

· WISDOM LIGHT SERIES ·

THE  
RIGHT  
VIEW

TURNING BELIEVERS  
INTO  
BODHISATTVAS

KHENPO TSULTRIM LODRO

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*The goal of the bodhisattva is NOT  
to attain Buddhahood, but to benefit  
all sentient beings more capably after  
attaining Buddhahood.*

————— BY PATRUL RINPOCHE

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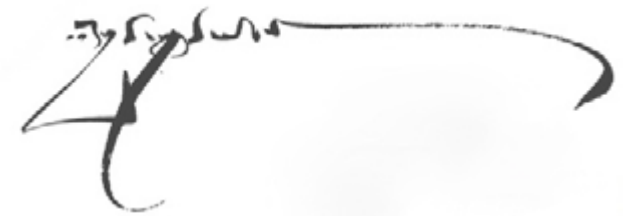
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Sogyal Rinpoche

Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö is one of the most important Tibetan Buddhist masters alive today. As demonstrated by his many writings, he is not only exceptionally learned in the traditional Buddhist teachings, but is also deeply familiar with science, western philosophy and the modern world. Here in this short text, drawn from a series of lectures, he encourages us to remember the Buddha's fundamental message on the real meaning and purpose of life: the cultivation of genuine wisdom and compassion. I am a deep admirer of Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö and supporter of his work.



## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

In this early 21st century, man has succeeded in building an advanced material civilization with hands and brains, and along the way have managed to overcome many of life's challenges. However, the fundamental question regarding cyclic existence remains an enigma which modern science is still scrambling to understand. Great scientists like Newton, Einstein and other luminaries, all must succumb to the inevitable process going from life to death just like you and me, without exception. Science, as we know it today, is not the answer to our ultimate longing for absolute freedom from samsara. This true liberation is beyond the cycle of birth, aging, sickness and death; it is where life rests, the natural state where every living being will eventually return. Those masters who had already attained this enlightened state conducted their lives with such contentment and equanimity, and carried themselves with tremendous dignity and grace until the very end. They experienced no suffering nor harbored any negative thoughts. Because once mind is free from all obscurations, external influences of the four elements (earth, water, fire and wind) cease as well. Only then can true freedom and happiness be had. To realize this ultimate ideal, man's self-awareness and inherent wisdom must be explored

and developed. As for the critical questions regarding the origin and the nature of cyclic existence, and the ways to go beyond its bounds, only the Dharma has the answers. For this reason, people from all walks of life really should familiarize themselves with Buddhist teachings somewhat. We believe that everyone can learn something valuable from it.

CHENGDU, SICHUAN, CHINA

## A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrö was born in 1962 in Drango (Luhuo) County in Sichuan Province's Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. In 1984, he received monastic ordination at the world-renowned Larung Five Sciences Buddhist Institute (Larung Gar) in Serthar, becoming a disciple of the preeminent spiritual master, H.H. Chogyel Yeshe Norbu Jigme Phunstok. After many years dedicated to the study of the five main sutric treatises and tantric scripture, he was awarded the title of Khenpo in recognition of his scholarship.

For more than twenty years, Khenpo has overseen monastic education at Larung Gar, producing successive generations of accomplished students. During the 1990s, he gave a series of dharma teachings in Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan. Over the past decade, Khenpo has concentrated efforts in Tibetan areas, promoting environmental awareness, education, vegetarianism, and the importance of protecting living beings and abstaining from taking life. At the same time, he has sought to deepen the broader Tibetan community's understanding of basic dharma, and to this end has traveled widely giving teachings to lay audiences. Placing great importance on the promotion of Tibetan culture, Khenpo has founded libraries and schools. Notably, he has also coordinated a team of language specialists and

scholars representing all Tibetan regions to collaborate on the compilation of a tri-lingual (Tibetan-Chinese-English) dictionary of new vocabulary terms.

Two volumes have been published in the past five years:

*Chinese-Tibetan-English Illustrated Dictionary of New Daily Vocabulary*

*Chinese-Tibetan-English Dictionary of New Daily Vocabulary*

Over the last ten years, Khenpo has been committed to deepening his understanding of western science and philosophy, and is utilizing contemporary methods to disseminate Buddhist culture. Khenpo has published extensively on Buddhism in Tibetan, Chinese and English languages. His Tibetan publications include four volumes of collected writings; his Chinese monographs include the *Wisdom Light Series*, *Stories of Transmigration*, *Buddhism: Superstition or Wisdom?*, *The Heart Sutra and Quantum Physics*, *The Secret Code for Unlocking Tibetan Buddhism*, *Tibetan Buddhism: Lifting the Veil of Mystery and Comprehending the Book Called Life*; translated English publications include *Daily Inspiration from Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro*, *The Right View* and *Are You Ready for Happiness?*

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

To many dharma friends in China, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro is known for conducting the activity of liberating live beings for 100 consecutive days every year for the past fifteen years. This activity has attracted numerous participants over the years, Buddhists as well as non-believers, both from within and out of China. As most of the participants were lay practitioners, Khenpo felt that it would be of great benefit to them to point out a more systematic approach to practice the Dharma. Thus the lectures, given in Mandarin, began around the same time.

All the lectures so far have been compiled into ten volumes of *Wisdom Light*, generally arranged by timeline and printed in China. *The Right View* serves as an introduction to some of the cardinal doctrines that are also unique to Buddhism. It is the first English edition of part of *Wisdom Light, Volume 1*. That means the lectures included in this book are some of the earliest and deal with the very foundational and key Buddhist doctrines. Khenpo once said that people often consider something foundational as being elementary. But in the case of Dharma, every view, every concept, even down to every word can be explained according to four different levels of understanding. The basic view and practices can be equally

profound, just a matter of how well one has trained the mind.

For many years, *Wisdom Light* has been the guiding light to many practitioners in the Chinese communities all over Asia. Hopefully, our English-speaking dharma friends can also be benefited now with the publishing of this book.

DEKYI DROLMA, HONG KONG

JUNE, 2015

PART  
ONE

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# BUDDHISM

## —THE DEFINITION

You may wonder why this topic is chosen. The reason is simply because even some veteran Buddhists in both China and Tibet do not know the real meaning and the scope of Buddhism. Other than the monastics, most farmers and nomads in Tibet think that to be able to help build a stupa or a magnificent temple from time to time, or to recite the six-word mantra of Avalokitesvara, will make them good enough Buddhists. But all these are just doing good deeds, not learning or practicing the Dharma. So, further explanation about Buddhism is certainly necessary.

### *The Incorrect Definition of Buddhism*

Some regard Buddhism as a kind of belief. Belief also means faith. Of course faith is needed in Buddhism, but it would be oversimplified to regard Buddhism as a belief since keeping faith is only one of the aspects of Buddhism. The foundation and the priority of Buddhism are not about belief, but wisdom and compassion. Although Buddhism does advocate the importance

of faith, it is not unique to Buddhism; science also calls for faith. For example, people today all want to promote faith in science. If one does not trust science, one probably would not even dare to take airplane. People take planes because they believe in the technology that allows airplane to transport people to their destinations. It takes faith to accomplish anything in this world, the same kind of faith as in Buddhism. Therefore, it is incorrect to equate Buddhism with belief.

Is Buddhism a kind of philosophy? No. There are Eastern, Western and other types of philosophy. Some of them may enunciate certain thoughts that are similar to that of Buddhism, but their analyses never go as deep. Hence, Buddhism is not a branch of philosophy.

Is it science? Certain views of Buddhism and some findings of science may be the same, but Buddhism as a whole is not science.

Could it be idealism? Many people consider religion idealism. It may be the case in terms of Western religions. As most philosophers in the West are idealists, albeit holding different philosophical positions, they simply identify religion as a category of idealism as well. However, Buddhist thought and idealism are completely different.

Among the four schools of Buddhism, *Sarvastivada*<sup>1</sup> and *Sautrantika*<sup>2</sup> did not maintain any idealistic viewpoints at all, neither did the Madhyamaka (Middle Way) school of the Mahayana tradition. The Yogachara (Consciousness Only) school of Mahayana

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had a number of sects, of those only one posited a small portion of its views that was somewhat similar to that of idealism.

For example, part of the views of Berkeley's subjective idealism appears to be similar to the central teaching of Yogachara that phenomena exist only as a process of mind. Russell, in the first chapter (*Appearance and Reality*) of *The Problems of Philosophy* also analyzed Berkeley's viewpoints, but found complete refutation of which rather difficult. Still, idealism never quite matches Yogachara in its profundity.

Aside from this, no other similarity can be identified between idealism and Buddhism.

Actually, part of idealism, Christianity, ancient Indian religions and other kinds of faith, all share certain common views with Buddhism, but that does not mean they are identical as a whole. Buddhism and idealism are fundamentally different despite their partial similarity. The differences are even greater from an overall perspective. Hence, to regard religion as idealism is purely an opinion of the West, with which Buddhism does not identify.

To illustrate further, Chandrakirti's *Introduction to the Middle Way*, the epitome of Mahayana teaching, holds that both mental and physical phenomena exist from the point of view of the relative truth, and neither exists in terms of the ultimate truth. Both are empty of self-nature, rather than the physical phenomena have no independent existence but the mental phenomena do. Furthermore, Chandrakirti explained that this is the view of the Buddha,

because in *Abhidharma-kosa-Shastra* the Buddha had inquired extensively into the existence of mental and physical phenomena from the perspective of the relative truth, and subsequently refuted the existence of both when enunciating *Prajnaparamita*. In other words, both exist if existence is affirmed, and vice versa if it is refuted. This is Chandrakirti's point.

On the other hand, the view of the Nyingma tradition can be summed up in Longchenpa's words:

External phenomena are not mind, only the illusory manifestations of mind.

From what I know about idealism, I can say with full confidence that to equate Buddhism with idealism is very wrong as their views differ quite substantially. Actually, no one really thinks of Buddhism as idealism, only that religion in general is viewed as such, which in the case of Western religion is not incorrect.

In summary, Buddhism is not idealism because it does not deem the ultimate nature of reality is based on mind or mental phenomena; neither is it materialism as it does not consider the ultimate nature of reality is based on physical phenomena.

Is Buddhism a religion?

The word "religion" came from the West. If defining Buddhism by way of the meaning of religion, Buddhism cannot be deemed exactly a religion as the word "religion" connotes the recognition of a supernatural power or powers as the creator and governor of the universe, which Buddhism dissents. Some in the West do

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not see Buddhism as religion because of this. Those learned and respectable Buddhist practitioners in the past also held the same opinion. I too do not see Buddhism fit the Western definition of “religion” as Buddhism has never acknowledged the existence of the Creator.

Then, what exactly is Buddhism?

## The Definition of Buddhism

Buddhism actually means Buddhist studies, a subject taught and transmitted by the Buddha; or, a way through which ordinary people can learn to reach Buddhahood.

In the scriptures, Buddhism is defined by the two words—“doctrine” and “realization.” Doctrine refers to the teachings transmitted by the Buddha himself or the commentaries on canonical texts and other treatises written by the bodhisattvas after the Buddha gave his blessing and approval, such as the Tibetan Buddhist canon of *Kangyur* (The Translation of the Word) and *Tengyur* (Translation of Treatises). Realization refers to personal realization gained through practice, which encompasses discipline, meditation and wisdom. In other words, “doctrine” and “realization” stand for the whole of Buddha Dharma. Two other words, even more significant, can also summarize the full meaning of the Dharma, that is, “compassion” and “wisdom”, which will serve as the cornerstone of our discussion on Buddhism here.

All Buddhist teachings, be they Mahayana or Theravada, exoteric or esoteric, can be summed up by wisdom and compassion. In fact, the union of wisdom and compassion is the essence of Buddhism; it is ultimately what to be learned and practiced in Buddhism.

What about burning incense, performing prostrations, reciting sutras and the like? Do these activities signify the process of

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learning Buddhism? Yes, they are part of that process, but certainly not the main part.

What is a Buddha? Is the real Buddha the one appearing in a thangka with golden face and sitting in a full lotus position?

That is only a partially real Buddha. In the view of Mahayana, the *Nirmanakaya* (Emanation Body) and the *Sambhogakaya* (Bliss Body) are the manifestations of the Buddha in order to liberate ordinary people and bodhisattvas of the first to the tenth bhumi, respectively.

The *Nirmanakaya* is for the Buddha to communicate with ordinary people. Although Buddha-nature exists within the mind of every sentient being, the *Dharmakaya* (Truth Body) of the Buddha is rendered powerless to those who have not attained realization and thus must rely on the *Nirmanakaya* and the *Sambhogakaya* of the Buddha for guidance to enlightenment. However, neither the *Nirmanakaya* nor the *Sambhogakaya* is the true Buddha, only the *Dharmakaya*, the union of wisdom and compassion, is.

To learn Buddhism is to learn wisdom and compassion. To attain Buddhahood means the manifestation of the inherent wisdom and compassion of Buddha-nature after all the obscurations have been purified. That is all it means.

Rongzom Pandita, one of the greatest scholars of the Nyingma lineage, once said, “The invariable definition of Buddhism is wisdom and compassion. No other explanation can fully express the core of Buddhism.”

He also thought that using any one of the numerous methods

to learn Buddhism is equally fine, such as the Pure Land sect’s focus on single-mindedly praying to Amitabha or Zen school’s experiential realization through meditation. But it would be wrong to consider one school’s method the single most appropriate way to learn over all others. Likewise, there are respective precepts for the monastics and laypractitioners. One should not think that only the monastic precepts are real precepts, or that observing the lay precepts cannot help one attain Buddhahood. In Vajrayana Buddhism, there are practices involving the subtle energy system of the body, but it is not the only method one can use to attain enlightenment. All these are just different ways to reach the same destination. No one particular method is absolutely required. The only unchanging essentials, however, are wisdom and compassion. On the other hand, a method that cannot engender wisdom and compassion in the end would not be deemed the practice of the Dharma. This is the point held by Rongzom Pandita, but both the exoteric and the esoteric school also concur.

In general, the whole of Buddhadharma can be fully summarized when told from the perspective of wisdom and compassion. If people ask: What is Buddhadharma? Answer: It is wisdom and compassion. What is learning Buddhism about? It is to learn wisdom and compassion.

It means the wisdom of the Buddha, which is not quite the same as worldly wisdom despite some similarities between the two. For instance, the Buddha's description of *sahalokadhatu*<sup>3</sup>, or the universe in plain language, and his views on the various worldly matters sometimes agreed and other times disagreed with that of ordinary people. In any case, the Buddha had his reasons for making certain statements.

For example, the Buddha had mentioned the existence of Mount Sumeru and the four continents around it when describing the macro world. This differed with the view of the universe held by some in the secular world. In the eyes of ordinary folks, the phenomena described by the Buddha were nowhere to be found.

Though I have explained before, it is more meaningful for us now, as opposed to people in the olden days, to understand the reason for the Buddha's description of the universe. In ancient times, people's knowledge about the structure and the constituent dynamics of the universe was limited. Buddhists at that time did not delve into this topic either. So there was no urgent need to elucidate further. Today, however, with the help of modern technology, the great majority has come to accept the current view of the universe, particularly at the macro level. Understandably, there are differences as well as similarities when compared with that of Buddhism. In order for people not to misinterpret

the Buddhist view, it is necessary to explain once again why the Buddha chose to describe the universe the way he did.

Buddha's primary goal of teaching was to communicate precisely the doctrine of the Three Dharma Seals to the listeners. Failing this, the teaching would have been pointless. What made the Three Dharma Seals so important? The answer is in the sutras. A disciple once asked the Buddha, "How can the real teachings be distinguished if the non-Buddhists try to deceive with their false version after you, The Blessed One, pass into nirvana?" The Buddha answered, "Any teaching, as long as it espouses the principles of the Three Dharma Seals, can be considered Buddhist teaching; otherwise, it is not Buddhist teaching." The fact that the Buddha always emphasized the key points in his transmissions should explain why so much importance has been attached to the Three Dharma Seals.

In the time of the Buddha, the listeners came from all walks of life. There were non-Buddhists, Brahmins, celestial beings, nagas, etc. Many of the Brahmins maintained a view of the universe that was at variance with the facts. The Buddha knew that to contradict them inopportunely would not only make them feel disagreeable but also jeopardize his work of propagating the Dharma. In order to teach them according to their capacity, the Buddha chose to apply skillful means instead, that is, to go along with their views, even knowing that those were wrong, as long as he could teach them the three characteristics of conditioned existence—

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impermanence, suffering and no-self (the Three Dharma Seals). The Buddha would not mind if the rest of their views were valid or not, because only through the knowledge of the Three Dharma Seals could they be liberated from samsara. Other branches of learning, no matter how proficient one is in, do not concern the question of liberation.

It is precisely due to the fact that the Buddha did not correct them that the view of the universe then was preserved. Once the capacity of the audience changed, the Buddha would also make timely corrections of their old views of the universe or other matters, and establish other viewpoints that might better correspond to their capacity. There are a variety of skillful means that the Buddha used to transmit the teachings, which have resulted in the kind of view of the universe in the sutras that is different from the modern understanding.

However, this explanation is not some expedient answer to the present-day question that the sutras do not conform to the view backed by modern science. The same explanation was already available more than a thousand years ago. It was just not necessary to explain to the people then, as they did not have the kind of knowledge on the universe like we do today. Nevertheless, to use skillful means to educate sentient beings also illustrates the incredible foresight and wisdom of the Buddha. The Buddha himself once said that there were quite a few inconsistencies in his teachings in order to suit the taste of different audience, but

the one that would never change is the teaching on emptiness. For example, from the point of view of the relative truth, impermanence and suffering being the nature of all conditioned phenomena are deemed absolute truth, but not from the point of view of the ultimate truth. In the Three Dharma Seals, only no-self is deemed the absolute truth.

In fact, the Buddhist view cannot be proved wrong just because its description of the macro world is different from what people generally know nowadays. The world, as we know it today, is nothing but a world that humans living on the Earth can observe either with eyes or with instruments. No one can be absolutely sure that this is the sole truth of the universe.

Buddhism holds that a glass of water seen by sentient beings of the six realms will manifest six different phenomena, respectively. By the same token, beings of the six realms will see six different worlds, somewhat like the idea of the multiverse.

At the level of the micro world, scientific views spanning from classical physics to relativity to quantum physics are getting closer and closer to the Buddhist views. The father of quantum physics also acknowledged that man's knowledge of the physical universe has taken a giant step toward the direction of Eastern civilization such as Buddhism ever since quantum theory was advanced. The reason that I mention this is to point out the similarities between science and the wisdom of the Buddha.

The dissimilarities between the two are those points that only the

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Buddha can explicate. Modern science or philosophy, even after tens of thousands of years of further development, will still be unable to reach the state of the Buddha, a state of emptiness and clear light wherein all phenomena are mandalas of the Buddhas, primordially pure. None of the thoughts, reasoning, intelligence, or even supernatural power of the world can perceive such state. This shows the wisdom of the Buddha reigns supreme over all worldly knowledge.

However, in the context of wisdom and compassion, wisdom can simply be put as realization of emptiness, which encompasses many meanings: realization of no-self, of emptiness pertaining to Madhyamaka of the exoteric school, and realization of Great Emptiness and Clear Light. From the point of view of the esoteric Buddhism, which also includes the view of the Great Perfection, emptiness and clear light are one and the same.

The term “Great Emptiness” has never appeared in the history of man’s thought and literature. And even if it did, it was only to mean the void as a result of matter being decomposed to decreasing size of particles until it could decompose no more. Some people now still do not dare to affirm even this void, insisting rather that energy should remain at the end. (Energy is matter too.) If energy also ends in a state of emptiness, it will be as if all matter were born from nothing. This, for many, is an unacceptable conclusion. So what these people are able to comprehend is even less than that of the exoteric school.

As I mentioned earlier, there are some similarities between the

views of science and Buddhism with respect to the micro universe, but that does not mean science equals what the Buddha realized. Back in the 1920s and 1930s, some Chinese scholars, monks, as well as laypeople used inappropriately Einstein’s mass-energy equivalence to explain emptiness in Buddhism. Explanations given in this fashion were actually a kind of nihilism: mass disappears upon turning into energy—that which existed becomes empty. But this is not real emptiness.

Emptiness defined by the Buddha is not something achieved through a process of transformation. Neither can the notion of energy (an existent phenomenon) becoming emptiness be accepted according to the law of the conservation of energy. Even if it were to be accepted, the derivation of such conclusion would not correspond to Buddhist’s idea of emptiness. Actually, real emptiness does not mean matter disappears into thin air; rather, matter and emptiness exist simultaneously. This is the definition of emptiness given by the Buddha.

Despite the fact that modern-day physicists’ understanding of the physical universe has come quite close to that of the Buddha, in terms of the knowledge of the mental universe or the view on emptiness, modern man’s intelligence and the wisdom of Buddhism are still poles apart. The best result that can be achieved with man’s intelligence is no more than having a better living standard, such as the material civilization brought on by the advancement of technology. Yet, a great many people think that technology brings

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not better life but one that is more complex and precarious. And there is certain truth to that opinion.

On the other hand, what can be attained through wisdom of the Buddha is liberation from samsara for every sentient being. This is not just a theoretical outcome, but quite realistic so long as everyone can undertake to practice according to the Dharma.

## Compassion

Great compassion is at the core of Mahayana Buddhism, of which all Mahayana aspirations are born. It would not be Mahayana Buddhism without great compassion.

The idea of great compassion, as elucidated by the Buddha, does not exist in any of the worldly schools of thought. The traditional Chinese culture upholds moral principles and the Western culture advocates charity and social welfare. But the Buddha's idea of altruism, demonstrated by the meditation practice of *tonglen*<sup>4</sup>, for example, and the bodhisattva's commitment to unconditional dedication to others, are unparalleled.

Great compassion can be explained in more details from two perspectives.

### **1. Conventional perspective** —————

For example, at the time when the Buddha was learning the path, he did not hesitate to offer his body to a starving lion. Or, if someone were to force a person in this room to jump off from the tenth floor, the behavior in the true sense of Mahayana would be that everyone in this room volunteers to jump. It is not just paying lip service. One should wish with all sincerity like this: It must be very painful to jump to death like that. Just let me take the pain for them.

Such acts of giving, or of forbearance as well, are great



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compassion in the conventional sense. The real intent of the Dharma is not only to have the motivation for compassion but also the actual action; not only to engage in charitable works to release sentient beings from temporary suffering, such as relieving the victims of disasters, giving food and clothing to the needed, nursing the sick and the wounded and so on, but also to be willing to do anything to liberate sentient beings from samsara even at the cost of one's own life.

However, we should not refrain from doing charity work just because it can only deal with sentient beings' temporary suffering. As Mahayana practitioners who aspire to benefit all beings, it makes sense for us to participate in the charitable activities in the society.

There was a story in the Vinaya: A bhikshu who was rendered immobile due to his illness had no one to take care of him. His bed was so filthy that it was as if he slept in his own excrement. One day, the Buddha came to this bhikshu's home with Ananda. The bhikshu panicked upon seeing the Buddha, but the Buddha gently comforted him and took his dirty clothes to wash personally.

If the Buddha could do this, we the followers of the Buddha would have no excuse not to do likewise. Yet, this is still not quite real compassion. Real compassion means that, at the time of life and death, one chooses to sacrifice one's own life for others. Although this ideal may also exist in some other schools of thought or theory, it is somewhat limited in their scope. Whereas the Buddha's great compassion is for all sentient beings, not just humans or Buddhists.

## 2. Supra-conventional perspective —————

The greater, more extensive compassion entails more than just ensuring the basic needs of sentient beings. Those needs should be taken care of, but they are not the focal point. The most important is to make all sentient beings understand the facts of samsara and the ways to be freed from it. This is the Buddha's greatest compassion—to teach sentient beings the truth first, then the methods for liberation.

Why so? For example, a patient can be perfectly nursed back to health. But can we prevent that person from getting sick again? No. We can only help this time. There is nothing we can do for the sicknesses that person will suffer in countless future lives. In fact, any form of material help, be it food, clothing, or money, can only temporarily relieve those in need, never for long. The only way to completely and permanently release sentient beings from all suffering is to teach them the facts of samsara and guide them to practice the Dharma so as to bring them onto the path of liberation. Ultimately, this is the real benefit to sentient beings, indeed the true meaning of salvation.

Only this type of compassion of the Buddha can be deemed great compassion. The conventional sense of kindness and sympathy for others is also a kind of compassion, but it cannot be described as being "great." Great compassion is closely connected to the profound wisdom of the Buddha, and bodhicitta for one is just such wisdom.

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We all agree that, in terms of charitable activities, other religions probably have done more, but the wars they started in the name of charity and justice have also numbered not a few. Therefore, it is still debatable whether they harbor absolute compassion or not. Relatively speaking, Buddhism has never meant to conquer anything or anyone. The Buddha also said that he cared not in the least the victory of fighting with another man, but most emphatically the victory from the battle with one's own mind.

Furthermore, great compassion has multi-level meanings. The Buddha once said, "I have pointed out for you the way to liberation. You must decide for yourself whether you want to go that way or not." In other words, the fate of each being is in each one's own hands, not the Buddha's. This attitude is different from that of other beliefs, the Savior or the Creator of which would decide who goes to heaven or to hell. Such difference also reflects the kind of freedom, tolerance, equality and peace encompassed in the great compassion of Buddhism.

## *Practice of the union of wisdom and compassion*

How should one practice wisdom and compassion?

Actually, the six *paramitas* practiced by the bodhisattvas are all within the bounds of wisdom and compassion: generosity, discipline and patience are practices of great compassion; one-pointed concentration and insight are that of wisdom; diligence serves as the auxiliary condition to the practice of wisdom and compassion. It is a simple and direct way to define Buddhism as wisdom and compassion. The broader and more profound connotation of Buddhism is the six *paramitas*.

If the essence of the whole of Buddhism is being condensed into wisdom and compassion, could there be a way to cover all eighty-four thousand teachings in one sitting of meditation? The answer is yes, that is, to practice wisdom and compassion.

Some may question the viability of practicing both in one sitting, as great compassion needs to be practiced with thorough and deep contemplation while wisdom to realize emptiness requires no discursive thoughts.

For us beginners, we need to first cultivate bodhicitta and then receive the bodhisattva vows. Once receiving the vows, bodhicitta—the essence of the bodhisattva vows—will be in our mindstream already. On this basis, one can proceed to practice emptiness.

While the thought of "wishing all sentient beings liberation from the suffering of samsara" may not be that obvious upon

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entering the state of emptiness, that is, no apparent compassion at the time, still the bodhisattva vows will accompany us into the state of emptiness because the essence of the bodhisattva vows has been in our minds already. The bodhisattva vows are not matter but a condition of mind. Although there are no distinct thoughts going through mind when entering the state of emptiness, the bodhisattva vows do exist at the time. Hence, not separating one from the other, mind and the bodhisattva vows can simultaneously enter the state of emptiness. At this point, the bodhisattva vows are emptiness and emptiness the bodhisattva vows. The union of wisdom and compassion means thus.

Here, union means when we immerse in the state of emptiness, mind attains realization of emptiness that is inseparable from the bodhisattva vows. If one can practice this way, one will be able to grasp all the essence of Mahayana Buddhism and not need any other practice.

This is how a beginner can practice the union of wisdom and compassion. If one is able to do this, the essence of the Buddha's eighty-four thousand teachings will be covered in one sitting, in one place, or at one time.

As for the respective practice of bodhicitta and emptiness, they have been taught already, thus no need to repeat them here. Just combine the two.

Naturally, before cultivating great compassion, one should generate renunciation first. One cannot have great compassion for sentient beings if one is unaware of the suffering of samsara,

because compassion comes from the suffering of sentient beings. No compassion, no bodhicitta either. The other condition for developing renunciation is the desire for liberation. When seeing the suffering of sentient beings, one aspires to save them from the clutches of samsara forever. But on second thought, how can one help others if one cannot attain liberation for oneself in the first place? With this in mind, the two requisites for generating renunciation— aversion to samsara and desire for liberation—are complete.

Renunciation is the foundation of bodhicitta. Having aroused bodhicitta, one is qualified to receive the bodhisattva vows which one can bestow on oneself. Afterwards, one can begin the practice on emptiness. Knowing that the union of wisdom and compassion is the combination of emptiness and bodhicitta essentially means that one has understood perfectly the quintessence of all the exoteric and esoteric teachings of Mahayana Buddhism.

Renunciation and bodhicitta should be practiced separately in proper order and followed by the practice of emptiness. As such, renunciation and bodhicitta that were practiced beforehand will also turn into the wisdom of emptiness.

Here, emptiness is not like the Theravada view of no-self. Rather, it contains the element of great compassion. And within great compassion, there is realization of emptiness. These views and practices of the union of wisdom and compassion encompass all the implicit significance of the Dharma. However, they are much easily said than done.

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Renunciation depends on the practice of the four general preliminaries, that is, the conviction of the rarity and preciousness of human birth and impermanence of all phenomena must be generated. For bodhicitta to be aroused, there must be sufficient amount of merit accumulated through mandala offering and obscurations purified and healed by meditation on Vajrasattva. Clearly, one cannot avoid undertaking the practice of general and extraordinary preliminaries no matter how one chooses to go on the path. This is also the reason why I have been insisting all along on the necessity of preliminary practice.

Now that we know the true meaning of Buddhism is wisdom and compassion, we shall learn and practice only these two from now on.



1. A school that held to the existence of everything
2. the Sutra school
3. this world; the world of suffering
4. A Tibetan word for “giving and taking”—give one’s own merit and happiness to others and take onto oneself the suffering of others

# THE THREE DIFFERENCES

In the teaching today, we will examine in more details the differences between Buddhism and non-Buddhism, the mundane and the supramundane phenomena and, lastly, Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism. The questions regarding these three differences seem quite easy to some, but the answers may not be so obvious to everyone. For someone who wants to practice the genuine Dharma, it is imperative that one understands the answers to these questions beforehand, as different answers will engender greatly different results in whatever actions one undertakes, be it doing good deeds or sitting down to meditate.

## *The difference between non- Buddhism and Buddhism*

Broadly speaking, the view, the practice and the behavior of non-Buddhist traditions and those of Buddhism are all different, and so are their results. The key difference lies in whether or not it requires taking refuge in the Three Jewels—the Buddha, Dharma

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and Sangha. One that does is Buddhism; otherwise, non-Buddhism.

Although non-Buddhist beliefs also proclaim some notion of emptiness, they are unable to enunciate the void nature of all phenomena based on dependent origination. Their idea of emptiness is only some sort of simple emptiness, unlike the one that is inseparable from phenomena. For example, some non-Buddhists also point out that what we see with our eyes and hear with our ears is all illusory. However, most of their ideas about emptiness are just nothingness which ignore phenomena altogether. This is neither the emptiness taught by Nagarjuna and other like-minded masters, nor the one expounded by Asanga and the like that is inseparable from luminous clarity. Emptiness of non- Buddhism means simply non-existence, just like human heads are without horns, which is not the true meaning of Buddhist emptiness. But non-Buddhist idea of emptiness, regretful to say, is just this simple.


That was the view of the mainstream non-Buddhists during the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. Later, when Islam invaded India, some of the most important Buddhist sites, such as Nalanda Monastery and Vikramasila(Precept Monastery), were sabotaged. Subsequently, a few non-Buddhist schools began to adopt certain Buddhist theories, resulting in the non-Buddhist canon being mixed with many Buddhist teachings. Yet, up until now, not one of these schools is capable of realization of emptiness beyond the notion of “not-self.”

Anyway, the most important and the key difference between

Buddhism and non-Buddhism lie in taking refuge in the Three Jewels. Accordingly, taking refuge is deemed a prerequisite for anyone who wants to learn Buddhism. However, it has never been forced upon anyone. Only those who want to learn the Buddha’s teachings or take up Buddhist practice must comply. Not taking refuge is to remain an outsider, is off the path to liberation and cannot be deemed a Buddhist.

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 *The difference between the mundane and the supramundane practice*

Nowadays, both in China and Tibet, many people identify themselves as Buddhists, lay practitioners, or monastics. They often participate in the activity of liberating animals, or practice prostrations and the five extraordinary preliminaries. Many feel proud that they practice every day. However, if you look closely at the motivations, you will find that quite a few practice only for their own benefits in this life, such as health, longevity, or the removal of a life-threatening obstacle. Others hope for a favorable rebirth in the god or human realm just because they fear suffering in the three lower realms (the realms of hell, hungry ghosts and animals). But any form of practice undertaken with these kinds of selfish motivation is considered, at best, a mundane practice.

Furthermore, we should not think of burning incense and doing prostration as being mundane, whereas listening to the teachings of Madhyamaka or the Great Perfection is supramundane. The distinction between the two is simply not about form.

Take the example of offering butter lamp to the Three Jewels. Given the same object of offering, act of offering and person who offers, the practice will be deemed mundane when renunciation is not generated and the purpose of the offering is to obtain worldly benefits like health, longevity, job promotion, wealth and so on, or a favorable rebirth. Conversely, offering lamp out

of true renunciation and to seek liberation from samsara will be considered a supramundane practice. Therefore, the gauge for distinguishing the mundane from the supramundane is no other than whether one has renounced worldly pursuits or not.

The Great Perfection itself is deemed supramundane, but our motivation for practicing it or listening to its teachings could turn it into a mundane practice instead. If our motivation were to gain benefits in this or next life, the teaching of the Great Perfection would cease to be supramundane upon entering our mindstream; it would not even be a Mahayana practice. What would it be then? It would just be a mundane practice, or, a practice of mundane Great Perfection.

What kind of practice is animal liberation? That also depends on your motivation. Even if the motivation is for a rebirth in the god or human realm or to avoid rebirth in the three lower realms, rather than for health or longevity in this life, liberating animal is still just a mundane activity. To liberate animals for one's own freedom from samsara is viewed as a supramundane Theravada practice. To do it out of bodhicitta, the wish to attain Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings, is a supramundane Mahayana practice. To couple the Mahayana practice with some Vajrayana views essentially makes animal liberation a Vajrayana practice.

Therefore, we must carefully examine and ask ourselves, "What is the purpose of my years of participation in animal liberation? Did I do it mainly for my own benefit?" If the intention is to attain Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings, then our action is

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undoubtedly a supramundane practice. If we liberate animals in the hope of attaining our own longevity, or a healthy human rebirth with long life, or a rebirth in Amitabha's Pure Land for ourselves, the actual intended beneficiary is really just us while it may appear that animals are being helped by our action.

Other actions should be examined in this way as well. Is going to a Buddhist institute or other places to receive empowerment or Buddhist teachings a mundane or supramundane practice? As we just said, if it is for our own benefit or to avoid either physical or mental suffering in this or future life, it is a mundane practice. Why? This is because our action comes from a worldly motivation. To be more specific, all thoughts and actions will be deemed mundane if they are motivated as such.

What is a supramundane practice? Where do we draw the line between the mundane and the supramundane? Supramundane practices are encompassed in both Mahayana and Theravada traditions. Unbeknown to many, even practicing Theravada requires renunciation as a prerequisite. When virtuous actions are being executed out of genuine renunciation, they are deemed supramundane practices.

What does the word "renounce" mean? First, to renounce is to forsake all worldly concerns. In other words, to renounce is not to have any attachment to worldly things and, at the same time, to be fully aware of the suffering nature of samsara. Second, one must endeavor to seek liberation from all suffering.

To lead a "renounced" life as a monastic monk or nun connotes the same meaning as one must leave home behind to pursue ultimate liberation. Home, in this sense, represents the secular world. It is not enough a clear evidence that one has renounced all worldly attachment by just walking out of one's home and putting on a monastic robe; one must also have developed a genuine sense of revulsion toward samsara.

For laypeople, cultivating renunciation also means not to be covetous of worldly things. Non-Buddhists cultivate renunciation as well. Many non-Buddhist monks or clergies do not wish to remain in samsara. They too seek liberation. However, lacking the right view, theirs are not considered true renunciation. What then is the right view?

It is a firm conviction of the suffering of samsara to a degree that one no longer harbors any desire for samsara and wholeheartedly seeks liberation from it. At the same time, one must also cultivate the transcendent wisdom that is implicit in the ultimate liberation. To seek liberation blindly without grasping the inherent wisdom will not bring forth a complete renunciation. The Four Noble Truths of the Theravada tradition is a part of this wisdom. And complete renunciation entails mastery of the Four Noble Truths.

Once having developed genuine renunciation, all the virtuous actions that one undertakes will be deemed supramundane. It is stated in the *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra* that one enters the path of Theravada after having successfully cultivated renunciation. Here, entering the path means taking the first step of learning the Theravada tradition. It

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shows just how vitally important renunciation is.

The four general preliminary practices of contemplating the preciousness of human birth, impermanence of phenomena, suffering being the nature of samsara and infallible karma are greatly conducive to cultivating renunciation. But many so-called Buddhists are reluctant to practice the preliminaries, particularly these general preliminaries. Rather, they want to skip all of them and go straight to the practice of the Great Perfection, Mahamudra and other similarly profound teachings. Frankly, there is no need to make exception for Tibetan monks, but this tendency is much more common among lay Buddhists in China. The Great Perfection and Mahamudra are indeed supreme practices. What should be questioned is whether one has the requisite capacity, and if the mind has been properly tuned. One cannot hope to succeed in either of the practices if unable to give positive answers to these two questions.

What then are the methods we can use to train our minds? They are the four general preliminary practices, and their importance should not be treated lightly. Centuries ago, Venerable Atisha and many eminent practitioners in Tibet attained supreme accomplishments with nothing but contemplation of precious human birth and impermanence throughout their lives. They are our role models and we should do likewise. Those unwilling to practice the preliminaries yet hoping to stride far on first try will never be able to reach the final goal of liberation, just as if they were blocked from reaching the end of a journey by the numerous high mountain passes.

The following example should further illustrate this point. Once there was an accomplished master. A disciple went up to him for one more profound instruction before taking leave of the master. The master said, "I do not have any better teaching." After offering all his possessions to his master, he pleaded again. The master, holding the disciple's hand, said sincerely, "You will die. I will die, too. Do take some time to reflect on this. My master taught me this and it is what I have practiced. My master did not give me any other teaching, nor have I practiced any other. This is it, the best pith instruction that I know of. Now go and practice it diligently!"

It is really this simple. You will die, and I will die too. We all know this indisputable truth, yet we seem to keep forgetting it. It is thus advisable for each of us to deeply contemplate this teaching, for nothing will come out of our practice otherwise.

Many people are convinced that what they practice must be of supra-mundane nature. How can it not be if they have been practicing the five extraordinary preliminaries? In fact, these five preliminaries are not only supramundane in nature but also part of the Mahayana practices. The key is, notwithstanding, having what kind of perspective when you sit down to practice these preliminaries. Though the possibility of practicing solely for the benefit of this life is slim, it is quite likely to undertake these practices to avoid rebirth in the hell realm. If the motivation is not to seek liberation for the sake of all sentient beings, the practice of the five preliminaries will be considered mundane, not



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supramundane. In that case, it won't be so meaningful to practice the five preliminaries after all. We all know that chanting mantras repetitively and doing five-point prostrations require tremendous mental and physical efforts. If, in the end, the outcome of our practice is viewed as not being in accordance with the principles of Vajrayana, Mahayana, or Theravada tradition, but is categorized as being mundane instead, it will be a real pity.

Many of us had received empowerment from His Holiness Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and are also fortunate enough to have learned many precious Buddhist teachings. These are not casual encounters. If we were to let them become just ordinary mundane affairs, they would lend no help to our quest for liberation. Even if we do manage to gain some benefits later on as a result of these encounters, which perhaps temporarily satisfy our worldly yearnings, liberation, on the other hand, will forever be lost. That would be regretful, wouldn't you think? So keep in mind of the preciousness of this human birth. Don't waste this life in neglect and ignorance, and miss the one chance for seeking freedom from samsara. In order to succeed, we must first begin by cultivating renunciation. Failing that, neither meditation nor mantra chanting can ever be deemed supramundane practice through which ultimate liberation can be attained. This is extremely important!

Renunciation is the prerequisite to bodhicitta. Without complete renunciation, genuine bodhicitta can never be aroused.

## The difference between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism

What is the difference between Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism? It is a matter of having bodhicitta or not.

What is bodhicitta? The answer is simple and known to everyone, at least in words: bodhicitta is the wish to attain Buddhahood so as to be able to liberate all sentient beings. But in practice, it is not so easy at all. Even some senior monks and people who claim to be yogis of Dzogchen or Vajrayana practitioners have yet developed genuine renunciation and bodhicitta.

When the Venerable Atisha was in Tibet, once during breakfast with some disciples, he blurted out, "Today, a practitioner of Hevajra<sup>1</sup> Tantra in India achieved the *samadhi* of cessation of a sravaka." (This is a concentration in which all gross sensations and thoughts have been totally extinguished. From a secular point of view, it means entering a completely thoughtless state and remaining in that state for a very long period of time.) The disciples asked, "How is it possible for a Hevajra practitioner to descend to a sravaka's samadhi of cessation?" The master said, "Hevajra Tantra itself is a supreme Vajrayana practice. As he did not practice it for the sake of all sentient beings, it became a practice of the Lesser Vehicle, which led to his downfall." This story tells us that it is the motivation or the purpose for taking up a practice that really determines whether such practice is Mahayana

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or Theravada, mundane or supramundane.

Let's take liberating animals as an example. On the surface, it appears that we are benefiting other beings. But, in fact, the purpose of many people is that they themselves can avoid suffering or obtain benefit in this life. Can they achieve their goals this way? Yes, they can. However, to release animals from suffering with only selfish motives is not Mahayana practice because the actual beneficiary is no one else but oneself.

Many people are practicing the five extraordinary preliminaries diligently. If you ask them, "Why do you practice the five preliminaries?" "If I don't, I won't be allowed to begin the main practice of the Great Perfection." or, "Without practicing these preliminaries, I cannot listen to the teachings of the Great Perfection." These answers may sound reasonable at first glance. However, if you ask further, "What happens if you are barred from practicing the Great Perfection or listening to its teachings?" "Then it will be very hard for me to attain liberation." Ask again, "What would happen if you were to attain liberation?" "I would have no more suffering, nor any defilement."

If your motivation is as such, there can be no bodhicitta to speak of in your practice. In other words, where can we find bodhicitta, one of the five extraordinary preliminaries, that you are supposed to be practicing? I'm afraid your so-called bodhicitta practice may just be a matter of completing the required mantra recitations. Bodhicitta itself, on the other hand, has yet been aroused in your

mindstream. You may think that your practice is to generate bodhicitta, but your aim is actually selfish. This can hardly be the way of a genuine practice of bodhicitta. And your practice of the five preliminaries also inadvertently becomes a Theravada practice as you have completely missed the point about bodhicitta.

Thus, we need to remain highly mindful and keep our conduct disciplined when undertaking any kind of practice. Often enough, upon closer examination, we may find that what appears to be altruistic actually only benefits ourselves. This is true in the case of the five preliminary practices as well as mantra chanting, animal liberation, prostration, etc. In short, if the purpose is to attain liberation just for oneself, no matter how sublime a practice is, it can only be deemed a Theravada practice. Conversely, if there is not one shred of selfish consideration, then whatever one undertakes would all be deemed Mahayana practice, be it just reciting the Buddha's name once or doing one prostration.

We have all learned many teachings and understood the diverse aspects of the doctrine. If you were asked to give a teaching today, you probably could do a decent job as well. But very few practitioners today, either monks or laypeople, practice the teachings they received faithfully.

In theory, monastics should far exceed laypeople in their spiritual progress and attainments because they are supposed to have relatively (not absolutely) fewer defilements. This is due to the fact that they have abandoned most of the material and emotional

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attachments which often give rise to negative thoughts or induce troubling behavior, and thus are not easily bound and affected by various worldly matters. Even so, the spiritual practice of many monastics is still less than satisfactory.

People generally think that it is very difficult for laypeople to drop all worldly concerns in order to focus fully on spiritual practice. Consequently, for them to attain liberation is equally difficult. Yet, even in today's world, there are still possibilities for people to succeed in their practice, to gain the ultimate wisdom and to be free from all suffering. The key lies in being able to cultivate a truly altruistic motivation and hold to the right view.

It is stated in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* that mundane and supramundane practices are essentially contradictory to each other.

For this reason, laypeople very rarely have the means or the will to drop all their worldly attachment to pursue a contemplative life. Nevertheless, if one could incorporate bodhicitta into one's everyday activities, Mahayana practice would not seem so incompatible with the trivial and sometimes inconsequential affairs one has to deal with on a daily basis. Naturally, it would be great not to have to get oneself involved in these affairs, but unfortunately for most laypeople, it tends to be unavoidable. The good news is that although Shakyamuni Buddha did not set too stringent a rule for laypeople, it has not prevented more than a few lay practitioners from becoming accomplished masters in the past as well as in the present age.

Then, what should we do now? Despite the fact that we still need to go to work, it is altogether possible that we can cultivate compassion and renunciation at the same time. These endeavors are not contradictory since there are ways for us to turn ordinary activities, which normally are not altruistic, into actions that benefit other beings.

For example, is eating a meal counted as a good, evil, or neutral action? On the premise of not harming lives, eating itself is neither good nor evil. But as stated in the *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra*, if one wants to eat first in order to have the strength to kill, fight, or trick others afterwards, eating that meal is the same as committing evil. If the purpose of eating is to have energy to listen to a Dharma teaching, to liberate animals or to cultivate virtue, then this eating signifies a good action. Moreover, if these positive actions are invested with bodhicitta, eating can even become a Mahayana practice. On the other hand, when eating is without any specific purpose, not thinking of hurting or killing others, liberating or saving animals, it is neither good nor evil; it is, in Buddhist terminology, moral neutrality.

Take another example of working and making money. Why to make money? If it is for purposes related to spiritual practice, working can be viewed as a kind of supramundane practice. If the money is intended for ill purpose, even before any real action has taken place, evil karma will start being accumulated every day one goes to work. When working is simply a means for living, it results in neither good nor evil karma. So, action may be the same, but karma

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may not. And the determining factor is nothing but one's motivation.

If willing, it is actually not so difficult to do good deeds, however one chooses to do it. On the other hand, unwilling to practice what has been learned, one can listen to the most profound teaching, such as the Great Perfection, all day long and still gains nothing from it. Nor is it so meaningful for the teaching to take place under this circumstance. No doubt listening to Dharma teachings is definitely helpful in terms of intellectual understanding of the Buddhist doctrines. Without this understanding, we will not know how to practice. But what good does it do if we do not put the doctrines into action? At best, we may just gather the merit of hearing the Dharma, but not much else. Neither can we hope for any progress in meditative realization. If we continue this way year after year, seemingly learning but never truly understanding the real meaning of the Dharma, we will surely be left empty-handed, with no guidance to rely on, when the time comes for us to leave this world. However, for someone who is willing and capable, even just eating a meal can be a cause of liberation. And the same reasoning applies to all other Dharma practices. So, be sure to have bodhicitta, the altruistic motivation, in whatever you do.

What then is the most important thing to do now? It is to reform our mind, i.e., to adopt a different mindset. For this, we should begin by giving up two things. First, we need to stop the hankering for things of this world, in other words, the attachment to samsara and the yearning for human or celestial rebirths in all future lives.

Why? For if we don't, no matter what practices we take up, they will all be deemed mundane which inevitably will turn out to be a huge obstacle to our progress on the spiritual path. So we must.

Realistically speaking, most of us still need to partake in everyday activities in order to survive. Although we may be unable to stop completely at the moment, it will not be a real hindrance to us so long as we consider this just a temporary expedient. Once the determination to gradually approach the path to liberation starts to germinate in our minds, we can reasonably presume that this is the sign of having developed renunciation. By then, the first requirement—to forsake attachment to samsara—is basically satisfied.

As the saying goes, "It takes more than one cold day for the river to freeze three feet deep." We are after all ordinary people, unable to just give up our insatiable worldly desires overnight. But as mentioned above, it does not matter what we practice, Mahayana or Theravada, as long as the aim is to attain ultimate liberation, genuine renunciation will gradually arise over time.

The second thing to abandon is the habit of looking out for self-interest only. Fail to stop this and continue to do everything with only self-benefit in mind, we will forever be barred from the realm of Mahayana and remain an outsider regardless of how our actions are classified, mundane or supramundane. Although we may think of ourselves as Mahayana or Vajrayana practitioners, we in fact have not even set foot on the right track of Mahayana practice, much less that of Vajrayana, if the motivation stays selfish. For this

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reason, selfishness must be forsaken.

No doubt this is something of great difficulty to do, as we have been drifting endlessly in samsara from beginningless time, all along holding close to our hearts the necessity of benefiting ourselves above all others.

Understandably, we cannot hope to discard an old habit like we do an old shirt. But if one wants to practice Mahayana, one must overcome this inherent tendency in spite of the apparent difficulty. Otherwise, one can only be a Theravada practitioner, lacking the requisite capacity to practice Vajrayana or even Mahayana. This is an extremely important point to remember!

The preliminary practices have always been the foundation of all practices. Often when hearing the word “foundation,” people tend to think that it means not very advanced and thus not especially important. That is a misunderstanding. As the saying goes, “What can the hair adhere to without the skin?” With respect to the Dharma, the so-called foundational practice is really the root of all practices and hence the most profound.

Nowadays in Tibet and China, many practitioners, including some monastics, only want to practice the five extraordinary preliminaries once and no more. The fact is that there is never a stop to these preliminary practices for all the Dharma practitioners. These preliminaries were never intended for being practiced just once or twice. As far as the practice is concerned, many practitioners simply emphasize the completion of mantra

recitations and not the quality of their practice. However, even if the quality has met the prescribed standards, it still gives no reason to stop. These practices may be described as being preliminary rather than the main practice, but they in fact constitute the main body of all the practices. Therefore, one really needs to work hard on these preliminaries if the aim is to be free from samsara; if not, then it is a totally different matter.

Actually, many people have been making the same mistake. That is, all the efforts that they have put into the preliminary practice only go to fulfill the requirement of certain amount of mantra recitations, missing the essential points of the teachings instead. To handle the practice this way is a foolish waste. The saving measure is to carefully examine the motivation for whatever we do, be it undertaking to practice the supreme Vajrayana, the foundational five preliminaries, or just doing daily activities.

Today, many supposedly reincarnated lamas are traveling frequently to the Han Chinese region. Over the years, they have made empowerment the most popular ritual there. Whenever an empowerment is to be given by one of these lamas, people all flock to attend, however far it may be. Some believe that they can immediately attain Buddhahood after receiving an empowerment; others, thinking they have gained a special status after receiving empowerment, become self-important. It is true that empowerment is very special and powerful. But what happens upon receiving empowerment? Most of the time, it just turns into something

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mundane (due to the factors mentioned above). This is the case with some Tibetans, but the situation is much worse with the Han Chinese. Many Dharma practices by themselves are really wonderful. To see them being practiced as tools for worldly gains is truly distressing. For most of us, there is already not enough time to practice, and other merit lacking as well. If, in the end, what little practice that we manage to do become just mundane undertaking, it will be most regrettable.

Now I'd like to caution you not to treat what I have said as mere knowledge. I am not introducing some Buddhist ideologies to you but rather the main points of Buddhist practice, i.e., the meaning and the methods of spiritual practice. Nor am I teaching you what renunciation or bodhicitta is, as you all have had the teachings on the related subjects often enough. But are you successful in meeting the requirements set out in each of the practice? I am afraid only very few have succeeded. If you cannot forsake worldly attachment and selfishness, a monastic robe, a title of Rinpoche, Khenpo or lay practitioner are no more than just labels and therefore not very meaningful. For the same token, having a rosary draped around your chest is equally useless if not accompanied by an altruistic aspiration. However, as long as one is armed with the correct knowledge of the Dharma and grounded in the right view, it really does not matter anymore whether you are a layperson or a monk.

As I said earlier, something as simple as eating a meal can also be a kind of Mahayana practice, purely depending on your

motivation. If that is the case, it is all the more so for other Dharma practices. Clearly, we should always be mindful of our practice as being mundane or supramundane, Mahayana or Theravada practice. Only when the right mindfulness is maintained at all times can we properly assume the role of a monastic or a lay practitioner. Absent such mindfulness, contemplative practice will just be a meaningless exercise.

Naturally, if we were to abide by all the requirements of Buddhist teachings, no one, including myself, could comply one hundred percent. Yet, we should still try our very best, as the endeavors will invariably benefit us in the end.

We may often think to ourselves: I am not really willing to generate bodhicitta, as I am only interested in my own benefit. But I will force myself to do it. Because if I don't, whatever I do will not be considered practicing Mahayana. This is called "contrived" bodhicitta.

How to differentiate between something contrived and uncontrived? For example, when you are very thirsty, you want to drink water. Drinking, in this case, is uncontrived. When you do not feel like drinking water, but drink it anyhow for reasons other than your own wish. This drinking is contrived.

If in this life we only have contrived, not genuine, bodhicitta, just as the Venerable Atisha said, "Those who have aroused contrived bodhicitta in this life will become great bodhisattvas in the next life and be able to deliver as many sentient beings from samsara as there are in Jambudvipa<sup>2</sup>." Why is that? That is due

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to the fact that simply arousing bodhicitta is already a supreme Dharma practice. Based on infallible karma, it is only logical for those people to attain equally supreme result in their next lives.

It is a common phenomenon nowadays to see people keep putting off practicing the Dharma and just idling the days away, as if they are sure of a second chance to be born a human again or to listen to Mahayana teachings and encounter Mahayana teachers once more. But there is no guarantee of that second chance ever coming through. Now in this life, we, the fortunate few, have met basically all the necessary conditions required for the journey to enlightenment. We ought to treasure this truly rare opportunity and immediately set about the task of practicing the Dharma.

When practicing, we should not simply adhere to the formality. Rather, the emphasis should be placed on inner transformation. This is important to note for both the monastic and the lay practitioners. If we manage our practice this way, even without engaging in very profound practice such as the Great Perfection or Mahamudra, we can, at the very least, safely put our practice down as being supramundane and a Mahayana practice. To be able to go this far with our practice is already quite an achievement, in my opinion.

Many of you have practiced the five preliminaries. Can you now forsake worldly attachment and selfishness that we discussed earlier? Just keep in mind that there are actually many levels to the process of forsaking them. It is usually considered good enough if you can more or less let go of some. One way to gauge how you

have done is to check your intention. For example, before taking up these practices, you were primarily concerned with your own interest. Now that the altruistic motivation has since strengthened, it serves to prove that you have been positively influenced by the practice. Otherwise, when no change takes place either in your thoughts or actions, how can anyone tell if practicing these preliminaries makes any difference?

According to some highly respected Tibetan masters, when practicing diligently, superior practitioners can progress every day, average practitioners every month and the least capable every year. It is understandable if lay people do not make substantial progress because their attention must still be directed to the various daily chores. But monastic practitioners like us whose main concern is solely Dharma- related ought to feel ashamed if we fail to accomplish much more in spiritual practice.

Finally, the point to remember is that altruistic motivation will naturally arise over time when practice is conducted properly and consistently. That is to say, our practice should follow the course of first establishing the right view, then learning to gradually forsake attachment and selfishness, and lastly endeavoring to arouse genuine bodhicitta. Taking these three steps is the minimum required of a true Mahayana Buddhist.

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1. One of the main yidams in Vajrayana Buddhism
2. the south of the four continents around Sumeru

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# THE THREE SUPREME METHODS

—THE ULTIMATE METHODS OF CULTIVATING  
VIRTUE AND TRAINING THE MIND

## *1. The necessity of foundational practice*

Though the Three Supreme Methods is the most foundational practice of Buddhism for the beginners, many probably have not even heard of it. It is by no means complicated to explain, but quite a difficult matter to execute properly even for those veteran Buddhists. Nevertheless, once we understand the philosophy and the aim of Buddhist teachings, we should try our best to apply what we have learned in order to make progress and be benefited from them.

It happens quite often that people make speedy progress at the initial stage of their practice, but the progress tapers off after some time. Worse, some may even stop practicing altogether. This is mainly due to a lack of systematic approach to Buddhist practice. What should be done about it? First, we must understand what the foundational practices are and duly recognize the importance they command on our spiritual journey.

If we try to practice the advanced teachings like the Great

Perfection or Mahamudra without first completing the preliminary practices, no results will be achieved owing to inadequately prepared faculty. Thus, the foundational practices should be made the top priority for all who intend to bring their practice to fruition.

It is stated in the sutras that practitioners are classified into three levels. Top-level practitioners are able to make progress every day. Those in the middle fare a little worse but are still capable of some breakthrough each month. Even the ones in the low level can better themselves at least by the year.

Let us ask ourselves: “Which level do I belong? Did I or can I improve over last year?” If the answer is no, we do not belong to any one of the three levels of practitioners. Since there is no fourth level, it just goes to show that we are practitioners in name only. And even that could be an overstatement.

I met some lay practitioners who still had not completed the very basic practices long after taking refuge. It is terrible and very disappointing. The reason for that is primarily a lack of motivation, which leads to practice at a snail’s pace or sometimes even withdrawal to a complete stop.

When H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche gave the teaching of the Great Perfection, he requested that all participants must complete the five preliminary practices beforehand or no attendance be allowed. That certainly gave pressure to many who subsequently scrambled to complete in time. Of course, if completion means only meeting the requirement of finishing 100000 mantra



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recitations without generating the corresponding aspiration or actions, it will do nothing for the inner self but a show of formality. Hence, it is most important to take a systematic approach to dharma practice and be mindful at all times of pure motivation.

As stated in the sutras, “Existence in the human realm is rare, and all is impermanent.” Most of you here are already in your 30s and 40s. The remaining days, a few more decades at the most, are really not that long and will soon pass by before you know it. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee the opportunity to practice will present itself again in the next life if you fail to seize it this time. So the point is to lay the necessary foundation now as the stepping-stones leading to a better start for the next life.

The minimum goal we should set for ourselves of this life is to enter the bodhisattva’s path of accumulation, which is the first step, a must, to start the journey of dharma practice. What then is the primary factor leading to the path of accumulation? It is genuine bodhicitta. Surely you all know the definition of bodhicitta. Many may even be able to expound methodically its actual practice. However, it would be hard to say how many of you can actually arouse genuine bodhicitta.

We must realize that if we fail to take the first step in this life, we may not have another chance, as being reborn in the human realm is not guaranteed and the opportunity to continue our spiritual practice in the next life even less secured. So, we must begin now. Even if we do not advance very far with this first step,

a very good foundation should have been laid for the next life. And the inherent blessing of bodhicitta will ensure the necessary conditions for practice to be continued then. Thus, no matter where and what the next life will take us, we will undoubtedly be reborn with unique qualities, that is, with compassion and bodhicitta. This first step is, therefore, very crucial.

Normally, when we are free from any physical suffering and encounter no difficulty in our daily life, we think the world is so good that we do not feel necessary to be mentally or physically prepared for impermanence -- just relax and idle the time away. Should some misfortune befall us, we would likely be caught off guard and much distracted as to what to do. By then it may be too late to even turn to the Buddha as a last resort.

On the other hand, many people feel insecure without money or the care of their children in old age, so they busy themselves all the time with the task of making money. As a result, their older years might have been well provided for, but not at all for their future lives. Eventually, everyone has to go through death and rebirth. It is startling to see that people in the secular world make no preparation for either.

Still, some others practice but only for the hope of gaining health, wealth, and other benefit through the blessings of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Of course, absent any adverse conditions, praying to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas can help us reach our goals. Nevertheless, the short-term goal of obtaining

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worldly fortunes should never be the choice of a dharma practitioner.

Reality is anything but sentimental. For eons, no one has been able to refute the existence of past and future life. This is the reality that everyone has to face. If one is not prepared when a calamity hits, no amount of worrying will help at that moment. Thus, practitioners must have the foresight to prepare for the unexpected and steadfastly take the path to liberation for themselves and others. While the body and the mind can still be exercised at will, one should seize every opportunity to practice, and practice diligently as an antidote to impermanence. Leave no chance for regrets later on.

After this brief introduction to the necessity of undertaking foundational practice, we will now address the main subject.

## II. The Three Supreme Methods

### **Definition and significance**

This practice is called the Three Supreme Methods. Previously, I translated it as the “Three Key Points” in order to get the attention of practitioners. All who study and practice Buddhist teachings must incorporate these three points in everything they do. It was translated as the “Three Key Points” simply due to its utmost importance. The direct translation from Tibetan is the Three Supreme Methods.

The *Ornament of Clear Realization* by Bodhisattva Maitreya named seven supreme methods. Every one of the six paramitas (generosity, morality, patience, diligence, contemplation and wisdom) that a bodhisattva practices must incorporate the seven supreme methods. These seven can be summed up more concisely in three. The virtuous actions we undertake, like meditating, burning incense or prostrating, should all be done in accordance with the three supreme methods. If so, even a simple act, such as offering a butter lamp or kneeling down to pay homage to the Buddha, can be the cause of enlightenment. Otherwise, no amount of virtuous deeds can lead us to the path of liberation or be the cause of Buddhahood.

What are the three supreme methods? They are: 1. motivation; 2. actual practice with a mind free of clinging and concepts; 3. dedication.

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*1. Motivation* Normally, purpose should always precede action. Very rarely a good deed or spiritual practice is undertaken without a purpose. If virtuous actions are accompanied with supreme motivations, twice the result can be achieved with half the effort.

*2. Practice with a mind free of clinging and concepts* It refers to a certain state achieved in practice. Once succeeded in reaching this state, all the good deeds that one does, be it meditation or animal liberation, will naturally become something supremely excellent.

*3. Dedication* Upon completion of a virtuous deed or spiritual practice, a proper dedication of the merit should be done according to the text. Since very good karma has already been committed during meditation or animal liberation, how to apply this good karma thus becomes a pivotal question. Should it be used to attain liberation, health, longevity or rebirth in the god or human realm? We can choose. In essence, dedication is to make a purposeful choice.

It is imperative that we incorporate the three supreme methods in every good action we undertake. Otherwise, actions may seem impressive and beneficial on the surface, but in fact are less than admirable. Thus, it is most important to fully understand the essentials of the three supreme methods and practice them accordingly.

## Actual practice

### – 1. Motivation –

When practicing virtue, people might have different motivations owing to the different circumstances they are in. Motivations can be classified in three categories: unwholesome, neutral and wholesome.

#### ◆ *Unwholesome motivation*

Nowadays, some Buddhists' motivations for conducting virtuous activities and taking up practice fall into this category. It is because they are only concerned with attaining happiness and comfort in this life, such as having good health, long life and wealth, or being able to avoid obstacles and suffering. If spiritual practice were to be undertaken only to achieve these aims, no matter how profound the practice itself might be, it would be deemed mundane. It is possible that practicing this way may bring worldly benefits, but no other good karma will ensue.

For example, if people practice the Great Perfection to eliminate physical pain or evil influence, this practice would become a mundane practice. The practice itself is not mundane, but it is motivated by worldly pursuits that turn it into something mundane in the end. For this reason, motivations of this kind are considered unwholesome.

Some may question, "These people are actually doing good things to others and keeping up with their practice, not killing

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or stealing. Why use the word ‘unwholesome’ to describe their intentions?” That is because even if one succeeds in reaping the benefits of this life through practice, so what? It is altogether likely that after regaining health, for instance, one may do something resulting in more negative karma, leading to more suffering in the future. Even though the motivation itself is not evil, it remains a potential cause of affliction. It not only will not help end suffering but more may ensue because of it. Hence, the descriptive word ‘unwholesome’ is assigned to this type of motivation.

The point is that Buddhist teachings are not just some stuff for casual conversation, nor should they be studied as cultural or academic subject. They ought to be applied in managing our daily life.

How should it be applied? Here is an example from the *Mahayana Abhidharma Sangiti Shastra*. Three people were having a meal together. One of them thought, “I’m going to steal something (or kill some animals) after my meal.” Another thought, “I’m going to help releasing some animals (or do prostrations) afterward.” The third person thought, “I just want to fill my empty stomach; nothing else is planned afterward.” They were all having a meal, but because each had a different purpose of eating, the same action resulted in three different kinds of karma. Eating, in the case of the one who wanted to kill and steal afterward, was doing evil; good karma for the one who wanted to do beneficial things afterward, which surely will bring good rewards in the future; neutral effect for the one who just wanted

to fill the stomach, an ordinary daily activity that would not have any particular consequences. They were doing neither good nor bad things when having a meal. However, different motivations ended up causing three different results. It shows just how crucial motivation is.

As said before, if the purpose of doing something was to satisfy worldly pursuits such as health and longevity, it would be deemed an unwholesome motivation. All the activities done on this premise, whether they are meditation or reciting sutras, are considered just mundane practices that do not lead to enlightenment. Patrul Rinpoche had said that absent genuine renunciation and bodhicitta, if one were to do a nine-year retreat and cut off all associations with others to practice the Great Perfection full-time, one would not even sow the seed of liberation, let alone other achievements. How terrible not having generated renunciation and bodhicitta! What use is there for other practices when not even the Great Perfection can sow the seed of liberation? Therefore, making the choice of motivation should never be taken lightly.

If the purpose of doing a practice is to obtain happiness or to chase away suffering in this life, it is an unwholesome motivation. Although it is better than not having faith in the Buddha’s teachings or being indifferent to cultivating virtue, it does not lead to enlightenment. Thus, practitioners seeking liberation from samsara must not harbor this kind of motivation. It is also stated in the scriptures that such motivation must be given up. So every time

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we do something good, we should always check our motivation first. For example, when the idea of doing prostrations or liberating animals pops up in our mind, we should ask ourselves why we want to do this. If our motivation is found to be wrong, it must be corrected as quickly as possible.

◆ *Neutral motivation*

Neutral means neither good nor bad. For example, someone invites a friend along to liberate animals, but the friend does not understand the merit and the benefit related to this activity, just goes along having no particular purpose. After the activity has ended, the friend's participation would have resulted in a kind of neutral karma. Maybe someone will question, "Didn't the friend also save some lives? Why was this karma neutral?" It is because the friend did exactly the same thing as everybody else but with no idea as to why it was done. That makes it neutral. Similar concept can also be found in the secular world. For instance, it is a serious crime if one intentionally kills a person, but not as much so if it happens by accident. On this, the law and the Dharma uphold the same principle.

It is stated in the scriptures that if our motivation is found to be neutral, we should rather improve than eliminate it. The reason is that the quality of being "neutral" and "wholesome" are relatively closer to each other, whereas being "wholesome" and "unwholesome" are poles apart. So while the former can

be improved, the latter must be given up. Ordinarily, before we sit down to practice or meditate, we should first examine the motivation carefully. If it was found to be neutral, we should improve it. Otherwise, none of what we do can lead us to enlightenment. The resulting virtuous karma caused by a neutral motivation may be able to bring some temporal rewards, but only very meager ones.

◆ *Wholesome motivation*

This is the most superior of the three motivations. It can be further divided into the motivation of an inferior, an average and a superior practitioner.

The motivation of an inferior practitioner is the lowest of the three. Those who cultivate virtue with this kind of motivation do not think about liberation from samsara. They are only concerned with not being reborn into the hell, the ghost, or the animal realm but the realm of celestial beings or human; and as human, better be born as someone with good health, long life, high position and wealth. Their actions, albeit virtuous, will not bring them any closer to enlightenment. Hence, this type of motivation is relegated to the bottom level.

Some people may wonder why, as mentioned above, a motivation to pursue health and long life is considered unwholesome, but here it turns up in the section of wholesome motivation. The previous one is unwholesome in the sense that it only aims to take care of

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things for this life; whatever of the next life is not its concern. The inferior practitioners, on the other hand, do not seek enlightenment or rewards for this life. Their goal is to obtain temporal blessings for the next life, which makes it a wholesome motivation.

However, for those seeking enlightenment, this should not be the motivation for virtuous actions. Nowadays many lay practitioners make it a habit to chant Buddha's name, burn incense, do prostrations and so forth every day. But please ask yourselves honestly why you do all these. Is it to gain health and longevity for this or next life and to make sure not going to the hell realm? If so, nothing that you do will ever free you from samsara, not if you practice for one hundred, one thousand, or even ten thousand years. Good karma resulted from this kind of motivation cannot be made the cause of liberation. Neither can it yield the fruit of liberation when matured. To practice with such intentions will not result in much virtuous karma other than some temporal benefits like health and long life, or avoiding rebirth in the hell realm.

The law of cause and effect works on infallible principles. For example, seeds of rice will yield only rice, not barley. Similarly, if a practice is not what leads to enlightenment, how can it yield the fruit of such? Many people think that if they regularly read scriptures such as the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Thirty-Five Buddhas Repentance Ritual*, the *Practices and Vows of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra*, the *Heart Sutra*, etc., they are no doubt Buddhist practitioners. Actually, that may not necessarily be the case. While

recitation of sutras is definitely a good thing to do, and the Buddha also praised its merit, motivation still matters greatly. If the motivation is not right, all will be wrong, and vice versa. That is, one can never do wrong with the right kind of motivation.

Some of you here started your Buddhist practice earlier, some just a couple of years ago. No matter how long it has been, we should all look back to see what motivated us to perform virtuous actions. If our motivation is that of the inferior practitioners, albeit some good karma may ensue, it will not lead to enlightenment. If we come to realize this might be a problem, something can still be done to transform our good karma into means for attaining enlightenment. The most effective way is to generate bodhicitta. Why? From the perspective of all things being incessantly arising and ceasing every instance, it is true that what we did before no longer exists, but the continuum of awareness of the karmic seeds has already been planted in our alaya consciousness. Once we have generated renunciation and bodhicitta, the continuum in the alaya consciousness will be transformed immediately. Virtuous karma of the past may thus become the cause of enlightenment. If we do not improve the inferior motivation, virtuous karma will forever remain just mundane practice and never become the cause of liberation. What a pity that must be!

Although it is not advisable to cultivate virtue with the kind of motivation mentioned above, it does not mean Buddhist practice cannot bring forth worldly benefit. Nor does it mean the Dharma

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should never be applied to worldly endeavors. Let us use taking refuge in the Three Jewels as an example. No matter what the motivation is, taking refuge prevents obstacles caused by both human and non-human beings, purifies a great deal of negative karma and brings health and longevity. These are the benefits inherent in taking refuge. Also, when we run into difficulty or experience pain, the normal thing to do is to pray to our guru and the Three Jewels, as all Buddhists should. It is not as if we oppose completely doing good for the sake of health or holding pujas for longevity and wealth. However, to direct every practice simply to gain worldly benefit is wrong. Liberation from samsara alone should be the ultimate goal for us taking up any practice.

The motivation of an average practitioner is that of a sravaka and pratyekabuddha, which is not to practice for worldly blessings like health or longevity. These people are scared of and loath all worldly fulfillments and clinging to the five aggregates (from physical body to consciousness), and long to rid themselves of the shackles of the five aggregates as soon as possible. Therefore, they do not perform good deeds or practice the Dharma for worldly benefit; yet liberation of others does not concern them either. Well, do arhats not have compassion? Yes, they do, and they take pity on the sentient beings as well. But because their compassion is not deep enough, they do not have the courage to help all sentient beings to freedom from samsara, wanting only to resolve their own cyclic existence. They are unwilling to generate bohicitta

and practice for others' sake. That is why such motivation is only of middling quality. Practice with this kind of motivation yields no karmic fruit other than liberating oneself.

Some people may think of themselves as practitioners of Mahayana, Pure Land, Zen or Vajrayana, but never Theravada practitioners. And they feel complacent, what with Mahayana being the superior vehicle and Vajrayana simply outstanding, whereas Theravada not being particularly profound. However, please carefully examine each one's own motivation. Perhaps we will be ashamed to find that we are not even up to the standards of Theravada practitioners.

All branches of Buddhism fall under Mahayana and Theravada. There is no third vehicle. To be a Theravada practitioner, the first requisite is having unshakable renunciation—complete distaste for worldly fulfillments and whole-hearted pursuit of liberation from samsara. Do we have such resolution? If not, we would not qualify as Theravada practitioners.

Mahayana practitioners, on the other hand, must have undaunted bodhicitta and be willing to serve the needs of others unselfishly and unconditionally. Can we do that? If not, we would not be deemed Mahayana practitioners either.

If we are neither Mahayana nor Theravada practitioners, strictly speaking, we are not Buddhist practitioners at all. What are we after all? At best, we are believers of Buddhism or of Shakyamuni Buddha, who may intermittently chant some mantras and do

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some good deeds here and there. Really, just be a little better than non-believers. Though we may have had many teachings and empowerments, met more than a few respectable teachers and practitioners, we still cannot get any closer to even the edge of liberation. Worse, it must have been horrifying to discover that we possibly may not even be Buddhist practitioners when going through the aforementioned self-examination.

Many people have heard the teaching of the Three Supreme Methods before, but that is not enough. To actually practice it is the most crucial. In my opinion, there is no need to hear more teachings if a teaching cannot be put into practice. One should learn to apply faithfully one teaching at a time. Like walking, one only needs to see clearly some ten meters or so of the road ahead in order to move steadily forward.

Conversely, knowing the condition of the road a hundred or even a thousand miles ahead but staying put at the starting point would be completely useless.

True, it is not that easy to be a real Buddhist, but do not let that discourage you either. Are renunciation and bodhicitta only fit for gods and celestial beings to develop? No, it is totally possible, even now in the so-called period of decline of the Dharma, for ordinary people like us to generate renunciation and bodhicitta. If they were only the privileges of the Buddhas and the bodhisattvas of the first bhumi, and impossible to be achieved by ordinary people, we would not be able to do anything even knowing that we are

not yet qualified as Buddhist practitioners. But it is not like that at all. Renunciation and bodhicitta are something that ordinary people are absolutely capable of generating. We need not be too discouraged or too arrogant, just honestly evaluate ourselves and spur ourselves on all the time to make constant improvement and not be a practitioner in name only. The fact that we are probably not yet practitioners by any standards ought to keep us under pressure and ultimately push us to make progress. Nothing but serious actions can lead us to success.

People are likely to go astray if these points are overlooked. I think it is really unnecessary for some to hear the profound teachings like the Great Perfection just yet. Does it mean there is no benefit in listening to those teachings? No, that's not what it means. Hearing the teaching certainly can plant some good seeds in the mindstream while also having the inherent merit associated with listening to the Dharma, but no other benefit to speak of. Therefore, I believe, without the necessary foundation, it is not very meaningful to rush into receiving those teachings. The most pressing task right now is to adjust the motivation.

Of course, only we ourselves know if we have aroused renunciation or bodhicitta. Unless someone has the ability to read other people's minds, it is impossible for anyone else to know even through fortune telling or divination. Thus, for the sake of monitoring our development, we must act as our own most unforgiving supervisor.



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The motivation of a superior practitioner is that of a bodhisattva, which is the most difficult in the category of wholesome motivation. My personal view is that barely a few people are able to take the path of the superior practitioner. Since beginningless time, all sentient beings have known to cherish themselves above others. Everything that one does is to take care of one's own interest, seldom others', and never serves others' needs unconditionally. Therefore, it is usually not very difficult for someone to achieve worldly success, but quite a different matter when it comes to arouse genuine bodhicitta. When basic quality such as bodhicitta is absent, all practices will fail in reaching their objectives. Therefore, we must strive to succeed in generating bodhicitta, no matter how difficult it is. The challenge is with our own self, with that selfish mind. It is a constant battle we must face with endurance. If we work hard at it, we will triumph in the end.

Before, lacking the essential wisdom, people tended to love themselves almost unscrupulously. But, under closer examination, selfishness is really without reason, groundless and moreover a big obstacle in our quest for ultimate happiness. This was never mentioned in anything that we learned from the secular world. Though some people might have said something similar, they lacked profundity. Only the Buddha told us the truth. Through his teachings, we are able to reflect on our previous actions and thus come to the conclusion that we were wrong being selfish. Henceforth, bodhicitta can be aroused. Among all the wholesome

motivations, bodhicitta is the most precious and most significant.

What is bodhicitta? The so-called bodhicitta is composed of two requisites. The first requisite is having the compassion to deliver all sentient beings from the suffering of samsara. Though we may not have the capability now, it can be developed. If we do not practice the Dharma, we will never have the ability. But if we do and are willing to make an effort, even though our capability is still somewhat lacking at the moment, we need not worry too much about it. Shakyamuni Buddha also began his path as an ordinary person and eventually attained enlightenment. He was not born a Buddha. In the biography of Milarepa, one disciple said to Milarepa, "Master, you must be an emanation of Vajrapani or some Buddha." Milarepa immediately retorted, "I know you want to show your respect to me by saying that. Yet it is a serious defamation to the Dharma because it indicates that you don't believe that the Dharma can transform an ordinary person into someone like me." Therefore, the issue is not whether one has the capability but the determination to set about obtaining that capability from now on.

Actually, it might not be that difficult to think occasionally, "I want to deliver sentient beings from the suffering of samsara." This thought may come up when we are not enduring any pain or hardship and our livelihood is not threatened. However, when facing with a life or death situation, say, if we were to choose between our own and other's death, perhaps we would be too

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embarrassed to say, “I want that person to die.” But we would certainly say, “I don’t want to die.” This would be an indication of weak bodhicitta.

The second requisite is having the determination to attain Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings. This is because the attainment of Buddhahood is the ultimate way of freeing all sentient beings from suffering. Though we need various skillful means to achieve this goal, the most needed is not merely to offer others money, good reputation, enviable position or to establish charities to feed or treat the poor.

Instead, the most meaningful method is to propagate Buddhadharma from which others may find out for themselves the true nature of life. This is the only way that can really benefit others.

As a matter of fact, after having aroused bodhicitta, it is acceptable for a bodhisattva to use all available means to benefit sentient beings, except the ones that only bring temporary benefit but leave endless troubles afterward. This is what the Buddha advised, which also points out the difference between the Mahayana and Theravada precepts.

In the Theravada precepts, a line is clearly drawn between what one is permitted and forbidden to do, with no exception allowed. But a bodhisattva can do whatever is necessary to benefit sentient beings as long as there is no selfish intent or any ill consequence thereof. It was with exactly this kind of foresight and open-mindedness that the vows of the bodhisattva were laid down.

However, the bodhisattvas primarily do not use worldly means to save sentient beings, but show them instead how to choose the correct path by way of the Dharma. Man is an intelligent creature. Once they know the most reliable path, they will choose wisely and willingly take the path of enlightenment with enthusiasm. The practice of virtuous actions should never be a passive one. In fact, any good action, if forced, will not be good any more as it comes not from the heart and is done merely as a formality. Therefore, it is extremely important to make everyone understand the essence, the view and the conduct of Mahayana Buddhism.

As for other beings, we can employ different methods that are suitable for them. For example, when liberating animals, we should recite the Buddha’s names and mantras for these animals. They cannot understand the Dharma teachings, but we believe the recitation of sutras and mantras will sow seeds of liberation in their minds, and that these seeds will soon mature. By then, they will know how to take the path to liberation and will actively seek out its direction as well. This is all we can do for animals. Humans, on the other hand, understand ideas. Teaching them the Dharma then becomes something extremely important.

In his explanation of the *Ornament of Clear Realization*, Patrul Rinpoche raised a crucial point. He said, “The goal of the bodhisattva is not to attain Buddhahood.” If that was not the goal, would the practitioners of Mahayana have any goal at all?

What he really meant is that if the aspiration to attain

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Buddhahood was simply due to one's admiration for the Buddha's greatness, his pure innocence and fulfillment of all virtues, yet no concerns for liberation of other sentient beings, it would not be in accordance with the doctrine of Mahayana. In other words, if liberation of others is out of the consideration, no matter how hard one works to keep the vow of attaining Buddhahood, those efforts will not be counted as Mahayana practice.

As one of the five major treatises, the *Ornament of Clear Realization* is certainly not one dealing with elementary subjects. It contains an abundance of instructions on practice and skillful means. Often enough, the masters abstracted their "pith instructions" from the five treatises and various other sutras and shastras. The above viewpoint also inferred from the treatises by Patrul Rinpoche is an important teaching and should be taken seriously by everyone.

In summary, the first requisite of generating bodhicitta is the aspiration to deliver sentient beings from samsara; the second, the determination to attain Buddhahood in order to free sentient beings from the suffering of samsara..

Now I have to remind everyone once again to recall and reflect on the many years of your Buddhist practice to see if you had in your mind only the interest of others and no concern at all for your own liberation. Had this idea ever crossed your mind? If not, there could not have been any real altruistic action either. And neither have you been Mahayana practitioner all these years. Besides, even

if we have been reciting the sadhana of *Receiving Bodhisattva Vows* every day, without the determination to attain Buddhahood for the sake of sentient beings, we are unlikely to be affected much by the recitation. It will just become a mere formality in the end. How dreadful that must be!

If bodhicitta has not been aroused so far, every endeavor should be made to do so. A rather detailed explanation of the specific methods can be found in *The Words of my Perfect Teacher*. And more extensive instructions on the subject are available in *Notes on the Words of My Perfect Teacher*, which also have been included in *Wisdom Light II—Teachings on the Five Preliminaries*.<sup>1</sup> So there is no need to repeat again now. Teachings in general are easier to understand, unlike treatises. Once understood and subsequently applied in actual practice, uncontrived bodhicitta can surely be aroused.

As you all know, the achievement of a trained athlete far exceeds that of an untrained person. Through training, however, the untrained can achieve the same result. Having bodhicitta or not is a matter of constant practice, not an unchangeable condition. If we do not start practicing now to generate bodhicitta, we will forever remain selfish and never become Mahayana practitioners. However, as we continue practicing for a period of time, say, three months, half a year, or a year, bodhicitta will certainly be developed to some extent. But it takes more than just practice to arouse bodhicitta. Other supportive measures are also needed, such as learning the merit of bodhicitta, studying and contemplating the

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relevant Mahayana texts, accumulating the most possible merit, etc. Without doubt, the most important is to cultivate the Four Immeasurables—loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity. If we can practice in this manner, arousing bodhicitta would not be a difficult task after all. For people who do not practice, it is indeed very difficult. Comparatively, those who are diligent will not find it quite so hard. In any case, all we Dharma practitioners must get pass this one hurdle before going further down the path to liberation.

In ancient times, cities were built with protective walls. If there was only one gate, everyone would have to go through that gate to go to any household in the city. Similarly, if we cannot break through the barrier of renunciation and bodhicitta, we will not have access to any genuine, profound practices like the Great Perfection, Mahamudra, Kalachakra and others. Once we pass, the doors to the various systems of practice will all open and we can choose at will to practice Pure Land, Zen, Madhyamaka, Mahamudra, or the Great Perfection.

For laypeople, cultivating bodhicitta and going to work actually are not two conflicting tasks; they can be undertaken simultaneously. Nowadays, the number of family members that one may need to support is probably seven or eight at most. Yet, during the time of the Buddha, an Indian king, who had to attend to numerous important issues every day, could manage to practice Mahayana and rule the country at the same time under

the guidance of the Buddha. Similarly, after we have generated renunciation and bodhicitta, we do not have to immediately abandon all worldly activities such as working, handling family affairs and so forth.

As long as we do not develop attachment to those ordinary activities, we can practice and work at the same time. Generating renunciation and bodhicitta not only are not incompatible with daily work, but may even come in handy for a true practitioner faced with thorny issues or interpersonal conflict.

Of course, for those who believe in the law of cause and effect, and the cycle of death and rebirth, but just want to do good deeds to obtain worldly benefits instead of ultimate liberation, it is not necessary to generate renunciation and bodhicitta. Yet for practitioners seeking the path of liberation and that of the bodhisattvas, arousing bodhicitta is a critical step that particularly should be kept in focus.

With bodhicitta, many problems related to practice could be easily solved since bodhicitta has within itself the incredible capacity for accumulating merit, forgiving and purifying evil karma and so forth. Thus, bodhicitta is regarded as the indispensable universal key for the entrance of Mahayana Buddhism.

There are two levels of bodhicitta: relative and absolute bodhicitta. What we have discussed so far falls under relative bodhicitta. Absolute bodhicitta is realization of emptiness being the ultimate nature of all phenomena. Relative and absolute

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bodhicitta encompass the whole of Mahayana teachings; they are the quintessence of Mahayana Buddhism. Without bodhicitta, it would be impossible to practice Mahayana Buddhism. That is how vital bodhicitta is.

Genuine bodhicitta of a bodhisattva refers to the aspiration to give others whatever is needed unselfishly and unconditionally, which in hard times is a particularly difficult thing to do. When times are easy and lives comfortable, it may not be too difficult to make a wish now and then during meditation: “I vow to attain Buddhahood for the liberation of all sentient beings. It is for this purpose that I meditate and undergo spiritual training.” But bodhicitta aroused in this kind of condition is an unstable one. Only with repeated practices can we generate bodhicitta that is genuine and firm.

Bodhicitta gives us the chance of going on the path of liberation. It is in essence the ultimate, true refuge. No matter who and what we are, everyone should have a refuge. What then should we take as our refuge? We all know that taking refuge in money, fame, or status is unreliable. How about our relatives, friends, or co-workers? Relatives and good friends can help us with some problems of this life, but they are completely powerless when it comes to solving the question of life and death. There is an analogy in the scriptures, “Two people, not knowing how to swim, are drowning at the same time; neither can save the other.” Likewise, relatives and friends, being ordinary people like us, are themselves entangled in the

endless cycle of death and rebirth. How can they help us when they are helpless themselves? Hence, they are not reliable refuge either. What about taking refuge in some social organizations? Not viable either. The fact is, on the issue of breaking the cycle of death and rebirth and gaining liberation thence, no one can help us. The only refuge worthy of trust is the path to enlightenment, especially its key element, bodhicitta .

The happy life we are having now is not permanent. There is bound to be suffering in the future. Some people do not see the point of preparing for future lives because they are not feeling any obvious distress right now. Yet worrying about the well-being in their old age, they will do all they can to make money even without concerns for karma and retributions sometimes. This is very foolish. It has never occurred to them that they have already been born human and that no matter how hard this life is, it is nowhere close to the severe suffering born by those in the three lower realms. Where will we be reborn next time? Will we have another human birth like this one? No one knows. So, to be well prepared for the next life should be the rational thing to do. What does it take to be well prepared? It certainly is not wealth or fame we need but spiritual practice. Although Theravada practice can solve our own problems, it does not help others. Consequently, we must strive to arouse bodhicitta as it is the only means to help both ourselves and other beings to liberation.

Previously, I have never emphasized Vajrayana practices such as

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the Great Perfection. And personally, I don't ever dream of one day attaining realization of the Great Perfection either. Is it because the Great Perfection is not sublime enough? No. The Great Perfection and the Great Madhyamaka are indeed highly sublime practices of Vajrayana. But my capacity is still not sufficient enough for me to tackle something so profound as renunciation and bodhicitta have yet been fully developed. It is as if someone sets out to paint a mural, but there is no wall space available. Of course, no mural either. So, a wall must be built first for a mural to be painted later on. This is how my situation is like right now. Practice of the Great Perfection or the inner winds and channels is something I need to learn and master but have not done so far. At this point, I can only aspire to successfully generate renunciation and bodhicitta. Other Vajrayana practices, like the Great Perfection, are not what I am seeking just yet. In fact, I will not even think about them because that will not help me one bit. My only wish now is to strengthen the foundational practices, i.e., renunciation and bodhicitta. Actually, many of the general and extraordinary preliminaries are developed and practiced just for this purpose.

This is the current state I am in. What about yours? What are your goals? Only you know the answers. I think, as a Buddhist, especially a Buddhist who has studied a great deal of Mahayana teachings, the goal should never be for money or worldly accomplishments. Perhaps to many of you, and me as well, the Great Perfection is just way too profound for us to grasp at this

point. People like us should start with generating renunciation and bodhicitta, the foundational practice.

The cultivation of renunciation begins with the four general preliminaries: contemplating the rarity and preciousness of human birth, the impermanence of all phenomena, the law of infallible karma and the suffering of samsara. Upon successfully completing the general preliminary practice, renunciation will arise spontaneously. As for relative bodhicitta, it has two stages, i.e., aspiring and engaging. The practice of aspiring bodhicitta is to cultivate the Four Immeasurables: loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity through which unbiased, unlimited compassion for all sentient beings will arise. Once that has been developed, generation of bodhicitta will be just steps away. It is only when practice progresses in an orderly fashion, step-by-step that we can hope to reap any results.

In addition, all practitioners need to do a self-check on goal setting. An incorrect goal would be tantamount to one's biggest inadequacy. If that happens to be the case, then one may not even be a qualified beginner of Buddhist studies at this point. If unwilling to work hard, one will forever remain a non-Buddhist. Actually, everyone has the capacity to arouse uncontrived bodhicitta if real effort can be put into the practice. Bodhicitta, as taught by Shakyamuni Buddha, is a practice exactly meant for people, perhaps like us, who are not yet beginners and have no bodhicitta.

The teachings I have given so far all deal with renunciation

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and bodhicitta. Sure, I can also teach the Five Treatises or some advanced Vajrayana practices, but they will not be helpful to most of you here, at least not for the time being. It is like a cook should only make as much food as the guests can consume. To make more than the guests can stomach would be pointless. And this is the very reason why I hesitated to give advanced teachings all along.

But why do I keep reiterating these foundational practices? Reiteration, I believe, makes stronger impression and draws more focus on the subject at hand. If I just casually mention a few times these basic practices, you probably would not have any lasting memory or any careful consideration of them. Perhaps some of you are tired of my nagging by now. In any case, renunciation and bodhicitta will always be the core of our practice throughout.

There are also those who ignore these basics but tirelessly run back and forth between China and Tibet to receive empowerments without knowing their respective meanings, conditions and requirements beforehand, which in the end have very little effect on their quest for liberation. So, I hope you will all make generation of renunciation and bodhicitta your aim and strictly refrain yourselves from undertaking any Vajrayana practice until your aim has been achieved. Only then can you consider the advanced, more profound practices like the Great Madhyamaka, Kalachakra, Mahamudra, the Great Perfection and so forth. The Vajrayana tradition of Tibetan Buddhism offers rich pickings of sublime practices, described by some as being plentiful as the

yak's hair. But no one would be qualified to practice any without first developing renunciation and bodhicitta as the base, which ought to be the single most important practice for us now.

– *2. Actual practice with mind free  
of clinging and concepts* –

Mind “free of clinging and concepts” means emptiness, the void nature of all phenomena. Most of you may not have realized emptiness, but there is no need to be anxious. Once you have generated renunciation and bodhicitta, realization of emptiness can be rather easy to accomplish after all. Conversely, trying to realize emptiness without cultivating renunciation and bodhicitta first will be like making rice out of sand.

To use another analogy, it will be easier to harvest when seeds are sown in springtime. Whereas in wintertime, due to a lack of the requisite conditions, seeds sown in this season may not yield any crop no matter how much effort has been made. That is to say, when all the necessary conditions are in place and ripe for happening, things will naturally take their courses as wished.

The standard set in the texts regarding actual practice, say, the practice of the six paramitas, is to do it while realizing at all times the empty nature of all phenomena. For example, when releasing life of other beings, one should realize that the person who releases (oneself), the beings released and the act of releasing are all without self-nature and hence illusory like dreams. That is, the

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action performed is free of the concept of a doer, an object and an action. This constitutes the second of the Three Supreme Methods.

Before having realized emptiness, it is not possible to truly free mind of concepts. Then, we can just adopt an approximate approach to all actions, which is relatively close to but not quite the real thing. For example, after we have learned the analytical techniques of Madhyamaka, we can fully appreciate the idea that phenomena manifest and, at the same time, are devoid of intrinsic reality, like dreams. However, this is just theoretical understanding, not true realization of emptiness. Let us still use the example of liberating animals. At the time of liberating animals, or at least at the time of dedicating merit after completion of the activity, we can employ the Madhyamaka theory to discern the illusory nature of the doer, the object and the action, thereby approximate the real freedom of concepts for the mind. Though this is not true realization, it is already quite close to it and can be used to train the mindset at the initial stage.

So far we have discussed the approximate and the true version of practicing with a mind free of attachment and concepts. The true version refers to the way a bodhisattva, having arrived at the first ground, practices the six paramitas. Because the bodhisattva has realized the illusory nature of all phenomena, there is no attachment whatsoever to any practice of the six paramitas. But those who have not realized emptiness can only imitate the true version at best. If one does not understand the viewpoints of

Madhyamaka, then not even this is practicable. When neither version is feasible, from what perspective can one approach the idea of a mind free of clinging and concepts?

For those who cannot practice either, the Buddha also pointed out a way. According to the scriptures, when practicing virtue, if it is impossible to have a mind free of concepts and attachments, one should at least try to be sincere and mindful. Being “mindful” means that not only the body does virtuous action but the mind also engenders proper aspiration, visualizes carefully and dedicates the merit. This is the lowest level one can reach in any practice. If the body is doing virtuous action but the mind wanders off, the virtue so cultivated will be made superficial and brings no benefit. We must pay attention to this.

To attain liberation from the suffering of samsara, one must succeed in realization of emptiness being the true nature of all phenomena, regardless of its apparent difficulty. One needs to overcome this last hurdle, renunciation and bodhicitta being the first two, before going further on the path to liberation. Once the first two are fully generated, realizing emptiness will come next. Without the latter, liberation would still be beyond reach even with renunciation and bodhicitta completely aroused. There is just no way to get around this. So ultimately, one must attain realization that all phenomena are emptiness.

Before one comes to this realization, the way to practice with a mind free of clinging and concepts is to conduct all practices



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earnestly, faithfully and whole-heartedly with the conviction of renunciation and bodhicitta. Though, for the time being, there is still certain difficulty in truly freeing the mind of attachments and concepts, as long as renunciation and boshicitta are firmly established, the true nature of phenomena will become fully evident over time. This is because the relationship between bodhicitta and realization of emptiness is one of interdependence. In other words, renunciation and bodhicitta will arise spontaneously upon realizing emptiness; emptiness shall be realized with relative ease once renunciation and bodhicitta have been generated.

– 3. *Dedications* –

What does dedication mean? For example, there are ten people and only one of them has food. The owner of the food could just keep it for self consumption. Instead, out of compassion, the food is shared with the other nine. Dedication is similar to this sharing. The good seeds sown by the virtuous actions that people perform will bear virtuous fruit. Mahayana practitioners, unwilling to enjoy the positive karmic result by themselves alone, give the fruit to all sentient beings to share. This is what dedication connotes.

There are two types of dedication: poisonous and nonpoisonous. “Poisonous dedication” means dedication with attachment. It is stated in the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* that good seeds sown with attachment is like poisonous food. It may taste delicious at first, but will cause tremendous pain when the poison takes effect. Similarly,

good seeds sown not by actions performed with mind free of clinging, as explained above, may perhaps yield some transitory benefit, but more suffering will ensue and no liberation attained because such actions are deemed defiled phenomena.

Nonpoisonous dedication refers to dedication free of attachment and concepts, i.e. to dedicate while in the state of realization that the true nature of all phenomena is emptiness. Nonpoisonous dedication is further classified into two types—genuine and simulated. Genuine nonpoisonous dedication refers to the one made by the bodhisattvas, who have arrived at the first ground or higher, in a state of thought-free concentration. It is beyond the capability of ordinary people whose capacity is more suitable for simulated nonpoisonous dedication. This type of dedication is not to use the logic of Madhyamaka to discern the void nature of all phenomena but the visualization as described in the *Thirty-five Buddhas Repentance Ritual*. One should visualize in earnest as follows: “However the Buddhas and bodhisattvas of all times and ten directions dedicate their merit, I do the same with mine.” This way is simulated nonpoisonous dedication.

It has been said in many scriptures that although the simulated version is not genuine nonpoisonous dedication, it can be used as a substitute. For example, how do we dedicate the merit accrued from liberating animals? We should sincerely make a vow: “However the Buddhas of the past, present and future dedicate their merit, I will do the same as well.” This would be nonpoisonous

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dedication. Naturally, we can also recite the *Practices and Vows of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra* as it contains many auspicious dedications. If not knowing how or not having the time to recite the whole text, we can just recite the eight verses in the two stanzas from “In whatever way valiant Manjusri and Samantabhadra know how to transfer merit” to “I dedicate all of these roots of virtue to accomplishing the deeds of Samantabhadra.” Nagarjuna once said, “These two stanzas embody the essence of the *Practices and Vows of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra*.” Therefore, to recite just these two stanzas would be the same as having read the whole text. It is easy to do and, at the same time, is unadulterated with defilement and deemed to resemble genuine nonpoisonous dedication.

After performing each virtuous action, dedication must be properly offered as the resulting good karma may likely be destroyed before it ripens. In what circumstances can it be destroyed?

- *Hate* In Mahayana Buddhism, hate, or anger, is the worst defilement. Strong hatred, once born, can immediately destroy all good karma accumulated over one hundred kalpas.

- *To boast one’s own merit* For example, good karma is likely to be destroyed when a person, after reciting the heart mantra of Manjusri one hundred million times, goes on to tell others what great merit he or she has thus accumulated and flaunts the skills in meditation with pride.

- *Regrets over virtuous action* For instance, a person has properly liberated animals but regrets after some time, thinking,

“That was a waste of money. I shouldn’t have done it.” This regret will immediately ruin the virtuous karma resulted from all previous acts of liberating animals.

- *Inverted dedication of merit* Inverted dedication would be for someone to dedicate, after completing a virtuous action, in the following manner: “May this root of virtue empower me to destroy my enemy so and so.” Dedication becomes inverted when it is adulterated with greed, hatred, or delusion. Although the evil wish may come true, owing to the power of dedication, no good karma will ever be born from the virtuous actions performed.

If we do not dedicate properly in time, under the circumstances mentioned above, all the roots of virtue, however many or supreme, will be destroyed in an instant. Of all the factors that may destroy good karma, hatred is the one that could arise most easily. When it does, it can destroy innumerable virtuous karma. To ordinary people, that would be most dreadful. Hence, dedication must be offered immediately after completing each virtuous action.

Will good karma never be destroyed after proper dedication has been offered? Normally, with proper dedication, especially one that is for the enlightenment of all sentient beings, karma resulted from virtuous deeds cannot be destroyed. It is like saving files in the computer. After they have been saved, they normally do not get lost.

In addition, dedication should correspond with motivation. If our motivation is to cultivate virtue for the sake of all sentient beings, our dedication should be for them as well. The two

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should not be inconsistent. It would not make any sense to arouse bodhicitta first and subsequently dedicate merit for our own benefit. According to the viewpoints of Mahayana Buddhism, we can dedicate merit neither for the worldly blessings of this life—our own health or prosperity, nor the attainment of the state of sravaka or pratyekabuddha, but enlightenment or the attainment of Buddhahood, the most sublime of all dedications. To dedicate as such, the seeds of virtue can never be depleted; the fruits born thereof, though ripened time after time, will never end. As the merit has been dedicated for the attainment of enlightenment, it will not disappear before then.

What is the difference between dedication and aspiration? On the premise that a virtuous action resulting in positive karma, like liberating animals, has been done, the aspiring vow made right after this action is dedication. When a vow or a wish is made without this premise, it is an ordinary aspiration. For example, when seeing a Buddha statue or a reliquary stupa, one prays, “May I in all future lives....” This is not dedication but aspiration. The difference lies in whether any virtuous action has been performed and any positive karma thus accumulated has been made the subject of dedication.

Now a few more things need to be emphasized. First, as a Mahayana practitioner, when aspiring or dedicating, one should begin with the vow: “May I, in the many lives from now until enlightenment, never harm the life or even a single hair of another

being, not even for the needs of my own body or life.” Naturally, one must make good one’s promise. If, for the time being, one cannot fully keep one’s words, at the least one should vow this way: “May I, in the many lives from now until enlightenment, never intentionally harm the life of another being, even for the needs of my own body or life.” Failing this, any more talks on practicing Mahayana would be pointless. Moreover, we should encourage ourselves to make the promise of not harming other beings at all costs as quickly as we can and make good that promise, which ought to be the goal of our practice at the moment as well.

Second, according to the sutras, when we dedicate, no matter how great or insignificant virtuous karma may be, we should never make the vows of the celestial being and human realm or that of a shravaka: “May I, through this root of virtue, attain the state of Chakravarti (a universal monarch), or have health, long life and so forth.” Rather, the vow should be: “May I, with this root of virtue, become the refuge of all sentient beings, the one who delivers all from samsara.” To dedicate as such with resolution is dedication of a bodhisattva.

An analogy of dedication is that a person, unwilling to keep the food just for self consumption, shares with others. Does this mean one’s virtuous karma is reduced after dedication, the same way one only keeps a dollar after sharing ten dollars with nine other people? The root of virtue is not at all like that. The more it is dedicated, the more it grows; the more it is kept for oneself, the more likely it decreases. This aspect of the root of virtue is just the

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opposite of that of worldly things. Thus, never forget to dedicate.

To make a simple dedication, one can recite the two stanzas of the *Practices and Vows of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra*. Or, one can choose other longer dedication prayers for a more extensive dedication.

For example, the last chapter of *Bodhisattvacharyavatara: Engaging in the Conduct of the Bodhisattvas* is on dedication. Its contents are all about dedications of the bodhisattvas. Certainly a fine choice for the occasion, that is.

One thing should be noted is that whether or not an aspiration prayer or dedication prayer is empowered to bestow blessing depends a great deal on who the author is. Can ordinary people like us write dedication prayers? If our motivation is pure, this purity of mind may lend certain ability, but no power to confer blessing to the prayers we write. It would not result in any benefit whatsoever to recite this kind of prayer one thousand or ten thousand times. Therefore, the author of a dedication prayer should best be a bodhisattva who has arrived at the first or higher ground, or at least a practitioner of the path of preparation who has attained a high level of realization. Only their words hold the power of blessing. Likewise, only the prayers of dedication and aspiration from them should be employed in our practice.

Longchenpa said that all virtuous actions, great or small, should be performed within the framework of the Three Supreme Methods. Following this, whatever actions being undertaken will be leading to the path of liberation. Otherwise, the good deeds

will be far removed from the path to liberation, however great or appealing they appear to be. This is how important the Three Supreme Methods is.

For most of us, it is still quite difficult to actually practice with a mind free of clinging and concepts, but for the time being we can practice the approximate version of it as a substitute. To truly generate motivation and make dedication as dictated by the Three Supreme Methods, we need to bring our practice up to a certain level first. Just as an athlete must be trained from early on to achieve an outstanding performance, aspiring to taking the grand vow of a bodhisattva needs tremendous practice right from the beginning. There is no way an aspiration of such magnitude can arise spontaneously without studious practice in advance. I hope every practitioner not only appreciates the importance of but also strives to practice the Three Supreme Methods, with particular emphasis on generating renunciation and bodhicitta. No need to rush into other practices before a solid foundation has been established.



1. Wisdom Light: lecture series given by  
Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro

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# ON CAUSE AND EFFECT

This is intended as a brief discussion of the nature, distinctions, ramifications and questions regarding causality.

What is cause and effect? For example, if a person commits theft, in terms of the person's body, speech, or mind, which one is the cause? The word "karma," which we often use in our speech, connotes the same meaning as "cause" here. A thief uses hands to grab something and puts it in a bag. Is this action the cause? When someone thinks, "I'm going to steal this." Is this thought the cause? In the case of stealing, should the action of the hands be construed as the cause or the thought?

The Sarvastivada School<sup>1</sup> and the Yogacara (Mind-Only) School hold many different viewpoints on the interpretation of causality, but the ones elucidated by the Mind-Only School are the more comprehensive within the context of the Relative Truth. The Yogacara School thinks that everyone has a mind continuum from beginningless time until the attainment of enlightenment. This mind continuum sometimes has the five consciousnesses of eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body, but sometimes not. No matter

how it manifests itself, a permanent existence called the alaya consciousness is present at all times. Whenever karma is committed, a karmic seed will be planted in the alaya consciousness.

There is an analogy for this. When ink is poured on the snow, the snow will be turned into ink color. After it melts, the color can still be seen on the ground. Similarly, if karma is born of defilements, the karmic mark will be left in the alaya consciousness after defilements are gone. Karma (or cause) is kind of a unique ability. Although our eyes cannot see how rice seeds germinate, they do have within themselves the capacity to do so. Likewise, when a karmic seed is planted in the alaya consciousness, it will yield fruit when all the right conditions come together. This fruit is also called karmic effect. And this particular capacity of the alaya consciousness to yield karmic fruit is the inherent nature of cause.

After a person has killed a being or stolen things, the karmic seed of such action will remain in this person's alaya consciousness. When it will germinate is uncertain, however. The scriptures often used the analogy of harvesting crops to illustrate the timing of karmic effect. There are great varieties of grains and vegetables and the length of time for them to ripen varies. Some may ripen in only one to two months, others five or six months, or even longer. The types of seeds, the geographical location and the climate are all contributing factors to this disparity.

Likewise, it is stated in the scriptures that ripening of the cause comes in four types. The first is the one that ripens in the same

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lifetime. For example, karma was committed in youth and the effect takes place in middle or old age. Sometimes karma ripens even sooner, and the effect can be seen immediately. The reason is that certain conditions can expedite the manifestation of fruit. Such fast ripening has something to do with the object and the motivation of the action. There are many such cases told in *One Hundred Stories about Karma (Karmasakata)*. For example, the Sangha and ordinary people are two completely different objects. If it is a serious case of stealing from or slandering the Sangha, the retribution may come right away or in this lifetime. If the same act is committed against ordinary people, one will surely bear the consequence but not necessarily right away or in this lifetime. The different results arise from the difference between the two objects. The other condition is the difference in motivation. If the intention to kill is very strong or has been premeditated for a long time, the retribution will come swiftly, whereas the effect may not be immediately apparent if the motivation to kill is not so fierce.

The other three types of ripening do not result in karmic effect that will manifest swiftly. The first is ripening in the next life. For example, the effect of committing great evil, such as the five hellish deeds, or great virtue will definitely materialize in the next life. Second, the effect is certain to manifest but the timing of which is uncertain; it may take three or four lifetimes or even longer. Third, there may or may not be any effect. What could be the reason for this uncertainty in view of infallible karma? When a

weak cause (or karma) encounters a strong antidote, causality may then be broken.

The first three types of karma, that is, the one that ripens in this and next life, and with uncertain timing, are immutable karma. The fourth, with indefinite fruition, is mutable karma.

About the powers of the four different types of karma, only the omniscient Buddha knows. Ordinary people or non-Buddhist practitioners possessing some psychic powers and even arhats would not know their intricate workings thoroughly. During the time of the Buddha, there were many non-Buddhist practitioners in India who, with their clairvoyance, saw lifelong virtuous people find rebirth in the hell, hungry ghost, or animal realm instead. They questioned, “If cause and effect was truly infallible, why would virtuous people not end up well?” Hence, they viewed the idea of cause and effect as pure nonsense.

How can a person who has practiced virtue the entire life be reborn in the lower realms? Well, although the person may have been virtuous throughout this life, we do not know anything about this person’s previous lives. Maybe the person has been virtuous in this as well as the last two lifetimes, but it may not be so anymore if we could go back even further. Some negative karma might have been committed many lifetimes ago. From the perspective of the three types of immutable karma, virtuous karma that the person has committed in this life happens to ripen not in the current or the next life, but in the yet known future lives. That is, it may not come

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to fruition until perhaps hundreds or even thousands of years later.

In our innumerable past lives, had we ever committed this type of immutable karma? The answer is yes. Therefore, we can be as virtuous as we would like in this life, retribution may still await us if we cannot purify all our negative karma of the past. Once this type of karma matures, there is no escape but to bear its effect albeit temporarily. Does this mean that virtuous karma we have accumulated in this lifetime will go to waste? It certainly won't. They also bear their own fruit. However, if virtuous karma is not powerful enough and ripens slowly, it is possible that we may have to suffer first before enjoying any reward.

Apparently, even non-Buddhist practitioners with some spiritual realization may still be confused about the workings of cause and effect, not to mention people without any right view or understanding. The complexity of the cycle of cause and effect and how it passes through the past, present and future make it possible only for the Buddha to comprehend entirely its causal relation. Others merely glimpse different parts of the cycle. These non-Buddhist practitioners are usually well learned; some may even have acquired certain clairvoyance over worldly matters. However, they jumped to a conclusion only based upon what they saw—virtuous people took rebirth in the lower realms—and from it the conclusion was drawn that cause and effect could not have existed. Then books were written and theories developed based on this conclusion, which gradually formed into a sect after attracting

enough followers. This is how nihilistic view was established.

How did eternalism come about? There were some people whose insight could not reach beyond certain point in time when even equipped with some supernatural power. Still, through this power, they discerned that they were once born in the form realm.<sup>2</sup> When they were celestial beings then, Brahma and Indra already existed. Now that they had died and exited from that realm, but Brahma and Indra were still around when they looked over again. They tried to see when these gods were born and when they would die. They looked a few thousands, even tens of thousands of years ahead and found the gods remaining alive. They then came to the conclusion that Brahma and Indra would never die. They looked back tens of thousands or a few million years, but could not find the days the gods were born. Then they concluded that only beings below the rank of Brahma and Indra would die, whereas Brahma and Indra would be eternal. They subsequently incorporated these viewpoints into their books, gathered followers and established a sect. This is how the views of nihilism and eternalism originated.

In the modern world, people also have similar questions. There are some who have never stolen things, killed or hurt anyone; rather, they have kept their vows and practiced virtue. Yet, they often seem to be less fortunate than others in many aspects. Such cases tend to make people wonder, "If karma was true, why should good people run into bad luck?" Lay practitioners who do not have in-depth knowledge of karma or fully understand the viewpoints of

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*Abhidharma-kosha-shastra* may ask the same question. Some would even say, “I have attended many pujas and read so many scriptures. I should not have to suffer this or that illness or misfortune.” This is a wrong view. The fact is that all the virtuous actions committed have been stored in our alaya consciousness. It is due to the relevant conditions not yet matured that karma derived from those actions has not come to fruition. This is like a farmer who sowed all his grains in the springtime and must wait five to six months for the harvest. In the meantime, he is just a poor fellow with nothing left to eat at home. Some people may question, “You have toiled hard every day, tilling the land. Why don’t you have any food to eat?” Question like this is pointless. Everyone knows that there is a waiting period between sowing and harvesting. The reason why he has no food now is because he did not plough the land properly last year to reap a bumper harvest this year. His hard working this year would not have directly affected that outcome in any way. Similarly, attending pujas or liberating animals would not have any direct impact on the pain and misfortune we suffer now as those are the manifestations of the ripening of past negative karma.

Another situation is that bad people seem not to get sick or encounter ill luck that often. Many of them have a good life and may even live in prosperity until they die. Again, people will question, “If cause and effect does work, why is it there is no retribution after all the bad deeds these people have done? It seems that evildoers live a healthier and happier life than people of virtue.

Wouldn’t this be an indication that causality does not exist?” This is exactly the same situation as the farming example.

Now let us analyze whether physical suffering and misfortune arise purely based on karma.

Some non-Buddhists think that karma dictates the arising of all phenomena. Whether a person has a good life, or even how early or late one can eat, is predetermined and hence immutable. However, this is not the Buddhist view.

Buddhism holds that physical suffering and misfortune all have various contributing factors as their causes. Some illnesses, the so-called karma-induced illness, originated from previous life. They are medically incurable, no matter how much money is spent. These may be attributed to karma. If you have a cold, headache, or fever, it may also be karma related, but not necessarily caused by karma from the past lives. Hence, karma is sometimes directly responsible for certain things to take place, but other times may not be so directly involved. The point is, in all matters, Buddhism has always opposed taking the dualistic approach, affirming one while negating the other. The same applies to karma.

On the other hand, if everything were destined and immutable as some non-Buddhists believe, what would be the point of undertaking spiritual practice? Since everything has already been set, there is no point trying to change anything in life—if having a good life, rejoice in one’s good fortune; a miserable one, just bear it. By the same token, if everything were predetermined, it would



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be useless giving food to the needed since going hungry would have been their destiny anyway. Hence, fatalism has failed to stand.

Still some others refuse to acknowledge the reality of cause and effect. This is also wrong. Best we should take the approach of the middle way rather than the two extremes.

In any case, it is beyond the limits of our perception to know whether suffering or happiness is karma related. Under normal circumstances, what we do now, either good or bad, definitely will affect future karmic results but not quite so imminently the manifestation of karma at present. However, exceptions are possible with special circumstances.

Some people think that it is because killing and stealing are against religious beliefs that people refrain from doing so. The truth is that killing and stealing should be forsaken because they are against the natural law and hence inevitable punishment. For example, is it against the Buddhist doctrine to take poison? Although Buddhism forbids people to take poison, the real reason is poison itself which is inedible. If you insist on taking it, you will be poisoned and experience pain. This is the result of acting against the natural law. Certain kinds of poison can take effect immediately; others may take months or even years for the effect to set in. The same is true of karmic results. Although we cannot see the actual workings of cause and effect, the manifestation of effect follows the same principle. If people see that a person remains in good health after taking poison but before the effect setting in, they

then assume that the person did not take poison after all. Does this make sense? In fact, one should not equate absence of pain with non-poison; it is simply not time yet for the poison to take effect. Similarly, killing and stealing are like swallowing poison. They are bound to take effect, just a matter of time.

There is an example in the text. Once there was a king who killed an arhat. The next day, a downpour of innumerable jewels fell on his territory. The rain of jewels, becoming more precious by the day, continued for the next six days. On the eighth day, however, a ferocious pouring of mud came down and buried all his subjects. Why did the king have jewels rained down on his land after killing an arhat? It was due to the great deeds he had committed in the past lives. Even though killing an arhat was an extremely grave crime, virtuous karma from the past ripened first and hence his great fortune. But when good karma was depleted, the negative karmic results ensued immediately. Did the Creator arrange the sequence of events as non-Buddhists would like to think? No. The mechanism is the same as that of crops, whose harvest depends on the right combinations of soil, climate, sunlight and other factors. It is not man-made but the law of nature.

If you would like to know more about karma, you can read the fourth chapter of the *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra*, which clearly explains the workings of cause and effect. Not understanding karma correctly will cause many problems even for people with clairvoyance, let alone ordinary folks like us.

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The fourth type of cause (karma) is mutable karma. Since the strength of this karma, virtuous or not, is weak, it will likely not cause any effect when met with a counteracting condition. For negative karma to become mutable, we must bring forth this counteracting condition, i.e., repentance. According to the *Mahyanabhidharma-sangiti-shastra*, the way to turn all evil karma committed since beginningless time into mutable karma is to repent and vow never to commit again. To repent past wrongdoings and resolve never to repeat again are the two key elements to turn immutable into mutable karma.

For example, a butcher who killed animals for a living had a change of heart and became a lay Buddhist. He expressed great repentance for the killings and vowed never to do it again. Once these two conditions are satisfied, karma derived from the killing will become mutable karma which may or may not result in any karmic fruit. If the repentance could go deeper, it would even be possible that the butcher might not need to bear any consequence at all.

About those past misdeeds that we have performed but cannot recall, we can contemplate like this: “All the misdeeds that I have committed since beginningless time, intentionally or unintentionally, are all wrong. As if they are the poison I have taken, I feel the greatest fear and regret for my actions, and vow never to commit them ever again.” This way, all negative karma can be changed into mutable karma. The significance of such resolution cannot be overstated. Otherwise, any karmic effect will

be possible if this is not done.

Although we have not committed killing or stealing in this life and, being Buddhist practitioners, we often chant mantras, meditate and liberate animals, these virtuous actions are still the doings of defiled mortals. Once strong anger arises in our minds, all our virtuous karma so far accumulated will be destroyed instantly if the merit has not been dedicated. Besides, the roots of virtue of ordinary people are not stable— being good now does not mean staying good forever. If we were to have the powers of divination, we would be able to see all of our negative karma being stored in the alaya consciousness. Without repentance, the ensuing retributions will surely take place. Then it will exactly match the nihilists’ view, i.e., causality does not exist, such that one may lead a virtuous life but still drop to the lower realm after death. That would be a dangerous view for us Buddhists. Thus, we must repent all our negative karma as all of them can be purified through true penitence.

On the other hand, virtue also has the possibility to turn into mutable karma. It is therefore important for us to save all virtuous karma as best we can. There are two ways to do that. One is dedication. The other, a better way, is to understand fully the meaning of emptiness, that is, knowing virtuous karma is, like dreams, intrinsically illusory. If we can contemplate in this way, even if anger arises, it cannot destroy the root of virtue. Because anger is defilement, a mental affliction rooted in attachment, it is incompatible with the view that all phenomena are illusory. But the

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virtuous actions we performed are directly associated with attaining realization of that view. Since something mired in attachment is inferior to the virtuous root planted with wisdom, anger cannot destroy this root of virtue. If we have neither attained any realization nor dedicated merit, but are constantly filled with anger, virtuous karma will be destroyed very easily. For ordinary people, the best way to save accumulated good karma is dedication of merit.

In conclusion, we should do everything we can to turn all evil karma into mutable karma and all virtuous karma immutable.

These four types of karma are very important. To know what causality is, one must know how to differentiate the four and be thoroughly knowledgeable about them all. This understanding is essential to our practice as well.

How to validate the existence of causality? The Buddha once said that it is not so easy for an ordinary person to prove the existence of cause and effect, but not impossible. Buddhism holds the doctrine of dependent arising of all phenomena or compounded phenomena. What is dependent arising? It means that cause begets effect. All phenomena are the manifestations of dependent arising, the results of conditioned genesis. Suppose a person killed an animal. It caused great harm to that animal. How can there be no consequence for the person who had committed such grave karma? Like casually throwing a seed into the moist and warm soil, it will germinate on its own with no tending required. By the same token, in the phenomenal world, every cause must bear its own fruit with no exception.

Sometimes patients, after being diagnosed and given only one to three months to live, may continue living a healthy life three months later with the help of performing virtuous deeds such as liberating animals or undertaking a long life practice. When the patients go for check-up again, doctors find the symptoms all gone. This has happened in Tibet, China and other parts of the world. It is not hearsay or a fairytale but a fact, which somewhat validates the existence of causality.

The Buddha also proved the existence of causality in the sutras through the following example. It seems that some people can never become wealthy, no matter how hard they try. There is nothing wrong with the way they work or operate, but they remain poor their whole lives. Others enjoy fabulous wealth throughout their lives without having to work hard for it. The same also happens with people's health and life span. We may think that these seemingly unreasonable outcomes are due to the variable external environment, but they are not. For example, once a Tibetan king, wanting to help the poor, divided all the wealth of the nobles evenly among the poor three times. However, after some time, everything went back to where it was—the poor remained poor, the nobles stayed noble and well-off. The king could do nothing more. Actually, not all those nobles were smart and capable, the poor foolish and lazy. Most likely, in this case, it could be the workings of cause and effect. Of course, the example is not saying that we are all destined to be rich or poor, so the rich would

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never need to work for anything and the poor would labor to no avail. Nevertheless, the law and the workings of cause and effect are present in this example.

Also stated in the *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra* is that some children may suffer the effect of seriously negative karma that their parents accumulated. If children can suffer the consequences of their parents' negative karma, is it not contradictory to the Buddhist teaching that one reaps what one sows and that no one can assume other's karma? The *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra* explains that these children themselves already have certain negative karma. Due to the close relationship between the parents and their children, the ripening of the children's negative karma may be expedited when the parents committed extremely evil karma. There are many such documented cases both in the East and the West. Generally speaking, it is very difficult to directly prove the existence of causality because our eyes cannot look beyond this life for causes from the past lives and effects in the future lives. Nonetheless, through indirect means, as shown by the example above, it is possible to prove the link between cause and effect. Not only is samsara conditioned by causality, but also nirvana and liberation. Therefore, if it is liberation that we seek, we must plant the seed of liberation, which will then yield the fruit. Such is the view of Buddhism.

The cardinal doctrine of Buddhism is dependent arising of all phenomena, which encompasses a broad range of subjects. From

the perspective of Relative Truth, it means that when there is cause, there is effect. Life's sorrows and joys, separations and reunions, in fact, all phenomena come with their own respective causes. Some we can see, some cannot. Only very special kind of persons can grasp the whole picture. But cause and effect always go hand in hand, never alone. No cause, no effect, and vice versa. If one is in pursuit of happiness, one must sow happiness to reap happiness. The seed of happiness is virtuous action. To avoid suffering and misfortune, one must not give rise to their causes. The cause of suffering is doing evil. Being foolish and ignorant, ordinary people try to reap happiness by sowing suffering. For example, nowadays many people try to prolong their own lives by killing and eating all sorts of animals. Aren't the means and the purpose completely contradictory to one another? Sadly, this contradiction has been evident in many other aspects of our life today.

Hence, without the correct understanding and the discernment of cause and effect, ordinary people may end up doing wrong most of the time and be forced to taste the unexpected, bitter fruit afterwards.



1. The school that discusses the existence of everything, asserts the reality of all phenomena
2. One of the three realms of mortality—the realm of desire, form and non-form.

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# THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

—THE PATH OUT OF SAMSARA

What is the difference between the Four Noble Truths and the Two Truths (relative and absolute truth)? The Two Truths delineate the doctrinal view on phenomena whereas the Four Noble Truths, though also contain some elements of that view, focus mainly on the practicable ways to attain liberation. Therefore, both are very important Buddhist doctrines that can lend certain help to one's practice if understood well. Of course, one may choose to learn only the theories necessary for undertaking specific practice rather than the more extensive knowledge of various Buddhist doctrines such as the Two Truths or the Four Noble Truths. But chances are one may be prone to mistakes more easily this way except for those with the sharpest faculties.

For example, if one has only limited knowledge of Buddhist philosophy, e.g., the rarity and preciousness of human birth or the suffering nature of samsara, doubts about the viability of gaining liberation through Dharma practice, the methods to be used for attaining enlightenment, or the soundness of the practice being

undertaken, to name a few, may arise during the course of one's practice. Lacking the wisdom gained from an orderly training in the Dharma and from contemplation, one is incapable of solving these issues alone and thereby easily confused, which ultimately may turn into a kind of hindrance to one's practice. Whereas gaining the requisite wisdom can be both helpful and encouraging. As practitioners of the Dharma, we should at the least have an adequate understanding of the key doctrines. Such knowledge is more than just needed for a true practitioner; it is indispensable

## I. Overview

The practice of the Four Noble Truths begins with the cultivation of renunciation and bodhicitta. Renunciation enables us to transcend samsara while bodhicitta inspires us to remain in samsara without being bound by it. Are they contradictory to each other? No, they're not. If renunciation is not generated, samsara cannot be transcended. We will then end up in the same position as all other beings in the six realms, having no ability to save anyone. In order to transcend samsara, one must resolutely cut off all attachment to it. But that does not mean one should abandon all those remained in samsara afterwards. To abandon them means one's goal is only to seek enlightenment for oneself and upon reaching that goal, one ignores their need for liberation. Sravakas and pratyekabuddhas,

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abiding in the meditation of cessation,<sup>1</sup> have transcended samsara and at the same time abandoned those left in samsara. Alas, owing to their limited power of samadhi, they neither have the ability nor the aspiration to lead other sentient beings to liberation.

But Mahayana Buddhism calls for transcendence, not desertion, of samsara. The bodhisattvas practice emptiness, not-self, or great compassion not to escape from the suffering of samsara but to benefit sentient beings more thoroughly and effectively, and to serve the needs of others more generously. Ordinary people, unable to break loose from samsara, have no choice but to remain trapped in the cycle of rebirth. Whereas the bodhisattvas, no longer being bound by samsara, choose to remain because sentient beings only exist in samsara, not in nirvana. In order to deliver sentient beings from all suffering, the bodhisattvas must work from within, not out of, samsara. The key to understand this dichotomy lies in distinguishing between the relative truth and the absolute truth.

The Four Noble Truths explain the nature, the origin, the cessation and the path leading to the cessation of suffering. Why are there not three or five truths? It is because all that is known or existent can be assigned to either samsara or nirvana; there is no other kind of existence in between. Samsara has its cause and effect; so does nirvana. Two sets of cause and effect make the Four Noble Truths. To explain nirvana and samsara by way of cause and effect is essentially what the Four Noble Truths are all about.

Why we ordinary beings keep drifting in samsara is century-

old question to which only the Buddha can fully answer. Others, even being adept in all the disciplines of the world, will still draw a blank when confronted with this question. The Buddha, with transcendent wisdom, gave the answer in a nutshell: It is not by accident or God's will that one is born a human or an animal. There is always a cause. Such cause is the origin of suffering, and suffering itself is the effect of samsara.

What does the word "truth" represent, as in the Four Noble Truths? It means reality. Does it mean that samsara is a reality? No, it doesn't. Here, "truth" represents the condition as perceived by the sages. The difference between what ordinary people perceive and that of the sages is as wide apart as earth and heaven. Ordinary people obscured by ignorance see only the illusions of reality while the sages perceive the true reality. Therefore, the word "truth" is never meant to define the view of ordinary people.

So then how many realities are there? There are four: That which causes samsara is the origin of suffering; the effect of samsara is suffering. That which causes nirvana is the path leading to the cessation of suffering; the cessation of suffering is the effect of nirvana. Cessation of suffering means eradication of all karmic hindrances and afflictions, and detachment from the defiled phenomena of samsara through the path of Dharma practice.

An analogy used by Maitreya Bodhisattva in the *Uttaratantra Shastra* aptly defines the Four Noble Truths. When treating any illness, doctors need to take four steps: 1. to ascertain the nature of

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the illness; 2. to eliminate the cause of the illness, since it would be ineffective to treat only the symptoms; 3. to prescribe remedies; 4. to heal. All doctors must go through this four-step process to treat an illness. Not knowing the cause of the illness, the doctor cannot prescribe a cure. Even knowing the cause of the illness but having no suitable medicine or the requisite pharmacological knowledge, or worse, giving the wrong prescription, the doctor will still be rendered ineffective. Nevertheless, everything that is concerned with treating a patient starts with identifying the cause of the illness. The Four Noble Truths also correspond to the four steps of treating an illness. The nature of suffering is what to be ascertained, the origin of suffering to be eliminated; the path leading to the cessation of suffering is what to be practiced (prescription), the cessation of suffering to be attained (cure).

At the same time, we should also find out what samsara means, what the cycle of birth, aging, sickness, death and, in fact, the world as a whole signify. But all these questions can simply be summed up in the first Noble Truth—the nature of suffering. Once understanding the nature of suffering, we will have a better grasp on how to deal with the cycle of birth, aging, sickness and death, of which the root cause is the origin of suffering. How then can this cause be uprooted? As physical illness needs the right medication to be cured, cyclic existence can only be stopped with practice of the Dharma. To counteract defilements and attachment, one must exert a sharply opposing force in order to be effective. The process

of exerting this counteracting force is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. In other words, the purpose of undertaking Dharma practice is to cease the endless cycle of rebirth and death, not unlike what the right medicine is to a patient.

Theravada practitioners aim to free only themselves from samsara, while the bodhisattvas aspire to do that for themselves and all other sentient beings. Frankly, to single-handedly lead all sentient beings to liberation is an extremely difficult task, one that not even the Buddha could have accomplished in a single lifetime. But the infinite power and aspiration of the Buddha have continued to benefit all those who are receptive to his teachings until this day. Even so, he cannot deliver all sentient beings. What matters is not that everyone can be saved but that we all strive toward that worthy end. It was for this purpose that the Buddha expounded the Four Noble Truths.

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## II. Comprehensive discussion

### **The importance of the four characteristics of suffering**

Regarding the Noble Truth of Suffering, either the exoteric and esoteric Buddhism or Mahayana and Theravada, all have their own views. Here we will only discuss the viewpoints commonly held by both Mahayana and Theravada of the exoteric school.

There are four characteristics to each of the Four Noble Truths. The word “characteristic” in Sanskrit is a technical terminology used in the *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra*. What is the relationship between the Four Noble Truths and their characteristics? An analogy can be drawn with the face. If the Four Noble Truths were the face, the facial features would be their characteristics. The *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra* states that the four characteristics of the Noble Truth of Suffering are: impermanence, suffering, not-self (*anatta*) and emptiness. Generally speaking, suffering refers to all the negative and impure phenomena of samsara. If examined closely, they can be categorized into the so-called four characteristics. Although these characteristics are not acknowledged in the context of Vajrayana’s uncommon view, they are recognized by both Mahayana and Theravada of the exoteric school.

As mentioned before, no sentient being is in samsara voluntarily other than certain bodhisattvas. Although some people, after being

hypnotized, claim that they purposely took rebirth in samsara, it may just be a lie or their imagination. The fact is that none of us is here by choice. Why do we keep coming back to samsara? It is due to all the defilements caused by karmic power. Like growing crops, seeds do not plan what kind of fruit to yield, or any at all. Given the right temperature and humidity, fruit will grow naturally. Similarly, when people are in the bardo state, they just aimlessly drift around, not knowing specifically what to do. Most of them end up taking rebirth, as the cause for rebirth has long been committed. And with all the necessary conditions fall into place, they have no choice but to be reborn again. If one could choose, why would anyone choose to be reborn as an ox or a horse or to live in misery?

The reason why we should understand the nature of suffering is not curiosity but to resolve the continuous cycle of rebirth and death. Just like a doctor who, in order to treat an illness, needs to examine and diagnose its cause first, we need to know what the nature of suffering is in order to end suffering. And the first step is to identify the cause of our cyclic existence in samsara.

Regarding the cause of being in samsara, there have been various assumptions ranging from being purely accidental to everything being masterminded by God. But all of them are refutable because one-sided opinions do not make good enough evidence. Only the ones that have been recognized as sensible and logical by those of great and varied learning can be considered valid proof. So far, the conjectures made by either the atheists or



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the fatalists have failed to convince the majority precisely because they lack such recognition.

The root cause of our cyclic existence in samsara is clinging to an inherently existing self wherefrom greed, hatred and delusion arise. Such clinging makes one concern just for one's own benefit and work only for the well-being of oneself. Without it, selfish thoughts will not arise, neither will the ensuing deeds.

Certain religions like to stress the mysterious power of ghosts and spirits. Although Buddhism does not deny their existence, it believes the biggest demon in the world is the deeply embedded tendency to cling to the self. Outer demons can only affect our daily life in small ways, such as causing illnesses or obstacles. They cannot bind us in samsara, not even if the ghosts of the entire universe combine their forces. Only clinging to the self has such power. Yet, we have never realized that this fellow, Self, who abides in our mind at all times and whom we are very fond of, is really a demon. If we are tired of taking the same route back to samsara again, we must first eliminate this demon. Only then can we be completely free of its interference.

How do we go about destroying the root cause of samsara now that we have identified it? Will burning incense, doing prostrations and reciting mantras work? They may, to some extent, if performed with genuine renunciation and bodhicitta. Renunciation can help us deal with the more obvious defilements while the subtle ones can be subdued by relative bodhicitta. However, the

subtlest self-grasping can only be eradicated by the practice of not-self and emptiness, hence their inclusion in the four characteristics. As for impermanence and suffering, why are they part of the four characteristics? They are appointed so as to help us form an aversion to samsara and thereby stop all worldly pursuits.

Basically, impermanence and suffering enable us to generate renunciation of the desire for worldly existence, while absence of an inherently existing self and emptiness lead us to affirm the view of *anatta* or "not-self." These four characteristics reveal the true face of samsara. Only by knowing what samsara really is can we engender the necessary will, courage and ability to transcend it.

Before receiving the Buddha's teachings, we did not understand samsara correctly, and we coveted and greedily pursued wealth and fame without any regard for the consequences. If one were to show no interest in such pursuits, one would most likely be considered abnormal. As a result, most people just follow others blindly and become slaves to money and fame. But the teachings of the Buddha destroy many of our deep-seated ideas about the world and life, and give us a brand new perspective which is above and beyond that of the uninitiated. No doubt others will try to refute the new standpoints, but they will not succeed as no other theories or philosophy can better the teachings of the Buddha.

The Buddha once said, "I do not argue with worldly people, but they argue with me." It means that the Buddha understands where people's desire and attachment come from. But when people

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hear the Buddha speak of impermanence, emptiness and not-self, they refuse to accept and constantly raise objections. Actually, it is no surprise that people object since the Buddha's viewpoints are something they have never heard of or thought about before and are entirely contrary to their usual way of thinking. So object they must. Still, truth is truth. Worldly people can object all they want at first, but eventually they will have to accept it. By worldly people, I do not mean the atheists or the materialists, but people like us who either have not yet learned Buddhadharma or attained realization of emptiness. It is in fact our very own established ideas that are opposing the new perspective.

Thus, what needs to be overthrown is our steadfast clinging to the belief of distinct, self-existing phenomena, not the standpoints of the atheists or some other philosophies. Once that clinging is gone, nothing that others preach can impair our true view anymore. For no matter how eloquent they are, they cannot affect someone who has realized emptiness. The means by which one can thoroughly destroy clinging to the idea of self-existing phenomena is to generate renunciation, arouse bodhicitta and cultivate the critical view of emptiness.

Why is realization of emptiness so powerful? It is because the cause of our endless rebirth in samsara is not something external but our own views and attachment, a kind of thought actually. And thoughts can be overthrown, but not all of them. Those that are formed on a solid base with logical reasoning are very difficult to be overthrown.

Is clinging to the idea of a real self well grounded and sensible? Not so. Ever since birth, we have always had this notion of a self. Now take a look and see if this self truly exists. And how does it exist? If we examine closely, we will discover that it does not exist. But why do we have this compelling sense of a real self? The truth is that it is all just an illusion. Like when running a high fever, one may see hallucinations as real or have strange thoughts popped up in mind. This is because the causes for seeing hallucinations or having twisted thoughts are already formed such that whatever one sees or thinks is nothing but the illusions created by these causes. Similarly, one may also see non-existing objects after taking some herbal medicine. It is not that these objects really exist somewhere in the world, but that the cause for forming such illusion already exists within oneself.

To practice after understanding the reality of existence, one will be able to see clearly that the self does not exist. The process from the beginning of practice to realization of not-self is the Noble Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering. However, at the outset of the path, the power of practice is not immediately apparent. Often enough, during meditation, one may experience deeply the non-existence of self. But in post-meditation period, one is still keenly aware of the need for food and clothing, for making a living, and the anger when being provoked. In the chapter *Wisdom of The Way of the Bodhisattva*, it explains that this situation is not because realization of emptiness is ineffective, but that one's own realization is still relatively weak and unstable. That is why we must maintain

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regular practice and keep enhancing its overall effectiveness. Once our practice has gathered enough momentum, the situation will change for the better. This is very important to note.

### **The reason for pointing out only four characteristics**

The Noble Truth of Suffering encompasses all sentient and non-sentient phenomena in samsara. There must be innumerable characteristics related to this world of myriad phenomena. Why then did the Buddha only point out four? It is because all the other characteristics are not so relevant to our practice. The Buddha gave an analogy of this in a sutra. A man was wounded by a poisonous arrow. If he did not receive treatment immediately, he would die. If, at this time, people around him just wondered where the arrow came from, what material it was made of and who made it, instead of pulling the arrow out, could he still be saved in time? No way. At that moment, the first thing to do should be to pull the arrow out to save his life, not to find out how and from where the arrow came.

The thrust of the story is that the few minutes it takes from being wounded to death are comparable to the few decades of our lives. What should we count as the most important in this rather short period? Is it to study the trajectories of the planets or the physics of the space? Many people have spent their whole life

doing these researches and died before reaching any definitive conclusions. To the deceased, whether there is life or water on other planets is no longer relevant. Therefore, our time should be spent on something most important in life, i.e., to free ourselves from the repeated cycles of birth, aging, sickness and death. To use our relatively short lifetime on any other analysis is really not worthwhile. If there were a bystander in the afore-mentioned story, that person would consider it absurd that instead of saving the wounded, the crowd was busy studying the arrow. It would be equally unwise to expend energy on something transitory and insignificant rather than on spiritual practice.

The phenomena of both the micro-universe and the outer space are part of all the characteristics of the Noble Truth of Suffering. So are chemistry, physics and philosophy. However, they have very little to do with liberation from samsara. Hence it is only reasonable to prioritize our focus in life, as some are more important than others. Most of the things that laypeople have to do to survive do not address freedom from samsara. Only four among all are concerned with liberation. The rest we can put aside. Once enlightenment is attained, all the questions, no matter how complex they are, will be easily understood without having to conduct any research and experiment. Even if a research is called for, it should take place after we have resolved the questions of cyclic existence. So, at the moment, just focus on the four characteristics.

Frankly, all the disciplines in the world are only concerned

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with our living, not how to resolve the fundamental question of existence. Once our lives are in danger, no amount of studies can help. Just look at people's attitude and their behavior during the time of SARS. What more needs to be said? This is why the Buddha only pointed out the four characteristics.

Next we will elaborate on the characteristics of each of the Four Noble Truths.

### The Noble Truth of Suffering

This encompasses the non-sentient world of land, rivers, mountains and so forth, as well as the sentient world of all living beings in the six realms. In other words, all sentient beings and what their six consciousnesses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind) come in contact with are all included in the domain of the Noble Truth of Suffering. Because we are in constant contact with both the sentient and the non-sentient world, suffering manifests around us all the time. We ourselves are also part of it. Even so, people have hardly known correctly the nature of suffering, which in turn leads to much distress. It is therefore so important to understand it well.

Why do the four characteristics—impermanence, suffering, not-self and emptiness—have profound impact on liberation from samsara? Because all negative karma such as killing, stealing and sexual misconduct that one commits out of greed, hatred and

delusion result from not having the right understanding of these four characteristics.

The opposing view of impermanence is the view of the eternalists, which holds that all phenomena abide forever. The eternalist view is an inborn belief of ours. People tend to regard all appearances as permanent and thus develop either a sense of desire for or dislike of them. However, if one has acquired certain understanding of impermanence, one is unlikely to bear a grudge against others for long because enemies do not stay enemies forever. From a subtler perspective, enemies, like all phenomena, also intrinsically cease and arise every instant. If one were to look for some truly existing enemies, one would not find any in the end. The same goes with desire. People commonly believe that wealth and fame are something dependable and therefore pursue them with all their might. Would they still have been so enthusiastic about their pursuits had they known the impermanent and unreliable nature of all things in the material world?

There is a classic story on impermanence in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. A practitioner did a retreat in a cave for nine years. At the entrance of the cave, there were some nettles. His robes always got caught by the prickly plants every time he left the cave. As it was kind of a bother, he thought about cutting the nettles. Then the thought of possibly not being able to return to the cave again crossed his mind, he decided to do something more meaningful with his time instead. When going into the cave, his

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robes got caught as well. The thought of removing the nettles arose again. But considering the possibility that this might be his last time leaving the cave, he decided against it and saved the time for training the mind. He continued like this for nine years until he attained accomplishment in his practice while the nettles remained standing at the entrance. It was his firm conviction that all phenomena are impermanent that made him treasure every moment of his life by not spending it on something meaningless but practicing the Dharma. His accomplishment came as the result of realizing impermanence, not emptiness, of all phenomena.

If we understand deeply the impermanence of all worldly matters, we will not want to direct all of our energy toward the pursuit of material comforts. But the reality is that other than the bodhisattvas and those true practitioners, most people today are just blindly seeking the fulfillment of material wealth on which they believe they can depend. Then from this mistaken perspective comes sets of other problems. Thus, we need first to destroy our own eternalist view through contemplating impermanence. Once we have gained a profound awareness of the impermanent nature of everything in this world, we will no longer be the same any more.

Why is suffering the second characteristic? People in general think that there are also many elements of happiness in life and do not sense that samsara only has miseries. The reason why we so actively and enthusiastically engage ourselves in the pursuit of wealth and fame of this world is because we believe there is

happiness to be had in these worldly achievements. This view comes from our belief that life in the god and human realm is basically a happy one. The Buddha requested that we regard all phenomena in samsara as suffering, which not only is a request from the Buddha but also a fact. Conversely, if the Buddha did not tell the truth, we would not need to comply either, whether or not the Buddha had requested. Although in real life we can see and experience suffering around us at any given time, we tend to easily forget what we have witnessed. As a result, the miseries we so witnessed cannot help us discern the true nature of samsara. This is why the Buddha taught us to regard samsara as nothing but suffering.

Some people may disagree and ask, “How can samsara be full of suffering when we have actually experienced happiness in this world?” But this feeling of happiness is really the result of us being obscured by some superficial and transitory appearances. Once we realize the truth behind the so-called happiness, we may begin to feel quite anxious about the precarious condition to which this life has been taking us so far.

The Buddha succinctly pointed out that there are three types of suffering. The first is gross suffering, which is utter suffering within all suffering, the truly painful. It is the kind of pain that everyone recognizes; it is easily noticeable, not subtle at all. This type of suffering primarily exists in the hell, hungry ghost and animal realm.

The second type is suffering arising from change. This type of

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suffering is not obvious at the outset, but may turn into something rather painful later on. For instance, if we see a stranger die of a car accident on the street, we probably will not feel too distraught with grief. However, if the deceased should turn out to be our parent or a loved one, our grief would be very strong and immediate because of the emotional attachment we have to the person. Frankly, we would not have suffered had suffering not been a latent part of family relationship already. Besides, worldly happiness can also turn into a source of suffering. For example, the happy gathering of friends and relatives gives one pleasure, but the eventual parting makes one sad. If there had been no feeling of happiness at the gathering, there would not have been any sadness at the time of parting. Thus, happiness is in direct proportion to suffering here. Suffering arising from change may appear to be happiness on the surface, but can in fact turn into suffering at any moment. That is to say, without earlier happiness, no suffering will ensue either, just like we never feel happy or sad about meeting and leaving the strangers at the malls or other public places. Since we did not experience happiness in the first place, no suffering will ensue afterwards. Suffering arising from change is so named because the ensuing suffering concealed within prior happiness will eventually reveal itself when conditions change. Suffering of this kind usually happens to the human and celestial beings of the desire realm.

The third is suffering of all conditioned phenomena. Because it is very subtle, our sense faculties do not react visibly to its

appearance and disappearance. Yet it acts like a locomotive to the suffering that will ensue. In other words, it is capable of engendering other suffering since it itself is impure and defiled in nature. This kind of suffering exists primarily in the form and formless realm.

These are what the Buddha gave as a comprehensive definition of suffering. If in samsara there were only one type of suffering, e.g., inherent suffering, then it would be reasonable to think that celestial and human beings, and even animals, can also feel certain happiness in this world. Unfortunately, this is not the case. No matter how colorful and fascinating the world appears to be, in the end all phenomena are inseparable from suffering. As the Buddha saw the whole picture, not just a part, of samsara, he came to the final conclusion after having observed the gross and subtle aspects of suffering that samsara is all suffering.

Man's suffering is minuscule compared with that of the animals, not to mention that of the hell beings or the hungry ghosts. Yet given a choice, how many of us would want to repeat this life again? Not too many! Most people feel that this life is too hard, too tiring and has too much pressure. There may not be too much gross suffering in the human world, but it does not mean that there is no suffering in our life. Human suffering often comes from a sense of aimlessness and fear. For example, the ultimate goal of many successful businessmen is really no more than having a comfortable life. But with success comes unparalleled pressure.

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Failing to cope with the pressure, some even take their own lives.

Those who have not learned or practiced Buddhist teachings may not care too much about it in their youth. But as they grow older, the feeling of emptiness increases with time as well because mentally they do not seem to be able to take refuge in anything. They spend their youth and energy to accumulate wealth in order to live comfortably in old age. But when old age does come, along with sickness and death, their wealth cannot help at all. Some may place their hope in other people. But we must accept the fact that the caring of friends and relatives or the filial piety of children who either offer to keep one company or send kind regards via letters or phone calls cannot dispel one's deepest fear. In the end, we all must face death alone. One can imagine how terrifying and remorseful it can be at that moment. Most people choose to either forget or ignore this inevitable ending and turn instead to indulge freely in worldly pleasures. But we can never leave behind the thought of imminent ending for long, as it poses a constant threat and is such a weighty reality for us to grapple with.

Young people are not above this either. They may look like they can afford to play and have fun all the time. But once they begin to contemplate the purpose of this life and the question of the beginning and the ending of life, they cannot help but realize that the two ends of this life are really a blur. What their minds and eyes can grasp are only the present, fleeting moments. Most of them, unable to face this frightening conclusion directly, just cast

these issues aside and ignore them.

Material comforts are like anesthetics that can only numb the senses temporarily while the reality of birth, old age, sickness and death never goes away. If we avoid facing these issues now, whether we get another chance to do anything about it in the future would be anybody's guess. This is by no means an exaggerated threat, but an inevitable outcome.

The discussion presented so far mainly demonstrates the effect on people caused by suffering arising from change.

There are also those who either due to their cultural background or poor financial condition, are not in the position to concern themselves with these issues just yet. But if one does have the means and the will, it is never too early to begin tackling these questions to make oneself aware of the true reality. On the other hand, if one refuses to change course and still indulges in pleasure seeking, one will in many respects match the description given by the past practitioners that such people are really no different from animals. Animals only care about having fun and enough to eat. Other values are not their concerns. We may think of them as being pitiable, what with all the limitations of their lives, while they themselves do not. Those who only focus on seeking pleasures in life are really not much better than animals, and in this sense the description from the past is a fitting one.

The eight kinds of suffering set forth in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* have all been part of our personal experiences.

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You may refer to the book for details. Some people assign a relatively low priority to the questions of life and death whereas fulfilling the basic needs of life is of the utmost importance. And they believe it is rightfully so. This just indicates a lack of in-depth understanding of suffering and impermanence. Why does the present matter but not the future? Can we really ignore the question about future life? Why don't we need to resolve what will face us in the next life and the one after that? Is it justified to only care about the present? Some may argue that there is no next life based on some scientific reasoning. But I think this question is a philosophical one rather than scientific. No science can prove the nonexistence of past and future life. Some so-called proofs are just the premature judgment of a small group of people which in no way can refute the existence of past and future life. This is a very real question that we should not make any excuse to evade. But more importantly, we need to contemplate the true nature of samsara on a much deeper level. To take life and death only at face value is what keeps us in samsara from beginningless time until now. The fact is that we have been fooled all along and need to wake up to this fact as quickly as we can.

The next two characteristics are emptiness and not-self. Emptiness means neither the mind nor the body is controlled by "I." Not-self means neither the body nor the mind is "I." Regardless of the conceptual difference between the two, both characteristics point to the absence of an inherently existing self.

Why is it important to ponder the non-existence of self? It is because it holds the key to ultimate freedom. Through cultivating renunciation and bodhicitta, we are able to greatly reduce greed, hatred and other afflictive thoughts. But lacking the perspective on emptiness, self-grasping, the root of all defilements, cannot be resolutely eradicated. Self-grasping is like a steel wire that links our mind and body together and confines us to this body life after life without freedom. In order to sustain the body and cater to its every need, mind following the commands of the body becomes its slave. As long as the wire stays, we remain bound. It is thus necessary to sever it. Once we are free from the fetters, mind can fly freely, like a kite without tethers, in the Dharma sky. Self-grasping can no longer exert any influence.

The only way to sever this wire is to realize emptiness. On attaining this realization, one ceases to differentiate between self and others. As a result, selfishness, unwholesome behavior such as stealing and killing for personal gains, hatred towards enemy and greed towards objects of desire will cease as well. From the perspective of Theravada, once these defilements are purified, one is deemed to have found the way out of samsara and attained liberation for oneself, which is the ultimate goal of Theravada practitioners. It means no more suffering and rebirth. Whereas in the minds of the bodhisattvas, purification of defilement is only the start toward their goal of being better equipped to benefit others. As realization of emptiness has destroyed selfishness,



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they can, from that point on, dedicate themselves entirely and unconditionally to benefit others. Therefore, one should endeavor to realize emptiness for one's own sake and others' as well. If not, the root of all delusions will still remain even though the more obvious defilements are reduced by other practices.

The doctrines and practices of Buddhism are logical and realistic, not at all mysterious. When understood, it is unlikely that anyone will disagree. Buddhism has pointed out a safe passage out of samsara for us, whether we choose to leave is another matter. If we choose not to go this way, we will just keep wandering away from the path to liberation. And whether or not liberation from samsara can be attained really all comes down to one's actual practice.

In terms of actual practices, emptiness and not-self are the two practices for the third and the fourth characteristic of the Noble Truth of Suffering. As for the second characteristic of suffering, you can refer to the common preliminary teaching on 'the woes of samsara' in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. To practice impermanence, I find that, at the moment at least, the factors contributing to the eternalist views are not those subtle ones but rather the more obvious ones. So the practice to counter this kind of view is the teaching on 'the impermanence of life' as specified in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Once we have completed these practices satisfactorily, firm renunciation will arise which is certain to help with our quest for liberation.

Actually, it is a big mistake not knowing the importance for all

sentient beings of learning and practicing the Dharma. Sentient beings all possess Buddha nature. Through the incessant effort of all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, surely everyone will eventually come to realize this. Just the process may take longer to come to fruition. Until then, we should also strive to gain that realization on our own.

As laypersons, you all have varied duties and at times tedious things to deal with everyday. But there are twenty four hours in a day. To spend one hour each morning and evening to contemplate the questions about samsara and leave the remaining twenty two hours for other activities should be a feasible arrangement, I would think. Even more importantly, besides having the right view, practitioners need to be able to practice. Already one needs extremely good fortune to hear the Dharma and develop faith in the Buddha, particularly so in this modern age. But absent the actual practice, no amount of Buddhist knowledge can help solve any problem of life. And even if it does help finally, it will be after a long, long time. Therefore, either for others' or our own sake, we should start our practice sooner rather than some time later.

Although it is understandable for laypersons to acquire a skill or two in order to make a living, it has nothing to do with liberation and is not the purpose of life, only something we do temporarily. Nonetheless, it does not mean that we ought to drop everything we do once we start Buddhist practice. If that were the case, Buddhism would not stay viable for long either. In Buddhist

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tradition, there have always been two distinct groups of lay and monastic practitioners. The monastics dedicate themselves solely to Buddhist practice whereas lay practitioners practice the Dharma while leading a secular life. Yet lay practitioners are not supposed to concern themselves fully with worldly matters, like those who do not practice at all. Appropriately measured participation in the mundane activities is already quite sufficient.

Other than the four characteristics, scientific discussions, philosophical viewpoints, traditions, cultures, etc. are also considered the characteristics of the Noble Truth of Suffering. In fact, these characteristics number in the tens of thousands. Since we cannot study them all in our limited lifetime, only these four are chosen to help us realize the true nature of cyclic existence.

### **The Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering**

There are two origins. One is defilement like greed, hatred, delusion, arrogance and the like. The other is karma caused by the defilements, which includes both positive and negative karma. Why are they deemed the origin of suffering? It is because they are what keeps us in samsara. In other words, everything we experience in samsara originates from karma and defilements.

We must understand that the six realms of samsara are not invented or arranged by the Creator or any personified god. Nor

are they some chance happenings, devoid of causes and conditions. They are in fact the manifestations of cause and effect. And the most important cause among all is clinging to the self. What does it mean by clinging to the self? For instance, when we have a headache, we say, “I have a headache.” A notion of the self is in that statement. Or, if a car suddenly drives by us when we are riding a bicycle, it would give us a start. Here, a sense of the self is also present in our minds. All that causes this sense of the self to arise is a kind of blind attachment. Attachment may be blind or senseless, but it has completely taken control over every one of us, including those we greatly admire.

The effect of clinging to the self is to put one’s own interest above others’. Although sometimes one may appear to be altruistic, in reality self-interest still comes first. Clinging to the self engenders greed, hatred, delusion and other defilements. Greed impels us to steal; hatred drives us to kill. The resulting karma becomes a cause which produces an effect. All the phenomena in the world including those invisible to us in the micro-universe follow the law of causality. Thus killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and other unwholesome deeds will definitely bear the corresponding karmic fruits which manifest as the myriad suffering of samsara. The cause that results in suffering is the origin of suffering. At present, our most important task is to uproot the causes of suffering. And the way to achieve this goal is to practice the Dharma, to cultivate the right view and to gain realization of emptiness.

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## The Noble Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering

The cause of entering nirvana or that of liberation is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. It also has four characteristics listed in the *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra*, but we will not discuss them in details here. The gist of the path is contained in *The Three Principal Aspects of the Path* written by Je Tsongkhapa, which encompasses all the key issues of exoteric and esoteric Buddhism.

The first aspect is renunciation, which essentially means not to make the pursuit of material accomplishments the purpose of life. Having generated renunciation, one should no longer act like those who exchange their whole precious life for ephemeral pleasures, but set to obtain liberation as the grand purpose of life. One can even imitate the bodhisattvas to arouse bodhicitta and live for the deliverance of all sentient beings to liberation. If one determines to focus life on obtaining one's own freedom from cyclic existence instead of pursuing material pleasures, one can be deemed having generated renunciation.

The second is bodhicitta, which is the aspiration to live for the attainment of liberation for all sentient beings. This is different from the good Samaritans reported in the newspapers or on television. The true bodhisattvas have only one goal in life, and that is to use their lifetime to benefit others.

The third aspect is realization of emptiness.

In a nutshell, the path leading to the cessation of suffering can

be subsumed under these three aspects. Over the years, I have kept insisting on the necessity of generating renunciation and bodhicitta before taking up any other practice. It is not because there are no better practices, but rather it would be useless to practice them without having the requisite faculties. Taking the path leading to the cessation of suffering can eliminate all the defilements which are the origins of the suffering of samsara. Just as physical pain disappears once the illness has been cured, suffering ceases after all the defilements have been eradicated.

Conventional wisdom holds that to see is to believe. So for us, what we can see with our own eyes is most convincing. For example, it would be quite difficult to visualize a transparent stone wall because the eyes do not see such a wall. However, when practice has reached a certain stage, practitioners will be much less influenced by the external factors. At that point, one has gained the ability to change or control outer phenomena at will, thereby weakening or eliminating the external influence altogether. But presently such ability is still beyond our reach. Although some may question its plausibility, descriptions of such ability are abundantly available in various texts and have been broadly analyzed in some of the more contemporary treatises. In addition, personal actualization by many accomplished practitioners has provided even stronger proof. It is just that our own practice is not up to that high standard yet. To get to that level of attainment, the foundational practices are absolutely indispensable. And the first step is to generate renunciation.

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## The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering

The cessation of suffering means having eliminated all the defilements. It is like the reemergence of blue sky after the clouds have been blown away by the wind. Similarly, when negative karma and defilements have been purified and uprooted by renunciation, bodhicitta and realization of emptiness, Buddha nature (*Tathagatagarbha*) will naturally arise. This is the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering, the ultimate effect of practicing the Dharma. Then, does it mean that actualization of *Tathagatagarbha* is the sole purpose for us to practice the Dharma? Of course not. The ultimate goal of Mahayana practice is to attain enlightenment in order to benefit sentient beings more effectively and completely.

Of the four noble truths, we discussed the nature of suffering more extensively than the other three. As for the specifics of the actual practice, please refer to *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. Dharma practice is indeed very important, but don't place too much attention on its seemingly mysterious side. Rather, we should just faithfully follow the words of the Buddha and steadily move along. This is the only sure way that will take us to the ultimate goal. So do keep up with your practice.




1. The attainment of cessation is the highest possible meditational state in Theravada Buddhism.

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# THE TWELVE NIDANAS<sup>1</sup>

—THE SEQUENCE OF CYCLIC EXISTENCE

 *The importance of mastering  
the doctrine of the Twelve Nidanas*

The doctrine of the Twelve Nidanas is a key Buddhist thought. It mainly delineates how the past, present and future lives of human beings or other viviparous animals of the desire realm<sup>2</sup> come about. In other words, it explains how we enter and leave this world.

Why do we need to understand our coming and going? The Twelve Nidanas, like the constantly moving wheel, take us into, out of and back into this world over and over again. We need to be prepared when this process restarts. What the Twelve Nidanas deal with is something that everyone has to face, and how to face it is a very important lesson for us all.

The Twelve Nidanas as presented in *Ornament of Clear Realization* are quite complicated. The intent of this discussion is, however, to focus only on the parts that are important for us to know.

We have all been through the cycle of the Twelve Nidanas

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innumerable times. It is still continuing today because we have not prepared to confront it so far. In fact, not knowing how to deal with it is the real reason. Unless we begin to tackle it now, the cycle of death and rebirth will never end on its own. This is obviously quite an important matter.

We neither came to nor will leave this world voluntarily. However unwilling, we all have to go when it is time, not by choice and certainly not on our terms. As well, we came in the same fashion. If there were free choices, no being would want to be born as an ox or a horse. But the reality is that we see these poor beings all the time. If free will were possible, all beings would naturally choose to be king in the human realm or someone like Indra, the King of the gods, instead of an ox or a horse. This clearly shows that beings cannot choose the timing or the form of birth. One just has to come when it is time. Why?

This is by no means God's will. Buddhism does not acknowledge a personified God but respects all faiths, including the viewpoints of atheism and the non-Buddhist traditions. Some people may find this statement unacceptable since atheism rejects the ideas of samsara and causality. How can such nihilistic views be respected?

As a matter of fact, the sutras answered this question long time ago. The answer is that although atheism is incorrect, atheists at least have contemplated the question of life. In this respect, they are better than those who, like animals, only care about eating and

drinking, and generally feel apathetic toward the issues of life and rebirth. Although the atheists have not found the truth, it is possible that with the right guidance their views may change gradually through meditation. Hence, Buddhism also respects nihilists' right to their own views. As for eternalism, it certainly deserves some respect since practicing virtue is part of its doctrine as well. The way both exoteric and esoteric Buddhism regard non-Buddhist faiths is this: respect their views but do not acknowledge them.

What Buddhism does acknowledge is that sentient beings do not have free will over their cyclic existence, and that it is not without causes that we keep roaming about involuntarily in samsara. Yet causes and conditions can be changed and improved because they are compounded phenomena.

Fatalists think that everything is predestined and under no circumstances can it be changed. Buddhists do not acknowledge this viewpoint. Buddhism holds that even immutable karma can be changed with the attainment of realization of emptiness or true repentance. It is also owing to the view that compounded phenomena are not predestined, but can be improved, transformed and controlled, that we need to learn the Twelve Nidanas. It can be said that not knowing the Twelve Nidanas is in fact not to know ourselves.

Those who are deemed the greats by the world, such as the respectable Nobel Prize winners, are really only adepts in their respective field that in terms of scope is still somewhat limited. Many of them possibly do not even understand their own nature,

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much less the mystery of mind. It is simply out of need, not curiosity, to resolve the question of cyclic rebirth that we now proceed to learn the Twelve Nidanas.

First of all, we need to identify the origin of sentient beings' endless and involuntary rebirths in the six realms of samsara. Once found, we must eradicate it. Only then will we have truly found the path out of samsara.

## *An overview of the Twelve Nidanas*

Of Theravada and Mahayana, each holds its own standpoint on the Twelve Nidanas. Within Mahayana, there are the views of Yogachara (the Mind- Only school) and Madhyamika (the Middle Way school). For Theravada, there are two views as well of Sarvastivada (the Realistic school) and Sautrantika (the Sutra school). Minor details apart, all these schools agree on the key points. Our discussion will just focus on their common grounds and ignore their differences.

In the scriptures, the Twelve Nidanas are divided into three phases: past life, present life, and future life.

*Past life* In this phase, the first is ignorance, and the second is volitional actions. What do volitional actions mean? Out of ignorance and defilements come the actions of body, speech and mind which produce either virtuous or evil karma. Volitional actions are such karma. The third is consciousness, which can fall under the past life or the present life. As it is usually included in the present life, there leaves only ignorance and volitional actions in the phase of past life.

*Present life* Consciousness, name and form, the six sense bases, contact and feeling belong to this phase.

In addition, there are craving—the desire of ordinary beings, grasping—the deeds performed to satisfy craving, and becoming—the cause of samsara, that is, positive and negative karma, with the

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three kinds of existence (desire, form and formlessness) the effect of karma. Although these three are assigned to the present life, they are the causes of the future life. Altogether eight states, the previous five plus these three, are in the phase of present life.

*Future life* There are only birth and old age/death in this phase. Old age and death are combined into one because some people get old before they die and others may die before they get old. It is hard to tell which comes first and hence the arrangement.

In total, twelve linking states are divided into three phases.

### *The key to breaking off the Twelve Nidanas*

Ignorance gives rise to volitional actions, volitional actions to consciousness and ultimately birth to old age and death. Each preceding cause gives rise to the subsequent effect which in turn gives rise to the next cause and so on. This is dependent origination. The same also applies in reverse. That is, when ignorance stops, volitional actions stop as well, then consciousness, name and form...until birth stops, finally aging and death stop. Dependent origination thus ceases. The continuation of dependent origination is samsara, its ceasing liberation from samsara.

What we are experiencing now is the continuation of dependent origination, the ceasing of which is what we need to accomplish. The key for continuing or ceasing dependent origination is ignorance, the first of the Twelve Nidanas. As long as ignorance remains, the subsequent phenomena will not stop. For instance, when the locomotive is running, the rest of the carriage will move along. If it stops or if there is no engine, the rest of the train will not move either. Similarly, if the first link of the chain does not stop, the rest will not stop; once ignorance stops, the rest cannot continue and hence liberation from samsara. All in all, the primary solution still rests with the eradication of ignorance.

As an example, in a nightmare we would experience pain and fear as real as we do in daytime. Why is that? When we sleep, we dream. However, it is not the dream that is affecting us and causing

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us pain but our clinging to the dream being solid and real. If we do not take it for real, it cannot cause fear and pain even though scenes of the dream do appear.

Likewise, the reason we experience suffering in samsara is also due to clinging—we take what is illusory as real and solid, so we suffer as a result. If we can turn around and realize the insubstantial, illusory nature of samsara, all fear and suffering will vanish as if waking up from a dream. Though samsara may not stop instantly, it will begin to fade. As in a nightmare, when we are aware that it is a dream, all the fear and pain associated with that dream will vanish immediately, even though the dream has not ended. Realizing the dream is unreal while dreaming stops all emotional reactions to it. We are now in the long dream of samsara. If we can wake up from it, that is, realize the empty nature of all phenomena, so can the cycle of rebirth ends.

The key point is ignorance. Ignorance is delusion. That means we mistakenly regard all we see and hear as real. It is this strong clinging to the illusion of reality that makes us endure much suffering. The bodhisattvas, having attained realization and thus comprehended perfectly the void nature of all phenomena, suffer no more. The fact that they are free of clinging and suffering enables them to remain in samsara until all sentient beings have been liberated. If instead they still cling to that illusion like ordinary people do, they cannot but experience suffering as well and would not be able to remain in samsara forever to liberate

sentient beings. Therefore, the first step is to eradicate ignorance.

Simply put, the way to eradicate ignorance is first to cultivate renunciation, arouse bodhicitta and lastly to realize emptiness which is of course the most crucial. The specific and essential method to attain realization of emptiness is to practice *anatta* (not-self)—neither beings nor the external phenomena have an inherently existing self. There are no other ways. Theoretically speaking, emptiness can be determined by deduction, but the practice of *anatta* is specifically intended for this purpose. It can serve as the foundation for practicing the Great Perfection later. In the end, we still need to practice the Great Perfection itself to find the way out of cyclic existence as the Great Perfection is indeed the best, fastest and easiest way for us to succeed in this endeavor. So first, ignorance must go. That means adherence to the independent reality of self and phenomena must stop.



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## *The three phases and the twofold causality*

The Twelve Nidanas have twofold cause and effect, but they are divided into three phases rather than just past and future life.

Regarding the twofold cause and effect, the first is termed that which “causes” and “to be caused.” Here, “cause” refers to inducing the five aggregates of the future life. In other words, without the preceding cause and condition, the subsequent cause and condition or the next link will not come about. The latter, the one “to be caused,” is the cause and condition brought by the one that “causes.”

The second is termed that which “generates” and “to be generated.” It means that if there was nothing to generate, the five aggregates of the future life would never be formed or generated. The cause is the one “generates” and the effect is the one “to be generated”.

The way that the Buddha classified the Twelve Nidanas is very thorough and comprehensive, backed by sufficient evidence and endowed with special meaning. But we will only discuss briefly why they are divided into three phases, and why only two are assigned to each of the past and the future life. Actually, all Twelve Nidanas exist in each of the three phases of life. However, there is certain significance as to why they are divided as such.

**First phase: past life** From ignorance comes clinging to an inherently existing self; from clinging to a real self comes the desire to find happiness for oneself. To satisfy that desire, one

needs many objects

that can bring happiness. In the process of obtaining these objects, one may affect others, sometimes negatively, resulting in either virtuous or evil karma being committed. Volitional actions, the second of the Twelve Nidanas, are such karma.

The eight states such as becoming, name and form, contact and so forth that belong to the phase of the present life also exist in the past life. Their exclusion is because they are not that important for this phase as opposed to ignorance and volitional actions. Among the eight states, craving, grasping and becoming are in fact ignorance and volitional actions as well, just named differently. The other five are not so crucial at this stage. The reason why we are what we are today is not due to consciousness, name and form, the six sense bases, contact and feeling in the past life but ignorance which in turn gives rise to karma. It is exactly these two that cause all the suffering in this life and hence their designation in the phase of the past life.

When we take rebirth, the eight states will also be present in the future life. Why is it that only birth and old age/death have been designated for the future life? It is because old age and death are birth’s suffering. Pointing out old age and death specifically would help us understand the woes of cyclic rebirth.

**Second phase: present life** The first state of the present life is consciousness. When the mind of a bardo being merges with

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a zygote from the parents, what emerged at the very first instant is consciousness.

It only lasts one instant, not two or three. From the second instant onward, name and form begins.

Another interpretation of consciousness is that, if alaya consciousness is acknowledged, it itself is the alaya consciousness. However, the Theravada tradition does not acknowledge alaya consciousness. To Theravada, this is mind consciousness. Either way, the mind emerged at the first instant of conception is called consciousness.

The second is name and form, which begins from the second instant of conception. In the beginning stage of gestation, there is just the shape of an embryo, not yet a full body. It can only be deemed a cause for the manifestation of a human body. This is form. What is name then? According to the *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra*, “name” is sensation, perception and mental formations associated with consciousness in the early period of gestation. In fact, all six consciousnesses are inseparable from sensation, perception and mental formations. Why are they called name? For instance, a name of a person or an object is not like matter which has mass that can block the passage of other substances. An object can have three or four names, but they would not interfere with one another. Likewise, neither would sensation, perception and mental formations obstruct one another as they are non-material, a process of mind and hence the term “name”.

Buddhism enumerates five stages of gestation that are described in both the *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra* and the tantras of Great Perfection. The descriptions are very detailed particularly in the tantras of Great Perfection. Despite the fact that the word “cell” was not used in these texts, the writing actually delineated the complex process of cell division (reproduction). Those with a medical background would be very surprised to discover that the depiction is in accord with that of modern medicine. The gestation period between the second instant of conception and right before the development of the six sense organs is designated name and form, which lasts quite a long time.

The third is the six sense bases. It refers to the early development period of the five sense organs of eye, ear, nose, tongue and body. Though growing gradually, the eyes can yet see and the ears yet hear. The state before the six sense organs can establish contact with the six sense objects is named the six sense bases.

The fourth is contact (coming together). That is when the five sense organs are fully developed and able to make contact with external objects. Why is it named contact? For example, in this state when all three conditions—the ear, the sound and ear consciousness—are present, the ear can hear the sound outside or within the uterus and can tell the volume of the sound. Contact indicates the ability to distinguish the external world, which is also a rather long process.

The fifth is sensation. It is the pleasant or unpleasant feelings

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that arise after having made contact. Sensation refers to the state beginning with the ability to distinguish between pain and joy, which serves as the cause, and grows gradually to the point before karma is committed. Although children may also generate karma, it is comparatively less common for them to commit karma in the same way as adults would for their own benefit. This state lasts more than ten years.

Of the twofold cause and effect, the above seven states belong to the first. Ignorance and volitional actions are the ones that “cause”—they cause consciousness, name and form, the six sense bases, contact and sensation of the present life to arise. Consciousness, name and form, the six sense bases, contact and sensation are the ones “to be caused”—they are caused by ignorance and volitional actions of the past life.

Next is craving, which essentially means desire for temporal fulfillment.

Grasping follows craving. Grasping is to engage in activities that sustain one’s livelihood, whereby karma is committed and the cause of rebirth is being set once again. Nowadays what most adults do every day would be defined as grasping. For instance, during the course of conducting business, people may cheat others of their money, tell lies and engage in all sorts of competitions. When competing with others, harms may be done either intentionally or unintentionally. All these are creating karma.

What follows is the state of becoming, which can be understood

as samsara or the cause of samsara. Here, it means the latter, the same as volitional actions. Just the wording is different. Volitional action is karma committed in the past life and the cause of the present life. Becoming is karma committed in the present life and the cause of the next life. In other words, becoming is virtuous and evil karma.

Craving gives rise to grasping and becoming. And karma is thus committed. By then, the causes of rebirth are complete: craving, grasping and becoming. How can there not be an effect (rebirth) when all the causes are already present? Rebirth is inevitable. These three describe the course that starts when one is able to perform karmic actions to the end of one’s life.

Above is the summary of the eight linking states of the present life.


**Third phase: future life** FThen comes birth of the next life. Here, birth means the same as afore-mentioned consciousness, the first instant of conception, only in different word.

Next is old age/death, which includes the whole process from the arising of name and form to sensation.

These are the Twelve Nidanas. Craving, grasping and becoming of the present life are what “generate”; birth and old age/death of the future life are that “to be generated.” This is the second of the twofold cause and effect.

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 *The significance of distinguishing  
the twofold causality*

There are proximate and distant causes as well as effects of samsara. The distant causes are ignorance and virtuous and evil karma (volitional actions) committed in the past life. The proximate causes are craving, grasping and becoming of the present life. The distant effects refer to birth and old age/death of the next life. The proximate effects refer to the five states of the present life from consciousness to sensation.

Even when the distant causes are present, no rebirth will take place if the proximate causes are absent. In other words, although ignorance and volitional actions, the causes from the past life, are already committed, it is still possible that we should not have to come back to samsara if we can completely eradicate craving, the desire for samsara, through the attainment of spiritual realization, notwithstanding all past negative karma have yet been purified. It is said in the sutras that a cart with two wheels will be unable to move if one of the wheels is missing. By the same token, absent craving, there will be no rebirth despite the presence of all the past causes. Ordinary craving can be resolved by cultivating renunciation, but subtler craving must be extinguished through the practice of not-self.

For someone to attain arhathood, the distant causes are needed but not the proximate cause—craving. Being an arhat, one must

have eliminated all defilements and craving is a kind of defilement. Still, arhats have to bear the karmic fruits of this life resulting from the causes formed in the past life, as many such stories are told in *One Hundred Stories about Karma* and other scriptures. Even so, they will not be reborn in samsara again as they have cut off all worldly desires. It is to help us understand this causality that the Twelve Nidanas are divided into the twofold cause and effect.

One may question, “Many accomplished masters have attained extraordinary realization. Why do they still encounter obstacles or become ill?”

There are two possibilities. One of them can be explained by way of the Twelve Nidanas. Accomplished practitioners may have eradicated all defilements in this life, but they were once ordinary beings in the past. Even Shakyamuni Buddha was an ordinary being before attaining Buddhahood, not to mention the lesser known practitioners. As an ordinary being, one cannot but commit karma and karma is infallible. Consequently, even accomplished masters must still go through suffering in this life due to some distant causes not yet resolved. Nonetheless, this will be the last time they have to experience suffering again in their cyclic existence since primordial time.

We all know the story of Nagarjuna. The prince of King Lexin went to him demanding his head. Nagarjuna said, “You cut it off yourself.” The prince, no matter how expertly he used his sword, could not cut the head off; it was almost like cutting through air.

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Nagarjuna then said, “I purified all the heterogeneous effects resulting from cutting others with weapons five hundred lifetimes ago, except the one of killing insects while cutting kusha grass. So, you may use kusha grass to cut off my head.” The prince then cut his head off with one kusha grass. This story tells us that even someone as accomplished as Nagarjuna cannot avoid any karmic effect when it ripens. Therefore, it is a possibility that some of these respectable practitioners still have residual karmic effects left to be resolved.

Another possibility can be inferred from the following example. Having attained Buddhahood, Shakyamuni Buddha was forever free from the influence of causality. However, he manifested illness to show sentient beings the infallibility of karma. For instance, the evil king of Sravasti attacked the hometown of the Buddha and killed seventy-seven thousand of the Shakya clan. The streets were all blood red because the king had ordered that only when all the streets were covered with blood could the killing stop. Finally, to satisfy the king, his people had to mix red dye with water and poured on the streets to make it look like blood was running everywhere. At that point, the Buddha started getting a headache. The reason is that in his past life, the Buddha and the slaughtered clansmen had done something bad together. The Buddha himself also said, “Because of that negative karma, I have to endure a headache even though I have attained supreme enlightenment. If it were not for the perfect merit I have thus gathered, I too would

have been killed today.” The fact is that the negative effect could never have happened to the Buddha. He manifested a headache only to help beings believe the truth of causality.

Moreover, according to the *Vinaya Pitaka*, in ancient India over two thousand years ago, with winter being so cold as to split open bamboos by its bitter cold winds, many bhikshus got sick due to the lack of shoes and caps to keep warm. The Buddha also got sick and had to take medicine. One time, he had a backache and asked Bhikshu Kasyapa to chant some sutras to ease the pain. But the truth is that the Buddha would never have sustained any real pain. These incidents were all just manifestations.

Because of these questions, the Buddha divided the Twelve Nidanas into the twofold cause and effect. On the subject of cause and effect, many Buddhists are either confused or simply do not understand, let alone non-Buddhists. Although not knowing what causality is, many of them still dare to refute and criticize the existence of cause and effect.

It makes one wonder what they could possibly refute and criticize something that they do not have any inkling about. Nonetheless, when the karmic force is in play, people will have this inexplicable impetus and nerve to act. Under certain circumstances, demons and demonic hindrances can also bestow fearlessness on people.

With the twofold cause and effect, the workings of karma and samsara are thus revealed: that which “generates” is primarily craving. When craving ends, so does rebirth.

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 *Use the Twelve Nidanas to introspect  
and practice diligently*

Now let us see if we miss any part of the Twelve Nidanas. None is missed. That means we are ready for the next cycle of samsara, and we will definitely return. But where we will be reborn depends on the magnitude of our virtuous and evil karma. If more evil than good have been done, we will come back to the lower realms; vice versa, with more virtuous than evil deeds, the celestial or human realm will be our next destination, but they do not last long. After a short period of bliss and good fortune, we eventually will fall again to the lower realms. In the long run, it does not seem so meaningful to be reborn repeatedly either as humans or celestial beings. As the danger of falling to the lower realms is always there, we cannot be completely safe until we succeed in transcending the cycle of death and rebirth. This is not like the doctrine of the Last Judgment or the end of the world as some other faiths believe, nor a scare tactic. It is simply the reality of samsara.

Basically we do not know much about what happens before and after life. Through the Twelve Nidanas, we can understand how we came to and leave this world, which affords us a better idea about the two ends of life. Although we have no clue as to what we were in the previous life, we know there were ignorance and karmic force; nor do we know where we will be in the next life, but there will be birth, old age and death. This much we know for sure.

If we do not wish to continue like this, we will need to stop the chain effect of the Twelve Nidanas. How can we do that? Can burning incense, performing prostrations and reciting mantras stop the interlinking effect? They can perhaps serve as one of the causes and conditions leading to that outcome, but not the key solution. What then is the most effective? Is it to cultivate compassion or to contemplate the impurities of the human body? Unfortunately, neither provides the solution to the task at hand which ultimately can only be dealt with via realization of emptiness. If such realization can be attained, all distant and proximate causes will cease, so will all distant and proximate effects.

For example, if the foundation of a high-rise is shaky, the whole building will collapse. Likewise, once ignorance is eradicated, the building of ignorance-based samsara will also collapse.

There is only the Buddha who knows the truth unlocking the secrets of cyclic existence. Not only that the non-Buddhist practitioners of ancient times could not grasp the truth of life and death, of samsara, karma and the nature of consciousness, modern scientists and philosophers are also at a loss. They are not the ones with definitive knowledge in this field. So, how can they give a credible criticism under the circumstances?

It is practically impossible to verify or fathom the inner world of humans with modern instruments. A video camera can capture the sound and the tears of a crying person for all to see, but it cannot record that person's mental activity: whether the crying is

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out of joy or sadness. This cannot be discerned from the image alone. Thus, the inner feelings or the mental aspect of a person is not observable directly through any devices. Sometimes, a more advanced scanner can pinpoint the location in a brain where irregular brain waves are detected when a person feels happy or distressed. But there is no way to know why the waves appear unless the person says, “I was very happy at that moment.” Then we will know that the irregular brain waves are the reaction of a happy mood, and confirm thence the appearance in the brain of such phenomenon when people are happy. If no one ever tells how he or she feels, can any device know the moods of a person by itself? No. That means the most essential part of human life, its mental aspect, is not to be captured or scanned by instruments. Some people may think they have expertise in this field, but they don’t. Even psychologists today are forced to admit that this area is where they still know very little about.

With regard to the mental aspect of human life, we can only rely on the teachings of the Buddha because only he knows the truth completely. How do we know this? The fact that many practitioners have gained extraordinary accomplishment by following the Buddha’s instructions validates the teachings being the right view and the right path.

So what should we do now? Our very first task should be to destroy ignorance. Before that is done, doing prostrations, reciting sutras and performing virtuous deeds can at best allow us to enjoy

certain worldly benefits. But ignorance cannot be destroyed this way as these good actions are not its antidote. If we do not want to continue roaming about in samsara, we need to find a tool that can exert a sharp and counteracting force on ignorance so as to be able to eradicate it. That tool is realization of emptiness. This is a very important point to note.

In any case, actual practice should always be undertaken in three stages: cultivating renunciation, arousing bodhicitta and finally contemplating emptiness. Just practicing these three accordingly would be enough to eradicate ignorance. No more, no less. Once ignorance stops, the chain of causation will be dismantled as well. So, do make the best use of your time and practice diligently.

For lay practitioners, the minimum is to take one hour each morning and evening to practice. Everyone should be able to manage at least this much in a day. The practice should begin with the cultivation of renunciation. Once that has reached some stability, go on to practice bodhicitta. After both renunciation and bodhicitta have been generated, move on to contemplate emptiness using the method of the Middle Way as a preliminary. The last is the actual practice of emptiness of which one may choose to go with the Vajrayana tradition if so wished, as Vajrayana practice may bring faster results. However, to practice Vajrayana entails empowerment and observance of the precepts. If unsure of keeping the Vajrayana vows, one can choose the exoteric practices instead, which may also

lead to liberation but will take longer time to achieve.

These are the necessary and important tasks for every practitioner. It would be a great loss to anyone who has acquired the knowledge and the methods of these practices in this lifetime yet does nothing. By comparison, to lose tens of thousands of dollars is considered a big loss by many. Money lost may be earned back, but not spiritual practice. Missing the chance this time, it will be hard to say whether one gets to practice again in the next life.

Actually, I have kept reiterating these key points many times in recent years. Many people should have known quite well the practice methods by now. But one should not only appreciate the knowledge gained so far but also put them into actual practice. Only then can rebirth end, can others and oneself be liberated.



1. The chain of twelve states of dependent origination
2. All sentient beings reside in the Triple Realms of the universe, i.e., the realms of desire (our world), form (lesser deities) and formlessness (higher deities).

# THE TWO TRUTHS

—THE KEY TO UNLOCKING MADHYAMAKA

## I. Overview

### **The differentiation of Madhyamaka**

In Tibetan Buddhism, a distinction is made between Madhyamaka (Middle Way) and Mahamadhyamaka (Great Middle Way). Its explanation is the following.

The theory put forward in the scriptures like Nagarjuna's *Six Treatises on Madhyamaka*, the *Wisdom* Chapter of *The Way of the Bodhisattvas* by Shantideva, *Introduction to the Middle Way* by Chandrakirti and so forth is Madhyamaka, not Mahamadhyamaka. The reason is that these texts only explain the teachings from the second turning of the wheel of Dharma and do not directly address the luminous nature of mind that is free of all graspings as taught in the third turning of the wheel. It is possible that people with superior faculty may realize emptiness while cultivating renunciation or bodhicitta. For instance, when we have



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contemplated the different facets of renunciation or bodhicitta for some time until the mind becomes weary, we will stop and just let the mind rest. At this point, all thoughts fall away naturally. If one has accumulated sufficient merit and purified enough negative karma, one may realize emptiness at the very instant when all deluded thoughts vanish. However, one must have acquired certain knowledge of Madhyamaka beforehand.

Mahamadhyamaka refers to Shentong Madhyamaka or Tathagatagarbha. In the Indian Buddhist tradition, there are no such terms as Rangtong (empty of self) and Shentong (empty of other). The Tibetans coined these terms, but the significance of Rangtong and Shentong is still present in Indian Buddhism. Mahamadhyamaka is about Tathagatagarbha. It is Great Madhyamaka because it comprises the additional meaning of “Clear Light.” As there is no discussion of clear light, considered the ultimate of Buddhist teachings, in Nagarjuna’s *Six Treatises on Madhyamaka*, it is designated only as an exposition on Madhyamaka.

### **The necessity of separating the two truths**

Both Madhyamaka and Mahamadhyamaka should be understood from the point of view of the two truths to avoid misapprehension.

The main subject here is Madhyamaka, not Mahamadhyamaka, and it will be examined from the perspective of the relative truth and the

ultimate truth because the two truths encompass the whole meaning of Madhyamaka. It is also critically important to separate the two.

Many people who do not understand the views of Madhyamaka tend to find many contradictions when reading the scriptures of *Prajnaparamita*, such as the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra*, that expound the idea of emptiness, i.e., the five aggregates, the four elements and in fact all phenomena are without distinct self-nature. This is plainly because they do not know the need to separate the two truths in their analysis. Here are some of the usual questions: Is Buddhahood a fallacy? If the Buddha is empty of self-nature, what is the point of practicing the Dharma and how is one supposed to attain Buddhahood? Are causality and rebirth for real? If karma, samsara, Buddhahood, the practice itself and the act of freeing sentient beings from suffering are all real, how can they be empty of self-nature at the same time? To answer these questions, the two truths must be applied separately.

In his treatise, *Introduction to the Middle Way*, Chandrakirti referred to a debate in the opening chapter on emptiness. As he was explaining the non-existence of cause and effect, someone objected by saying, “Cause and effect clearly are real phenomena to our five sense consciousnesses. If they are non-existent, how can eye-consciousness see, or ear-consciousness hear?”

How did Chandrakirti end the debate? By applying the ultimate truth and the relative truth separately to his explanation, he was able to dispel the doubt.

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Actually, the reason to separate the two truths is not to stop any argument or to refute the viewpoints of any individual or other beliefs, but to disprove our own misconceptions. Similarly, the purpose for teaching *prajnaparamita* by the Buddha or writing the *Six Treatises on Madhyamaka* by Nagarjuna is to dismiss the wrong views of ordinary people, not merely to prevent any arguments. Though we do not need to debate with others, we need to convince ourselves. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to learn the theory of the two truths of Madhyamaka.

### **The importance of studying the two truths**

The scope of Madhyamaka is very broad, but here we will only focus on its basic but very key points which are both theory and actual practice.

First of all, we should know that to encounter the teaching on emptiness is not something to be taken for granted. Hearing it plants the seed for realization of emptiness that is not only indestructible but will also come to fruition in the near future. It is stated in the *Four Hundred Verse Treatise* by Aryadeva: Most sentient beings do not have the chance to hear the profound teaching on emptiness due to insufficient merit. Even if they do, most are unable to generate faith in or have reasonable doubt about the empty nature of phenomena, having little merit and

inferior capacity or being negatively influenced by the surrounding environment and their social background. Anyone who can muster even the slightest doubt about the plausibility of all phenomena being empty of self-nature will hence have the means to cease samsara in the end.

In addition, without the knowledge of emptiness, one cannot grasp the meaning of “a mind free of clinging and concepts” and will have difficulty applying this in one’s practice according to the three supreme methods. In this respect, studying the view of Madhyamaka is indeed very important.

After generating renunciation and bodhicitta, next comes the practice of emptiness. In *The Three Principal Aspects of the Path* by Je Tsongkhapa, the first two aspects are renunciation and bodhicitta, and the third is none other than the right view of emptiness. For us to arouse genuine renunciation and bodhicitta is not a problem, just a matter of time. From that point on, one must succeed in realization of emptiness in order to attain ultimate liberation. Otherwise, one cannot but fail to achieve this final goal, no matter how skillful one is in the practice of renunciation and bodhicitta.

Mahayana practitioners need to pass three checkpoints on the path to liberation, namely, renunciation, bodhicitta and realization of emptiness. The importance of gaining the wisdom of emptiness is thus apparent. Although it may still be too early for most of us to practice emptiness now, to learn something about it in advance definitely helps what we want to accomplish in due course.

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Nowadays, some people suggest that one only needs to undertake the actual practice and not care about the theory behind it. But how should one practice without knowing why to practice first? People like Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Chinese Zen lineage, and Jetsun Milarepa did not go through the traditional academic training, only relied on a long period of ascetic practice and the supreme blessing of their masters, to attain ultimate realization. But, then again, they were of incomparable faculty. How likely is it that we have the same quality? Not very likely for most of us, I would think.

What we should do is to set out on the path by way of learning and contemplating the teachings of the Buddha. Otherwise, how is one supposed to practice, knowing neither the theories nor the methods? Merely keeping the mind calm and thoughtless is not what practice is about. We all know that many animals regularly go into hibernation for months on end or even longer. Would anyone call this a form of practice? Or, would they thus be enlightened? I think not. So, just keeping the mind blank is not so important. What we really need is forming the correct view, which can only come from learning and contemplating the teachings. This is why the process of learning the Dharma has occupied such a critical position on the path to liberation.

What we need to know and think about is this: The right view of emptiness is the mighty sword needed to cut the root of samsara. Lacking this and relying only on the power of renunciation,

bodhicitta, the six paramitas and so forth cannot stop cyclic rebirth completely. You may feel that sometimes we emphasize the importance of renunciation as if nothing else matters, next we praise bodhicitta as the saving grace of all evil, and still at other times we make realization of emptiness the sole solution to all problems. The fact is that one should be equally mindful of all three. It is the actual practice that one should proceed in due order, starting with generation of renunciation to finally attaining realization of emptiness. As each has its own merit and functions, only by combining all three can one reach the final destination of liberation; not one is dispensable.

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## II. The meaning of Madhyamaka and the two truths

### **The meaning of Madhyamaka**

Madhyamaka means to cease all attachments and abandon the notion of duality. Simply put, duality refers to the tendency of clinging and grasping of ordinary people. Even our dreams are based on the notion of duality. During twenty four hours of a day, the things that we do, the thought from the sixth consciousness and the sensations of the five consciousnesses are all deemed duality. Duality denotes a twofold division as we always tend to think in relative terms like have and have not, permanent and impermanent, high and low, left and right, up and down, long and short.... The path to move away from this dichotomy and take the middle is Madhyamaka, the Middle Way. Well, does the “middle” exist somewhere? No, that is not possible. Be it as such, the term “middle way” is still the one provisionally suitable to express the concept of emptiness in human language. To fully understand it, however, one must only rely on direct personal experience.

### **The meaning of the ultimate truth and the relative truth**

To ordinary people, the ultimate truth represents an invisible,

untouchable state. In other words, it is a condition that our six consciousnesses have never been exposed to. The fact is that other than the physical and the mental world that can be reached via the six consciousnesses, there is another state which by no means parallels Plato’s world of Forms. Rather, it can be compared to the reappearance of a blue sky after dark clouds have been blown away. Our senses and perceptions are like dark clouds that block the truth of everything, including the self. All we need is to find a powerful force like the wind that can blow the clouds away. Once the clouds are cleared, we will discover this other state where there are no illusory manifestations of matter, mind, or movement, just a spatial, luminous and peaceful world like the clear blue sky of late autumn. Although this state does not exist as in the normal sense of a world, it can be addressed, albeit spuriously, as a “world.” Such is the state of the ultimate truth, the ultimate reality of all phenomena.

Incidentally, it was from the viewpoint of the ultimate truth that the Venerable Huineng composed his well-known stanza on the nature of mind:

*There is no Bodhi tree, Nor stand of a mirror bright.  
As nothing is ever there, Where can the dust alight?*

Who then is privy to this indescribable state? The Buddhas, bodhisattvas and realized beings know and can enter this state at will. Ordinary people are unable to directly experience it, but they can verify its existence by employing the logic of Madhyamaka.

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The relative truth is however something we understand most well. Everything from what we can feel via the five sense consciousnesses to all the thoughts arising from the sixth consciousness are deemed to be the relative truth. Consequently, there exist in the relative truth various phenomena of cause and effect, samsara, good and evil karma, success and failure as well as matter, mind, time, space, movement and all the disciplines of the world such as art, science, philosophy and the like.

The Buddha once said, “I do not argue with worldly people, yet they argue with me.” The first part of this sentence was spoken from the perspective of the relative truth. In this context, “worldly people” refers to the viewpoints formed on the basis of the five sense consciousnesses. From the standpoint of the relative truth, are the objects that worldly people see considered physical matter? Yes. And more than being physical, all the objects including mountains, rivers, land, etc. and our thoughts and feelings are also deemed to be existing. So do samsara and nirvana, good and evil. That is, everything that people can see, hear, smell, taste and touch exists. However, the sensations that people gain in this fashion only manifest a world of illusions, a world created by the five consciousnesses. Even if tentatively, the Buddha still affirmed the dream-like existence of this world. And whatever the five consciousnesses do not acknowledge, the Buddha considered them non-existent as well. Thus, the Buddha maintained his position of not arguing with worldly people. The view that he acquiesced to is

the relative truth.

The following stanza composed by the Venerable Shenxiu<sup>1</sup> can be understood from the perspective of the relative truth.

*Our body the bodhi-tree, The mind a mirror bright Constantly wipe them clean, And let no dust alight.*

However, as a representation of Shenxiu’s realization of *prajna*, it has yet reached the ultimate state.

What did the Buddha mean by “worldly people argue with me”? The Buddha had said this from the perspective of the ultimate truth. Why would worldly people argue with the Buddha? As the state of the ultimate truth expounded by the Buddha has surpassed what people’s five consciousnesses can normally comprehend, they cannot help arguing with him.

All things exist on two levels, namely, the relative truth and the ultimate truth. Let us take the example of a house. If observed from the point of view of the five consciousnesses, a house does exist in terms of the relative truth, serving its purpose in daily life. What is a house in terms of the ultimate truth? This we need to examine carefully. Our eyes may see a house, but does it truly exist? In fact, our eyes only see the appearance of a house, a phenomenon, but cannot distinguish whether this phenomenon is real or false.

For example, when there is something wrong with the eyes, one may see a snowy mountain as being yellow or blue. From the analysis of the mind consciousness, one knows that white should be

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the real color while yellow or blue is an illusion. And the evidence on which the mind consciousness bases its analysis comes from the correlated eye consciousness: Over the years, I have seen the snow white mountain. But now, all of a sudden, it becomes yellow. This must be a problem with my eyes, not due to any change of the mountain. It is through this kind of inference that one positively identifies the color of the snowy mountain as being white, not yellow. However, neither the eye nor the mind consciousness can transcend itself. Eyes can only see what they normally see and cannot go beyond that. The bases of mind consciousness all trace their origins to the five consciousnesses; they cannot overstep these boundaries either. Therefore, both the eye and the mind consciousnesses have their limitations and can never pass beyond that limit. This limited extent is the domain of the relative truth. Yet, by studying the theory of Madhyamaka, we can learn of the ultimate truth of, say, a house.

The ultimate truth is like the original white color of the snow mountain, and the relative truth the illusion caused by the eye problem of seeing a yellow or blue mountain. White is reality while yellow or blue is illusion. Or it can be said that the ultimate truth is like what we experience when we are awake and the relative truth the scenes in our dreams. The fact is that everything we go through in life, no matter waking up or sleeping, is really nothing more than a dream at the end.

The so-called success or failure is just a matter of having

a good dream or a nightmare. Judging from the point of being awake, the scenes in dreams are completely non-existent; all the feelings of pain and happiness, of being beautiful and ugly, vanish with the end of dreams. Similarly, when we finally reach the state of ultimate truth, joy and sorrow, good and evil, and all other phenomena of the mundane world will cease altogether. Yet, at the same time, we are still aware of the joy and the suffering of others. This awareness, serving as the impetus, will propel us to continue forever the task of freeing others from samsara.

Above is a general introduction of the relative truth and the ultimate truth.

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### III. How to discern the two worlds

How do we traverse between the worlds of the ultimate truth and the relative truth? Is only one of them the real truth? Or are both the real truth?

Ordinary people, unable to go in and out of the worlds of the ultimate truth and the relative truth, can only stay in the world defined by the relative truth. We practitioners now know the existence of the ultimate truth, but we still cannot enter it through our own practice. The

bodhisattvas who have attained the first bhumi and up can move back and forth between the two worlds from time to time. When they abide in the meditation of emptiness, they are in the world of the ultimate truth; once out of that meditation, they are in the world of the relative truth. The Buddha, on the other hand, always remains in the world of the ultimate truth as he has forever transcended that of the relative truth. Still, the Buddha knows fully the world of the relative truth: what sentient beings do, how to save them from suffering.....

Thus, it concludes that there are three types of people<sup>2</sup>: one remains in the world of the relative truth all the time, one always in the ultimate truth, and the third moves between the two worlds. Those who stay in the world of the relative truth are us ordinary beings. The ones who remain always in the ultimate truth are Buddhas. And the bodhisattvas from the first to the tenth bhumi move in between the

world of the ultimate truth and the relative truth.

The bodhisattvas are fully aware of the empty nature of phenomena once entering the state of the ultimate truth. When they are out of meditation, they return to the world of the relative truth. Back in this world, they experience various phenomena, both physical and mental, but they already know deep in their hearts that all is unreal, like dreams.

What do ordinary people, the first type of person, need to do now? They need to transcend their knowledge of the relative truth. Once that is done, they will discover the existence of another world, the world of the ultimate truth. Subsequently, they will compare the two truths and realize the huge difference between them. From this exercise, they come to see that the world they are living in, the world of the relative truth, is really just based on illusions. As they continue to practice the teachings faithfully, the whole phenomenal world will gradually disappear until there is nothing left. Does this mean that there is just a total blank afterwards? No, clear light of Tathagatagarbha will manifest at the very end. Although our topic today is Madhyamaka, not Mahamadhyamaka, still Madhyamaka must ultimately acknowledge Tathagatagarbha (Buddha nature) that is encompassed within Mahamadhyamaka.

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#### IV. *Why is the world of the relative truth illusory?*

In terms of the relative truth, the primary task for us ordinary people is not to comprehend the nature of Buddhahood or to attain the same realization as the bodhisattvas. Those are really far beyond what we can handle at this point. Instead, our task should be to disprove the viewpoints formed on the basis of our sense consciousnesses. But can we? Yes, we can. The foundation of all our clinging is without logic and unstable, so it can be knocked down quite easily. There are many ways to do this, but we will only select a few for discussion here.

Although in the *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra*, it has pointed out the five aggregates, twelve sense bases (*Ayatana*<sup>3</sup>) and eighteen elements (*dhatu*<sup>4</sup>) of humans, people normally are only aware of the mental world and the physical world. Hence, our discussion will be conducted only from the perspective of these two and leave out the more complicated details.

#### **Discern the illusive nature of the physical world**

Many people have this doubt in mind: The physical world is an objective reality. How can it be non-existent? But one should ask in return: Who knows that the existence of the physical world is an absolute fact? Is this idea self-taught, taught by others, or just felt like

this way? The substantiality of the physical world is not instilled into us by our parents or teachers, but comes from our own sense experience. When do we start having this sensation? For instance, some people did not believe in Buddhism at first. After learning its doctrines from reading the scriptures, they think it makes sense and thus become Buddhists. Is it the same with our sense of a concrete physical world, that we initially did not feel this way but later on develop it after learning of some theories? No. We were born with this innate sense. The sense of “I,” being inborn, then gave rise to the sense of “my.” We never ask for evidence of this sense of “I” and “my”; we simply accept this view without question. So, it is just our own idea, for no good reason, that the physical world is substantial.

– *i. Search for the evidence of physical existence* –  
Take the white wall for example. Just because the eyes can see it, we believe that the wall is white. But as said earlier, is there any reason why we believe so other than our eyes see a white object? No. The so-called reason is merely a sensation of the eyes; there is no other evidence. Then, are the eyes reliable? Do they always have the final say on everything? They certainly do not. Our eyes cannot even see the micro-universe in terms of the relative truth, not to mention that of the ultimate truth. Thus for the eyes to see a world more refined than the micro-universe would be totally out of the question. After going through a series of close observations and rigorous analyses, we find that there is no way to substantiate



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that the wall is white; no proof can be produced.

Furthermore, the temperature, speed and weight of an object can be measured by the instruments. Does this mean that the object exists? The instruments, however, need to be monitored by the eyes. Without the five sense organs, who is to know that the instruments could measure these data? This means that ultimately our perception is just a function of the sense organs. Other than this, there is no evidence whatsoever to prove the wall is white.

But the Buddha or Nagarjuna did not force this conclusion on us. Rather, it is derived from the fact that we really cannot produce any evidence to support the claim that “it truly is a white wall” after repeated observations.

*– ii. Search for the evidence  
that the present is not a dream –*

Another example is to distinguish between reality and dream. If I were to ask you to come up with the evidence in ten minutes to show that being here now and listening to this teaching is not a dream, I doubt that any of you could do that. The fact is that the inherent nature of dream and the actual world are not different; both are unreal. Some people may insist that being in class here and now is definitely a reality, not a dream, because they were not sleeping before coming here. In order to dream, one must be asleep. How can they be dreaming now if they are fully awake? Nevertheless, we often see in dreams exactly the same situation

as when we are awake. So this kind of argument cannot prove anything.

To people in general, the period prior to and after this life is nothing but a blur. We might have assumed that at least we know well what the present life is about. But judging from the reasoning above, we may no longer be so sure.

So far we have not tried to explain the two truths by way of the analytic methodology of Madhyamaka but from an angle that is easily understandable. Through the prior analysis, we cannot find the evidence to substantiate that, firstly, the wall is white and secondly, the present is not a dream. It goes to show that nothing that people do, see, or hear is actually based on anything solid. But in the modern society, most people are only concerned with accumulating wealth; whether they are living a real life or a dream is not important. The fact is that if people can contemplate seriously, they will realize that no evidence can be found to substantiate the reality of any matter or object.

What then is the conclusion following this line of thinking? It should at least raise some questions in our minds: What am I? Am I living in a big dream? This is something we would not have thought about without going through the following process of thorough examination: the dreams at night are small dreams → life in daytime is a big dream → the small dreams are enclosed within the big dream.

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– *iii. Search for the essence of matter* –

It would be easy to discern that the physical world is unreal by applying the reasoning of Madhyamaka, such as Nagarjuna's five reasons<sup>5</sup> or Chandrakirti's seven reasons<sup>6</sup> of the non-existence of the wooden cart. We will not go through all of them here, only take one simple example to demonstrate its logic.

Say, a disassembled car will become a pile of car parts, not a car any more. To continue disassembling, parts will become pieces of iron, then particles, then at last all matter will disappear before our eyes; nothing is left.

This would be the end result if analyzing from the point of the physical world. On a larger scale, the Earth is just a very small particle of the immense Milky Way. By further and further breaking apart the Earth, smaller particles will keep emerging until the end. So far, no philosophy, science, or other disciplines of the world have been able to perceive what would be at the end of this process. The Buddha, however, explained clearly some twenty-five hundred years ago: At last, no matter how small the particle is, it can neither be divided endlessly nor be indivisible. The so-called smallest particle can still be divided further until nothing is left. Another example is made with a dollar bill. If a dollar is changed to ten dimes which then are given to ten people, the dollar essentially disappears. The division of matter is similar to this. Ultimately, it will disappear without a trace.

If it is too difficult to comprehend how the smallest particle can

be divided down to nothing, one can use the construct of a car, a house, or a piece of fabric for observation of the illusory nature of matter. For example, when a piece of fabric is made into garments for people to wear, the fabric will be seen as something truly existent. But when the fabric is divided into threads, one does not see the fabric any more. If the threads are subdivided into wool (providing the threads are made of wool), no more threads will remain, only wool. To subdivide the wool further, it leaves just particles to be seen. Then, may I ask what happened to the fabric, the threads, and the wool? They have all disappeared one by one

In fact, all matter can be broken down, ultimately, to nonexistence. After all, matter arises from emptiness, disintegrates into emptiness, and is inseparable from emptiness at all time.

So far, we have at least understood that the external physical world is all an illusion. Yet, as ordinary people tend to cling to the idea of inherent existence, in the end they can only pin their hopes on the existence of mind. However, the nature of mind is also non-existent.

### **Discern the insubstantiality of the mental world**

Now let us turn inward and observe our own self. According to the Buddhist text, humans are made up of five aggregates. We all know that flesh, bones, skin and so forth compose the physical body and all its components can be taken apart further. Apart from

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these constituent elements, there is mind. The so-called mind refers to the mind consciousness or spiritual consciousness. If the five sense organs of eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body are impaired, their corresponding consciousnesses cannot continue. Can mind consciousness continue nonetheless? No, it cannot exist on its own either. But how is this possible? We have always thought that mind is the one who does the thinking, who receives and rejects the external stimuli, while the body is like its servant doing whatever mind tells it to do. For example, if mind orders the body to touch fire, even though fire will consume the body, the body must still obey the order if mind so desires. Then we cannot help but ask, “What exactly is the intrinsic nature of mind consciousness (or mind)?”

Can the myriad instruments be used to measure mind consciousness directly? No. When emotions arise in mind, the brain and other organs will be duly affected. Instruments, in this situation, can only indirectly infer the state of mind through the detection of physiological changes. The true nature of mind, however, can never be found this way.

As a matter of fact, what mind can do is beyond imagination. So for questions regarding the nature of mind, it would be best to ask mind itself. How to do that? Just calm the mind first and then observe what it is. That is, by using the method of Great Perfection to look for the answer, the inherent truth of mind will present itself. Although there are other methods, such as the logical system of Madhyamaka, they are not effective enough. Thus, the best option

is to go directly to mind.

However, do not ask mind before we have generated renunciation and bodhicitta because it will not answer anyway even if we do. Once renunciation and bodhicitta have been aroused, mind will reveal its true identity as soon as we ask.

The mental world is more complex and subtler than the physical world, having unfathomable aspect with layers of deepening profundity and unimaginable power. This is why that, throughout the human history, intelligent people have all been confounded by it except the Buddha who alone has grasped the essence of mind. It is a pity that most of the wonders of the mental world are kept only in the realization of certain practitioners and in specific Buddhist texts. Ordinary people, though have never been separated from the mental world, know nothing about its true face and magical powers. The truth is that the infinite cosmos is sustained merely by a subtle and magical inner power. When this power dissipates completely, all the splendid phenomena in the universe will vanish in an instant. How unbelievable!

Some people get terrified when they just barely experience emptiness during meditation. That may be the experience of some of you as well. Because we have always believed that self exists, the sudden discovery of the total non-existence of self terrifies us. We wonder, “If I do not exist, what is ‘this thing’ that is sitting here? What is one to do?” Have no fear, really. This is a normal reaction of a person of relatively inferior` capacity, a sign of getting

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a little closer to the state of emptiness. For instance, when the hand is near the fire, it feels the heat.

If the hand is far away, it will not feel anything, no matter how fierce the fire may be. By the same token, there are many teachings on emptiness in the Buddhist canon. If we do not learn or practice them, emptiness will mean very little to us, if any. When we almost have the first taste of emptiness during meditation, we begin to have some reactions. Being scared is one of them. But this fear is only temporary and we will soon overcome it. By continuing the learning process, we will come to know that our inherent nature has always been like this since the very beginning, that there has never been an inherently existing “I.” Yet, I have still survived. “I” is both empty and existing at the same time. So, do not fear.

Now we know that neither the physical world nor the mental world exists. And the physical and the mental world compose the world of the relative truth; everything is contained within these two worlds. If they do not exist, what does? This means that in the final analysis not a single thing exists, just as Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch, had said in his well-known stanza, “Nothing is ever there.” At this point, intellectually we know, or more precisely sort of sense, that the two worlds of mind and

matter do not exist, but this is only a superficial sense of the consciousness, not realization of emptiness.

## *V. The indivisible union of the two truths*

Emptiness (ultimate truth, reality) and phenomena (relative truth) have never been contradictory to each another. As mentioned previously, some people mistakenly think that emptiness of the ultimate truth and the phenomena of the relative truth are contradictory after reading the Diamond Sutra and the Heart Sutra. They think that if emptiness is true, there can be no samsara; if samsara exists, it cannot be emptiness. But this is just their personal view. In fact, the two truths do not contradict each other at all.

Take the earlier example of a piece of fabric. The observation can be made in reverse order from emptiness to the aggregation of quarks, atoms, molecules, etc. and finally wool. Wool can be knitted into yarn, yarn to fabric, and fabric made to clothes. Either to take apart or put together the constituent elements, the essence of fabric is actually the same. When put together, the existence of fabric is of the relative truth. When taken apart, the final non-existence of fabric is of the ultimate truth. The essence of fabric has never been separated from the

ultimate truth, but, in the relative truth, fabric exists and can be made into clothes. The two are not contradictory. Hence, it was said before that all matter can be defined by the ultimate truth and the relative truth.

Are all these only some kind of theory? Not so. This is not just a play of words but principles that can be applied to practice the

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union of the two truths. How? At present, we must start from the relative truth, that is, to generate renunciation and bodhicitta first. Cultivating the view of emptiness can wait. Once a firm foundation of renunciation and bodhicitta is laid, everyone will be able to enter the state of emptiness without much difficulty. Conversely, absent this foundation, it would be quite a difficult task to realize emptiness. No amount of empowerment that one receives, or however many tulkus one can meet and rituals to attend can help in this regard. The key to Buddhist practice does not lie in what kind of image one can produce, but in seeking a secure spiritual path from within and following that path with best effort. Only then can any accomplishment be attained.

In terms of external conditions, nothing can surpass the great compassion and tremendous power of the Buddha. If external conditions could force liberation on us, we would not be in samsara today as the Buddha would have done everything within his power to free us from all suffering. In fact, the Buddha has already shown us many paths

to liberation, but due to our own inertia we are still mired in samsara like the rest of the ordinary people.

In summary, first by learning the doctrine of the two truths, we know that all phenomena are simultaneously empty and existent. From that point on, we will ask no more such question: If both the Buddha and sentient beings are empty of self-nature, why bother with Buddhahood, bodhicitta, and the like? We can go on

with the practice with full confidence. Then on the basis of firm renunciation and genuine bodhicitta, we can approach the actual practice of emptiness.

The way to practice emptiness is first to understand what we have so far discussed as well as the theories put forth in Madhyamaka, then to contemplate the reasoning behind them over and over again. Realization, or a deeply felt recognition, that everything is empty of self-nature will arise subsequently. By then, one will not feel obligated to acknowledge emptiness in all things just because the texts say so, but still feel deeply a sense of void when doing the observation by oneself regardless of what the view of the text is. This feeling, in fact a preliminary understanding, is called realization. To prolong this cognitive feeling is in effect cultivating the mind. Naturally, the longer the feeling stays the better. As we live in a state of grasping and clinging all the time before coming to realization, the longer we can remain in realization after attaining it, the less time we will spend with attachment.

Emptiness has many levels, so does realization. What we just discussed is the very first level. To keep building on this, one will eventually attain true realization of emptiness and thus end all that clinging and grasping. Since the view of not-self and clinging to an existing self are totally incompatible, once the view of not-self is firmly established, attachment to an existing self naturally falls apart.

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## VI. *The purpose of realization of emptiness*

Lastly, we must know why we need to realize emptiness. From the Theravada perspective, one needs realization of emptiness to attain one's own liberation, to break the cycle of death and rebirth for oneself. From the Mahayana perspective, the purpose of realizing emptiness is not for one's own sake but to gain better ability to benefit sentient beings.

Why is realization of emptiness capable of this task? It is because without this realization, self-grasping will persist. That means one cannot completely give up the idea that self-interest still accounts more importance than others' even if one is willing to dedicate oneself to serving others selflessly and unconditionally. This thought of valuing oneself above others, if let stay, will hamper one's effort to give oneself unselfishly and unconditionally to others, so it must be destroyed. Once it is gone, self-grasping also ceases. One's own welfare will not be a concern any more. At that point, one would be totally free to do the only task at hand, that is, to deliver sentient beings from the suffering of samsara. Thus it is for this reason that the bodhisattvas aspire to attain realization of emptiness, not at all for the pursuit of personal liberation. Understand clearly the purpose of realization of emptiness is very important.

In conclusion, the bodhisattvas are said to have transcended but not abandoned samsara. Having transcended samsara is because

they are no longer bounded by the six realms, completely undefiled and unaffected by samsara. Not abandon samsara is because they have reached the highest state of realization of emptiness but opted to remain forever in samsara as their sole purpose is to benefit sentient beings more effectively. This is the ultimate state, the final goal that we should all aim for.



1. A patriarch of the "Northern School" of Chinese Chan Buddhism who supposedly had the famous verse-writing contest with Huineng in the 7th century
2. In this context, people refer to ordinary human beings and the manifestations of Buddhas or bodhisattvas in the human realm.
3. Twelve ayatana: the six sense organs and sense objects
4. Eighteen dhatus can be arranged into six triads where each has a sense-organ, a sense object and sense consciousness
5. refer to Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way (Mulamadhyamaka-karika)
6. refer to Introduction to the Middle Way (Madhyamaka-avatara)

PART  
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# WHY VEGETARIAN?

Years ago, I wrote a book about the merit of being vegetarian and the faults of eating meat or being non-vegetarian. Our talk today is based on part of that book. With regard to the Buddhist views on being vegetarian and non-vegetarian, here is what the book said:

According to the Theravada tradition, one is allowed to eat only the ‘three kinds of clean flesh.’ Other kinds of meat are strictly forbidden. Now in Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries, the Sangha still upholds this practice. They think that not eating meat at all is to follow the decree of Devadatta.<sup>1</sup> And the practice of eating the three kinds of clean flesh is rather in keeping with the precepts taught by the Buddha in the Theravadin Vinaya.

Within Mahayana, Chinese Buddhism has long maintained the fine tradition of vegetarianism. At present, the majority of Chinese Buddhists is vegetarian. They mainly abide by the teachings in two Mahayana sutras: the *Lankavatara Sutra* and the *Nirvana Sutra*. In a way, being vegetarian also exemplifies the Mahayana spirit of compassion.

However, there has been much misunderstanding about Tibetan Buddhism on this subject. Although it is groundless, many people think that meat eating is condoned by Tibetan Buddhism. These days even the monastics and lay followers of the exoteric schools also presume that Vajrayana practitioners can eat meat. This conclusion has been drawn based on the simple observation that in Tibet, where Vajrayana Buddhism thrives, most of the ordained and lay followers do eat meat. (It is not really so, which will be discussed later.)

Vajrayana Buddhism was developed in two stages: the First and the Second Propagation period. The period of the First Propagation refers to Nyingmapa whose central teaching is *Dzogchen*, or *Great Perfection*. The tantras of *Great Perfection* specify clearly that no meat eating be allowed. The period of the Second Propagation refers to Gelugpa, Kagyupa, Sakyapa and all the other schools of Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet except Nyingmapa. Of all the tantras of this period, the most important and pivotal is the *Kalachakra Tantra*. Both the *Tantra* and its annotations specify very clearly that meat eating is not allowed. All these point to the fact that Mahayana Buddhism, be it exoteric or esoteric, is against eating meat.

In that case, why are meat and alcohol present in ganachakra? Actually, ganachakra is not at all like the ordinary eating and drinking spree. Following is further explanation on this.

If Mahayana Buddhism is against eating meat, why do some of the Tibetan practitioners eat meat? It is not because the



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scriptures gave them permission to do so but for other reasons. As you all know, most of the Tibetan Plateau is unsuitable for growing vegetables and rice. In the area where it is possible to grow crops, the yield is very low. And lacking sufficient transport facilities makes it difficult to have contact with the outside world. Especially in the pastoral areas, there is only tsampa (roasted ground barley) if people do not eat meat. In earlier times, due to the scarce availability of transportation, it was almost impossible for nomads to have contact with people outside of Tibet. Even within Tibet, people kept rather infrequent contact with one another. For example, some pastoral and agricultural areas in Qinghai were hundreds of miles apart. People there could only rely on horses and yaks to reach one another. The journey was treacherous and offered no guarantee of a safe return. Therefore, those in the pastoral areas had no choice but to eat meat because of the environment they were in. Although Mahayana teachings strictly prescribe vegetarianism and Tibetan practitioners also knew that eating meat is wrong and not in accord with the doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism, they still could not be vegetarian for the reasons described above. So they ended up eating meat, but only the three kinds of clean meat, never the unclean ones.

Nevertheless, those people do not represent Vajrayana, Tibetan Buddhism, or the Tibetan Sangha. As a matter of fact, there are quite a few vegetarians among practitioners in Tibet. One example is Shabkar, author of *Flight of the Garuda*, also a great

practitioner. Another is Nyala Pema Dündul of Xinlong County, a realized master who had attained the rainbow body. His was no ordinary attainment as no trace of his physical body was found after he passed away. These masters used to eat meat as well, but they later vowed to stop forever. Other examples include Thubga Rinpoche who was the master of H.H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, and Patrul Rinpoche's guru who was a disciple of Rigdzin Jigme Lingpa. These and many other eminent practitioners all pledged to be vegetarian. While it is a fact that some practitioners in Tibet eat meat, it does not mean that all Tibetan practitioners do or that the scriptures condone this behavior. One cannot find anywhere in either the Mahayana sutras or the Vajrayana tantras that deem meat eating acceptable.

One thing does worry me though. Some practitioners from China who used to be vegetarian went to Tibet to study Vajrayana. Instead of learning the essence of Tibetan Buddhism, they adopted the bad habit of consuming meat, even to the point of being excessive sometimes. They believe this is the way of real Vajrayana, and that as a yogi of Vajrayana, eating meat is only right and natural. There are some Chinese monastics who claim to be Vajrayana practitioners after returning to China from Tibet. Clad in the monastic robes, they buy lots of meat and alcohol for the ganachakra. After reading the relevant text for the occasion, they start to feast on the food and the alcohol. This is their idea of a ganachakra. Many ill-informed lay Buddhists also think that

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alcohol is nectar of the gods, and that eating meat is not a problem. They even look down on those of the exoteric schools who still remain vegetarian. All of these views and attitudes are wrong and must be corrected.

But we still need valid proof to support the call for corrections. This we will discuss from the perspectives of the three vehicles: Theravada, exoteric Mahayana and Vajrayana. Let us see how they treat the subject of meat eating.

### *The Theravada Standpoint*

According to the Theravadin Vinaya, during the time of the Buddha, there was a layperson, a village head, who had many hunters working as his subordinates. Before he was enlightened, the hunters used to offer him large amount of meat from their hunt. After receiving some teachings from Shakyamuni Buddha, he eventually attained realization of the Hinayana path of seeing and stopped eating meat. However, his subordinates continued to hunt and offer him meat. He would instead offer the meat to the monastics whenever they came begging for alms. Once the monastics ate the offered meat, some non-Buddhists then began to attack them by saying, “Even laypersons do not eat them, but the disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha took those meats. This is outrageous!” On hearing this, some bhikshus, seeking the Buddha’s advice, asked, “What should we do about these comments from others now that we are eating meat?” The Buddha then set the rule of eating only the three kinds of clean flesh of which some special requirements were also laid down. That is, the meat of snake, dog, horse and ox were not to be eaten even if they had met the standards of the three kinds of clean meat. Because Indians, during the time of the Buddha, considered the meat of these animals unclean like human meat. To date, the Southern Buddhist tradition still upholds this rule.

Should one practice only Theravada and none of the exoteric or esoteric practices of Mahayana, eating the three kinds of clean

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flesh will not violate the earliest teachings of the Buddha.

What are the definitions of the three kinds of clean meat? First, I did not see with my own eyes that the animal was killed for me; second, I did not hear from someone I trust that it was killed specifically for me; third, I myself have no doubt that it was not killed specially for me. For example, the meat sold at the market is for all meat eaters, not for me alone, so it is to be deemed clean meat. Or, when being a guest of a Tibetan house, the host would usually kill a sheep to honor the guest. The Chinese would more likely want to kill chickens, fish, rabbits and the likes for the same occasion. These are not clean meat. The rule of Theravada stipulates that only the three kinds of clean flesh are permitted for consumption; others are not.

## The Mahayana Standpoint

The Mahayana point of view is what we particularly want to focus on. Mahayana Buddhism does not tolerate consumption of any kind of meat. Not only meat that does not qualify as being clean but also meat from animals died of illness.

Where can we find proof of this view in the Mahayana canon? It is mainly in the *Lankavatara Sutra* and the *Nirvana Sutra*. There are others, but these two provide the most explicit explanations.

The *Lankavatara Sutra* has expounded the many faults of eating meat. We will only discuss the three major ones here.

The first is that all sentient beings have been parents to one another since beginningless time. As such, the animals that we eat today surely have once been our parents too. Eating their meat will be like eating the flesh of our own parents or children. It is therefore a wrong thing to do even from the mundane perspective, let alone the supramundane point of view.

Second, when animals see meat-eating people, they may seem a little scared. We know that animals in some ways are much more sensitive than humans. They know who are meat eaters and can differentiate the smell between a meat eater and a vegetarian. The Buddha said that when meat eaters approach animals, especially small animals, they may terrify the animals so much as to make them almost feel faint. It is the same as how a human would feel when seeing a Rakshasa, a demon also called man-

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eater. Consequently, from the perspective of benefiting sentient beings, those who claim to be bodhisattvas, who have taken the bodhisattva vows and are cultivating compassion definitely should not eat meat either.

The third is from the perspective of benefiting both self and others, an especially important point to note. If meat-eaters should be reborn in the animal realm, they would be carnivores for sure. It is because their predilection for meat in this life has left a strong habitual tendency of craving for meat in their alaya consciousness. When they take rebirth, the body may have changed, but the habitual tendency still remains in the alaya consciousness. We can see that when this tendency is in force, some carnivores, just a few hours after being born, would hunt other small animals for food without ever being taught how to. Because they were meat-eaters in the past, the tendency to eat meat is very strong. Coupled with the fact that being animals now makes them unable to choose right from wrong, they cannot help killing for food again this time around. This is the most terrifying aspect.

As we all prefer to think of ourselves as dharma practitioners, perhaps we should just check how we have done so far with our own practice. Mahayana Buddhism has named five paths and ten bhumis (grounds). Where do we stand now?

Among the five paths, the paths of joining and of accumulation are practices for ordinary people. Even so, the two paths can gather significant merit already. The path of accumulation has three

levels: superior, average and inferior. Not to mention the average and the inferior levels, even those practicing at the superior level may descend to the animal realm. It is because at this stage they are still susceptible to breaking the bodhisattva vows and the root precepts of Vajrayana. And when they do, they will definitely reincarnate in the three lower realms as karma never fails. If meat eaters were to end up in the hungry ghost or animal realm, they would most certainly be carnivores.

As for the path of joining, it is already quite an accomplishment for ordinary people to reach this stage in their spiritual practice. From the standpoint of Vajrayana, it means that one's practice of the development stage has reached a point where one can vividly visualize yidam, the meditational deity, not just in mind but also in reality that is visible to the eyes. This applies to both the wrathful and the peaceful deities. And one's practice of the completion stage has unblocked all the inner channels and the flow of energies. In terms of realization of emptiness, one has attained quite an advanced state that is only short of having realized Great Clear Light, which means one has not yet arrived at the first bodhisattva bhumi, or the path of seeing. Even so, it is stated very clearly in the scriptures that if such practitioner should violate the Vajrayana root precepts without repentance, he or she would still be reborn in the lower realms.

Are we, including me, now on the path of accumulation, the path of joining, or not even on the path at all? The lowest level, or the first step, of the path of joining begins with uncontrived bodhicitta which

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will arise only after we have the conviction to attain Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings. Do we have uncontrived bodhicitta now? If not, we cannot be deemed having entered the gate of Mahayana Buddhism. In fact, we are no better than the rest of the ordinary people, and are more than likely to cycle through the animal realm time and again, most possibly as carnivores.

Being humans now, we have the ability to discriminate right from wrong and to make choices. We are well aware of the faults related to eating meat and can also afford not to eat meat. Yet we do not or are unwilling to make the right choice. If and when we do take rebirth as animals, we will: 1. want to eat meat and meat alone, regardless of how delicious fruit and vegetables may taste; 2. not know the faults of eating meat; 3. not have the ability to choose. There will be no way we can avoid being carnivores by then. If we choose to be meat eaters when we can be otherwise, being carnivores in the animal realm would just be a natural outcome.

The Buddha clearly told us that meat eaters would become carnivores such as lion, tiger, and leopard if they were to descend to the animal realm. This can be inferred through logic as well. In the animal realm, there are only two categories of food: meat or non-meat (vegetables, fruits and nuts). At that point, because of the deeply ingrained tendency to eat meat (habitual tendencies can wield great power), meat eaters will become carnivores who can only kill to survive. It is stated in the *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra* that there are three types of killing—killing born of greed,

ignorance and anger. To kill for food is one born of greed. We have all watched on *Animal World* (film series) how many lives some carnivores need to eat within a 24-hour period. For example, the Blue Whale, the largest known animal species in the world, can eat up to four tons of krill each day during the feeding season. And these are just one day's provisions. A life eaten is a life taken and a negative karma fully committed. Over its entire life, the Blue Whale never once would chant the Buddha's name or practice virtue. If it lives to be a hundred, it will have committed such negative karma for one hundred years. Can you imagine what will happen to it in its next life? The Buddha told us in the *Vinaya* that life proceeds in four separate directions: from light to light, from light to darkness, from darkness to light and from darkness to darkness. If keeping on eating meat, one's life will be going from light to darkness. Of course, if one can avoid darkness through practice of the Dharma, it will not be a cause for concern. But how sure are we of our practice?

We consider ourselves Buddhist practitioners, but to stop eating meat already seems to us too big a sacrifice to make. Is this how we mean by practicing Buddhism or being Mahayana practitioners? Do we really know how to choose right from wrong? Often enough our so-called Buddhist practice is being taken up under the condition that we make no sacrifices and suffer no loss to either our reputation or material possessions. However, this is not how we should follow the Buddha. What loss is there being vegetarian? Just

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cannot eat meat, that's all. If we consider this a loss, even greater losses will be awaiting us in the future. Already we have a great variety of vegetables, fruits and grains readily available for our consumption. Why do we still need to eat the flesh of other beings?

Some people may think, "Even those accomplished practitioners eat meat too. Why can't we?" But should we compare ourselves with them? Have we attained comparable realization or capabilities? If the answer is yes, then go ahead to eat meat; if not, reconsider your action.

The ways those accomplished practitioners used to deliver sentient beings from samsara are sometimes beyond imagination. It is described in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* that when Naropa found Tilopa,<sup>3</sup> Tilopa was neither reading nor meditating, but eating fish. He had built a big fire and put a bucket of live fish beside it. He roasted and ate the fish one by one. For someone like Tilopa, the appearance of eating fish was in essence an act of delivering the fish from cyclic suffering. Eating, in Tilopa's case, should not be interpreted purely in the literal sense of the word; whereas in our case, eating is simply eating, not delivering anyone from any suffering. The two are completely different.

Moreover, whether a meat eater or a vegetarian will be reborn in the hell realm or in Pure Land really does not concern us at all as we will not be reborn with them. One only reaps what one sows. Sowing the seeds of virtue begets virtuous fruit, while the seeds of non-virtue produce the bitter fruit of suffering. In general,

regardless of what other practitioners want to eat, meat or no meat, we should just check ourselves if we have attained the same accomplishment as those respectable masters. Comparison with others is really nothing but a futile exercise.

The third fault related to meat eating is the most dreadful and also the reason why I became vegetarian. I used to eat meat. My thinking went like this: I am an ordinary person who has not even started the path of accumulation, but have received many Buddhist teachings and am fully aware that meat eaters will cycle through the six realms. Surely, the animal realm will be unavoidable. At that point, eating meat and taking lives will invariably be the norm. Consequently, many lives may be taken in just one day resulting in continuous rebirth in the lower realms for eons to come. Now one may consider not eating meat a kind of sacrifice when in fact it constitutes not one bit of sacrifice at all. If the aim is to strengthen the body, many things will suffice other than eating meat; the palate too can be easily taken care of. What I thought then was not that I did not like to, but dared not, eat meat. Hopefully, everyone will give some serious thought to this reasoning.

It would be best if one can be vegetarian for life. If it is too difficult to do now, try for as long as you can, say, one, two, three years or longer. If that is also not possible, one can set aside certain time to be vegetarian, such as during the following four months of the Tibetan calendar:

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*January 1 – 15* (the most auspicious time of the year)

*April* (Note: April 8, the birthday of Shakyamuni Buddha)

*June* (Note: June 4, Buddha's turning the wheel of the Dharma)

*September* (Note: September 22, Buddha's return from Land of Thirty-three Heavens after teaching his mother and other gods there)

If it still is not doable, just make the 10<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> of each month the days to be vegetarian. No matter how one chooses to do, the most important is to pledge as follows, "Due to various reasons, I am not able to remain vegetarian for long, but I will hold firmly my promise to be vegetarian in these four days (or four months). May the merit of this promise help me refrain from eating any meat in all my future lives."

Nowadays, many people think that eating meat is man's right and thus justified. But from a long-term perspective, the problem of meat eating is much more serious than others as it concerns matters of grave consequences, i.e. the possibility of being reborn as a carnivore. By then, one will have no choice but to take other beings' lives. Being vegetarian in most parts of the world is really quite easy as vegetables and other nutritious foods are in abundance. Today, even non-Buddhists are promoting vegetarianism. Why don't we Buddhists do the same? Besides, the Chinese Buddhists' fine tradition of upholding vegetarianism can also be preserved and advanced with our help.

At the time when I was still eating meat, I would stop that

whenever I went to the Han Chinese regions because of the easy access to abundance of vegetables there. I found no reason to eat meat at all. If there is concern for insufficient nutrition, dietary supplements are always available. Therefore, I hope everyone will make an effort to be vegetarian whenever possible.

Buddhist practice is something that should be undertaken step by step. As ordinary people, we cannot hope to reach certain stage in our practice, say, accomplishing the path of accumulation, in an instant or an hour. So, the right thing to do is to proceed step by step such that liberation may eventually be attained.

Above are some of the reasons stated in the *Lankavatara Sutra*. How does the *Nirvana Sutra* deal with this subject?

As the Buddha was entering nirvana, he laid down another precept. He said, "When I was propagating the teachings of *Sravakayana* (early school of Buddhism), eating the three kinds of clean flesh was allowed. But from now on, eating meat of any kind should be banned for practitioners of all schools." Since then, bhikshus and bhikshunis of Theravada tradition have not been allowed to eat the three kinds of clean flesh either. Notwithstanding, exception is allowed. If someone is gravely ill and, by doctor's order, he or she must eat meat or else may die. And if this person's death will cost the benefit to sentient beings and the spreading of the Dharma because no other person can give the same teachings, provide guidance and so on, then the patient is allowed to take meat as medicine. At this point, meat is no longer deemed ordinary food.

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 *The Vajrayana Standpoint*

Clearly, Mahayana disallows meat eating. Not only the three kinds of clean flesh but also all other kinds of meat are forbidden as well, including those from animals that have been killed for human consumption and those died of natural causes. This is the view of the *Nirvana Sutra*.

A disciple also asked the Buddha, “How come the three kinds of clean flesh were allowed to eat during the first turning of the wheel of Dharma, but not now?” The Buddha replied, “Precepts are like stairs going up one step at a time. During that time, some people who had the chance and the capacity to learn Buddhism came for the teaching. If asking them not to eat any meat right away, which they were unable to comply, would have created obstacles to their practice.” So, out of compassion, the Buddha initially permitted them to eat the three kinds of clean flesh. Afterwards, through gradual guidance, they were led to quit meat altogether.

In Vajrayana, especially stated in the stanzas of the *Kalachakra Tantra*, it is very wrong to eat meat. Karma of many people sharing the meat of one animal is grave enough. Karma of one person consuming many small animals is much, much worse. For example, processed meats like sausage, hot dogs, luncheon meat, etc. are very often made from the meat and organs of various animals. Eating these kinds of meat will produce tremendous negative karma, tantamount to the one committed by eating many lives. It is Vajrayana’s view that all Mahayana practitioners must refrain from eating any kind of meat.

Many people have questioned, “According to the Buddhist doctrine, it is wrong to eat meat and drink alcohol. But isn’t it true that Vajrayana practitioners have been taught to regard and accept alcohol and meat as sacramental substances<sup>4</sup> of samaya?” In that context, of course one should accept them, but the key is how to accept them. Suppose there is a strong poison that can easily kill any ordinary people who have taken it. However, a practitioner who, through nothing but the power of practice, not only survives the poison but also sustains no residual effect. In this case, if one’s practice has afforded oneself this level of capabilities, taking alcohol, meat, or tea would not make any difference. But for us ordinary people, it does make a difference and thus we are advised against taking meat and alcohol. In Vajrayana, the proper way for ordinary people to accept the sacramental substances of samaya is through



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visualization practice, not to actually eat meat or drink alcohol.

What then should we do about the meat and alcohol offered in the ganachakra? If we refuse totally, we will break the vows associated with the 14 Root Downfalls of Vajrayana. Instead, we can partake of a tiny bit of meat, the size of a fly's leg. This way, it neither means eating meat in the conventional sense nor rejecting the sacramental substance of samaya from the perspective of Vajrayana. As for alcohol, we can just dab a little with the ring finger on the lips. Acting this way will prevent us from breaking the samaya of Vajrayana or the vows of bodhisattva and pratimoksha; all three will be kept intact.

If you are given a big piece of meat during the ganachakra, just take a piece no larger than the size of a fly's leg and give the rest back. If too much alcohol is poured into your palm (of course, tell them beforehand not to pour so much), just dab a little on your lips with a finger and dispose of the rest. Never allow yourself to freely chow down on chunks of meat or gulp down alcohol.

Furthermore, it is stated very clearly in the Great Perfection that the meat to be offered for the ganachakra cannot be from animals that were killed and sold in the market for human consumption as those are considered unclean. Instead, one should use the meat of animals that have died of natural causes like disease, fire, earthquake, lightning strike, etc. Only these kinds of meat are deemed clean and suitable for the ganachakra. According to the Mahayana teachings, the distinction between clean and unclean meat is this: the meat of animals killed for human consumption is unclean; those from animals died of natural

causes are clean. Still, partaking of "clean" meat is not allowed. This is the view commonly held by both exoteric and esoteric Buddhism. And we should always be mindful of the proper way to prepare for the ganachakra by using only the clean meat.

Vajrayana also holds that the butcher and the person buying the meat are equally guilty of killing lives. It is the same logic as paying the workers to repair a stupa whereby in our minds we would gather all the merit since the money is from us. Likewise, the animals are not killed by us personally but the butchers. Nevertheless, it is primarily due to our need to consume meat that drives the butchers to kill. In other words, we pay the butchers to kill. One may argue, "We never asked them to kill." But will the butchers kill if they do not expect to be paid? Normally, the relationship between the butchers and the animals is not one of hate.

The animals have never hurt these people nor broken any law. Money is no doubt the ultimate motive, and it comes from us. We can be said the instigators of the killing. If there is merit to be had in paying workers to repair a stupa, by the same token there are faults in paying others to kill. This is the view of Vajrayana, but it also makes a lot of sense even from an ordinary person's point of view.

The situation has now gone from bad to worse thanks to the highly developed transportation system which has enabled many slaughterhouses to export all kinds of meat every day. For example, fish caught at the sea can be transported by plane to almost any destination right away. Nowadays, some of the slaughterhouses do

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not just cater to one village, one city or one country but to all meat eaters all over the world. In other words, they kill for the sake of meat eaters worldwide. It is no longer like the old days when the only buyers of a village slaughterhouse were the village people.

In our world today, innumerable lives are being killed every day for the meat eaters. Who are the meat eaters? We should know that some of us belong to that group. This means slaughterhouses in many countries are presently killing tens of thousands of animals for our sake. It is a terrifying spectacle indeed, so said in the scriptures as well.

On the surface, it seems that eating meat should not cause much concern. But that is not the case after careful consideration. It in fact hurts oneself as well as other beings. With this in mind, we must resolve to do right for all concerned.

Although Vajrayana requires its practitioners to accept five meats and five nectars as part of the practice, beginners must stay away from them and use instead visualization or some herbal medicine as substitutes. If not, plainly eating meat and drinking alcohol will create huge demonic obstacles to one's practice. What does it mean by demonic obstacle? On hearing this term, many people instantly picture a human or non-human being with eyes, ears, multiple heads and hands. These actually are just petty demons. The king of demons that would obstruct our practice is none other than the habit of eating meat. Such is the view of Vajrayana. So who says that eating meat is permissible with Vajrayana?

Depending on each person's own condition and capacity, all of us

should at least try to be vegetarian from now on. The length of time to stay vegetarian is a personal decision, but the longer the better. Our motivation though should be different from that of the non-Buddhists whose primary concerns are mostly health related rather than considerations for the future life or compassion for other sentient beings. We will not only stop eating meat but should also vow not to eat meat ever again. Absent the vow, simply stop eating meat would not be deemed a virtuous deed on its own. The vow should go like this, "By the merit of quitting meat now, may I never eat meat again in all future lives.

If I were to be reborn as an animal, I would hope to be an herbivore, never a carnivore." With this, even if we should end up in the animal realm, we would not eat meat and not hurt any beings, including ourselves.

Most of the monastics in China have kept the long tradition of being vegetarian. We rejoice in their virtue and praise their upholding the tradition. Hopefully, both the lay and the ordained practitioners of Vajrayana will also carry on this good practice.



1. A Buddhist monk and the cousin of Shakyamuni Buddha who was said to be jealous of the Buddha's greatness and wisdom and want to become a leader himself.
2. Tantric feast offered as part of a spiritual practice
3. Born in the 10th century, he is regarded as the founder of Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, who developed the Mahamudra method.
4. Refer to five nectars and five meats in the tantric practice.

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# LIBERATING LIVING BEINGS

To liberate lives is a common practice frequently performed by many Buddhists. When conducted properly, the resulting merit is boundless. Otherwise, the merit will be greatly diminished. It is therefore very important for us to know the proper way of liberating living beings.

All the activities of a bodhisattva can be put into six different categories, that is, the six paramitas or the six perfections. In other words, the bodhisattva's view, conduct, practice and activities of benefiting and delivering sentient beings are vast like the ocean, but all can be summed up in the six paramitas.

If it is performed properly every time, liberating lives can have all the remarkable qualities of the six paramitas as well, even to liberate just a single life. Now let us see how this can be done.

## I. The Perfection of Generosity

There are three kinds of generous offering practiced by the bodhisattvas: fearless offering, offering of Dharma and of material items.

◆ *Fearless offering:* To liberate living beings is already a form of fearless offering. Still, certain conditions need to be present to make it true to the spirit of such offering.

First, check if the environment is suitable for the liberated beings to live. For example, the weather loaches<sup>1</sup> from China can be bought in Tibet as well. Local Tibetan nomads mistake them for regular fish, buy and set them free in the river. But the riverbed is armored with rocks only, no mud. And the water is very cold, as it originates from the snowy mountains. The weather loaches, unable to cope with this environment, all die shortly after being released in the river.

Back in 1991 and 1992, due to our inexperience, we bought some swamp eels in Kangding<sup>2</sup> and released them in a river there. You can imagine what happened to them. Yes, they all died. We had the good intention to set them free, yet we failed to really protect them from adversity. What a shame! Thus, to check the suitability of the environment is a really critical step for the survival of the creatures being liberated.

Second, check whether the beings may get caught again and killed after being released. If they do, grave karma will be unavoidable for both the liberators and the possible killers. Therefore, it is imperative that best efforts be made to find a safe place to liberate beings.

While there is no risk of being caught again, but the beings cannot live long anyway, should we still liberate them? Yes, we should, as we can never find a place for them to live forever. Our top priority should be to release them from the immediate danger

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of death before all other considerations.

To be able to satisfy these two conditions when liberating any beings would be in keeping with the genuine spirit of fearless offering.

Although freeing small fry or other beings that will not be killed in the near future is also liberating living beings, they are not lives saved at the point of being killed. To engender great merit and to be deemed a genuine form of fearless offering, lives saved should be those that are about to be killed such as the assorted fish sold in the marketplace.

◆ *Offering of Dharma:* This is very, very important. How should it be done?

Firstly, recite the various Buddha's names or other mantras to the beings about to be released. According to the scriptures, these beings will be greatly benefited upon hearing the Buddha's names and mantras. Also make sure that every one of them can hear the recitations. If we recite from afar and dedicate the merit to them afterward, they can be benefited somewhat but cannot obtain specifically the merit of hearing the Buddha's names because they did not hear the recitations. If we recite within their hearing range, the merit they will receive are twofold: first, they will be the beneficiaries of our dedication; second, by the merit of hearing the Buddha's names and mantras, they can attain liberation from samsara. It does not mean that liberation can be attained in their next life, which ultimately depends on how serious their respective karmic hindrances are, but it should not take too long.

Secondly, feed them nectar pills. The use of nectar pills is not emphasized in exoteric Buddhism, but very much so in Vajrayana. Most of the nectar pills were originally handed down by Guru Rinpoche and later discovered by real tertons, finders of terma (hidden treasures). It should be noted that not all nectar pills have beneficial effect. Some of the so-called nectar pills are not only devoid of any merit but can also bring harm if taken, such as preventing one from attaining liberation in future life and creating hindrances to liberation.

Where do these harmful pills come from? Some are from tertons who are actually impostors and some are concocted by demons to hurt sentient beings. At times, genuine nectar pills, after being handled or made by persons who have broken samaya vows, can also be tainted. As Guru Rinpoche did not leave behind many nectar pills, accomplished masters, after retrieving them, will mix them with other nectar and medicinal herbs, then bless the pills through meditation and mantra recitations. If during this process there is one samaya violator among the attending practitioners, the pills will get tainted.

Therefore, close attention is needed when administering nectar pills. As ordinary beings, we cannot tell the real from the fake ones with the naked eye. The only way is by examining whether the pills came from a pure source. This is a very important step. If we are unsure of their source, we should just chant the Buddha's names and omit giving the nectar pills to the soon-to-be liberated beings.

It is also very important to place the texts of *liberation upon*

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*wearing*’,<sup>3</sup> such as the *Tantra, Single Heir of the Doctrine*, on the head of the beings to bless them. Beings touched by this will soon be able to attain liberation. One may question, “These beings have neither practiced nor received transmissions of the Dharma. Why should they be able to attain liberation simply by attaching such texts to their body or being touched by it?” The only plausible explanation would be the inconceivable power of the Buddha’s skillful means to deliver sentient beings from suffering.

Still others may wonder why the Buddha could not liberate all sentient beings with the same skillful means. The sutras said that for beings to encounter ‘*liberation upon wearing*’ or *Bardo Thotrol (Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo)*, they must have had certain causes and conditions occurred in their prior lives. What does it mean by past causes and conditions? For example, one can learn Vajrayana, the Great Perfection, or listen to profound teachings such as the *Tantra, Single Heir of the Doctrine* in this life, but may still take rebirth in the lower realms due to improper practice or broken vows. In that case, after being in the lower realms for a very long time, one may ultimately be saved not by the exoteric practices but that of the supreme Vajrayana rather effortlessly. This is because one has previously planted the good seeds of being exposed to the Vajrayana teachings and thus accumulated the merit that eventually allows one to be liberated by the inexplicable power of *liberation through hearing or upon wearing*. So, it is not a given that all sentient beings would have the

same merit or same encounter.

Offering of Dharma is particularly important. If we are given two choices: 1. we can release all the fish in the market free of charge on condition that we do not recite the Buddha’s names for them or feed them nectar pills; 2. we can recite mantras, feed them nectar pills and bless them with the text of ‘*liberation upon wearing*,’ but we cannot buy them to set them free. Which one should we choose? Make sure it is the latter.

From a short-term perspective, the significance of releasing tens of thousands of lives from the suffering of death is already self-evident. There is absolutely no comparison between giving a new life and giving money or other objects to a being facing death. Put in another way, if we are about to be killed, would we like someone to rescue us or give us a lot of money? The answer should be obvious. Realistically, what is the use of money for a dead person? In most cases, the relatives and the friends of the deceased do not really know how to use the money left behind to assist the deceased, e.g., to perform phowa. At the juncture of life and death, money loses its purpose. Saving lives is naturally the most important.

But from a long-term perspective, offering of Dharma is even more important. The reason is that although we can buy the fish free and liberate them, the best we will achieve is to save them from the pain of death just this time. If we do not recite the Buddha’s names or perform other rituals for them, we cannot truly benefit them other than setting them free. What they will

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do afterwards is anybody's guess. If the beings are carnivores, perhaps the better alternative is to let them die after having heard the chanting of the Buddha's names. This on the one hand will plant the virtuous root for them, and on the other hand stop them from committing more negative karma.

In general, people all long for wealth, longevity or certain magical power. But, in the long run, it is very difficult to say whether these are really good for a practitioner or an ordinary individual. You are all familiar with the story of Devadatta. If he had not had supernatural power, he would not have committed two of the Five Great Offenses leading to the avici hell. He subjugated the king with his supernatural power, convincing the king of his might and to obey his words. Together, they committed a great deal of the offenses that led to the avici hell.

About longevity, the following story makes a point. A disciple of the Venerable Atisha violated the precept and died after getting involved in a village dispute. Upon hearing the news, the Venerable Atisha noted with sorrow, "If he died three years earlier, he would have died a bhikkhu adept in the Tripitaka." This means that if he died three years earlier, he would have died a bhikkhu with pure vows and of great knowledge in the Tripitaka. But he died a different person with a tainted reputation three years later. Therefore, having longevity is not necessarily a good fortune. Some beings may end up committing more negative karma with extended life span.

Someone had asked on the web about how to benefit beings that were about to be killed in a market or some other places if there was not enough money to buy their freedom. The easy way is simply to recite the Buddha's names to them. If you happen to have some pure nectar pills, feed them those. Otherwise, just recite the Buddha's names and mantras. The merit of reciting and hearing the Buddha's names and mantras is beyond imagination, which undoubtedly will benefit the poor beings. For example, as recorded in many sutras, simply by reciting the heart mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha (*om muni muni mahamuniye svaha*) had in the past led many to the attainment of Buddhahood.

Moreover, having an unselfish motivation is also very important when reciting the Buddha's names and mantras. Selfishness has been part of the human nature since beginningless time. If one were to recite the Buddha's names and mantras to other beings for one's own sake, the action would not be deemed an exemplification of Mahayana practice. Nonetheless, it is still far better than not reciting at all. In the Tibetan Canon, there are texts specially intended for offering of Dharma, which are not available in the Chinese texts. If needed, one can substitute with recitation of *pratitya-essence mantra* (essence of dependent origination) instead. The key is that recitation must be performed when liberating living beings, even for just a single being, because it can help many of them to eventually attain liberation from samsara.

In addition, palms should be held together at the chest level (as

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in prayer) during the recitation. It is explained in the *Aspiration Prayers to be born in Sukhavati*<sup>4</sup> that pressing hands together in this fashion signifies veneration of and praying to Amitabha Buddha. Remember that even to press palms together just once can dispel eons of karmic obstacles. So be sure to do likewise. At the same time, we should visualize in earnest that we are holding palms and reciting the Buddha's names and mantras on behalf of these beings. Through our endeavor, they will be able to receive the merit, remove tremendous karmic hindrances and swiftly attain enlightenment. This is very crucial.

What is the ideal number of beings to be liberated each time? Given the right conditions, it should be as many as possible. With limited amount of money, the smaller the size of the beings, the bigger the quantity that can be bought. That means more lives can be saved and helped to attain liberation. On the other hand, liberating larger animals such as yaks and sheep or larger fish like silver carp are also meaningful. We can plainly see that these beings generally endure more pain when being killed due to their larger body. As we help them avoid this immense fear and pain, we also gather greater merit at the same time. The *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra* said so too. For example, which is a greater evil, killing an ant or an ox? Although they are both living beings, the dying pain of an ant is not as enormous as that of an ox, relatively speaking. Due to the large size of the body, animals like yaks and sheep suffer more physical pain when they die. It is therefore a relatively

greater evil to kill large animals.

Of all the beings we can liberate in this region, I think weather loaches are the most suitable because of their moderate size which allows us to buy decent quantity with relatively little money, and the extremely brutal death they suffer at the hands of their captors. But the prerequisite is that the location must be right for the survival of the loaches.

For the beginners to Mahayana Buddhism, the ways to propagate the Dharma and benefit sentient beings are no other than liberating living beings. Unlike the Buddha who by turning the wheel of the Dharma each time could lead hundreds or thousands of the audience to the attainment of arhatship and inspire a mass audience to generate supreme bodhicitta, we are incapable of such feat. What we can do for the time being is to participate as best we can in the activity of liberating living beings either personally or by donating money to it when unable to attend. This is our way of benefiting sentient beings, of practicing offering of Dharma.

◆ *Offering of material items:* There are certain texts in the Vajrayana practice that particularly deal with this. Like the ones that explicate the proper ways to feed fish and birds, practitioners are instructed to have rice blessed with mantras, nectar pills, etc. before feeding and not mixed with any meat or blood. Frankly, this is not a common practice for most of us, nor is it the most important. The one that warrants emphasis is offering of Dharma.

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## II. The Perfection of Discipline

There are two types of discipline to be maintained: first, the Theravada precepts of never harming other beings; second, the Mahayana precepts of always benefiting sentient beings.

How to apply these two when liberating living beings? To make every effort not to let the beings hurt during the process is one way. Take fish as an example. Fish might get hurt when they jump out from the containers and land either on top of the containers or on the ground. To roughly grab and quickly throw it into the water, as normally done by some, may cause harm too. Other than birds perhaps, throwing usually gives animals a great sense of fear, which in turn can be detrimental to their mental condition. Those who act this way may inadvertently cause themselves to be reborn as a mentally disordered person in the next life. In this situation, the right thing to do is first to pick up and put the fish back gently into the containers. And do not release them to the water before completing the recitation, feeding the nectar pills and blessing them by passing the text of *'liberation upon wearing'* over them. It would be a great loss to the liberated beings if all these are missing from the process.

Liberating living beings can also prevent some evil karma. Take the example of freeing one fish. First, if the fish vendor sells the fish to a restaurant, he will have committed karma of killing that fish. By buying the fish from the vendor, we stop that from

happening. Second, if we do not buy the fish, the cook at the restaurant will kill it. We prevent the cook from committing that karma with our purchase of the fish. Third, the customers eating the fish are also guilty of killing. By buying the fish, we prevent karma of killing for the third time. As the fisherman would not know at the time of catching the fish if it was to be liberated or killed, his evil karma, if any, may not be prevented by our purchase. But the other three can all be avoided. When liberating beings, to make every endeavor not to hurt them as well as the feelings of other people is in fact benefiting sentient beings already. This manner of liberating living beings constitutes the perfection of discipline.



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### III. The Perfection of Patience

We may also encounter difficulties when liberating beings, e.g., extreme weather conditions, fatigue, insect bites, interferences from others, etc. When these happen, we should contemplate that they are there to purify our negative karma. Or, we can practice the teachings of *The Way of the Bodhisattvas* to exchange our own well-being for other's suffering. That is, we willingly endure all the hardship and inconveniences on behalf of other beings. It may seem just a small sacrifice on our part, but great merit can be accumulated this way as well. Therefore, we should practice patience with all physical discomfort and hardship. By the same token, when others make unreasonable demands on us or cause outright trouble, we should neither argue nor be angry with them, just accept their behavior with equanimity. This is the perfection of patience.

### IV. The Perfection of Diligence

Diligence means having joy in practicing the Dharma. Liberating living beings should be a joyful event for every participant. To perform virtuous deeds with joy is deemed the perfection of diligence.

### V. The Perfection of Contemplation

How can we practice contemplation when liberating living beings? Usually one equates that practice with meditation in a lotus position. As we certainly won't be sitting down to liberate any being, can we do this practice? Yes, we can, according to the scriptures. In fact, one can always practice contemplation whenever propagating the Dharma or engaging in any other virtuous activity. Contemplation, in the context of teaching the Dharma, means to conduct the teaching assiduously and without distraction. That in the context of liberating living beings means to recite the sutras or mantras with total concentration and release the beings with great care. If the mind wanders while doing the recitation, it is no longer practicing contemplation. Contemplation denotes a still mind. To offer dedicated prayers to the Buddha or steadfastly generate true compassion toward the beings when liberating them signifies the perfection of contemplation.

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 *VI. The Perfection of Wisdom*

How can we be endowed with wisdom when liberating living beings? Being mindful that it is a practice of Mahayana, that it can sow the virtuous seeds for the liberators and benefit the liberated, and that the recitations of sutras, mantras and the Buddha's names are complete, all exemplify the meaning of having wisdom. The more profound understanding of that is to know the liberator, the liberated and the act of liberation are all illusory phenomena, devoid of self nature. If one were to gain thorough knowledge of such view and subsequently attain realization thereof, it would naturally signify attaining the state of supreme wisdom. But absent this view, wisdom can still be had in the manner otherwise described above.

To be able to liberate living beings as demonstrated here would have captured the essence of the six paramitas. If in addition the three supreme methods—pure motivation, practice with a mind free of clinging and dedication of merit—can be incorporated alongside, liberating living beings will truly be an act of supreme virtue.

We have all committed incalculable karma of killing lives since beginningless time. Even so far in this lifetime alone, we have generated enough such karma to send us to the hell realm. And the best way to counteract this karmic effect is to liberate living beings. At the same time, we must also resolve by making a pledge not to intentionally kill or hurt ANY sentient beings ever

again. With such determination, all negative karma associated with killing lives will indubitably be purified. In case one's resolution is not yet as firm, the pledge can be made on account of the selected beings of one's choice. For example, one can vow never to kill snakes or weather loaches again from now on. When this vow is made and the beings are subsequently freed, one's specific karma of killing snakes or weather loaches from beginningless time will then be purified, but that of killing other kinds of beings stays.

On the other hand, does it make sense to swear never to kill dinosaurs from now on? You may think that it is meaningless, since there is no dinosaur to be killed even if you want to. But it does make sense still. Dinosaurs once existed, which means we surely had the opportunity to kill some in those lifetimes. As explained above, when such vow is made, one's karma of ever having killed dinosaurs will be purified, but not those that involved killing of other beings. If we vow not to kill any sentient beings, our karma of killing all kinds of beings can be purified. If the vow is made for the sake of particular beings, our karma of killing those particular beings can be purified.

Liberating living beings is the best antidote to karma of killing lives. However, if we liberate beings simply for the purification of our karma, though karma can be purified, it is not the way to practice Mahayana. Whether to liberate beings to purify our own negative karma or, out of bodhicitta, to do it for the sake of all sentient beings is ultimately a personal choice.

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All the Buddhas in the past including Shakyamuni Buddha, after having aroused bodhicitta, had vowed to deliver all sentient beings to liberation before attaining Buddhahood themselves. Yet they have already attained Buddhahood while we still remain in samsara. Did all the Buddhas break their vows? No. The Buddhas' vows were made out of their deep compassion for the sentient beings. By the supreme power of the grand vows, they were able to swiftly attain Buddhahood. Whereas the thought that is constantly being turned over in our minds is usually just our own welfare, which explains why we are still struggling in samsara as yet. This clearly demonstrates that the key to attaining Buddhahood rests squarely on nothing but one's altruistic aspiration.

Some people think that there are countless fish being sold at the markets and what they can buy is only a fraction of the total. Not even to buy out just one type of fish is possible, much less all the fish. They wonder how meaningful it is to continue liberating lives under the circumstances, and thereby become disenchanted.

The fact is that aspiring to save all the lives in the world is an impossible mission even for the Buddha who can only help those whose karma has ripened and are thus receptive to his teachings. To those with yet ripened karma, the Buddha is equally helpless. The same reasoning also applies to liberating living beings. For someone as wealthy as Indra, the ruler of gods, not even he could have bought and liberated all the beings there were. As there are an infinite number of sentient beings, it could be even beyond the

Buddha's reach sometimes to deliver beings from samsara, let alone what our limited ability can achieve. All we can do is to help other beings the best we know how.

It is stated in the sutras that every participant in the liberation of living beings will gather the full amount of merit thereof. For example, if one hundred people were to kill one person, this bad karma would not be divided among the hundred but borne completely by each one. The same goes for virtuous deeds. If one hundred people were to set one life free, everyone would collect the whole merit of freeing one life, not just one percent of it. Over the years, we have freed billions of lives in this part of China and all the merit accumulated thus far belongs to every participant. Just liberating living beings is already an incredibly virtuous practice. When it is conducted together with unselfish motivation and proper dedication, it will garner even more inconceivable merit which undoubtedly can purify all our negative karma.




1. A cold-water fish commonly eaten in Asia
2. The capital of Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan province, China.
3. Liberation upon wearing primarily consists of mantras or texts designed to be carried in one form (a booklet) or another on the body, which signifies the Tibetan faith in the book as an embodiment of sacred power that can protect against death and evil.
4. Sanskrit term refers to the Pure Land of the Buddha Amitabha

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# THE WAY OF LIVING AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

 *The need to separate the way  
of living and the meaning of life*

The way of living and the meaning of life may seem to be the most basic things that we should all know about, but to separate the two in practice is not so easy. I personally feel that it is rather important to be able to tell the difference between the two. Nowadays, many people including quite a few Buddhist practitioners think that the way of living and the meaning of life mean one and the same. However, what they have in mind is just the way of living, which less intelligent animals also know, never the purpose and significance of life.

For an animal, to be able to successfully live up to ten or twenty years as a result of the causes and conditions engendered in past life which allow it to live this long means victory already. This after all would be the meaning of life for this animal.

Many people also mix up the two. Among them, there are non-Buddhists and some lay practitioners of Buddhism. Although increasingly more people are becoming interested in learning Buddhism, some of them seek only the benefit of the celestial beings or the human realm in this life. What will happen in the next life or the question of liberation from samsara are not at all their concerns. They burn incense and read sutras only to get a better treatment from this life. On the surface, it may appear that they are practicing Buddhism, but in fact they view Dharma practice only as a way of living. To non-Buddhists, working is their way of living; for some Buddhists, the way of living means going to the temple to render worship to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. The so-called Dharma practice does not touch upon the meaning of life whatsoever. To make clear distinction between the way of living and the meaning of life is the most basic step to entering the path of Dharma.

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 *The way of living*

The way of living means how one goes about sustaining oneself, essentially how one manages to live. What is the proper way of living for a Dharma practitioner? What did the Buddha say about this?

Should all practitioners give up everything and retreat to the caves to meditate like Milarepa did? It would be great if one can do that, but most laypeople cannot and so the Buddha did not rule this way. In a nutshell, the Buddha only asked all Buddhists to be content with fewer desires, which means differently to the monastics and lay practitioners. How then should lay practitioners interpret this request from the Buddha?

I have seen that someone who owns three or four villas but hardly ever lives in any of them. Very often this person just spends the night on the office sofa. Others own three or four cars but only use one; the rest just lay idle in the garage. This kind of lifestyle does not comply with the Buddha's request for a life filled with fewer desires. From the standpoint of the world as a whole, over-consumption of either fossil fuels or trees is also a wrong way of living, which does not meet the Buddha's request either.

In today's world, one is basically unable to survive without money and the Buddha also deemed reasonable means for living justified. What he requested is that under normal circumstances one should live a simpler and modest life. There is really no need for fancy stuff as long as one stays in a livable condition. But that

is not to say that one must eat lousy food, wear old clothes, or live in a run-down place. The Buddha also said that it is not necessary to live too modestly if one can afford a comfortable life with relative ease, thanks to good karma from the past life. To live a simple life, as opposed to a luxurious one, means less energy need be spent on acquiring material wealth and hence more time and attention for really meaningful matters. This is the way the Buddha told us to live.

However, we often bring much suffering upon ourselves for inessential things in life. For example, we kill so many lives and cause great suffering to other beings to get meat, milk and eggs, the three major sources of modern illnesses that are basically inessential food for our survival. We did not know any better before, just following a wrong mode of living and hence resulting in great pain for many sentient beings. This is just one example. Other aspects of our lives can also be reexamined this way.

The Buddha particularly wanted to avoid taking a dualistic stance toward any issues. To lead a poverty-stricken life is an extreme. Most people cannot maintain a contemplative life under such harsh condition except for someone like Milarepa. On the other hand, a life of indulgence may cause all kinds of physical problems. For instance, many doctors suggest that over-consumption of meat could be the cause for heart disease. Therefore, the proper way of living set by the Buddha is one of simplicity and modesty.

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Another rule is that one must not live by the ten evil actions such as killing, stealing, cheating and so forth. On the premise of not violating this rule, it is all right to live a rich life, but only very few with extremely good karma do not have to work hard for it. In general, the richer the life is, the higher the toll it would take on one's well-being. So the Buddha's suggestion of a simple way of living is actually a better choice for all.

Did we separate the way of living and the meaning of life before learning the Dharma? I think not. At that time, most of us considered eating well and having fun the meaning of life, but the Buddha told us that those are just the way of living.

Is burning fuel the purpose of a car's existence? No. Its purpose is to transport. Burning fuel is just a way to sustain itself. Only with fuel can it have enough power to fulfill its purpose. Likewise, food, clothing and housing are what we need to maintain our existence. As for the meaning of life, there is a big difference in understanding between those who have learned the Dharma and those who have not.

Now that we have learned the teachings of the Buddha, we should do our best to follow his advices as much as we can, if not one hundred percent. We would be Buddhas ourselves if we can comply one hundred percent! And the first step is to begin with distinguishing the meaning of life and the way of living. From now on, having good food, pretty clothes and a fabulous place to live in no longer denote what life is about. Material wealth and

other worldly things are only necessary for us to maintain a living. However, most of those who have not learned the Dharma do not think the same. Even in philosophy, the meaning of life and the way of living cannot be clearly separated. Surely, the Buddha is the only one who truly knows the meaning of life.

A wealthy man once told me that he could make a few million bucks from just one deal, but to him it only meant that more numbers were added to his bankbook. One only needs so much to live. He could never use up all his money in this lifetime. I think what he said makes a lot of sense. Such is the reality. Naturally, if he were to use the money for charity or something meaningful, it would be a different matter entirely. If not, just accumulating great wealth should not be deemed the meaning of life.

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## *The meaning of life*

There are many different views on this, but ultimately the meaning of life is to get oneself prepared for the liberation from cyclic existence. In China today, people in the large cities have bought all kinds of insurance for health, old age and what not, which in certain time frame and to some extent can serve their purposes, but none for afterlife. When disaster hits and life is in danger, people discover all of a sudden that no insurance can guaranty them a save passage in afterlife. If it can be ascertained that there is no life after death, we need not care what would happen afterward; normal insurance will suffice. But so far no scientist or philosopher can completely refute the idea of cyclic existence or disprove next life. Rather, the evidence of a cycle of death and rebirth is becoming increasingly more abundant, which is based not on any assumption but facts available in everyday life. We cannot evade reality and the reality is that next life does exist. Under the circumstances, we have no excuse not to prepare for its coming.

From now on, we should direct our thoughts and actions toward the ultimate liberation. Through contemplation of impermanence and the woes of samsara, we can begin to cultivate renunciation and gradually move forward on the path to liberation. This is the meaning of life for us Buddhists. The path to liberation, once taken wholeheartedly, can fundamentally resolve the issue of cyclic death and rebirth. Moreover, taking the path of Mahayana can not only

help oneself but also all other sentient beings to liberation from samsara over time. Therefore, we ought to be forward-looking and strive to set higher goals. Otherwise, we may fail this life miserably perhaps not in material terms but in essence, like so many others who have died with great sorrow and anger because they did not know to distinguish the way of living and the meaning of life when still alive. Failing to realize what this life really means is a huge loss as opposed to losing out in some worldly competitions, which is actually insignificant by comparison. Whether we get another chance to amend this later on is hard to say. So now is the time to make that distinction particularly in our actions.

Three years ago, I asked everyone in the class to write me a note telling me how and what each one would arrange for daily practice. Now I would like to know what, if any, progress you have made in these three years. In other words, have you learned anything concrete from your practice? The Buddhist logic holds that regardless of what phenomenon, if it does not move in as short a time as one-ten-thousandth of a second, it will not move in the subsequent one-ten-thousandth of a second either even until the final one-ten-thousandth. If no progress has been made in all these time, I am afraid that none ever will, even in another six, nine or twelve years!

I gave many teachings in the past few years, but none from the Vajrayana tradition. It is not for a lack of ability to teach on my part but to avoid confusing you with the more profound teachings at this point of your learning process without additional benefit.

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In your current condition, those teachings would not help you find the right path or gain a real taste of the Dharma. So I decided to cut off all the complex details and gave you instead the concrete and practicable instructions for actual practice. However, did you practice accordingly? What have you learned if you did?

As there are quite a few of you in the class, it is understandable that you may progress at different pace. Still, if most of you only know the dharma theoretically rather than practicing it in daily life, the teaching will not be as meaningful. Asking you to write me a note can also serve as a kind of reminder that perhaps it really is time to take one's practice seriously in view of the fact that no progress has been made after a long period of time.

The purpose for practicing the Dharma is not to gain health and wealth or be trouble-free in life but to attain liberation. In order to reach that final goal, all defilements must be eradicated first. Although it is somewhat impractical aiming to accomplish that in three to five years, one can still check if defilements have been reduced or at least have tended downward over time. This is what we should be concerned with, not what it would be like in the realm of the Buddha or the great bodhisattvas. There is simply not enough time for us to explore and argue all the points presented in, say, *Ornament of Clear Realization* or *Madhyamaka*. In other words, we cannot hope to reach the same height as Nagarjuna or Chandrakirti by way of discussion only.

For example, when I studied *Ornament of Clear Realization*,

the first subject was on bodhicitta. It became very complicated as almost every word could be interpreted variably from different perspectives, which confounded me to no end. Questions like how many categories of bodhicitta there are, what relative or absolute bodhicitta means and the like were discussed over and over again. A viewpoint usually had people both for and against it. As a result, much time was spent on either defending one's own or refuting other's position. It is really a shame that I have yet aroused bodhicitta after all these years and so many arguments. Whereas some of my classmate who rarely engaged in this kind of discussion, only focused on the actual practice of bodhicitta, have by now successfully engendered bodhicitta.

Lay practitioners like you should be even more careful not to repeat the kind of mistake I made as you have limited free time to begin with. If all your time was spent on learning different teachings while little on actual practice, you would not be able to retain any in the end, just like someone who has to throw up due to over-eating and indigestion. It is all so pointless!

In the last few years, most of the teachings I gave were relatively short on theory and logic, except for a few easily confusing questions laypeople had that required further explanations. The emphasis was primarily on the way of actual practice. But did you do as taught? By the way, if you ask me the same question, my answer would probably be no as well. We cannot continue like this. From now on, everyone must take up one's own practice seriously.



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This is the most important.

In theory, we all know the difference between the way of living and the meaning of life. However, in practice, we often behave like the uninitiated making wealth accumulation the meaning of life. We ought to know better now to separate the two and be less attached to material wealth than before. The word ‘money’ can mean a lot of things in addition to its traditional definition; in fact, it can be used to denote all worldly possessions.

I have met many successful businesspeople who are running large corporations. They told me their goal is to have the means to help the needed or to spread the Dharma. If that was true, perhaps it would not be necessary to give up the pursuit of wealth, but the attachment to wealth must be checked.

Many lay practitioners often told me that they pray for the Buddha’s or the bodhisattvas’ blessing to help them succeed in their jobs or business so that they can afford to offer more money to the Three Jewels. This is good motivation, but in fact we need not offer money to the Three Jewels. Real Buddhas and bodhisattvas would not care for us to have more money. Rather, they would very much like us to have developed renunciation and bodhicitta. As long as we can manage to live a reasonably decent life, they wish we should concentrate on the practice of Dharma and do our best to take control of our own cyclic existence. This is really what we should be doing now.

In *Training Anthology*, Shantideva expounded a viewpoint based

on teachings from the scriptures. If a bodhisattva, undertaking to practice alone at a quiet place, immerses himself or herself completely in the bliss of meditation and cannot be bothered to deliver other beings from samsara, it is deemed a bodhisattva has fallen from grace. Therefore, once having aroused bodhicitta, one should still get involved in certain activities, only with different purpose.

Take the example of a moth. Do you know why, whenever a moth sees fire, it must fly directly into the fire even knowing that it will surely be burned to death? Does the moth intentionally want to kill itself? No, it simply loves the fire.

This phenomenon is neither by God’s will nor causeless. Butterflies, moth’s close relatives, are not so sensitive to fire. Perhaps from the standpoint of modern biology or the practice of medicine, it can be explained by a certain substance that moth has that is particularly sensitive to fire. Nowadays, everything can be explained by science anyway. But it is not the most important reason.

All phenomena are the effects of causes of which there are two kinds, proximate cause and distant cause. Distant cause is the one committed long time ago while proximate cause is formed at the present. In the case of the moth, all the explanations we make from the standpoint of physical matter are considered proximate causes. The distant cause is that the moth in its last life was a being much attached to form, one of the five aggregates, who cared strongly about its own look. With this kind of attachment, one will likely be reborn as a moth. The cause of the moth’s desperate tendency to fly

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into fire is actually greed or desire.

We are all ordinary people; all must be reborn. No one can stop this, not even the Buddha. If the Buddha were able to end death and rebirth, we would all be out of samsara by now. Unfortunately, that is not the case! No ordinary people can choose what to be in the next life or not to be reborn. If we were to come back to samsara willingly, no one would choose to be animal, let alone hungry ghost or go to the hell realm. Yet, there are innumerable sentient beings in the hell realm, all because of the stubborn desire for samsara.

To those who know little about the Dharma, it is quite complicated to explain the path to liberation. Where is liberation? How to get there? One can always find a way to go to any place on earth from a map, but the path to liberation seems not so straightforward. It would be much easier if one follows the Buddha's teachings, however. Imagine that all the people on the street are moving forward, but one of them suddenly turns around and starts walking back. On the road of samsara, most sentient beings are moving toward the realms of hell beings, hungry ghosts and animals, whereas Dharma practitioners are heading back to the natural, pure state.

Isn't it kind of fashionable now to talk about 'going back to the nature'? But the 'nature' that worldly people go back to is not the real thing. The true meaning of going back to the natural state is to give up all desires for samsara and take the path leading to ultimate liberation. So the first thing we should do now is to generate

renunciation. From now on, the meaning of life for us should never be merely having money, children, family and so forth.

Some people may not think of samsara as suffering because they themselves have not been through too many miseries so far. The seemingly happy life they are having now already makes them feel on top of the world. Any talk of Pure Land or liberation is basically useless stuff for them. But they are wrong. As they are ignorant of the nature of cyclic existence, there is no way they could know that the good life hardly ever lasts long. Without delving into the details here, one should be able to see clearly the nature of cyclic existence through contemplation of impermanence and especially the woes of samsara as specified in the ordinary preliminaries. It is plainly obvious if the same ignorant way of living is continued, what lies ahead in the future could be very dreadful indeed. So we must turn around.

In order to attain liberation, we need to forsake material wealth, fame and those fulfillments associated with secular life. However, it does not mean that all must be abandoned as even the Buddha needed to beg for alms every day. To the eyes of the ordinary people, the Buddha manifested as someone who also needed food, clothes and other necessities to live. So for us it is even more unlikely that we can completely give up worldly life. But in addition to managing everyday life, we also need to have unshakable determination to take the path to liberation. On this basis, even one single recitation of mantra can begin to turn us

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around. The more steps we take on the path, the closer we are to liberation. Conversely, to live life the way we used to will take us further away from it.

All these are easily said than done. Since generating renunciation is easier than arousing bodhicitta, we should begin with the former. This is also the Buddha's way, for fear of discouraging people to continue if they run into trouble doing the most difficult thing first. Thus, having generated renunciation, we then go on to develop bodhicitta and lastly to practice emptiness. Having sufficiently comprehended Madhyamaka of the exoteric school, we can advance to the profound practice of Great Perfection. Such are the most reliable steps for the path.

Although this teaching should be for the beginners, I feel that most people still need to hear. On renunciation and bodhicitta, you can all say a thing or two and pass exams. But can you pass in actions? I don't think I can pass. If you cannot either, let us all work hard on it.

I gave teachings on renunciation and bodhicitta a few years ago, on emptiness last year. This year the subject is back to the very basics again. You may wonder why, but I think this is necessary. You should take this opportunity to check in terms of real action if you have completed the foundational practice satisfactorily. That is, whether you have made any progress toward the generation of renunciation and bodhicitta, or been positively influenced by the Dharma in any significant way. To be able to satisfy the requirement of foundational practice is the very basic achievement of any practitioner.

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# A BUDDHIST'S MODE OF LIFE

How should a Buddhist live? The Buddha gave us the answer long time ago. Being his followers, we should all adopt the kind of life that he had prescribed for both the monastics and laypeople. Doing so will make for a much more meaningful life.



## *I. Avoid duality*

In the *Vinaya Pitaka*, the Buddha told the monastics that one should avoid duality in life. Duality mentioned in Madhyamaka is the eternalist and nihilist view, whereas in the context of the way of living, duality denotes the impoverished and self-indulgent life.

In the case of ordinary people, an impoverished life means to deliberately live in a poverty-stricken condition. But to some practitioners like Milarepa, poverty is not an obstacle but assistance to their practice. Obviously, not everyone can attain the same state in practice as those masters. For us ordinary people, it would be very difficult to consider matters like renunciation, bodhicitta and

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liberation if we must struggle constantly to eke out a living. A harsh living condition may be helpful for some to generate renunciation, but renunciation developed under this circumstance is not real, as genuine renunciation must include aspiration to seek liberation. Poverty alone may not be enough reason for people to forsake samsara. Only those who have grasped the essence of the Dharma may possibly generate true renunciation. Therefore, Buddhists in general need not and should not deliberately live too poorly.

Some non-Buddhists in India follow asceticism strictly, forsaking food, clothes, bath, etc. They believe liberation can be attained through physical austerity. Others suggest that practitioners must jump into five fires—fires in the four directions plus the sun—to attain liberation after the body has been burned down. In *Hetuvīdyā*,<sup>1</sup> the view of a non-Buddhist school was mentioned, which posited that both physical and mental phenomena are the causes of samsara. When one of them is destroyed, freedom from samsara may then be possible.

We must be clear that all these views are wrong.

Buddhism holds that the cause of our cyclic existence is nothing physical but karmic force. As long as karmic forces remain, physical body will continue to manifest no matter how many times it has perished. Once the habitual tendency accumulated in the alaya consciousness has reached a maturing point, physical body may manifest at any given time. It can also be said that the physical world, the universe and the body of sentient beings are the work

of alaya consciousness, not unlike what the materialists suggest that mental phenomena are something manufactured by the brain. The fact is that it would be totally useless to torture the body to attain enlightenment so long as karmic forces remain in the alaya consciousness. That is why the Buddha asked the followers not to live in hardship deliberately because it will not bring anyone any closer to liberation, only suffering upon oneself. Naturally, it would be a different matter altogether if being poor was due to a lack of merit. The Buddha did not say that Buddhists cannot be poor, must be wealthy, or that the poor and those having a hard life cannot attain liberation. He only advised that there is no need to go to extremes to be poor.

There are others who are pretty secured financially but mistakenly assume that easy life cannot lead one to liberation, only enduring hardship will. The Buddha disagreed with this. In his opinion, liberation would still not be attained even if one were to refuse to eat, drink, or bath in one's whole lifetime.

Incidentally, there is also a suggestion that one can attain liberation by bathing in the Ganges. This is again groundless! Dirt on the body cannot keep us in samsara. If mind cannot be cleansed of greed, hate, delusion and clinging to a real self, just keeping the body clean as a crystal would not have anything to do with liberation. What really needs to be cleansed is the alaya consciousness. We will only be able to gain freedom from samsara once the defilements stored in the alaya consciousness have been completely removed.

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Many of you have read the biography of Milarepa, which describes how he meditated in the caves without food, clothing and means to clean his body. There were many other practitioners in Tibet who had also attained liberation in equally harsh conditions. Upon hearing their stories, some people just automatically infer that leading an austere life is the prerequisite for attaining liberation. However, real austerity means undertaking to practice with diligence and great patience as well as overcoming all kinds of difficulties without fear. Otherwise, paupers among all people would be the first to reach enlightenment.

The Buddha told us that under the premise of not having to pay too great a price and not being too attached, it is acceptable to maintain a rich and leisurely lifestyle.

The opposite is to greedily pursue a life of extravagance with much effort or improper method. Why should this be avoided? Because other than a few exceptions, most people must expend a great deal of time, energy and planning to obtain material wealth, which in the eyes of the Buddha is not worth the effort. His view is that Dharma practitioners should be content with a life of fewer desires.

To be content with fewer desires is the principle set by the Buddha that we should adhere to in our daily life, but what it means to accomplished practitioners like Milarepa, to monastics in general and to laypeople varies accordingly.

To ordinary people like us, to be content with fewer desires does not mean that one cannot eat good food, wear nice clothes and so

on, but the items should not be too expensive. The point is to live a normal life—not lacking any of the necessities for living, but the desire for more possessions must be kept within certain limit.

For example, some people believe that wearing designer clothes, driving an expensive car and living in a luxurious mansion symbolize their high social standing. However, this is in fact what the Buddha meant by self-indulgence because these objects are not necessities. People can never be fully satisfied with their lives if they do not know how to control their desires, as desires can grow and expand endlessly. No matter who you are, there will always be someone who is better than you. If your aim is to get to the top social stratum, your whole life will be spent in the pursuit of such vanity until the end. The consequence of chasing endless desires is never to be happy. Many such cases can be found in our daily life either from our own experience or that of other people. It is therefore important to be content with fewer desires in life.

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## *II. The principles to be followed*

Having avoided duality, the actual way of living would vary with times. In the Buddha's opinion, we Buddhists should measure our life against the living standards of ordinary people in our times, not too low and not too high. This is how the Buddha defined a normal life.

Well, does it mean that we do not need to think about money from now on? No, we can still try to make money, but how to treat money is another matter that needs to be carefully considered. Whether money is earned as in the case of laypeople or received by the monastics as an offering, it is important to know that money is not the property of any one person but belongs to all sentient beings. One is only helping sentient beings to manage and distribute the money and hence it should be spent wherever it is needed to benefit others. If one holds such view, even lay practitioners can go and make more money than it is required for a normal life. Lacking it, however, one would be deemed violating the Buddha's principle of living, that is, being content with fewer desires, and can never be truly happy. Then, it makes no difference if one is a monastic accepting an offering or a layperson making more money than is needed for a normal life.

## *III. Money is not omnipotent*

If we do as the Buddha advised, neither money nor everyday life can pose any trouble for our practice. Otherwise, when the conflict between pursuing liberation and managing daily life cannot be resolved, many people will end up being confused and upset. Therefore, it is critical to be able to strike a balance between the two.

Once a question was raised in Newsweek: Money or happiness, which one is more important?

How would we answer if we were asked the question?

Shakyamuni Buddha answered this question 2500 years ago. That is, happiness is the most important. Money alone cannot make people satisfied, nor can one obtain happiness and freedom from it. Nonetheless, most people still think that there can be no happiness without money. To them, money is the key to happiness.

Of course, other than barely a few exceptions, people who are destitute generally do not feel much happiness. But does it mean that wealthy people must be very happy? No, it certainly does not. Money really cannot buy everything!

In some poor regions, people lacking basic subsistence are far removed from life of material prosperity elsewhere. And everyone there wants desperately to escape from poverty, thinking that everything will be taken care of once they have money. Although we all know that we cannot take anything with us when we die, we still try very hard to get closer to the kind of life that money can

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buy, just so that we may have a happier life before we go.

However, when people do become wealthier, their level of happiness has not grown with the improvement of their living conditions. For instance, many well-developed countries in the West, such as those in Scandinavia, have instituted very extensive social welfare systems for their citizens. Almost everything they need in life is provided, but the suicide rates in those countries were surprisingly high at one point. According to the data from the World Health Organization in 1994, the suicide rates of the Scandinavian countries all ranked in the top 10 on their list. Apparently, to the Scandinavians, material wealth was not as important as we thought. Although the standard of living in general is much higher in the West, many people there are not happy. This is but one indication of material wealth not being in direct proportion to happiness.

*Forbes* once did a survey on 400 richest people and 1000 median to low-income and poor individuals in the United States, asking them to pick a number from 1 to 7, with 1 being very unhappy and 7 being very happy. The result of the final tally showed that the happiness index for the super rich was 5.8. The experts also found in their many years of investigations that the happiness index of the Inuit living in the freezing cold northern Greenland was 5.8 as well. Moreover, the Masai (an ethnic group of semi-nomadic people located in Kenya) living in dirty, dilapidated shed with no running water also had the same happiness index of 5.8.

David G. Myers, social psychologist of Hope College in Holland, Michigan discovered an interesting discrepancy between wealth and happiness based on data from the US census in 2000. Myers found that the buying power of the average American had tripled since 1950. Wouldn't it be reasonable to conclude from this statistic that Americans' level of happiness in 2000 should be thrice as high as that in the 1950s? The fact is that people were much better off financially in 2000 than some 50 years ago, but the younger generation was not happier than their fathers; they were instead more prone to anxiety.

American psychologist Dr. Jean M. Twenge did a sweeping analysis on 269 studies conducted from 1953 to 1993 measuring the anxiety levels of children and college students. The results of her analysis published in 2000 demonstrated that the anxiety level of an average American child in the 1980s was higher than that of the child psychiatric patients in the 1950s.

Michael Willmott and William Nelson of the Future Foundation wrote in their acclaimed book *Complicated Lives* that the accumulation of great material wealth in the past 50 years did not make people much happier. It is a classic example of a paradox of progress. People of this generation are wealthier, healthier, more secured and enjoy more freedom than previous generations, yet their life seems to be more depressing.

A study done by an American social psychologist a few years back concluded that for the past 40 years the number of Americans

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who described themselves as being “very happy” had been steadily going down. According to another survey, from 1960 to 2000, with price being the same, the per capita income of the United States had tripled while the proportion of people who felt very happy had dropped from 40% to around 30%. While in the more advanced economies such as France, UK and the US, the number of people who suffered mental depression had been growing steadily in the last ten years or so. The study explained that the relationship between income level and happiness is not linear but skewed. That is, before income has reached a certain level, rising income will increase the level of happiness. But when annual income passes beyond the so-called magic level of US\$75000,<sup>2</sup> earning more seems unable to produce more happiness

Money is not omnipotent. This the Buddha had said long ago. But now it has been proven so more and more clearly. The data above evidently show that our sense of happiness did not come from material prosperity.

Everyone is seeking a happy life, yet all seem to be experiencing unhappiness of one kind or another. More and more people realize that having more money and possessions is no guaranty for more happiness. This truth has been well elucidated in the Buddhist texts, which the economists and psychologists in the West only found out now.

Nagarjuna used the following analogy to describe man’s desire in the treatise entitled *Letter to a Friend (Suhrlakha)*. People who

suffered leprosy, a disease caused by bacteria, would feel extremely itchy and painful when the symptoms flared up. In order to alleviate the pain, many lepers would go very close to the fire. The bacteria being stimulated by the heat then became much more active and made the patients suffer even more. This analogy actually hints at man’s desire. We have always thought that money can buy us happiness and so we strive all the time to make more money. But the truth is that being rich often makes us even more miserable.

There is also another saying in the same treatise as well as other texts that desire for and indulgence in material possessions is like salty water. The more one drinks, the thirstier one gets. If one cannot see the point of being content with fewer desires in life, the ever-expanding desire will only result in more unhappiness.

Nowadays, in many people’s minds there is a big question mark over the idea that happiness follows economic expansion, because in real life that is not the case. The statistics are also pointing to a different reality. So, people cannot help wondering if they will be as unhappy as those in the highly industrialized countries when they themselves have become prosperous.

In the past, some Western philosophers also held the view that happiness comes from material wealth and possessions. This idea has been around since the Renaissance.

Julien Offray de la Matrie, a French materialist of the Enlightenment who proposed the metaphor of the human being as machine, believed that man’s happiness and pleasure must be



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felt via the body's organs. He said that happiness cannot be born of mind or feeling. If one were to look for happiness in one's own thought or by studying some hitherto unknown truths, it would be like searching for happiness in an unhappy place.

It is also Voltaire's view that sensual pleasure is the impetus for people to pursue happiness. He actively opposed the asceticism imposed by the church then, insisting instead that neither law nor religion should block people's desires.

Under the influence of these philosophies, people in the West generally accept the view of accumulating material wealth as a means to obtain happiness. But after a few hundred years of endeavor, real happiness still remains elusive. Inasmuch as having good cars, beautiful houses, even yachts and private planes, many rich people continue to feel aimless, dejected and miserable in life. There doesn't seem to be any solution at hand for them.

Richard Layard, British economist of the London School of Economics, wrote in his landmark book *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* that since the 1950s, the average per capita income of developed countries has tripled. People in those richer societies have more to eat and to wear, bigger cars and houses, more time and ability to travel abroad, shorter workweek, higher pay and, most importantly, better health, but they are no happier.

Dr. Darrin M. McMahon, American historian, took six years to study happiness and wrote the acclaimed book *Happiness: A History* using massive amount of historical data and human

experiences in real life as reference. The book pointed out that the average life for American males and females of 46.3 and 48.3 years old respectively in 1900 has increased to 74.1 and 79.5 years old respectively in 2000. But it would be wrong to infer from this information that people in the West have become happier due to improvement in material living conditions and scientific development. Comprehensive surveys conducted in the U.S. since 1950s show that the proportion of people who consider themselves happy has remained stable at about one third, whereas of those who feel "very happy" has decreased from 7.5% to less than 6%. At the same time, the proportion of people being diagnosed with unipolar depression seems to have increased by a wide margin instead. The author noted in conclusion<sup>3</sup>:

But when, and if, human beings decide to take this fateful step in the quest to live as gods, they should know that in doing so, they will be leaving a piece of their humanity behind. For to judge by the yearning and pursuit—the noble restlessness—has driven Western culture for the past several thousand years, there are certain things that human beings will never know—certain riddles they will never answer—if they are to remain mere mortals. The holy grail of perfect happiness is one of those things, and like that precious mythic relic, said to have gathered blood from the side of the son of man, it, too, may exist only in our minds, a deliverance cup and a chalice to hold our pain.

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This conclusion and others of the kind are drawn from actual data and real-life experience in the human history.

Buddhism does not exclude the possibility of relative and temporary happiness existing in samsara, but not absolute happiness. Generally speaking, suffering accounts for the better part of samsara. Although this view may perhaps be accepted now, many people still consider the poor must suffer more than the rich. However, the data presented above already point out that it is wrong to equate material prosperity with happiness. More importantly, what I mean to show you is that as long as we live the way that the Buddha prescribed for us, our life will be relatively happier and more meaningful.

Of course, there is no possibility for happiness if one cannot even sustain the basic needs of life. But once an average living standard can be maintained, one must learn to keep life simple, that is, to live contently with fewer desires. If not, happiness will forever be beyond one's reach.

The Western societies have now realized the way they used to pursue happiness is wrong after hundreds of years of trying. Personally, I think that perhaps after another hundred years or so the whole world will come to this realization and naturally side with the Buddha's point of view because it is the only way to real happiness. In view of what we know today, the idea that only material possessions can make people happy seems to run into a dead end. On the one hand, man cannot find happiness this way.

On the other hand, nature also forbids us to continue living in a way that consumes so much of the earth's resources. Eventually, we will all be left with no other choice but to adopt the way of living prescribed by the Buddha. We may find relative happiness in samsara only if we know how to live.

#### IV. Faith - the source of happiness

According to some surveys, given the same living condition, the level of happiness for those who have faith far exceeds those who have not.

It is because the ones having faith can more easily find their identities in a disorderly society as well as refuge for the mind and purpose for their lives. Most importantly, having faith can help people better control their worldly pursuits, knowing somewhat the futility of relying on those for ultimate happiness. Relatively speaking, their desires are less rampant and hence feeling happier in life overall.

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## V. The way to happiness

I have said more than once before that the Buddha is incomparable not only with respect to the view on emptiness, not-self and luminous mind but also in terms of seeking temporary happiness in the mundane world. In my opinion, Buddha Sakyamuni is the greatest thinker of all times. From now on, we should all try our best to live the way that the Buddha had prescribed for us, one that is not devoid of material comforts. It is good enough to have a car to drive, watch and clothes to wear; they don't have to be name brands. To be content with fewer desires does not mean that one cannot own anything. That would be impossible any way. In fact, there is an unbreakable rule in the Vinaya that it should not demand ordinary people to do anything that they are incapable of doing. The Buddha knew very well our limits and thus would not ask for something impossible of us. He did not say that everyone must lead a life of hardship but that we should control our desires and spend time and energy for something more meaningful in life. Otherwise, we can never be really happy or accomplish anything worthwhile. Do consider this point carefully.

In Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*, it said that, according to the Buddha's advice, being content with fewer desires is the greatest asset that one can have. Those who are able to maintain such disposition are truly rich people even if they do not own a single asset, because only they can attain the ultimate, perfect happiness.

An article entitled *Why It's So Hard to be Happy*<sup>4</sup> listed five points

to be happier: 1. do not focus on goals; 2. make time to volunteer; 3. practice moderation; 4. strive for contentment; 5. practice living in the moment. Money, designer clothes, expensive cars, etc. were not on the list. Apparently, many of our old ideas about how to be happy are wrong. The Buddha knew very well the relationship between material wealth and man's desires—how people's minds change with the rise and fall of their fortune. This is why the Buddha had specifically instructed this mode of life for the Buddhists.

Ordinary folks like us do not really understand our own minds—how it would change or what direction it would take—trusting only that happiness will come with material prosperity. Although we might be wealthy in the previous life, whatever experience of that life has long been forgotten. Now in this life, because we have not had too much money and never been the super rich, there is certain difficulty for us to know the reality of living in luxury. When the going gets tough, most people just yearn for material wealth as the panacea for all their problems.

What is the real meaning of life? The answer can only be found in Buddhism. Other worldly disciplines such as philosophy have so far failed to answer this question fully. The general view is that nothing remains after death, so the meaning of life is to enjoy life to the fullest while it lasts even at the cost of squandering the precious lifetime, depleting massive amount of resources and destroying the natural environment. Still, happiness is beyond reach. It shows that to pursue happiness this way only leads to disappointment.

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For most people, it is quite necessary to understand these points. Whether to continue chasing material prosperity or choose a more meaningful way of living is crucial to where this life will lead us. As a matter of fact, it is an extremely rare opportunity that we were born human, have encountered the teachings of the Buddha and had some time to practice. No other things in the world are as extraordinary as such opportunity. In our countless past lives, we must once have enjoyed great wealth and high esteem that made others envious and might even have owned the most precious wish-fulfilling jewel (*Cintamani*). The same will happen in the innumerable future lives as well. But all those did not make us any better off today.

We should know that the purpose of a car is not to burn fuel but for transportation. Burning fuel is just a car's way of living—it moves things while consuming gasoline. Likewise, the purpose of man is not just eating, drinking and having fun. Eating and drinking are how man can sustain life, never the ultimate goal of mankind.

What then is man's ultimate goal in life? Those having no faith can never find the answer. However, as Buddhists, our goal is to use the opportunity we have in this life to practice the Dharma diligently so as to be better equipped to benefit all sentient beings.

1. Buddhist Logic
2. According to a study done by Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton from the Center for Health and Well-being at Princeton University.
3. Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History*, 479.
4. Michael Wiederman, *Scientific American Mind*, February 2007.

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