanted to perform black magic on me. They accused me of a list of things I did not know even existed!

People who want to criticise others will do so. But then, if your conscience is clear, you will survive. Look at the big

picture.

When dealing with such people, you must be steady and stable like a mountain, no matter if it rains or snows, you are not shaken or bothered by them. Let these people say what they want, it does not matter. The most important thing is to apply Dharma into that situation and preserve the lessons learnt through that experience.

Those who like to criticise are afflicted by the eight worldly concerns. They like to criticise and complain about others as they wish to be praised. They are happy when praised and not happy when not praised. Let them complain and criticise, but do not be bothered too much by what they say.

You must develop compassion for them and love them. View them as an object of compassion. Having a precious human rebirth is so difficult to come by. Yet they are unable to treasure it and practise the Dharma well. Feel compassion for them for they are too overwhelmed by the negativities of ignorance, anger and attachment,

pride and other negative emotions. If you really want to practise the Dharma, you must see all sentient beings as your children. If your child loses his or her temper, scolds you or insults you, let them be and do not get upset. They are, after all, children. Accept people for what they are.

A man came to our centre during Vesak Day and saw a golden frog on one of our cupboards. He said that the frog was used for feng shui (geomancy) purposes, and since we were Buddhists we should not have anything to do with it. The frog was actually placed there for decoration. This goes to show that no matter what we do, people will always have something to say or criticise. However, we must not think that we are always correct and that our perception of things is always right. If our perceptions are always so pure and correct, we would be Buddha already! Also, there is nothing wrong with feng shui, as long as our motivation for employing it is to benefit others and not to merely obtain pleasures of this life for ourselves. Dagri Dorje Chang, an accomplished Buddhist master said that, “Yes, Buddhism speaks of the

emptiness of all phenomena, but as long as we are not enlightened, how can we not be affected by astrology?”

So, we can use astrology and feng shui as long as our motivation is pure, that is, we want to help others and ultimately become enlightened. Even Guru Padmasambhava, a great Buddhist saint who brought Buddhism into Tibet, went to Wu Tai Shan (Five Peak Mountain) in China to learn the art of feng shui from Lord Manjushri! If you wish to use feng shui and geomancy to help others, it is all right. You are not deviating from the teachings of Buddha at all.

Hence, if people wish to criticise us, let them. If our actions are done out of pure motivation, out of wanting to help others, we need not be bothered too much by what people think of us. But this does not mean that we develop a superior attitude towards them either.

Chapter 7: Being Mindful

If we pray from our hearts, sincerely repent, and strongly wish to be more mindful, we will be able to become mindful.

My students often ask me how they can be more mindful in their daily lives. 'Mindfulness' is a term that crops up frequently in Buddhist terminology. Mindfulness basically refers to constant awareness of your body, speech and mind. In other words, you are always conscious of your physical conduct, of what you say and of what is going through your mind. Obviously it is not easy to be aware of such things! However, mindfulness is important because it helps prevent us from acting negatively and causing suffering to others and ourselves. It also enables us to check that we are putting into practise what we have learnt.

It is not easy to remember to be mindful. All too often, our old habits pop up faster than we realise. For instance, we may be trying to watch what we say, but our habit of

talking harshly to people could suddenly manifest when someone upsets us, and it is only after we have spoken harshly or rudely do we realise, “Oh! I’ve just been rude. I should have been more mindful and try to stop the impulse to be rude.”

We must learn and practise to be mindful. Mindfulness refers to being aware and conscious of our thoughts, actions and speech. This is easier said than done. The only way we can be mindful is by knowing that perfect practice brings perfect mindfulness. Why do I not say “Practice makes perfect”? This is because bad practice equals bad habits. For instance, all of us can write but are our writing habits the same? You may be right-handed whereas your friend could be left-handed. Do you even hold your pen properly? I have encountered people who hold their pens in the wrong way but they would say that they cannot change because they have already gotten into the habit. This is precisely what I mean by bad practice yielding bad results. So perfect practice equals good results! During our spiritual practice, it is essential to start looking out for our mistakes and flaws, and learn

properly from our own experiences and from our spiritual leader. If you do not have a Buddhist teacher, then follow the instructions of your own religious leader. If you do not belong to any religious tradition and do not have any spiritual teacher, you could start by slowly observing your own mind. Do not rush into the practice of mindfulness by trying to be aware of the hundred and one thoughts that are going through your head, or trying to be conscious of how you act and relate to others.

So how can we develop more mindfulness in our lives? There are two answers to this question. The first is a 'nicer' answer which everyone likes to hear. It is, "If you compare yourself today to the time before you met the Dharma, have you seen any changes?" Most of you would agree that you had made some changes to your 'self' and your life after meeting Dharma. With this in mind, you know that no matter how little you think you have changed, you have somewhat improved. This is worth rejoicing in! So do not get too stressed up by forcing yourself to improve or over-exerting yourself.

This is actually the simpler answer to how to be constantly mindful. This is suitable for the less serious spiritual practitioners, like those who go to the temple to pray once in a while for worldly things like wealth and reputation. These people do not pray to improve their Dharma practice and to cultivate their minds. I do not know whether this first answer is suitable for you or not, because I am not a Buddha! You need to examine yourself to see if it applies to you.

The second answer is better: To develop mindfulness, you must constantly meditate and be aware of the feeling of Bodhicitta. If you do not meditate on Bodhicitta, develop your understanding and make attempts to engage in the deeds of a Bodhisattva, you will find yourself stagnating in your practice after some time. Mindfulness will then seem to be superficial.

Bodhicitta is a very important quality in Mahayana Buddhism. It is the earnest wish to become fully enlightened, like the Buddha, so as to bring other sentient beings to enlightenment. A Buddha is omniscient

and so he has the best ability to teach beings effectively. So, if we truly want to be of benefit to others and lead them to enlightenment, we must become a Buddha first. Through this constant awareness, mindfulness arises as we continually engage in the cycle of study and contemplation. The reflections and experiences that we have gone through will enable us to amend our negative habits and thoughts.

We must always think about and meditate on Bodhicitta. My Guru, Lama Lhundrup has said that we must set our motivation right. If we set our motivation right at the start of the day, at least throughout the day we will have some merits and the level of mindfulness will naturally increase. Even if we have done negative actions, our mind has that bit of love that can offset that negativity. Just like, when we add a drop of milk into a cup of black coffee, its colour totally changes. The coffee is no longer pure black. In other words, by beginning the day with good motivation, at least there is some virtue in our actions during the day. If we think about Bodhicitta at the start of each day, we will not be afraid of what may happen because no matter

what happens, we only want to spend our day so as to benefit others. It does not matter whether we are working or enjoying ourselves. The important thing is to think that we want to spend the day trying to benefit other beings.

So, it's good to start having Bodhicitta at the start of the day. As mentioned in Chapter 6, you should do prayers in the morning before you start your routine for the day in order to remind yourself of the need to help others. You should at the very least do some short prayers when you wake up, like taking refuge in the Triple Gem, reciting some purifying mantras and also rejoicing that you are still alive!

Before going to work in the morning, you should try to pray and meditate on the suffering of other sentient beings. By doing so, you will be able to realise the sufferings of others and have compassion for them. This will help your mind to be mindful when difficult conditions arise. For example, if conditions arise which rouse your anger, you may get angry but immediately mindfulness comes to you because you have been training your mind

to recognise that other people suffer terribly from mental unhappiness too when they get angry. By knowing this, you do not get upset yourself and mindfulness increases.

It is not a matter of simply saying you want to be less angry and more loving. It is not so easy. It is not just repeating constantly to yourself, “Must be mindful, do not be angry. Must be mindful, do not be angry ...” and then stick your head in and out as you repeat these words. Then you will be like a pigeon! Have you seen how pigeons move their heads when they walk? My other Guru, Geshe Lama Konchog used to say that the child monks strut around the monastery sticking their heads in and out while reciting their prayers. Lama Konchog said that since they are wearing red robes, they really look like red pigeons! So, if you just mouth your prayers and not pray sincerely from your heart, your prayers will be ineffective in helping you improve your mind. You will recognise your faults only after you have committed it. You will not be able recognise the impulse to do negative actions and hence cannot stop yourself from committing the actions because you lack mindfulness. This lack of

mindfulness is the result of you not praying from your heart and sincerely repenting and strongly wishing to be more mindful.

From the very start, you must strongly arouse the wish to be more mindful and work towards it rather than regret your lack of mindfulness after you have become angry or after some emotional outburst. It is a lousy excuse to say that you cannot be more mindful and did not notice your anger arising. To me, it is a matter of whether you have put in enough effort to be more mindful. It could also be that you are contented with your level of development and so did not try your best to improve further.

If you do not integrate your spiritual meditations into your daily life, and only think superficially in your mind “Oh I want to develop Bodhicitta, to benefit others ... blah-blah-blah”, you will not be able to see any improvement in your mind.

We have talked about Bodhicitta and wanting to benefit others... have you ever tried to think about HOW to

benefit other sentient beings? If a beggar on the street asked you for money, should you give him some money? Of course! So in the same way, as we study and contemplate on Bodhicitta, we must prepare ourselves on how to react to situations. We must mentally prepare ourselves and consider all the possibilities that could happen during different scenarios. For example, if someone upsets you, how would you react? If someone scolds you, are you ready to show patience instead?

Our problem is that we reach our present limit and stop there. We do not aspire and attempt to reach a higher level of spiritual development. This is why some of the problems we face today and those we faced some years back are the same. We simply have not tried to improve and raise our current level of spiritual development. His Holiness Dalai Lama says we human beings are so easily contented with our limited spiritual development but can never stop striving for greater comforts and all kinds of activities to improve our external conditions.

Be careful not to develop arrogance about your level of

spiritual progress either. True practitioners are the most humble. His Holiness, whom we regard as a Buddha, calls himself a simple monk, often saying he has no realisations and has made little spiritual progress.

Overcoming Our Negative Habits

Have you ever tried telling yourself, “Tomorrow morning I MUST wake up at six-thirty a.m.!” and the following day, you actually wake up at six twenty-nine, just before the alarm goes off? That happens because you have told yourself what to do.

We often talk to others but not to ourselves, because we think we know ourselves very well. But when we actually face up to ourselves, we go, “Gee, I don’t really know if I am like this or that. I don’t know my actual traits and habits.” That is because we do not talk to ourselves.

Talking to ourselves does not mean talking to our reflection in the mirror. You might as well consider a visit to a mental institute if you start doing that. Talking to

yourself means doing analytical meditation and studying your own faults and thinking, “These are my such-and-such faults. Therefore, I must increase my humility, wisdom, and patience. I must stop my anger. I must totally remove it.” It is not enough just to “stop” something negative in us. “Stopping” is like just cutting the weeds but not eliminating their roots.

When you understand this, you will realise it is not a matter of just stopping it once. You must realise that your habit came about from doing something so many times until it became a habit. I once saw a hawker who sold fried noodles. He had a unique and characteristic style of frying noodles which was inimitable! Perhaps his customers were more interested in his frying style and not so much the taste of his food. He has developed his own personal style because he has cooked this way for so long that it became a habit. All of us have our own habits which are built up by repetition, isn't it? We must recognise our habits so that we can become objective and have a clear goal of what we want to achieve. Our objective to achieve enlightenment is for the sake of

benefiting all sentient beings. With this, laziness gets destroyed. Ego gets destroyed. Self-cherishing, pride, lack of patience, anger, and ignorance gets destroyed. Stopping our bad habits or negative thoughts is like learning to take medicine for our illness. For example, if you are down with diarrhoea and are given thirty pills, would you swallow all the pills? Would you recover faster that way? Certainly not. Similarly, negative habits can only be broken if you study them and analyse them carefully. You must be convinced of the path to change. There is one goal but many steps leading to it.

When you are ill and need medicine, you must find the medicine and buy it. After opening the package, you must check the recommended number of pills to be taken each time, as well as the timing to take the medication. Just before taking the medicine, you should offer the medicine to the Buddha, and then for the sake of all sentient beings, you take the medicine with the thought that “May only myself be sick, not others. May all sentient beings be healthy and be free from all illnesses.” There are many steps to reach the final result of recovery.

Similarly, like the steps to taking medicine and recovering from your illness, I've shared with you the steps to stop your bad habits or negative thoughts. To achieve your goal of breaking out of these bad habits and negative thoughts, you must follow all the steps properly. Otherwise you will not achieve the goal.

Laziness

Being lazy also comes from taking life and others for granted. If you meditate on the kindness and sufferings of other beings, you will learn to cherish others and not take life for granted. You will feel compelled to practise and do whatever you can to bring benefit to other sentient beings. As mentioned in Chapter 6, if you cannot feel the suffering of other sentient beings, I would suggest that you visit any of the chicken farms at Lim Chu Kang.

Women these days give birth once or twice, or maybe three times throughout their entire lives. The hens in the chicken farms have to lay eggs every day! When the hens can no longer keep up with the required level of egg

production, they end up as curry chicken in cans or as chicken flavouring in soups. It is suffering beyond imagination. Their lives are like that - eat, lay eggs, and then wait for death.

Hence we must realise how fortunate we are to be humans and to have all the right conditions for spiritual practice. The number of humans can be counted, but the number of animals and insects in the world is uncountable. Even the number of fishes cannot be counted. The fact that we are reborn as humans and are able to encounter the Dharma is so unbelievably precious. If you do not think carefully and do not develop the fear that you may become an animal in your next life, you will not have the compulsion to practise. If you divide the number of human beings by the number of animals and insects, you will see how small the probability of being reborn as a human is!

If you have just died and become a bardo being, the 'officer in charge' in the bardo state will show you a number of different realms and tell you, "There are six

realms here. Choose the one you want and it will bring you to your next rebirth!” Only one of the six realms will bring you to a human rebirth, effectively giving you only one out of six chances to be reborn as a human. The chances of being reborn in the three lower realms are very high. For example, you may think that different coloured paths leads to different realms, but you may end up in the same place. So you may be tricked. The next thing you realise is that you have fur instead of hair! You will be wondering what has happened to your head and your hair, and why you have four legs! When you try to say something, you hear yourself going “Snort, snort!”

Think about your karma based on what you have done in the past. What good have you done? And what negative actions have you done before? Do you think you will be reborn as a human being again? For some, maybe a 50-50 chance, but for others it can be quite difficult to be humans again, isn't it?

Examine your life closely and think about what you have done. You must be honest and accept the fact that if you

do not change yourself, you will likely undergo suffering in this life and in your many lives to come. You must constantly bear this thought in your mind.

Everyday, you should pray with Bodhicitta, the thought of wanting to become enlightened for the benefit of all sentient beings. Dedicate your merits accumulated with Bodhicitta. Do think of wanting to purify yourself and become a Buddha so that you can help all beings achieve happiness. You must realise the fear of having to undergo suffering. You must see that if you do not correct yourself, you will eventually have to suffer. All beings are suffering like you too. This fear of having to suffer, coupled with the desire to help all beings overcome their sufferings, will compel you to practise. Then you will not be lazy anymore!

In any serious practice, you have to realise that you need a guide. Knowledge from books like this is just knowledge. The changes you have to make in yourself are not something you can easily do by yourself. If you want to be a champion athlete or concert pianist, you

need a coach or a guide to train you, isn't it? Someone who will guide you, push you and who has your interest at heart. To truly embark on this journey, which is like climbing a mountain you have never been to, you need someone to guide you. In fact, no matter what spiritual tradition you follow, it is the same. In Buddhism, especially Tibetan Buddhism, much emphasis is placed on following the teachings of your Guru, because without your Guru, spiritual progress will be extremely difficult.

As with these teachings, make the effort to find your guide too. Reading texts can only advise you on the path to enlightenment. If you try to do it by yourself, you will quickly reach a limit, and probably end up with an even bigger ego looking back at your own 'spiritual development'. The skill that a qualified spiritual guide brings is often to create experiences for you. What does this mean? The qualified spiritual guide or teacher uses situations and conditions to mould his students. The student will learn from such experiences and will be 'moulded' to become a Bodhisattva.

So you should practise what your Guru has taught you, and constantly have strong refuge and devotion in the Guru and the Triple Gem. As you take refuge, you should visualise your Guru at your crown, emitting white light rays to you. It will be very beneficial for you if you could hold on to this visualisation when you are dying.

Chapter 8: The Difference between Dharma and Samsara

You would have realised that regardless of whether you have been born into Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, etc all these teachings are really just all about developing a good heart through the training of the mind. All religions make you look inward for happiness. They do not proclaim that wealth and comfort is the meaning of life.

Buddhism is special because it is the only spiritual tradition suitable for beings of all spiritual inclinations. Besides emphasising on love and peace like the other religions, most importantly, Buddhism emphasises on non-violence. Buddha taught that we should have genuine love and respect for all life forms, irregardless if the being is a human, an animal or even an insect. He taught us not to kill and included 'no killing' as one of the five precepts of Buddhism. The five precepts is the code of conduct or ethics undertaken by lay Buddhist practitioners. The five precepts are commitments to

abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication. The Buddha taught the five precepts out of compassion, and for the betterment of society. Thus, they are to be undertaken voluntarily rather than as commandments from a god.

Whatever your age, you must realise that cultivating the Dharma is quite different from anything that you may have done before. It is very common for people who are new to an idea, for example practising the Dharma, to get quite enthusiastic about it. Then, this quickly fizzles out just like a cannonball! First, it makes a lot of noise and after it is fired from the cannon, it creates a loud explosion and then there is total silence afterwards. Consistent daily effort is required when cultivating the Dharma.

You should not think that cultivating the Dharma is about focusing on the spiritual progress that you have made. You should not grasp about your achievements or compare yourself with others. There is a great difference between physical and spiritual maturity.

The word childish can be interpreted in many different ways. The difference between an adult and a child is age. Many people come to Dharma centres thinking that because they are older they have more 'experiences' and so should be more advanced than younger students. Spiritual maturity and physical maturity are not the same. Many older students I have had were very stubborn and some still are today! They are also rigid in their views and their thinking is very worldly. They mistake their worldly wisdom which brings them success in this life in terms of jobs and so on, with their 'spiritual success'. They equate their 'spiritual attainment and maturity' to their accumulation of knowledge and believe that they can now teach others.

Alternatively, some people become Lama-chasers. They believe that by meeting high Lamas and getting blessings and gifts from them, they are by association acquiring some 'spiritual capability'.

Some people also make large financial offerings to their Lamas and they think that by doing so, they become the seniors of the spiritual community. These benefactors are

very kind, and they do play an important role in the spiritual community. However, their spiritual maturity may be less than a nineteen year old practitioner. You may ask, “How can this be?”

There are ways of distinguishing between the childish and the matured by judging the level of their mental capacity. In fact, those who only think of the present and not the long-term future are childish. Those who are able to project beyond this life’s immediate concerns and can reflect on the long-term future are matured. They have greater powers of judgment and discernment about this life and about future lives, and having fully understood this, they have been successful in giving up non-virtues of this life. Their thoughts are suffused with virtuous thoughts of future lives.

Another way of distinguishing the childish and the matured is to analyse their behaviours. Ordinary beings whose minds are dominated by anger, attachment and all kinds of emotions are childish. They have not contemplated on the Dharma and so have not realised the insight into Emptiness. They are not able to control their emotions as compared to

those who have trained their minds in accordance to the Dharma. Those who have contemplated on the Dharma and have mastered mind transformation to overcome their negative behaviours are matured practitioners.

Therefore think about your own Dharma practice and seek guidance from your Guru. Some students are impatient with their Dharma practice and they try to speed up their spiritual path. They overexert or push themselves too hard, and after a while, they get *lung*. *Lung* is a Tibetan word which means “Wind”. It refers to mental imbalance or mental frustration of our mind.

This could happen due to our frustration of not meeting up with our own expectations. All of us have certain expectations of ourselves when we set certain goals that we would like to achieve. During the process of trying to achieve the goal, we may be challenged by obstacles. When things do not go in accordance to what we think it should be, we become frustrated or even go into depression thinking how lousy we are. This is the symptom of *lung*, a feeling of ‘feeling down’. When we get

lung, we can get angry, upset or depressed easily. We can even get angry with our own Gurus!

The key is to try your best and be happy with whatever improvement you have achieved in your Dharma practice. Do not become obsessed and overexert yourself. Before Buddha attained enlightenment, he went into six years of extreme asceticism. He realised that he was just wearing down his body and the ascetic practices did not help him generate new insights. Rather, the practices led him to weakness and self-destruction. When he decided to give up extreme asceticism, five of his students left him. He was nearly dying of starvation until he heard a melodious tune coming from the river. He staggered towards the river and saw a man teaching a boy how to play the sitar. The man told the boy that for a stringed instrument to make beautiful music, the strings should neither be too tight nor too loose. If the string of the sitar is tightened too much, the string will break. If the string is too loose, there will be no music. After hearing this, the Buddha realised the Middle Way – we should not be too rigid or too relax in our views about life. Similarly in

our Dharma practice, we should not be too strict or too relaxed with ourselves. If we are too strict with ourselves, it will only harm and weaken our mental and physical bodies. If we are too relaxed, we will not make any effort in our Dharma practice. We must know when to be disciplined and when to relax in order to progress well in our Dharma practice.

It is okay to relax. You are not expected to just pray and chant all day, and come to the Dharma centre continuously. Chanting day in and day out is not Dharma practice. Some people, who are vegetarians, chant all their life, but once they stop chanting, it is all negative talk, cursing, gossiping and etc.

If you feel mentally stressed out, unwind - go to a disco, pub, gym, or whatever. But when you are there, your motivation should be, "I want to enjoy, recharge and after that, I will work for all beings." Perhaps even at a disco, think of all the people around you as your close friends and you aspire to lead them to enlightenment. So externally, you are a Buddhist seeming to be 'enjoying'

Samsara; but in fact, internally you are practising Dharma. Be sincere to yourself when you do this.

We need to understand the difference between Dharma and Samsara (cyclic existence). Everybody has expectations that things should be done in a certain way. They even have expectations of what Dharma should be. Due to this rigid view of how things **MUST** be, there arises frustration for others and for oneself. We hold tightly to our own small-minded view and completely forget the teachings of Impermanence and Emptiness. Once we refocus onto the big picture of the countless number of beings suffering in the six realms, we recognise how small-minded we are. As Lama Yeshe says, “be gentle with yourself and do not lose the big picture; it is okay to make mistakes but it is not all right to give in to them without learning anything from your mistakes.”

For each time that you feel you have failed, reflect and use the mirror of the teachings of Dharma to evaluate things from a Dharma viewpoint. Then with a good and

kind heart, perform your deeds happily and sincerely with the genuine feelings of closeness to all beings. When your mind is balanced and suffused with Renunciation, Bodhicitta and Right view of Emptiness, there will be limited space for small-minded pettiness. You will find that you get over 'feeling down' very quickly.

Look at the big picture and do not think of everything in relation to yourself. When you do that, frustration dissolves and you feel quite silly in relation to the magnitude of life. Frustration is due to the build-up of 'winds'. Exercise helps to reduce mental frustration. Endorphins are released when we exercise. Another way is to lie on your back when the sun is rising or lie down in an open field with minimal lights and look at the stars, then realise how small you are in comparison to the galaxy. If you realise dependent origination - that we all need each other to survive, then how can you develop mental frustration? Just because things are not going the way you want them to be, do not get frustrated. Do not escape through seeking another spiritual tradition, or escape back to your 'old ways' and 'normal life'. You will

realise that you will never be able to escape from the 'clutches' of frustrations wherever you might be.

Many of my highly educated students use the words of Buddha's teachings to justify their actions. They use these teachings to further their own perspective. It is dangerous to intellectualise the teachings of the Buddha for one's own perspectives. When we do so, we may 'flavour' the teachings with our own deluded views and we will become judgemental.

Dharma is not meant to be some form of intellectual gymnastics to boost our own ego. It is not about judging others and feeling superior about our knowledge. Dharma is about love, compassion, and wisdom. Without judging and having the feeling of love, compassion and wisdom, we will develop the ability to see things in its natural state. If we can see things in their natural state, our mind will become calm and we will not get agitated easily. On the contrary, Samsara is the continual judging of what is right and wrong, and how things should be rigidly done in a certain way.

As we do not have full realisations of cause and effect, there is a tendency for us to pass judgment and have preconceptions about the things that happen around us. Wisdom is not something you can claim to have because you have worldly experience. You may have worldly knowledge, but remember this is usually related to the eight worldly concerns. In studying the Dharma, you must let go of your preconceptions and open yourself to realising things through study, reflection and meditation.

You must be balanced. That is why Buddhism is the middle way. Develop Renunciation. Do not chase after things and think, "This thing will give me satisfaction; without it life would be hopeless." These preconceptions and grasping make you rigid and inflexible. Do not always expect things to happen in a certain way. When a difficult situation arises, you start criticising and have *lung*. Then, you become even more tense, frustrated and disturbed. Remember that difficult situations are also often the best source of Dharma lessons.

Renunciation of Samsara is neither easy nor difficult.

Cultivate and train your mind to be detached from all existent phenomena. For your mind to be healthy, you should not be grasping at any object, be it pleasure or suffering. Then, your mind will become peaceful and you will feel more relax. We have to break our concrete preconceptions, and that can only be done by having an open and clear mind. Because our conceptions are concrete, we are not flexible. When somebody with good reasons says, "Let's do it this way" but you do not want to change, this is rigidity. Only you are right, everyone else is wrong. Remember that sometimes the new ideas suggested may actually be better than yours. Be open and flexible. Relax, clear your mind and enjoy!

I hope that these thoughts that I have shared are beneficial to you. Nothing written here is new. It was all taught by the Buddha thousands of years ago. Hence, I do hope that you will take these teachings and apply it to your life to create happiness for yourself and others. Enjoy your life and be happy!

SKY – The Nature of Reality

"Sky", what is your colour, "Sky"?

Are you "blue" as we say in English,

Or are you "green" as we say in Tibetan?

So what are you? Tell me your colour...

"Sky", what is your nature, "Sky"?

Are you "Sunny", "Cloudy" or "Storming"?

Whatever your "nature" is, you are still the "Sky"!

"Sky", so what are you, "Sky"?

Are you "truly existent" as we believe,

Or are you just "there"?

Whatever you are,

You are but a "perception of our minds"...

"Mind", what is your colour, "Mind"?

Are you "blue", "green" or "red" as we label you?

So what are you? Tell me your colour...

"Mind", what is your nature, "Mind"?

Are you "happy", "jealous" or "angry"?

Whatever your "nature" is,

You are still "non-inherently existent"!

"Mind", so what are you "Mind"?

Are you "truly existent" as we believe,

Or have you always been "there"?

Whatever you are,

You are but a "transmigrated mental continuum".

So "awaken" and start to see all phenomena as "it is",
Then all will then be meaningless.....
With nothing to "claim" and nothing to "cling",
Strive to truly "Renounce",
And train intently with "Bodhicitta",
Then the "Right view of Emptiness"
Will slowly start to grow within our minds.
With all things being "truly empty" because
Of all being "truly labelled",
Where then is anything being "truly existent"?
When everything is then
So hollow of being existent of its own side,
Then the "right view of Emptiness" will arise.
Thus, give up all clinging,
Even clinging to these "thoughts of mind training",
And there will be nothing left to grasp...
So "World", what are you "World"?
Where are you? "World"...

Composed on the 11 day of the 7th Lunar Month on the year of the Iron Snake western year 2001 at 1140p.m. by yogi Thubten Namdrol in response to the call of much needed advice for the disciples of "Thekchen Choling" which was requested by the most kind Namdrol Tsepal (Analine Choong) whom faced with similar problems but with Bodhicitta asked for advice to counter the "nature of the mind".

May you all meet with success with the practice of the Dharma to attain supreme awakening for the sake of liberating all sentient beings! May all be auspicious!