

**FREEDOM  
THROUGH  
UNDER-  
STANDING**

**ATISHA  
CENTRE  
BENDIGO, VIC  
VEN ROBINA  
COURTIN  
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**Painting of Lord Buddha** by Jane Seidlitz.

## **1. UNRAVELLING OUR EMOTIONS**

### **VEN ROBINA COURTIN**

The Buddhist view is that we've all got extraordinary potential to cultivate our minds, our consciousness. It's not some special gift that only some people have; it's innate within all of us.

But potential for what? Not something holy, like heaven in the sky, or next life, but potential to eliminate entirely fear, depression, anxiety, neediness, low self-esteem and to fully develop love, contentment, compassion, clarity, courage and the other qualities we want so badly. That's the meaning of nirvana.

It is something very earthy, so tasty, not something vague and mystical.

This potential exists, simply, in our minds, our consciousness. Therefore we need to learn how to access our own mind. Sounds simple enough, but it's not a job we're educated to do. It is not our habit to look inside, much less know deeply and well what's going on there.

### **WHAT IS THE MIND?**

From the Buddhist point of view, the word "mind" covers the entire spectrum of our inner experiences: thoughts, feelings and emotions, unconscious, sub-conscious, intuition, instinct, even what some might call soul – all of this is our consciousness. And this, as Lama Zopa Rinpoche puts it, is where the workshop is. This is what we have to become deeply familiar with in order to cultivate our marvelous potential.

Mainly what we're familiar with, what we run to in order to understand our lives, is the outside world, the past – the

people and events and objects – which we're convinced are the main cause of our happiness and suffering.

This is okay, and necessary, but not enough. Our parents, our genes, the boyfriend, the boss, the external environment – they are merely catalysts for our experiences, not the main event. The main thing is our own mind, our own emotions, characteristics, personality traits, tendencies: our own very being itself.

Investigating, unravelling, and transforming this is the Buddhist approach to psychological work.

## **BEING OUR OWN THERAPIST**

According to this model of the mind, psychological states fall into three categories: positive, negative, and neutral. Leaving aside the neutral, the positive states, which are at the core of our being, are necessarily the cause of own wellbeing and happiness, and the basis of our capacity to benefit others. The negative, which are not at the core of our being and thus can be removed, are necessarily the cause of our unhappiness and the basis of our harming others.

The key job, then, is to develop the skill to look inside, to be introspective, in a clear and disciplined way, so that we're then qualified to do the actual job of changing our emotions, of distinguishing between the positive and negative. To become our own therapist, in other words, as Lama Yeshe puts it.

Not an easy job. First of all, we're not educated to look into our minds. Second, we only notice we're angry, for example, when the words vomit out of the mouth; or that we're depressed when we can't get out of bed one morning. Third, even if we do look at our feelings, often we can't tell the difference between the positive and the negative: they're mixed together in a big soup of emotions – and a puréed soup at.

And one of the biggest obstacles is that we don't think we can change them: they're so concrete, so real: "I'm born this way, what can I do about it?" We so fiercely identify with the neuroses, believing that they're the real me. We even think they're physical. And anyway, who *wants* to look into their mind? "It's not my fault, is it? I didn't ask to get born! This is how we all are! What am *I* supposed to do about it?"

Everything conspires against our doing this job.

### **NEGATIVITY IS NOT INNATE**

To give ourselves the confidence to even start, we need to think about how the negative states of mind are not at the core of our being, they do not define us, they are not innate, and thus can be removed. This flies in the face of our deeply held assumption – one that's reinforced by all contemporary models of the mind – that the positive and negative have equal status; that they're natural; they just are who we are. If you ask your therapist for methods to get rid of all anger, jealousy, attachment and the rest, they'll think you're insane!

We can be forgiven for thinking the negative, neurotic, unhappy emotions are at the core of our being: they certainly feel like it! We identify totally with them, follow them perfectly, truly believing this is who I really am. This is the irony of ego.

### **NEGATIVE STATES OF MIND ARE DISTURBING AND DELUSIONAL**

So, if the negative, neurotic emotions are the source of our pain and the positive ones the cause of our happiness, then we'd better learn to distinguish them. This is the very essence of the job our being our own therapist.

What are negative states of mind? They have two main characteristics (which the positive ones necessarily lack) and

these are indicated by two commonly used synonyms: “disturbing emotions” and “delusions”.

**Disturbing** Even though we can see that anger is disturbing to oneself – just look at an angry person: they’re out of their mind! – we fiercely live in denial of it; or we deflect it, so determined are we to believe that the external catalyst is the main problem. My friends on death row in Kentucky told me that they receive visits from an old Catholic man who, after thirty years of grief and rage after his daughter was murdered, finally realized that the *main* reason for his suffering was his rage, his anger.

**Delusional** The other characteristic that these unhappy states of mind possess is that they’re delusional. We’d be offended if someone accused of that, but that’s exactly what Buddha is saying. The extent to which our minds are caught up in attachment, anger and the rest is the extent to which we are not in touch with reality. He’s saying that we’re all delusional, it’s just a question of degree.

In other words, anger, attachment and the rest are concepts, *wrong* concepts. It seems like a joke to say that these powerful emotions are based in thoughts, but that’s because we only notice them when they roar up to the surface as emotion.

Perhaps we can see the disturbing aspect of them, but rarely the delusional.

They are distorted assessments of the person or the event that we are attached to or angry with; they’re elaborations, exaggerated stories, lies, misconceptions, fantasies, conceptual constructions, superstitions. As Rinpoche puts it, they decorate on top of what is already there layers upon layers of characteristics that are simply not there. Bad enough that we see things this way; the worst part is that we *believe* that these stories are true. This is what keeps us locked inside our own personal insane asylum.

Understanding this is the key to understanding our negative states of mind and, therefore, how to get rid of them.

## **ATTACHMENT AND ANGER COME TOGETHER**

The delusion that runs our lives is attachment. It's a profound dissatisfaction, neediness; a primordial sense that something is missing, of being bereft, lonely, cut off. It's just there, *all the time*, in the bones of our being.

And this is where aversion, anger, the exact opposite of attachment, comes into play. The split second that attachment is thwarted, doesn't get what it wants – and that's a thousand times a day – aversion arises. Then this is expressed externally as anger or internally as despair and depression. Attachment and aversion are utterly linked. Being a fantasy, attachment is not sustainable; the bubble has to burst, and it has nowhere to go but aversion (or ignorance, which manifests as boredom, indifference, uncaring).

In our never-ending efforts to keep the panic at bay, we hungrily seek the right sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, thoughts, words, but the split second we don't get them, aversion arises, exploding outwards as anger or imploding inwards as depression, guilt, hopelessness, self-hate.

## **DELUSIONS ARE LIARS**

At the root of this, as Buddha calls it, is ignorance: *marigpa* in Tibetan: unawareness: a fundamental unawareness of how we actually exist. The function of this “ego-grasping”, as it's called, is to isolate and concretize this universe-big sense of self, a deluded sense of “I”, a totally fabricated sense of I, whose nature is fear: paranoid, dark, cut off, separate, alienated, and overwhelming.



This instinctive, pervasive sense of an independent, self-existent, real, solid, definite me-ness, totally pervades everything – there is not an instant when it is not there. It's at the deepest level of assumption, beneath everything. It is always there, informing everything we think and feel and say and do and experience.

And the main voice of this I is “I *want*”. Why? The vivid sense of a separate, lonely I manifests as a deep sense of missing something, not being enough, not having enough. And that is the irony of ego – we actually feel empty, bereft. And so that neediness, that bottomless pit of yearning, that hunger: that's attachment. And it's the main voice of ego, it is constantly there, moment by moment; not just occasionally there, but constantly there.

This attachment, this desire, being a misconception, makes the mistake of believing, a million percent, that that delicious person, that gorgeous taste, that lovely smell, that nice feeling, that idea – that when I get *that*, when I have it inside me, then I'll feel full, then I'll be content. That is what desire thinks.

This is so hard to see how desire is deluded. And it is not meant to be a moralistic issue. As soon as we hear these words we feel a bit resentful, “What do you mean – I'm not allowed to have pleasure?” That's how we feel. But as Lama Yeshe has pointed out: we're either completely hedonistic, and grasping and shoving everything in, or we're completely puritanical. And the irony is that they are both coming from a misunderstanding of desire; they both come from ego.

Buddha is not being moralistic. He is not saying we should not have pleasure – the reality is he is saying we *should* have masses of pleasure, joy, happiness, but naturally and appropriately, and, incredibly, without relying upon anything external. This is our natural state when we've depolluted our minds of the neruoses, in fact.

Right now, because of the misconception that desire has, we have got the wrong end of the stick. Desire thinks that the delicious chocolate cake, that gorgeous thing is *out there*, vibrating deliciousness, demanding that I eat it – nothing coming from my side at all. We don't think out mind plays any role at all. We think that it's all happening from the cake's side, all the energy is coming from the cake.

## **OUR MIND MAKES IT UP**

And the thing is that we don't see this process! The fact is we are making up the cake – attachment has written a huge story about cake and what it will do for us. It is a complex conceptual construction, an invention, an elaborate view, an interpretation, an opinion.

We're like a child, as one lama said, who draws a lion, and then becomes afraid of it. We invent everything in our reality, and then we have all the fears and the paranoia and the depression and the grasping. We're too much!

But we make up that cake, we make up the enemy – we made them up ourselves. This sounds pretty cosmic, but it is literally true. This doesn't mean there is no cake there – there is. And it doesn't mean that Fred didn't punch you – he did. We need to distinguish between the facts and the fiction: that's the tricky part.

It is hard to see this, but this is the way delusions function. And basically they are liars. What attachment is seeing is simply not true. What attachment is seeing simply does not exist.

There *is* a cake there, but what we think is cake and what cake actually is are hugely different. This is interesting. And because this is hard to see indicates how ancient it is within us.

What we're seeing or experiencing, what we are grasping at – delicious cake from its own side that will make me happy – is a total lie. It doesn't exist like that at all. There is a cake there, it is brown, it is square: that's valid. And this is what's hard to distinguish – the correctness, and the incorrectness. What is actually there and what is not there. That is the job we need to do in knowing the way delusions work and therefore how to get rid of them.

### **ATTACHMENT IS THE VOICE OF THE VICTIM**

Another characteristic of attachment is that it is the voice of the victim. We truly feel we have no control – cake is this incredible powerful thing, and I just have to have it. What choice do I have? That is attachment talking. Attachment gives all the power to the outside object. Which is why we feel like a baby. That's the victim mentality. And victim mentality, the one of hopelessness, the one of no control, that's the voice of attachment. Literally. That's exactly how attachment functions. Attachment is giving all the power to that object. It sees this truly delicious divine thing, which in reality our mind has made up, and then we believe it and then blame it.

### **ATTACHMENT IS NOT A FUNCTION OF THE SENSES**

"We make the body the boss", as Lama Yeshe would tell us. We totally follow what the senses feel. We assume the delicious cake is an object of the senses – of course, it is; but what we think we see isn't what's there. What appears to the sense of sight, for example, is not a delicious cake but simply the shape and colour of the thing. "Delicious cake" is a story made up by the mental consciousness, specifically attachment. This is a crucial point.

Let's analyze. What is being experienced in relation to that cake? What are the states of mind? One of them is the senses

indeed – we smell it in the kitchen, so there’s our nose sense. Then there’s the touch, the sight, we see the shape and color when it comes to the table; then we touch it, the hand feels it, then there’s the taste consciousness, the one we’re wanting the most. So four of the five senses are involved in the experience of that cake.

The senses are like dumb animals. Our tongue doesn’t experience the hunger for the cake, it doesn’t leap out of our face and grab the cake desperately; even our hand doesn’t, although it looks like it. The hand goes out to the cake, but not from its own side. So what does? It’s propelled by the neurotic need to get the cake in the mouth. The mental consciousness, in other words. The thought. It is the story about what is chocolate cake, and I need chocolate cake, all the stuff about chocolate cake that is chattering away in the mind. That is where the delusions exist. Attachment is not a function of the taste. It is simply not possible. How can it be? Our tongue doesn’t feel neurotic. Our tongue doesn’t feel grasping, our tongue doesn’t feel, “I want to have more cake”, it is just a doorway through which this bunch of thoughts, these concepts, this sense of “I” grasps at the experience, isn’t it? That is all. So the senses do not experience attachment. It is a logical fact.

## **WE ARE ALL JUNKIES**

So, of course, for ages we have had the mistaken assumption that satisfying the senses is the way to get happiness. So right now, we are totally dependent on sensory objects. We are all junkies, it’s just a question of degree. We can’t imagine having pleasure unless we get that fix. That fix is any one of the objects of the five senses. Which makes it sound quite brutal.

But unless we can start to look into this and cut through this whole way of working, we will never break free of suffering,

we'll never becomes content, satisfied, fulfilled. Ever. Which is why, the basis of practice, the foundation of all realizations, is morality. Discipline. It means literally practicing control over the senses. And it is not a moralistic issue; It's a practical one. The aim is to get as happy as possible. This is the aim.

### **NOTHING WRONG WITH PLEASURE!**

This happiness, this pleasure, is not deluded. If pleasure were deluded, we might as well give up now. Pleasure, happiness, joy are totally appropriate.

So where's the problem? Why do we suffer? Why are we frantic and anxious and desperate, fantasizing about the cake before it's even there, then shoving two pieces in when it comes, and then being depressed when we eat too much? Why all this rubbish? Because we have these delusions. Suffering doesn't come from pleasure, it doesn't come from the senses. It comes from neuroses in the mental consciousness. But right now it's virtually impossible for us to have pleasure without attachment.

### **ATTACHMENT TO A PERSON**

It's the same with people. Let's look at the person we are attached to, the person we are in love with – even more dramatic. Again, this soup of emotions, which we never analyze, never deconstruct.

I can say, "I love you". That means I wish them to be happy. Totally appropriate. Unbelievable, virtuous. The more of this the better. We will only get happiness if we keep thinking that. "I want you not to suffer", that's called compassion. Generosity, maybe you'd like to give the person something. Generosity, in its nature is a virtue, necessarily the cause of happiness.

So, love doesn't cause suffering, compassion doesn't cause suffering, the senses don't directly cause suffering, happiness can't possibly cause suffering – so what does? The cause of suffering is the attachment, first of all, the neurotic sense of an “I”, a hungry “I” that sees this person, grossly exaggerates their value to me, gives too much power, puts the power “out there” in that person, just like the cake, which implies that we are devaluing the power of ourself. We're giving all the power to this person, like it's all out there, this person, vibrating, so delicious, so gorgeous, this is exactly how it feels. So attachment is hungry and empty and bereft and lonely. And is completely convinced that having that person is going to make me happy.

What attachment does is exaggerate the beautiful qualities of the person, it is exaggerating our sense of an “I” that needs that person, because attachment thinks that if I don't get that person then I am not happy; because we don't believe we can be happy inside, we have to have an object. Attachment then starts to manipulate this person, expects massively that this person will give me happiness.

It's the same with the person we loathe. We really believe that that person, from out there, from their own side, independently, definitely, is an awful person, as if ugliness is coursing in their veins along with their blood. We hear their name, it appears awful, we see their face, it appears awful. The discomfort in our mind is huge. We think the discomfort, the unhappiness, the hurt, the anger, the pain, we actually think and believe they are doing it to us.

But it's a lie. It's our own anger that causes the person to look awful, the anger that makes us so miserable.

## **GOING BEYOND ENEMY, FRIEND, STRANGER**

Usually the only person we wish to be happy – that’s the meaning of love – is the person we are attached to. And the only person we are attached to is the person we love. So we assume because they come together, they’re the same thing. It is just not accurate. We need to start going beyond those limits, which is so scary. When we start practicing equanimity, we analyze: enemy, friend, and stranger – we try to cut through this narrow self-centred view of attachment, ignorance and aversion.

Right now we assume it is normal that when a person is mean to me, I don’t like them. So we call them enemies. And we assume it is normal that when a person is nice to me, we call them friend. And when a person is doing neither, they are called stranger. That’s the reality of the entire universe, isn’t it? We need to go beyond this one.

## **WHAT IS ANGER AND WHAT IS ANGER NOT?**

A perfect question. And the perfect answer, which I heard from Lama Zopa Rinpoche, is: “Anger is the response when attachment doesn’t get what it wants”. But what is it not?

**Anger is not physical.** Anger is part of our mind, and our mind is not physical. It exists in dependence upon the brain, the genes, the chemical reactions, but is not these things.

When anger’s strong, it triggers huge physical symptoms: the blood boils, the heart beats fast, the spit comes out the mouth, the eyes open wide in panic, the voice shouts. Or if we experience aversion as depression, the body feels like a lead weight; there’s no energy, a terrible inertia. And then, when we boost our serotonin, the body feels good again.

But these are just gross expressions of what, finally, is purely thought: a story made up by our conceptual mind that exaggerates the ugly aspects of the person or event or oneself.

Recent findings prove what is explained in Tibetan Medicine: that what goes on in the mind affects the body.

**Anger is not someone else's fault.** This doesn't mean that the person didn't punch me; sure they did. And it doesn't mean that punching me is not bad; sure it is. But the person didn't make me angry. The punch is merely the catalyst for my anger, a tendency in my mind. If there were no anger, all I'd get is a broken nose.

**Anger does not come from our parents.** We love to blame our parents! Actually, if Buddha is wrong in his assertion that our mind comes from previous lives and is propelled by the force of our own past actions into our mother's womb; and if the materialists are right in asserting that our parents created us, then we *should* blame them. How dare they create me, like Frankenstein and his monster, giving me anger and jealousy and the rest! But they didn't, Buddha says. (Nor did a superior being – but we dare not blame him!). They gave us a body; the rest is ours (including our good qualities).

**Anger isn't only the shouting.** Just because a person doesn't shout and yell doesn't mean they're not angry. When we understand that anger is based on the thought called aversion, then we can see we are all angry. Of course, if we never look inside, we won't notice the aversion; that's why people who don't express anger experience it as depression or guilt.

**Anger is not necessary for compassionate action.** His Holiness the Dalai Lama responded to an interviewer who suggested that anger seems to act as a motivator for action, "I know what you mean. But with anger, your wish to help doesn't last. With compassion, you never give up".



We need to discriminate between good and bad, but Buddha says that we should criticize the action, not the person. As Martin Luther King said, it's okay to find fault – but then we should think, “What can I do about it?”

It's exactly the same with seeing our own faults, but instead of feeling guilty we should think, “What can I do about it?” Then we can change. Anger and guilt are paralyzed, impotent, useless.

**Anger is not natural.** Often we think we need anger in order to be a reasonable human being; that it's unnatural not to have it; that it gives perspective to life. It's a bit like thinking that in order to appreciate pleasure we need to know pain. But that's obviously ridiculous: for me to appreciate your kindness, you first need to punch me in the nose?

**Anger is not at the core of our being.** Being a delusional state of mind, a lie, a misconception, it's logical that anger can be eliminated. If I think there are two cups on my table, whereas there is only one, that's a misconception. What to do with the thought “there are two cups on my table”? Remove it from my mind! Recognize that there is one cup and stop believing the lie. Simple.

Of course, the lies that believe that I'm self-existent, that delicious objects make me happy, that ugly ones make me suffer, that my mind is my brain, that someone else created me – *these* lies have been in my mind since beginningless time. But the method for getting rid of them is the same.

What's left when we've removed the lies, the delusions, is the truth of our own innate goodness, fully perfected. That is what's natural.

## **PRACTICE IS PAINFUL**

Real practice is painful – real practice. Until it is painful, it is not practice, we're just playing safe. We're just keeping our

nice comfort zone. Practice has to threaten something – it has to feel painful. Just like when we are overweight, we decide we are going to get thin and beautiful, and we start doing push-ups. It has to be painful at first. We know that if the second we start feeling pain from doing pushups we stop, we will never benefit from doing them. We can always pretend “Oh I did my pushups this morning”, but if the second they started being painful, we stopped, we know that if our muscles don’t hurt, they will never get strong – it is logic. Giving up attachment is like that – it has to be painful.

Until then, we are just being in our comfort zone – we’re playing safe, thinking that being spiritual means smiling and being holy and having a pleasant manner. It is just not so. Until we stretch, until we go beyond our limits, we won’t get better at doing anything. We really get our body strong when we go beyond our limits every day. How do we become an accomplished pianist or anything? We have to go beyond our limits. That’s what spiritual practice is – we have to stretch our limits.

This means we have to be facing our attachment every day, feeling the pain of it, seeing it. And then, the second we start to do that, somehow we become fulfilled, satisfied. That is what is interesting. When we start to give up being a junkie, we start to become happy. We begin to taste our own potential. As long as we continue to follow attachment, which is so deep, we will never be happy.

## **PRACTICE STARTS WITH MOTIVATION**

So how to begin? It all comes from motivation. We can start the day by deciding we will begin, be very courageous. It starts from the thought. We tend in the West to dismiss thoughts. We

say, “It’s only in the mind”, we give no value to the mind, even though we are caught in it. We give no value to just thought.

The point is, that if we really understand this fundamental, and easily provable, truth that every thought programs us into what we will become, we would be so happy to have positive thoughts, and be content with them. Because of two things; first, everything that we do comes from the thought that we think. If I am going to get up and walk out the door, what is the first thing that has to happen? My legs don’t just jump up and walk out, my mind has to say “I want to walk out that door”. So what does that mean? How do we walk out a door? The first thing is to think “I want to walk out that door”.

So every day, you’re saying “I want to be compassionate, I want to be beneficial”. You’re aspiring, and then you’ll act. It is no mystery. That’s how we become pianists, footballers, a cook – or a happy, beneficial person. It starts with the thought, the motivation, the aspiration.

So we just start our practice with powerful sincere motivations. We are sincere, after all; we do want to be these things, loving, compassionate, etc. Genuinely wanting, seeing the reasonableness of having a compassionate thought, seeing the reasonableness of turning around a negative thought. Not thinking that thought doesn’t matter. What we are is the product of our thoughts. It is simply a fact. This is what karma is saying. No one else made us into anything, we made yourself. As Lama Zopa says, remember, we can mold our mind into any shape we like.

Practice is, in the beginning, every day, is motivation, motivation, motivation. I want to do this, I am aspiring to that. When we start every day, we wish “May I be useful, may I not shoot my mouth off to too many people”, etc. Even this is so profound. We have to value the thought, value the mind, it is so powerful. Like the Dalai Lama says, we are then on the right

track for the rest of the day. Don't underestimate that. If we really got that, we would be so content, knowing we were sowing the seeds for future crops of happiness. It is like we had a big open field, and we are sowing seeds for the future. That's practice. That's how we start.

We shouldn't fret, "I'm hopeless, I'm useless". We are too concrete in our thinking. So we start with the motivation, start with the thoughts, and we go into the day, and bring that awareness with us. Watch our mind, be careful of the rubbish, try not to shoot our mouth off too much, try to be a bit useful, rejoice in the good stuff. At the end of the day, we look back, we regret our mistakes and rejoice in our efforts, and then go to bed with a happy mind. That's one day of practice. One day at a time. It is organic, and it's humble. We start one day at a time, and slowly, something develops.

## **2. HOW KARMA PLAYS OUT IN OUR LIVES**

### **VEN ROBINA COURTIN**

#### **FOUR WAYS THAT KARMA RIPENS**

There are four ways in which our actions from the past lives – you know, before we even entered into this present womb of our mother – there are four ways those past actions ripen in the present. Or indeed, there are four ways in which our present actions leave seeds in the mind that will ripen in the future as one's experiences. It's a constant process, ongoing. Every microsecond of everything that goes on in our mind, and the things we do on the basis of those thoughts with our body and speech, this is the karmic process. This is constantly occurring. This is the natural process of cause and effect, constantly in play.

#### **1. FULLY RIPENED RESULT: A REBIRTH**

The first, main one – they call it Fully Ripened Result – is the type of rebirth we get born into. So, you know, if we're materialists, or if we're Christians, for example, we both agree on one thing at least – that someone else made us. I was made by God. I was made by Mummy and Daddy. They're the same principle, aren't they? That you're made by someone else. Which means it's got nothing to do with you.

Whereas the Buddha says, "Everything to do with me." Our past actions are the main cause of why my mind found its way to my present mother's human womb. Why blame your parents? They're just lying there having fun and you come along. So Buddha puts us right in the centre of responsibility of even why we're human in the first place. Which is kind of an

interesting concept – who would have thought that you were the main cause of who you are? Big surprise!

Not more than a few weeks before conception in your mother's womb, your consciousness was in another form, another life. And at the time of that death, before you stopped breathed, very simply speaking, a very strong seed from having practised morality – in the context of keeping vows of morality according to Lama Zopa Rinpoche – was activated that basically programmed your mind after it left that body to find its way to your present mother's human womb.

Your father and mother having sex is just a co-operative cause. They did not make you, they did not create you. Your consciousness had very strong karmic connection with them from past history with those particular parents.

One lama said that at the time of a male and female human having sex, billions of consciousnesses that are recently passed away (and that's obviously not just from the human realm; Buddha would assert a whole spectrum of possibilities of types of consciousnesses existing in different realms) are all hovering around trying to get in. Well, we got in! From Buddha's point of view, we should be weeping in delight every day at how fortunate we are, getting such an extraordinarily fortunate life.

Clearly it's easier to get a mosquito birth, dog birth, a fish birth: we can see there are billions and trillions of other sentient beings, we can see this. But we got the human one. Amazing.

That's the first way our karma ripened – the type of rebirth we born into.

But, you know, Mother Teresa and Hitler both got one of those, so what causes the differences?

## 2. ACTIONS SIMILAR TO THE CAUSE: OUR TENDENCIES

That gets us to the second way in which our past actions ripened in the present. And this is our tendencies, our characteristics, our personality; our depression, our kindness, our wish to kill, our wish to lie, our being good at piano, our being good at math; whatever it might be.

And that's an interesting point, psychologically speaking. In Buddhist terms, we give equal status to whether you're good at love, good at anger or good at music. It's just a tendency.

But we see our artistic tendencies and our emotional ones in a very different light in our contemporary world, don't we?

For example, we're honoured to own responsibility for our being good at music.

"Why are you good at piano, Robina?"

"Well, I have musical tendencies and I practised really hard: *that's* why I'm good at it.

"Why are you good at anger, Robina?"

"Oh, that's my father's fault! Nothing to do with me!" No accountability whatsoever! We love being accountable for our being good at music, or maths, or being a gymnast, you know, but not emotional stuff. We have this different set of laws when it comes to emotional stuff, which I find most fascinating – no logic at all.

The Buddha says, those tendencies – whether you're angry, jealous or just being good at music – are just tendencies. Why do we have a tendency? From having done it before. Quite simple. Mozart clearly had musical tendencies. Hitler clearly had other tendencies, and he expressed them, didn't he, in his actions.

Our mothers and fathers – this is a big shock to us – they're not the main cause of this. The absolute default explanation in the materialist world is it's all in the DNA and the genes, etc.

That's why we always look into the past, to our parents, for the causes of why I am what I am.

Yes, Buddha agrees: look into the past, but not to your parents; look into your past lives.

Alternatively we see it all as conditioning. My mother was a musician, and everyone would say, "Yeah, Robina's good at music because her mother was good at music." Buddha would say, "No – Robina's good at music because she practised it before. My mother had also practised it before, and then she encouraged my music by teaching me. A simple point, but shocking to us.

So, your tendencies – they call this Actions Similar to the Cause. They're yours. You're fully programmed with every one of these from the first second of conception. Millions of these different imprints. Millions of these different tendencies. They're your own past habits.

### **3. EXPERIENCES SIMILAR TO THE CAUSE: HOW PEOPLE TREAT YOU, ETC.**

The third way that your karma ripens is called Experiences Similar to the Cause, and that's all the stuff that happens to you. The people and creatures you meet, the parents you get, the teachers, the abusers, the ones who are loving to you, the ones who rape you, the ones who give you a million dollars, the ones who are kind to you, the ones who steal from you, whatever it might be. The way you're treated and seen in the world. The main cause? Your past actions.

So Buddha puts every sentient in the very centre of our experiences. He says our actions are the main cause of why we are who we are and why what happens to us. All the good and all the bad. This applies to giraffes, dogs, ants, fish, humans –



all “*sem-chens*,” the term in Tibetan for “sentient being”: “mind-possessor.” We’re all mind-possessors.

Buddha says that there’s not an atom of space where you won’t find mind-possessors. Trillions of them.

#### **4. ENVIRONMENTAL KARMA**

And fourth, they call it Environmental Karma. Environmental karma, which is the very way the physical world impacts upon us. For example, here we are sitting in this room. It’s quite pleasant, isn’t it? It’s quite peaceful, pleasant view out there, it’s quiet, you know – the walls aren’t dripping with mould. It’s pleasantly painted. It smells nice. No-one’s threatening us.

We take this for granted – we never ask, “Why are we having a pleasant experience?” For the Buddha there are very real causes created by us: this pleasant environmental experience is the result of our collective virtue.

If suddenly the building explodes, or a gunman comes in, *then* we’d ask, “Why is this happening?” This would be due to our collective non-virtuous karma.

Basically, Buddha’s point about karma is that suffering, which is when everything goes wrong – it could be externally, could be the people, could be the environment, could be in your own mind; when everything’s out of whack, out of balance, disharmonious, when the elements are all crazy, when people are all fighting, when people are mean to you, when your own mind’s berserk – all this is necessarily the result of negativity.

And happiness: same: the result of positive karma, virtuous actions.

#### **I’M THE BOSS**

The four ways our past karma ripens in the present – the very fact that you’re this human being, with this very particular

family and friends and people who harm us and people who help us; all our tendencies; and even the way the physical world impacts upon us – are all the result of our own actions. Necessarily. It's just the way it is. It's a natural law. It's not blame, it's not punishment. There's no concept of punishment or reward in Buddhism – that implies someone punishing and rewarding, doesn't it? And for the Buddha there's no one pulling the strings, no one running things.

Buddha says each one of us in charge. "We are the boss"! Big surprise! So if I am the boss of my own present experiences, if I am the cause of it, then indeed I can be the cause of my future experiences – which is why we should then check up: Do I like this life, do I like people punching me in the nose? Do I like having people being angry at me? Do I like being depressed and angry and jealous and poor and living in an ugly environment? No, I don't. Then, okay, there must be causes of this; what were they? Buddha lays it all out, all from his own observation, his own experience.

This is Buddhist practice.

### **3. THERE'S NO KARMA THAT CAN'T BE PURIFIED**

**VEN ROBINA COURTIN**

As Lama Yeshe says, “We create negativity with our mind, so we can purify it by creating positivity with our mind.” This is the process of purification.

If we are the creators of our own reality, our experiences, then we change things. Of course, easy to say, but very hard to see this, mainly because we're addicted to the samsaric way of interpreting life: that we didn't ask to get born, that it's not my fault: so deeply ingrained in us!

#### **THERE IS SUFFERING: FIRST NOBLE TRUTH**

So, if we're sick of suffering, we'd better know how to accurately identify it. This is the First Noble Truth. There are three levels of suffering.

##### **1. The Suffering of Suffering**

This is in-your-face suffering; all the bad things that happen.

##### **2. The Suffering of Change**

Now this is a bit depressing, because it's what we actually call happiness. Buddha calls it suffering. It's a sneaky, honey-covered razor blade; it's basically when attachment gets what it wants. It looks to us like happiness, but it's just the junkie getting the fix. It's actually fraught with suffering.

##### **3. All Pervasive Suffering**

The third kind of suffering, even more subtle – we don't even give it a name in our culture, or even in our religions – is being born in the first place with this body, which is the body of a junkie in a world constructed of junk, and to survive you

need to ingest it. There's no choice: it's all in the very nature of suffering. That's the third level of suffering.

## **THERE ARE CAUSES OF SUFFERING: THE SECOND NOBLE TRUTH**

So, we're locked in suffering – the world is in the nature of suffering, the Buddha says. And why all this? Well, it's got causes – that's the Second Noble Truth. And guess what? There are two main causes, and we created both of them. It's scary – we think it all comes from everybody else.

One is the **1. past karma**, the past action, that left the seed in your mind when you did the negative action that is now ripening as your suffering. And the second cause, and actually they both subsume down to this one, is the **2. delusions** in the mind that cause you to do the negative action in the first place, which then again manifests when you punch me in the nose and I say, "How dare you," and I punch you right back, and the ball keeps rolling.

## **TWO LEVELS OF PRACTICE**

### **1. WATCH OUR BODY, SPEECH AND MIND LIKE A HAWK AND REFRAIN FROM DOING HARM NOW**

So, in relation to these two causes of suffering, there are two main kinds of practice. And as Lama Zopa Rinpoche says, the first one, the most immediate, the most urgent, is in relation to the second cause of suffering, the delusions: do not respond in a deluded way to the good and bad things that happen every day, which are the fruit of our past action.

You own these karmic appearances as yours, so you do everything in your power to not respond with negative mind, body, or speech. You do everything in your power to avoid

harming the person back or grasping at the good things; you watch your mind like a hawk and try not to sow more negative seeds. That's your first immediate practice. Every minute, watch your mind like a hawk, watch your body and speech like a hawk. You avoid at least creating more negative karma in relation to the situations of daily life.

The second one is where you now have to take care of the karma you've already created in all the countless past lives, the seeds that are lying in your mind, latent, waiting for the conditions to ripen as your suffering. They haven't ripened yet; so you've got to get ahead of the game, you've got to pull them out, or at the very least weaken them. And that's what purification is.

## **THE FORCE OF OUR PAST HABITS**

But before we get into purification, first let's look at why it's so hard to do the most immediate level of practice, the most urgent: to watch our body, speech and mind and not create negative karma now.

So it's a tough one, because the tragedy of karma is, we're brainwashed, we're completely conditioned, we're completely habituated, we're completely brainwashed – not by others but by our own past actions, habits. We are propelled by the force of our past habits.

Now, when it comes to good things, aren't we fortunate? For example, a friend of mine taking the lice out of her three-year-old son's head, and the little boy cries, "Mummy, Mummy, leave them alone, don't hurt them. It's their home." The little boy is full of compassion. He's three. She hasn't taught him this. So *he* is propelled by the force of *his* past karma, which is his compassion. We can deduce logically that he has practiced compassion in the past so that now it arises just naturally. How fortunate that spontaneous compassion arises in his three-

year-old mind and he cries with compassion for the lice in his own head! How marvelous! Programming is good when it's virtuous karma.

Look at Mozart: his mother gives him a piano at the age of six, off he goes writing, his sonatas. We can deduce that he's programmed with music. When I popped out of my mother's womb, shouting and kicking, we can deduce that I was programmed with anger. So, it's a tough one when the programming is negative, because whatever's happening to you appears bad, not fair; it feels so spontaneous that you believe that anger is totally right.

## **JUNKIES FOR PLEASURE**

So we are propelled by the force of our past habit. And that, conjoined with the attachment – you're lost. Completely lost. That's why it is so hard to change – because we are junkies for pleasure. We are junkies for pleasure. That's this human realm. Buddha calls it a desire realm. So that means we are junkies for pleasure; we are born with these senses that crave their objects. The moment we get the object, that's what we mean by happiness. If we feel happy, then we logically deduce the action we did must be good.

The same with the torturer – I remember reading about one of those guys years ago, a multi-murderer and a torturer. He said, from the time he could remember, he was compelled to kill, to torture and kill creatures, little ants and animals, because it gave him pleasure. And then of course as he got older, he graduated to humans.

He intellectually knew it was wrong; because he could see the world didn't approve, but you know, he had to keep it secret, of course. But he was totally addicted to the pleasure

that it gave him. Why? Habit from the past, programming from karma.

We think in the West, Oh, he's just this devil, he's an evil person. But the logical reason he did it is because of his past killing, no doubt as an animal, torturing – look at animals, they torture each other all the time. Constant. They're just addicted to torture. Being tortured and torturing – that's what animals do. Worst, most intense suffering. This guy – karmic imprint, you know, of torture. And what happened? He got pleasure from it: habit meets attachment equals pleasure. And the logic is, "It must be good, because it gives me a good feeling." Of course, the world doesn't agree, so he's going to keep it quiet. There's always this conflict in his mind. But he is addicted to the pleasure.

Look at our pathetic little habits, you know. Overeating, smoking, junkies for sex, maybe... look how hard it is to get past our old habits, and we've got pathetic little habits, you know. Imagine if you got born with the habit to torture! What a terrible suffering – can you imagine? Or just to even kill fish and not realize it's suffering, not realize it's negative, all because it feels good. This is why attachment is so tricky.

This is why we have to have really logical, intelligent minds to have a sound basis for what is good and what is not, and then judge our experiences according to it. And then struggle to change our old habits. It's a tough job, because we are propelled by our habits. We're on autopilot, you know. We think we make choices. We think we're intelligent. We're not. We're just junkies for habits, you know, craving to get good feelings. Stuff the food in, whatever we do. So we have to look into our minds carefully, and then struggle to change the habits. And it is a struggle, we all know that.

So that's the immediate level of practice, the most urgent, as Rinpoche says, the here and now, dealing with what arises every second.

## **2. PURIFY THE KARMIC SEEDS THAT HAVE NOT YET RIPENED**

This other one – the purification – is to deal with the seeds that haven't even manifested yet, that one can see no evidence of. This is called purification. And as Lama Zopa says, we are insane not to do this practice every day.

### **PURIFICATION IS A PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESS**

So, like all this work in Buddhism, this process of purification is practical, it's psychological. A really easy way to remember is – and I like this one – is to call the steps the Four Rs. There are different orders of these, according to the practice, but I like this particular order.

The first one is Regret, the second one is Reliance, the third, the Remedy, the fourth one, Resolve, the determination to make changes.

### **1. FIRST OPPONENT POWER: REGRET**

So the first one is you've got to acknowledge what you've done wrong. If you've taken poison, let's say, the very first step is to recognize that you've done it. You've got to first acknowledge there's a problem. It's pretty reasonable. You've first got to acknowledge you've eaten poison. "Oh, what a fool! Quick, what can I do about it?" Then you find yourself a decent doctor; then you do something to purify it, you apply the antidotes. Then you determine never to do it again. This is reasonable; it's practical, it's common sense.



Trouble is, when it comes to morality, we seem to have this other set of rules and we get all guilty and ashamed and neurotic, or we blame; we're ridiculous. We do everything to avoid responsibility.

### **BLAME, GUILT, DENIAL**

When it comes to doing things like killing and lying and stealing, instead of simply acknowledging it, we want to find someone else who's fault it is. That's as ridiculous as trying to find someone to blame for the poison in my dinner. You're dying, but all your thoughts are for blaming. Blame is pretty useless, which is our typical mode.

Another typical mode is guilt – “Oh, I ate poison. Oh, I'm such a bad person. I ate poison.” Every day, you're getting sicker and sicker...” Oh, I'm such a bad person, I ate poison.” We love to live in this one. Completely useless. Complete waste of time. Totally impotent. It's the same as blame, but you're the person you're blaming. One is anger, one is self-blame. They're the same problem.

The third one, even more ridiculous – and we love this one – “Robina! There's poison in your dinner!” “There is not!” We call it living in denial.

### **ACCOUNTABILITY**

So we've got to be accountable. This entire process of purification is based upon the understanding of karma and on the recognition that you don't want suffering. Regret, the first step, is all about yourself.

So, we have guilt, now, which beats ourselves up. “I'm just a bad person.” Blame or guilt, we run to these spontaneously because they are a natural response to having ego-grasping, of having this ignorance that clings to the self-existent me. It's this dualistic state of mind that naturally blames others, or

naturally blames yourself. And we have to conquer that. We have to argue with that wrong view.

One time His Holiness was asked the difference between guilt and regret. It was such a sweet answer, but quite profound. He said: “With guilt, you look into the past and you go, “I did this and I did that and I did this,” and then you go, “and I’m a bad person.” We just assume naturally that if I’ve done bad things, I must be a bad person. That’s how we think. That second thought is the view of ego, the view of ego-grasping, that over-exaggerates the badness, and paints the entirety of myself with that brush.

The same with blame. “You are a bad person. You did this and you did this and you did this and you’re a bad person.” This is what all delusions do; they exaggerate. And it’s just not accurate. Forget being not morally right – it’s just not accurate. It’s an exaggeration. It isn’t accurate to conclude because you’ve killed and lied and stolen, that you’re a bad person. You’re not. That’s mistaken. Your *actions* are bad, no problem with that. That’s clear. That’s more precise.

But the point here is, then His Holiness said, “With regret, you also look into the past and think, “I did this in the past, and I did this, and I did this...” but then you think, “What can I do about it?” Now, we have to cultivate this consciously, it doesn’t come naturally. Instead of saying, “...and I’m a bad person,” you then say, “What can I do about it?” You change the thought. We have to cultivate that view. That’s what regret is. It’s wholesome, courageous, and optimistic.

You could say that regret is like compassion for yourself. Like the poison, the reason you say, “Oh my God, what an idiot! Quick, where’s the doctor?” – it’s obvious why you say this. You don’t have to state it: you know that poison will cause you suffering, and you know you don’t want suffering. Well,

same here. You're sick of suffering, and you understand that having harmed others will cause you suffering.

## **WE HAVE TO SPELL IT OUT**

So, when we do this practice at the end of the day, you speak out to yourself what you have done to harm others. You bad-mouthed your husband, you talked about your girlfriend behind her back, you took the pencil at work and you never returned it. I mean, maybe you're not going around torturing and killing too many people, but whatever it is, you've got to acknowledge it. "I did do this and this..." And then you check the main things throughout this life – maybe you had an abortion, maybe you went fishing, maybe you're a hunter: you acknowledge it, and you regret it.

And, of course, this step is most important if you have taken vows: lay or monastic vows, bodhisattva vows, tantric vows. It's vital to regret having broken them, and not just this life but in the past as well.

And this is regret. You acknowledge what you have done to harm others and, because you don't want suffering yourself – this is the motivation behind regret (compassion for others comes in the second step), you regret having done it. "I regret this. Why? Because I'm sick of suffering. I don't want the suffering that will come from this if I leave that seed in my mind. Because if I do leave that seed in my mind – that poison – it will ripen as my suffering and – hey! – I do not want suffering."

This attitude does not come naturally to us. Guilt comes naturally! Even if we say the word regret, it still feels like guilt. So, we have to spell it out to make it a new thought. It's a really crucial point, I tell you. It's not enough just to say, "Oh, I regret killing and lying and stealing." It feels like guilt, so you've got to change the words.

The simple, most fundamental thing about karma is that everything you do and say and think leaves a seed in your mind that can ripen as that experience for yourself in the future. You just have to think: do I like being stolen from? Nope. What causes people to steal from me? I must have stolen from them. So if I've just stolen a pencil, then I'll get stolen from in the future. I don't want that. It's just logic; you've got to think it through, if you apply the law of karma, you know.

So you've got to be logical. Think it through. Make it real for you, not just some religious feeling. Not some weird, guilty feeling. That's useless. It's practical – I regret having done this because I don't want to be stolen from, I don't want suffering, I'm sick of it. Yet again I've shot my mouth off – shouted at people. I'm sick of this habit. First of all, too, you can even right now see the suffering and the hurt it causes you, the pain of that anger, you're feeling all caught up in it and fed up with it and you're so sick of it. You've got to feel that pain and be fed up with it. "I'm sick of this suffering, I'm sick of this boring habit."

And, of course, the main suffering we do not want is to be born in the lower realms, which is the main result of negative actions. We really have to think these things through.

And we're just talking here of the habits that we do that harm others; we're not looking at just our own emotional problems yet. We're looking at the actions of our body and speech first – what we do to harm others first – killing, lying, stealing, bad-mouthing; there's only so many names for them. You regret them. Remember the things, your old habits in this life – you know, maybe you're addicted to sex and you harm people with your sexual attachment; but you look at the suffering you're causing yourself.

## **THE BUDDHA'S VIEW OF MORALITY**

You see, this is a very interesting point, let's look at this a bit more – Buddha's view of what morality is. It's a really important point to think about. The usual view we have about morality, which is why we're like children and resisting it mightily, is because we think it comes from somebody on high forcing it upon us: either God or our mother or the judge or the police, you know. We think it's done to us.

It isn't like that, not for Buddha. I asked a Catholic priest, a friend of mine, "What defines something as a sin?" He said, "It's going against the will of God." That is what defines a sin: something you do that is against the will of God. Now, that's reasonable if God is the creator, and that's reasonable if you are a Christian. That's appropriate. That's correct.

But that's not the Buddhist definition of a negative action. Going against Buddha's views is not what defines something as negative. It's got nothing to do with Buddha! That's like saying, "Why is smoking bad? Oh, because my doctor told me not to." Your doctor's merely a messenger. The reason smoking's bad is because it'll hurt you, dear.

For Buddha, what defines killing as bad is really simple; it's because it harms another. Buddha says this is a conventional truth that you can prove quite quickly. You just do your market research in this world, in this room and you ask around, "Do you like getting killed, stolen from, lied to, kicked in the teeth?" Everybody will say no.

So we can deduce logically that a negative action is one that harms another, because you've just proven it by agreeing we don't like it. That's what makes it negative. It does not come from somebody on high, it's not set in stone; it is not, in other words, self-existent. It is a dependent arising. That's Buddha's view; it's a natural law. So, what a negative action is is one that harms another.

But in this very first stage of practice where you regret doing actions that harm others, the reason first – you have to hear this point – the reason you regret having done it is not for the sake of others yet; it’s for *your* sake, remember? So, a negative action is defined as an action that harms another; but at this first step, you regret it because your doing it programs your mind to keep doing it and to have it done to you, not to mention being born in the lower realms.

So, you regret it because *you* don’t want the suffering. This is a crucial point. We’ve got to understand this, not just be vague about it. “Oh I do my Vajrasattva practice, oh I regret lying, killing...” We don’t even give it thought, you know, we just wishy-washy gloss over it.

So a negative action is defined as one that harms another, but at this first stage – and this is the very meaning of the first level of practice in Buddhism – in the first scope of practice, junior school, I like to call it – His Holiness uses this analogy as well: the way the teachings in the lam-rim are structured, it’s like the education system. In Tibetan medieval language they call it the Lower Scope of practice. So junior school level of practice is to control your body and your speech.

The reason you will regret killing and lying and stealing and bad-mouthing – and there’s not that many actions you do with your body and speech that harm others, sexual misconduct, lying, killing, stealing, you know, shouting at people, harsh speech, talking behind backs; there’s only so many. “You know what, I’m sick of this suffering, I’m sick of the pain it causes me right now and I do not want the karmic fruits of this in the future. No way! So I regret having killed, lied, stolen, etc. etc.”

Then it makes it very real for you, because it’s about yourself. Don’t feel bad about this. Don’t feel guilty, like I should just be having compassion for others. Compassion’s the

Great Scope – that’s university, people! You’ve got to recognize your own suffering before you recognize the suffering of others. You’ve got to be sick of your own suffering – this is what renunciation is – you’re sick of your own suffering. That’s why you’ve got to contemplate what these ridiculous things that we do, do to *ourselves*. Don’t gloss over this step, it’s extremely important.

So, you regret the things you did today, yesterday, this life, in beginningless past lives – the things you’ve done with your body and speech to harm others. “I regret anything I have ever done, since beginningless time to any sentient being.”

And of course, for those of us with vows, deeply regret our broken vows: pratimoksha vows – vows of individual liberation, the vows you take for junior school and high school – if you’ve broken those, then you deeply regret having broken those. If you’ve taken bodhisattva vows, then you deeply regret having broken your bodhisattva vows. If you’ve taken tantric vows, you deeply regret having broken your tantric vows, because these are lifelong vows. So you regret these, hugely, because you don’t want the suffering that this can cause in the future: being separate from our lamas, the Dharma, the Buddha’s teachings, not to mention other suffering.

And if Buddha is right in asserting, as he does, that we’ve had beginningless lives, that we’ve had countless lives as animals, and that mightn’t be the most suffering life, but that’s where we do the most harm; animals just in their nature harm and get harmed. Look at one whale: it opens its mouth for one mouthful of one breakfast on one day and forty million creatures go in. And you get guilty because you killed one person. Get some perspective, please! That’s a lot of sentient beings. So they live in a killing environment; they live on killing, animals do. So, the harm we’ve done to sentient beings

as animals is inconceivable in comparison to what we've done as humans.

So if our minds are beginningless and we've had these lives, we've done countless things and that means those karmic seeds are on our minds now. So, you better regret them, because you know you don't want that suffering again! "I regret anything I've ever done to any sentient being since beginningless time." Regret the lot! Because I do not want suffering – we've got to add that thought. "Because I am sick of suffering. Because I do not want suffering." You've got to say that. That's what makes it real, and not just some nice religious feeling. Not just guilt.

That's regret, the first of the four opponent powers.

## **2. SECOND OPPONENT POWER: RELIANCE.**

### **a. REFUGE**

Now you think, "Well, good! Whom can I turn to? Where's the doctor, please?" So you turn to Mr. Buddha. He's our doctor. Second step: Reliance.

There are two parts in Reliance: the first is reliance upon the Buddha; that's called Refuge. So what does that mean? Let's look at this again, carefully. If I'm a Christian, I would rely upon God, because he's my creator. So how I get purified is by requesting him to forgive me. Well, Buddha will forgive you; he's a nice guy, I promise. But it's got nothing to do with purification. Nothing. It's nice to be forgiven, but it's not the point. It is not the discussion. Quite different.

So we rely on Buddha because he's our doctor – he's got the methods; he's got the medicine. So, "Thank goodness I've got a decent doctor," you think. And you do a little prayer, you visualize Vajrasattva, the particular manifestation of Buddha that all the lamas praise as the best one for this practice.



In the bodhisattva path, the Buddha manifests as like, gorgeous, you know, jewelry on his arms and ears and throat, and silken clothing; they call it the royal aspect. This is coming from tantra, where that's a whole different discussion and it has to do with enhancing the senses and energizing them. It's quite different, another level. So, Buddha in that aspect is called Vajradhara, or in Tibetan, Dorje Chang.

When I first became a Buddhist, I really like this name "Dorje Chang" and I asked Lama Yeshe, "Who's Dorje Chang, Lama?" and he said, very simply, "He's the biggest Buddha, dear." I was very proud to know I liked the biggest Buddha! So basically, that's the tantric aspect of Shakyamuni Buddha.

For this purification practice, we use another aspect of Vajradhara, who looks the same, but he's white: Vajrasattva. He's particularly to do with emptiness, because realizing emptiness is when you've finally cut the root of the delusions, and that's when we actually purify our minds. Until then, by doing this purification practice we are simply stalling the ripening, we're weakening the seeds, we're like burning them, we're not pulling them out completely. Until you've realized emptiness, you will never cut the delusions, you'll always have more suffering. We need to stop their ripening, though, and that's what the purification process does. So, one relies upon Vajrasattva.

So, we visualize him above our head, and then we takes refuge, say a prayer remembering the Buddha, grateful to have a Buddha, and we imagine him as our own lama, who manifests as the Buddha for our benefit, to show us the way. That's what refuge means. You rely upon the doctor.

Now, you've got to look at what it means, "rely upon the doctor." Why would you rely upon a doctor? Two reasons: one, because you do not want more sickness and you need their medicine; and two, because you are confident they're a good

doctor. It seems kind of obvious; you don't go to a doctor because they've got a cute nose. So you rely upon their advice. It's perfectly reasonable.

Here, of course, this implies having thought about the Buddha, seeing that he's valid, and wanting to rely upon the Buddha because you want his medicine so that you can heal yourself.

In other words, if you've never thought about suffering, and you haven't regretted anything you've done wrong because you haven't thought about suffering and its consequences, then the Buddha will be pretty meaningless to you. If you haven't taken poison, or you don't realize you've taken poison, you might have heard about some amazing doctor who's got every antidote to every poison on earth, and you go, "Oh, how interesting. But how boring. Who needs him?" You don't care. But check how you feel when you've discovered you know you've taken poison; you're going to hang on every word that doctor says and take his advice perfectly.

## **2b. COMPASSION**

The second part of Reliance is where you have compassion for those you have harmed. It's a bit curious that it's called reliance. The lamas put it like this: here we are, now wanting to cultivate compassion for the suffering of others. Whom do we rely up, or need, in order to accomplish compassion? Suffering sentient beings, of course. If we never meet a suffering sentient being, how could we ever cultivate compassion. It's in this sense that they say we "rely upon" sentient beings.

In the first step, Regret, it's like having compassion for yourself. You're regretting the harm you've done for your sake. Now here, what you need to cultivate is compassion for those you've harmed, and you regret for their sake and want to purify

yourself for *their* sake. But you can't have that until you've got the first one. Compassion is based upon this first one, on Regret. You can't have compassion for the suffering of others until you've got this real sense of renunciation for your own suffering. It's impossible, you can't. You've got to have this one first.

Why? Very simple. Renunciation has two parts: The first part is: you are sick of suffering. Now, we all know that – we're all sick of suffering. But the second part's crucial: you now know *why* you're suffering – your past negative actions and your delusions. When you've got these two, that's renunciation.

Compassion is these two as well, but instead of yourself, it's applied to others. One: you see people suffering, and you find it unbearable. But, two: you now know why they are suffering, and that's the big shift here. You now know why they are suffering: because of their karma and their delusions: They, like you, are the source of their own suffering. You don't have compassion because they're poor innocent victims, which is the only people we usually have compassion for now; we love to have compassion for innocent victims, usually animals and children.

Now you see others suffering and you know why they're suffering. It's a crucial difference and one has to cultivate it carefully. Again, it's completely based on the teachings of karma, so one has to think of this so carefully, analyze it so carefully. Because the feeling we have now is guilt and shame and hate and blame, you know.

Our compassion now on based upon there being no karma. We only have compassion for innocent victims, because we assume the cause of suffering is the horrible oppressor. Buddha says, "Wrong view." Actually, when you've got this view of compassion, you'll have even more compassion for the oppressor. That's a fact. Why? Very logical. It's like a mother

for her junkie kid. Everybody else hates him – he lies, he steals, he's a pain to be around; but the mother, her heart breaks for him. Why? Because he is causing himself suffering. That's the basis of compassion.

You see people who are the victims of harm, you realize it's the result of their own past actions and your heart breaks for them, but you have even more compassion for the people who caused it, because the people who are the victims are just finishing their suffering and the ones who caused it are just beginning theirs.

Once you've got this first for yourself, which is renunciation: I'm sick of suffering, I know why I'm suffering: karma; then it's easy then to have compassion for others. You can't get it properly until you've got it for yourself. This is a reasonable psychological kind of progression, and all of it's based on karma.

Now, in this second part of the second step, Reliance, you think about compassion now. You think of those you've harmed, and you know what it's like to suffer so you know what it's like for their suffering. You regret for their sake, now. Compassion for others.

And if you're brave enough, you can have compassion for those who have harmed you, because they're going to suffer in the future. And of course, the dynamic of all this is you know you caused them suffering in the past, that's how come they're causing you suffering now. When you've got karma down, you can own it so strongly.

### **WITH THE VIEW OF KARMA, NO BLAME, THEREFORE NO ANGER**

In 2003 I remember, in New York, I was there for a conference that Richard Gere had organized: a bunch of ex-prisoners,

when His Holiness was there. Twenty ex-prisoners who had been meditating in prison: black and white, male and female, Puerto Rican, Mexican: a cross-section of American society. So people like me who had worked with people in prison were invited as well. We had this very nice talk all day, just a lovely conference, you know? And they all met His Holiness.

Richard also invited two young Tibetan nuns who'd been tortured and sexually abused in prison for a couple of years, basically for just being nuns. So they were telling their experience.

First of all, if you could quantify suffering, then it was obvious to all the Americans that the suffering of the nuns was more than all of theirs put together. But second, it was really clear they weren't angry, which is a big surprise to us. Because we have a victim mentality, and because we think we're innocent victims, and we think suffering is caused by others, we assume anger is normal; because anger is blame, isn't it? Anger is the response of the innocent victim.

But if you have the view of karma, you don't have blame. The nuns were sad, there were tears, but they weren't angry. And that's a big shock to us: we assume anger is normal; in fact, we'd think you're not normal if you don't have anger.

But these nuns, at the end of their talk, they said very quietly, "And of course, we had compassion for our torturers, because we knew we had harmed them in the past."

This is a huge point. This is why we can't just gloss over karma, we've got to really give it thought. And this is the basis of all of Buddha's teachings. It is a way of spelling out the law of cause and effect. Really think it through – it's the basis of all practice. And it's the basis of compassion.

### **3. THIRD OPPONENT POWER: THE REMEDY**

So now, the third step. Now you take the medicine. You apply the antidote. You can say in Buddhism there's a whole medicine cabinet of remedies, but all the lamas in the Tibetan traditions praise this particular meditation, this particular visualization, this particular mantra as a really potent medicine. Often this step is simply called "applying the antidote."

So, you know, anything here would apply. If you've got a habit to kill, you make a point of saving lives. You go get a bunch of worms and instead of having them killed as bait, you release the worms. It's a powerful thing to do. Or one of your practices could be, one of your antidotes could be to help sick people: anything you do that's opposite to the thing you're regretting. If you're regretting lying, you make a special point of telling the truth. You must do this anyway in your life. They are necessary.

But here, in this step, the very powerful practice, very powerful antidote, remedy – and one has to think about why it's powerful, not just because it's religion, you know – this very potent medicine of visualizing Vajrasattva and saying his mantra. This is said to be a very powerful medicine that works at a very deep level of your mind. So, one does this visualization of Vajrasattva purifying the various actions of your body, speech and mind and reciting the mantra.

All the lamas say that any practice that involves saying the Buddha's name, visualizing, reciting their mantras, is hugely powerful, far more powerful than practices that don't involve the Buddha. They talk about the "power of the object," the object of one's thoughts, actions, etc. So doing this practice of visualizing nectar coming from the Buddha and purifying your negative actions of body, speech and mind while you recite the

mantra, is like an atomic bomb on the negative karmic imprints.

That's the third step.

#### **4. FOURTH OPPONENT POWER: RESOLVE**

And the fourth one, as Pabongka Rinpoche says, is the most important: Resolve, or the determination to change. If you can't own responsibility for what you've done wrong, you can never make the decision to change, can you, because you don't want to own it. First with regret and then the determination to change, you're really becoming accountable. You're really growing up. You're becoming mature. And you're becoming your own friend. That's why this practice is so crucial to do. Not just to gloss it over, say, "Oh I've done my Vajrasattva mantras..." That's not enough, I tell you. That's just not enough. You've got to think through these four steps. It's psychologically really profound. It's being your own therapist, as Lama Yeshe puts it, I'm not kidding.

Things really shift if we can do this properly, because this is where we get the courage to know we are in charge of our life and we *can* change. Because it's the power of our own will, our own determination to change.

So this fourth step, again, is so practical: you make determination not to do again. So, if you have taken vows – I will never kill, I will never lie, I will never steal – you've taken those five lay vows, and they're lifetime vows, so obviously you need to reiterate that vow.

Every time you say "I will never kill," it's like digging that groove deeper in your mind. It's not enough to say, "Oh, yeah, I took vows twenty years ago. Twenty years ago I vowed I wouldn't kill," but you've never thought of it since. It's like saying, "Oh, I'm a pianist, I played piano twenty years ago." You're not, unless you do it every day. We see these things as

so self-existent. It's not enough. It's an ongoing, dynamic daily thing.

If every day you say, "I will never kill," I mean, excuse me, guess what the result will be? It's hardly rocket science. If every day you say it, that protects you every day from ever killing. It's obvious. It's so embarrassingly obvious. But we forget these things. So you need to reiterate your vows. I will never kill. I will never steal. I will never lie. I will never whatever they are. I will never break my bodhisattva vows. I will never break my tantric vows. You need to say this every day. Reiterate your commitments.

And it's not just because you're hoping God will make you good or Buddha will bless you; it's you training your mind. Like if you do pushups every day, guess what? You keep getting better at it. We understand it when it comes to creativity and art and learning things, but we think this is "religion" so we don't understand why I should say every day I'll never kill. Because you're training your mind in that direction. Because everything comes down to the thought. All you're doing by becoming a Buddha is programming your mind with positive thoughts. It's nothing more secret than that.

Then, of course, you don't lie to yourself, as Rinpoche says. If you're not ready to say I'll never do it again, if you haven't taken the vow, and you're still going fishing every day or going hunting, then don't lie to yourself and say "I'll never kill again"; you're not ready. Be realistic.

Look at our old habits, like getting angry. So maybe you'll say, "Okay. I see the reasonableness of not getting angry. I'm going to give it a go. I won't get angry for five hours." Or you might say, "I won't lie for ten hours," – and because you've got to go to bed soon, when you're asleep, you won't lie, believe me; you'll keep your vow!



Be realistic; it's an incremental thing, and you've got to take this seriously on board. That's why you can't just do your mantras and think, "I've done my practice." It's not enough. It's a serious psychological procedure that you're involved in. Practice is real; it's you dealing with your own mind.

So, give yourself a timeline. And when it comes of course to your delusions, your neurotic thoughts, the things that harm you only – and I didn't mention this in Regret – but of course you can think of your own rubbish: your own angry thoughts, your depression, your jealousy, which are destroying you. You can deeply regret these because it's obvious the suffering it causes you; because you're sick of the suffering.

Now here in this fourth step, you maybe can't say, "I'll never be depressed again"; it's not possible, if you're caught up in the middle of it. But you make some decisions for yourself; realistic, humble decisions. "Okay. I'm going to watch my mind like a hawk. I'm going to do my best tomorrow."

Any vows you've taken, you must reiterate them at this step: I will never break my lay vows, I will never break my bodhisattva vows, I will never break my tantric vows, etc.

If you haven't taken vows, and if you can start to say I will never kill, lie steal, etc., then great. Take it at your own pace. Make decisions every night with this practice, and you will change. "We can mold our minds into any shape we like," as Lama Zopa Rinpoche says. We're the boss, remember.

## **4. MEDITATE ON THE CLEAR NATURE OF OUR MIND**

### **LAMA YESHE**

Maybe you're not sure what it means "to meditate on your mind." The mahamudra way is to concentrate on the clarity of your mind, its conventional nature. But we start by focusing on our concepts, the views of our own thoughts. In other words, in order to discover the clarity of our consciousness, the object of our meditation, we first observe the thoughts.

By becoming quiet, we purify the grosser levels of our consciousness—all the dualistic thoughts about good and bad, the worldly superstitions, the artificial concepts, the negative thoughts. This creates space. Whether you're confused or miserable, blissful or in some fantastic clear light experience, it doesn't matter. Simply watching the feelings, the views of your own mind, automatically leads to concentrating on the clarity of the mind.

We observe the thoughts, and then we let go. *No* intellect—we don't analyze our thoughts. Leaving the mind as it is like this is the special emphasis of this meditation. In our gradual-path meditations we analyze. But mahamudra meditation emphasizes *not* analyzing. Because when the mind is analyzing, it's trembling, shaking. It's like an airplane when it's turning; it shakes, doesn't it?

Lama Tsongkhapa says that when we contemplate the consciousness, we should not follow any object, such as form or color or sound, or even the image of a buddha, a mantra, a syllable. These we should abandon.

We refer to this approach as “nonconceptual,” “non-superstitious.” In Tibetan we say, *mitogpa kyongwa*: “maintaining a nonconceptual state of mind.” I think this is very sensible, very logical. Of course, our habit to follow the five sense objects is strong, so we need to learn to develop the skill in meditation to stay on the consciousness itself.

I think, for Lama Tsongkhapa, using our own mind as the object of concentration is a very sensitive, direct way to realize the universal reality of our consciousness: it *easily* eliminates the superstitions and confusion—this is the *point*—which *easily* leads to the universal reality of nonduality, mahamudra.

### **NO NEED TO CLEAN THE MIND**

Now let’s practice. Just watch your thoughts. Maybe not *literally* watch—language is a problem. Be like the sunlight, which merely shines.

Normally we think our mind is bad, deluded, and that we have to make it clean. But mind’s nature is clean-clear: clarity is a fundamental characteristic of mind. In Buddhism, this applies both in philosophy and in meditation. You don’t need to make effort to make your mind this way or that; you just need to leave it alone. Its clear-light nature is pure from the beginning, and this nature exists forever.

If you can find the object to some extent, then just let go, let go. If you try too hard to make it bright, you will lose it, and distraction will come.

### **NO EXPECTATIONS**

Abandon expectations, any hope, say, for a high realization. Abandon expectations of any kind, in fact. Just let go. Keep the concentration strong and be satisfied with that.

Losang Chokyi Gyaltsen says you should not “allow your conceptual mind to entertain any fears or expectations and enter equipoise without the slightest distraction.”

In other words, when you’ve reached a reasonably clean-clear point, without emotional disturbance, don’t start worrying or get too excited. No! Just leave it there.

### **AVOID EVEN POSITIVE CONCEPTS**

Avoid all concepts, even positive ones such as, “How wonderful if all sentient beings can reach buddhahood!” That is not valid here. Even if you have a memory of your past life as some Himalayan yogi or you have some fantastic vision—even if the Buddha comes! – do not follow it. Let go of it immediately.

Don’t think that I’m trying to get you to forget about everything, your normal life. “Maybe I should just go to sleep and forget everything.” No! Panchen Lama mentions this: “It’s not the cessation of mental activity as when you faint or fall asleep.” In the development of concentration, all such thoughts are interferences. That is why you need to stop following them.

Because our habit to go to the form, the sound, the color, the smell, is so deep, we must use great skill to keep our awareness strongly on our consciousness.

We also have the habit to go to the past or the future; we get so distracted. We must break this habit, too. Remain focused on the clean-clear state of our own consciousness. The yogi Tilopa says to place the mind on the consciousness alone, without anything else. Eventually our muddy consciousness, our superstitions, will settle and become clear. Continuous nonstop mindfulness is the resource of awareness.

### **LIKE THE SUN**

Your consciousness is like the sun. Just like the sun’s rays shoot out from the sun, our thoughts, our views—right

views and wrong views—manifest from our consciousness. Whatever thought you experience, keep your mindfulness of it, continuously. That is the meditation.

### **LIKE SPACE**

Your mind is like space. When the rain comes, the space is not disturbed. Rain falls, but still it's part of space. When the rain is strong, it's disturbing, but when it stops, things become quiet and peaceful again.

The rainfall is similar to your superstitions: when they are manifesting, it's disturbing, but they still have nonduality nature, still the original nature.

### **LIKE THE OCEAN**

Your mind is like the blue ocean. It's there, you just watch it. Your thoughts are like the waves. Waves manifest from the ocean, but they are still part of the ocean. When a wave rises out of the ocean, there's some turbulence. When it drops back into the ocean again, it's not different from the ocean, is it?

### **LIKE THE FULL MOON**

Your consciousness is like the full moon. On this earth all the people and fishes and chickens and trees—all the organic things—are moving, functioning. But the full moon is just there.

Your intensive awareness remains intensive awareness of consciousness, even though the distractions themselves are coming and going. They no longer energize you. They no longer distract you. You remain on your thoughts with intensive mindfulness.

As Losang Chokyi Gyaltsen says, “Tighten by making taut and look nakedly at the nature of that which is clear and knowing”—your mind, in other words—and “recognize any conceptual thoughts that arise.”

## **LEARN TO LET GO**

When you reach the point where you can experience the clarity of your consciousness, then try to let go. Keep your concentration a little loose rather than exerting tremendous effort. Don't squeeze your mind. Too much effort, too strict discipline, is not good. You need to learn to let go.

Keep your mindfulness continuous and experience the clarity. When the mind is stable, let go. In this state, you experience quiet, joyfulness, even bliss.

"Let go" has many meanings. When you drive a car, for example, once you're aware of the right speed, the overall situation, then you need to just let go, relax. When you relax you can enjoy the drive. It's almost as if the car is flying, isn't it? But new drivers can't do that. They're always trying to adjust things; they're too nervous, too tense.

It's the same with new meditators. You have to learn to let go. If you don't know how to let go, you can never experience bliss. When you try too hard, you get headaches and high blood pressure, and eventually you hate meditation. Just the sight of your meditation cushion makes you want to go nowhere near it! So learning to let go is extremely important.

When you know how to let go, the root text says, you will be liberated from superstition. "When mind bound in a tangle is relaxed, without doubt it frees itself." When you know how to let go, you taste the blissful chocolate cake of meditation. Then each time you go to meditate, you will enjoy it.

## **DON'T REJECT DISTRACTIONS**

Don't feel bad when distractions come. Don't get upset and reject them. There's no need to think, "Oh, this is ego. It is bad." Recognize that these deluded thoughts, the dualistic thoughts, the superstitions, are simply a manifestation of your consciousness. Look at the essential nature of the thoughts: they are also clear in their nature, as we discussed. When they

come, instead of rejecting them, look, then penetrate into their essential nature.

Or think that the thoughts are like the birds, the airplanes, all the organic things that move in the space of your consciousness; they come and they go. Just let go. You can use your awareness to watch the essence of the superstitions; you don't need to lose the awareness.

### **IF TOO DISTRACTED, RELAX AND WATCH THE BREATH**

If the distractions are too strong, it's better to stop the meditation on the consciousness and do the nine-round breathing meditation. Or you can simply watch the breath. Breathing meditation is simple. Breathe, but don't think about the breathing. Using the breathing techniques, we can help our super-sensitive schizophrenic mind calm down so that we can again contemplate the clear mirror of our own consciousness.

Sometimes people don't know how to breathe, and that creates tension. Notice that when you are sad or depressed, you sigh deeply, don't you? Breathing is very important for health. You should be sensitive to the movement of your breath. Breathing well can even energize bliss, while breathing wrongly can cause problems.

These techniques can quickly cut the gross levels of the superstitions, and soon you'll reach a point where your mind is more neutral and you can go back to the clarity of your mind.

### **PERSEVERE. AND BE SATISFIED**

It's important to put energy into the practice from the beginning. And to not give up. The Vinaya texts illustrate this with an example: If you want to make fire by rubbing two sticks together, you have to be persistent. You can't just give up and then start over; it will never work. It's the same with your concentration.

Lama Tsongkhapa emphasizes that when you get some

experience of clarity, be satisfied. Don't think, "Oh, this not enough clarity; this is not what my lama means." You understand? You're over-intellectualizing. You need to discover what is right through experience; don't go by mere words.

Perhaps you have special experiences in meditation, and then they go away. Don't be disappointed. They are valuable. They are *your* experience. It has nothing to do with intellect, nothing to do with the books, nothing to do with my words. It's important to recollect these experiences. They show you what you can achieve. At other times you can have perfect experiences, but you don't recognize them. You just throw them into the garbage.

When I do retreat, I have some experiences too—small experiences. When I recollect my retreat, I am satisfied. I am not saying I have great experiences, but they're good enough. I think all of us can have moments of bliss—or even of simply not being disturbed by the concepts. That's super! Remember these times. They're *your* experiences, not anyone else's.

## **RETAIN THE CLARITY OUTSIDE OF MEDITATION**

With mahamudra you don't need to do anything formal. The clarity of your mind is with you twenty-four hours a day, so it's possible to retain the experience during your breaks as well. You use your mindfulness and leave your mind on the clarity of your own thoughts.

This is very simple. You can apply it in any situation: while you're drinking tea, while you're eating, walking, talking—even while you're dreaming. Part of your mind is always aware of the clarity of the thoughts.

Normally, you're busy with your fantasies, transfixed by your thoughts and ideas. Or you're always thinking, "Oh, I'm so confused," and there's no sense of clarity. But the clarity of your mind is always accessible. It makes no difference whether



you are feeling confused or miserable, blissful or fantastically clear. All these feelings are your mind, and they are clear in their nature.

Every situation can become a meditation. Just watch your own mind, the views moving through your mind. When your emotions are strong, instead of focusing on the object, the person, focus on the mind itself. Sit back and observe the clean-clear nature of the feelings themselves. Instead of making your mind busy with the dualistic judgments about the person or other external things, simply keep your mindfulness on the subject, on mind itself.

At a certain point you will become clear. You keep your mindfulness on whatever's arising, and you let go, without intellectualizing or analyzing. Okay?

This is beautiful. Whatever situation you're in, you immediately remember the clarity. Once you've developed this habit, you can bring it into any situation. You're developing mindfulness. That's what concentration meditation is.

*From Mahamudra: How to Discover Our True Nature, to be published by Wisdom Publications, Boston, in October, 2018. 1.*  
Unravelling Our Emotions 7

## **5. EVERYTHING IS TRANSITORY**

### **LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE**

#### **SEE ALL PHENOMENA AS A STAR, A FLAME, DEW, A WATER BUBBLE, A DREAM, LIGHTNING, A CLOUD**

Look at all the causative phenomena: I, body, mind; friend, enemy, stranger; all the possessions, all the surrounding people; look at them like a shooting star the star is there, then the next minute when you look, it's not there. All these causative phenomena, including power, reputation and so forth, all these things, are in the nature of being transitory.

Like a flame. Just as a flame in the wind can go out at any time, so all causative phenomena can stop at any time.

Like dew. Just as those drops of water on the plant in the mornings can go at any time, these causative phenomena can go.

Like the bubble. The water bubble can pop at any time. We can't trust that it can last for this many hours or for this many minutes. So similar: these causative phenomena, like a water bubble, can end at any time because they are in the nature of changing within every second, due to causes and conditions.

Like a dream: it happened and then it's gone. The appearances happened but they're gone, finished. What we see in the dream, traveling or living with the family or having so much wealth, having a party, whatever – the appearance happened and then it's gone. The causative phenomena are like that. For a short time there are the appearances throughout life, but we cannot trust that they can last a long time. These things can be stopped at any time, like the dream.

Like lightning. All these causative phenomena – I, body, mind; friend, enemy, stranger; all the possessions, all the surrounding people – are like lightning. The lightning came and then went. It happened in one second and during that time, while the lightning is happening, suddenly you see many objects. You can see your own human body and the surrounding people, the place, things. While there's lightning there's this appearance for a few seconds, and then again it becomes dark. Again this bright appearance stopped. So like that, these causative phenomena can be stopped at any time.

Like the clouds in the sky. While we are looking at the clouds, they are changing. Constantly they are changing. Not only changing their shapes, changing within every second as a result of causes and conditions. As we are looking at it, it's changing shape, it is disappearing. It is there, but while you're looking at it, it is disappearing. The next minute when you look at the sky the cloud is not there. So like that, all these causative phenomena, the nature of the people and things and events of our life are like that, like the clouds in space, in the sky. All these are in the nature of transitory.

## **PRACTISING LIKE THIS, THERE'S NO SPACE FOR SUFFERING**

We need to keep our mind in the awareness of these causative phenomena being just like these examples – that they do not last, that they're all changing within every second as a result of the process of causes and conditions: the existence of this thing depends on another cause, and that in turn depends on previous causes. Therefore the decay of the experiences of life also happens due to causes and conditions. Something happening depends upon causes and conditions and the stopping of it also depends on causes and conditions. And this can happen any time.

When we practice mindfulness of this process, suddenly there's no place for confusion; suddenly no space in our mind for confusion. Suddenly the confusion that we have in the life, suddenly it's stopped.

When we practice mindfulness of this, when we remember this, when we keep our mind aware of the nature of impermanence, it immediately cuts off our depression, which is when what attachment expected didn't happen.

Remembering that everything is transitory immediately cuts off the mountains of problems. We believe, "I have serious problems". They suffocate us, almost as if we can't breathe. We feel we are not free. We feel that our life is sunk in problems, drowned in a quagmire of problems.

By remembering the nature of the phenomena, that this I, body, mind, life, belongings, friend, enemy, stranger are in the nature of impermanence, immediately, immediately cuts off these problems, all these confusions.

All of a sudden you are free from problems, those mountains of problems. Before remembering impermanence, it looks like there are serious problems, but by remembering impermanence, the next minute, you're free. You discover it was nonsense. The way we were thinking, what we were believing, it now becomes nonsense.

By remembering impermanence, which is the nature of these causative phenomena, there is great tranquility in our own heart, immediately there is peace in our heart, a calmness.

When we do not remember the nature of these causative phenomena, their impermanence, that these things can be stopped at any time, then there's no protection, no protection for our mind. Then, delusion: anger, dissatisfied mind, attachment, ignorance, so forth, they take over. They defeat us. They take over our mind. Like the Communist Chinese took

over Tibet, the delusions took over the mind, invade the mind.

If we do not practice mindfulness of the nature of the phenomena, such as impermanence, and the ultimate nature, emptiness, the delusions take over our mind, we become a slave. Delusions use our body, speech and mind as a slave to work for them. So just for a short time, remember that I, action, object, enemy, friend, stranger, all these things, the possessions, so forth are changing every second as a result of causes and conditions; because of that, these things can be stopped at any time by causes and conditions.

*From teachings given in Sydney in 1993.*

## **6. SEEING PROBLEMS AS GOOD**

### **LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE**

#### **WHY WE NEED OMNISCIENT MIND**

Each sentient being has a different level of mind and different characteristics, and you have to know the exact method to fit each one. You should be able to say one word at the same time to millions of people and suit each one. Each one will hear something different according to their different level of mind, their different karma; but at the same time, according to their karma, what they hear should guide them on the right path, to liberation and to enlightenment.

However, right now we cannot see even one sentient being's level of mind, one sentient being's karma. To be able to guide all sentient beings perfectly, without the slightest mistake, and benefit them extensively, we need to know everything about each one's level of mind and characteristics.

Also, to lead even one sentient being gradually to enlightenment, we need the foundation of knowing the whole path. We cannot reveal just one method; one method cannot suit everyone. There have to be various methods in accordance with the levels of beings' minds. For example, by telling Makyeda, who had killed his father and mother, "Father and mother are objects to be killed," Guru Shakyamuni Buddha made him feel happy. In his depression and anxiety, it was helpful for Makyeda to hear this. It actually helped him to realize the two selflessnesses, of persons and of aggregates, and to understand that the two ignorances were to be eliminated. These words became the cause for Makyeda to actualize emptiness. Instead of getting stuck on the literal

meaning, Makyeda understood that the words meant that the two types of ignorance, apprehending the I and apprehending the aggregates as truly existent, were to be eliminated.

To say that everything is truly existent suits the minds of some people. Hearing this helps them to practice better and leads them to happiness. Though there is not even one atom of true existence, to that particular person with no capacity to understand that there is no true existence, one would teach that Buddha said there is true existence, because this instruction would become the means to lead that sentient being gradually to liberation and enlightenment.

To lead sentient beings gradually to happiness and enlightenment, one has to see every single karma, every level of mind and characteristic of every sentient being, and all the various methods that are suited to each of them. And that comes only with omniscient mind. Even arhats, who have infinite psychic powers, cannot see every single karma. Though free of disturbing-thought obscurations, arhats have still not removed the subtle obscurations to omniscience, so they cannot see subtle karma or the secret actions of the Buddhas. Arhats cannot perfectly guide sentient beings, even though they themselves are free of samsara.

Therefore, to work perfectly to benefit all sentient beings, one has to achieve the state of omniscient mind - no matter how many eons it takes, no matter how hard it is. There is no other method. Until one achieves omniscient mind, the realizations of one's own mind are not complete, and one cannot give sentient beings what they need, which is the highest, longest-lasting happiness. Achieving enlightenment is the most meaningful thing one can do to benefit oneself and to benefit other sentient beings.

## **USING PROBLEMS TO DESTROY SELF-CHERISING**

In order to achieve ultimate happiness, we must destroy our delusions. The Dharma, the path, the Buddha, the guru, for example: all these are meant to destroy your delusions, to hurt your self-cherishing thought and to subdue your mind.

Receiving criticism, disrespect or bad treatment also hurts your self-cherishing thought, your thought of worldly dharma. This is not bad, but good. Therefore, hurting your self-cherishing thought and worldly concern is Dharma practice.

Normally in our daily life we interpret someone treating us badly as negative, but actually it is positive. It becomes a remedy for our selfish mind and worldly concern. The person who treats us badly is helping us to destroy our delusions, our self-cherishing thought, worldly concern and desire, just like the Dharma does. By doing something opposite to our wish, the person interferes with the comfort we are seeking out of worldly concern, so they harm our worldly concern. This is exactly the same as Dharma. Their action becomes the real medicine to cure the real inner disease that we have had from beginningless time - the chronic disease of the three poisonous minds.

It is the same with any problem or miserable condition that you experience, such as having cancer or AIDS, which is the result of having followed self-cherishing thought and the three poisonous minds in this life or in previous lives. These diseases are not wanted by the self-cherishing thought; again they are like medicine, the path, the Dharma.

Seeing as negative the people who badly treat you or miserable conditions such as disease doesn't help you at all; this only harms you and others. Look at them as positive, as purification. This helps you to exhaust now the heavy negative karma that would otherwise mean your experiencing sufferings



in the hells for many hundreds of lifetimes.

Instead of seeing anything that harms your self-cherishing thought and worldly concern as negative, look at it as positive. Use it to destroy your delusions and to achieve liberation and enlightenment. In this way, whether there is a cure for your problem or not - and especially if there is no cure - you can make your problem worthwhile while you are experiencing it.

As mentioned in one thought transformation teaching, “Suffering is the broom that cleans away negative karma and obscurations.” Your experiencing problems is the broom, the vacuum cleaner, that cleans away negative karmas, that cleans away the cause of problems.

The teaching also says, “Disease is also the broom that cleans away negative karma and obscurations.” Disease is just used as an example - this can apply to any problem. Life’s problems can become the teaching of the Buddha. If you look at problems as positive, you can use them to destroy your self-cherishing thought.

In the practice of chod, you purposely create a terrifying situation and invoke terrifying spirits in order to slay the ego. For the highly realized practitioners who are successful at chod, it is very easy in such a situation to see clearly the object to be refuted, the truly existent I. The more quickly you recognize it, the more quickly you are able to realize the ultimate nature, the emptiness, of the I, the aggregates and so forth.

However, you don’t have to depend upon chod to create a situation in which you can try to realize emptiness. Any miserable situation - being ill, being criticized or harmed by someone - is exactly the same. The people who bother you in your everyday life are the same as the spirits you ask to disturb you when you are practicing chod. Instead of using these difficult people to develop your anger or jealousy and create

negative karma, you can use them to recognize the object to be refuted and realize emptiness. You can use the everyday situations that you are already experiencing to realize emptiness and to practice bodhicitta, which means destroying self-cherishing.

Since people who bother you destroy your self-cherishing and other delusions, just as the Dharma, the Buddha and the guru do, they are actually not harming but helping you. Like a mirror, they show you your mistakes and thus help you in the most essential way. By showing you your delusions and helping you to eliminate them, by destroying your delusions and worldly concern in this way, they are giving you ultimate happiness.

By destroying your self-cherishing, these people give you enlightenment, because the main obstacle to achieving enlightenment is self-cherishing thought. And the main obstacle to achieving liberation is desire, which ties you to samsara. In terms of subduing your mind, the person who destroys your worldly concern is as great and as precious a teacher as Buddha. Through causing you to generate the path within your mind, they make it possible for you to achieve enlightenment. This person is as precious as Buddha, as Dharma.

To be precious and kind like this, the person doesn't have to have a motivation to benefit you. For example, your wisdom realizing emptiness helps you to stop your delusions, but the wisdom realizing emptiness doesn't have any motivation to help you. Medicine is also precious because it cures disease, but it doesn't have any motivation to help.

You do not cherish yourself because you are kind to yourself. That is not your reason. Therefore, cherishing someone else doesn't have to involve their being kind to you

either. Why not cherish others in the same way you cherish yourself? Why not cherish your enemy, who helps you to practice Dharma, generate the path and achieve enlightenment? This person is unbelievably precious, just like guru, Buddha and Dharma. There are infinite reasons why you should cherish such a person.

### **OTHERS ARE NUMBERLESS**

You are just one person. Even if you are reborn in the hells, you are just one person - nothing much to be depressed about. Even if you achieve liberation from samsara, you are just one person - nothing much to be excited about. All of the numberless sentient beings - those who are called “others” - are just like you in wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. Their wishes are exactly the same as yours, and they are numberless. Each one is as important and as precious as you think you are; and these others who are so important and so precious are numberless. You, just one person, are completely insignificant. You are nothing when compared to the numberless others who are so precious and so important. You are nothing precious, nothing important.

If there are two people in addition to you, those two people are greater in number than you and thus more important. It is like the difference between one rupee and two rupees: two rupees is more valuable than one rupee. And 100 rupees is more valuable than one rupee; 1000 rupees is much more valuable than one rupee. Given the choice between taking one rupee or two rupees, you would choose two rupees. If the choice is between one rupee and 100 rupees, of course you would take the 100 rupees. If you had a choice, it would be silly to take the one rupee. You would naturally choose the larger amount. Like this, when you compare yourself with one hundred or one thousand or one million people, or numberless

sentient beings, you are nothing precious, nothing important.

Compared to all other human beings, who are uncountable, you are insignificant and unimportant. Also, each of the god, demi-god, animal, preta and hell realms contains an uncountable number of beings. The number of ants alone is uncountable. So, between you and them, they are more important. In one dark room - even in one corner - there are so many mosquitoes; they are more precious, more important. Think in detail of each realm, of each type of creature. There are so many beings just in the animal realm: butterflies, worms, flies. If you think in detail, it is incredible. Just on this earth, even in one country, there are so many.

Just like you, all these beings want happiness and do not want suffering. There is nothing more important in your life than working for sentient beings, pacifying their suffering and giving them happiness. There is nothing more important than this. Anything other than living your life for other sentient beings is meaningless, empty.

What we call “I” is completely insignificant when compared to the numberless human beings, the numberless animals and the numberless other sentient beings. Each time that we generate bodhicitta, thinking “I am going to achieve enlightenment for all sentient beings,” this includes all those beings, all the mosquitoes and ants. Think of how many suffering creatures, such as worms and flies, there are on one mountain; the bodhicitta we generate includes all of them. It includes all the fish, and all the animals that eat the fish. It includes every single one of the numberless creatures in the water, big and small, that eat each other. Each time that we generate bodhicitta, the altruistic wish to obtain happiness for others, it encompasses without discrimination all the different human races, every type of creature in the water, on the

ground, in the air. Without discrimination, it encompasses every living being.

This altruistic thought to achieve enlightenment for all sentient beings is an incredible attitude. When you generate bodhicitta, you include everybody in your thought to benefit. No matter what problem they have, no matter where they are - the East, the West, the Middle East, another world - everybody is included. Not even one sentient being is left out.

### **WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL SENTIENT BEINGS**

You can understand the idea of highest happiness from an everyday example. Given a choice, even animals will choose the most delicious food and leave other food that is not so interesting. Even a dog does this. And when shopping or doing business, people try to get the most profitable deal they can by buying the best quality, longest-lasting goods. Even though they may not know that they can achieve such a thing as enlightenment, in their daily lives everyone wishes to get the best. Unless extremely poor, everyone tries to get the best of everything, to build the best, longest-lasting house. Even though there may be no knowledge of enlightenment, there is a concept of peerless happiness. It is only because of lacking the Dharma wisdom-eye that people are not aware that enlightenment is the main thing missing in their lives, and is what they need to achieve.

Just as you are always trying to get the most in terms of happiness, so too is every other sentient being. What everyone needs is the peerless happiness of full enlightenment, the state free of all obscurations and complete in all realizations.

Having received a perfect human rebirth, met a virtuous teacher to lead us on the path to liberation and enlightenment, and met the Buddhadharma - especially the Mahayana teachings - each of us has the opportunity to free all sentient

beings from all obscurations and sufferings and lead them to the fully enlightened state. We have this opportunity to help because we have received all the necessary conditions to develop our mind, to generate the graduated path to enlightenment and to achieve omniscient mind, with great compassion for all sentient beings and the capacity to guide them. Therefore we are responsible for freeing all sentient beings from all suffering and its causes, the obscurations, and for leading them to the fully enlightened state.

I often use this example: If you saw a blind person walking towards a cliff, you would immediately grab them before they fell over the precipice. It wouldn't matter whether they asked for help or not. If you have all the necessary conditions - eyes to see, limbs to grab, voice to call - then you are capable of helping the blind person. Simply by having these, you are responsible for helping the person who is in danger of falling off the cliff.

While having the capacity to help, if someone saw the situation and didn't help, this would be very cruel and shameful. Somehow it wouldn't fulfill the purpose of having eyes and limbs, which is to use them to help others. If such a thing happened, how pitiful it would be from the side of the blind person about to fall off the cliff, and how terrible from the side of the person who had all the conditions necessary to help, but didn't.

How very cruel and harmful it would be, if now while we have all the necessary conditions, we don't practice bodhicitta, the essence of Buddha's teachings, especially the Mahayana teachings; if we don't develop this ultimate good heart; if we don't develop the capacity to guide sentient beings; if we don't achieve enlightenment in order to work perfectly for sentient beings, but always live our life with self-cherishing thought,

thinking of nothing other than our own happiness. How selfish and cruel this would be. In reality, we are completely responsible for leading all sentient beings to enlightenment.

## **SACRIFICING YOURSELF**

Concern for other sentient beings brings a natural wish to give them happiness and not harm them. You don't want to lead them to suffering. Remember the story of the bodhisattva captain who, by killing that one person who was planning to kill the five hundred traders, sacrificed himself completely. In order to save that person from creating negative karma, the bodhisattva captain was willing to be reborn in the hells. But instead of becoming negative karma and cause of rebirth in the lower realms, his action of killing shortened his time in samsara by 100,000 eons. By generating bodhicitta and cherishing this one sentient being, by exchanging himself for this one sentient being, the bodhisattva captain accumulated incredible merit and came closer to enlightenment.

There is also a story about Asanga. For twelve years he tried to achieve Maitreya Buddha in his meditations, but for all those years he was unable to see Maitreya Buddha. One day when Asanga was returning to his cave, he saw a wounded dog full of maggots. He felt such unbearable compassion. First he cut flesh from his own leg and spread it out on the ground so that he could put the maggots from the dog's body onto it. And then, so as not to kill the maggots by removing them with his fingers, he bent down to pick them up with the tip of his tongue. As he leaned forward to do this, with his eyes closed, he found that he could not reach the dog. Asanga opened his eyes and saw Maitreya Buddha right there, instead of the dog. Sacrificing himself for what he saw as a wounded dog became powerful purification; only after this did Asanga see Maitreya Buddha.

There are many other stories like this. Sacrificing yourself to protect even one sentient being from suffering and to lead them to happiness is powerful purification. Not only does it purify many eons of negative karma, but it accumulates much merit, bringing you closer to enlightenment. The fact that you can achieve enlightenment quickly by sacrificing yourself for even one sentient being is one reason to cherish others.

Cherishing yourself is an obstacle to the development of the mind, to the generation of realizations of the path. If you cherish yourself, there is no enlightenment, but if you cherish even one sentient being, there is enlightenment. Cherishing even one sentient being makes possible the achievement of enlightenment.

So, there is a big difference. With self-cherishing thought, there is no hope of enlightenment; but cherishing one sentient being, which purifies obscurations and accumulates extensive merit, leads you to enlightenment. From these stories and reasons, the conclusion is that even one sentient being is much more precious than you. Without considering how precious sentient beings are due to their great number, you can see that even one sentient being is unbelievably precious. There is no way to finish explaining the value of this sentient being, all the benefits you can gain from this one sentient being.

What is called “I” is the object to be abandoned forever; what is called “others” - even one sentient being - is the object to be cherished forever. This is why living your life for others - dedicating your life to even one sentient being - gives the greatest enjoyment and the most interesting life. Real happiness in life starts when you cherish others. Living your life for others, cherishing them with loving kindness and compassion, is the door to happiness, the door to enlightenment.

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