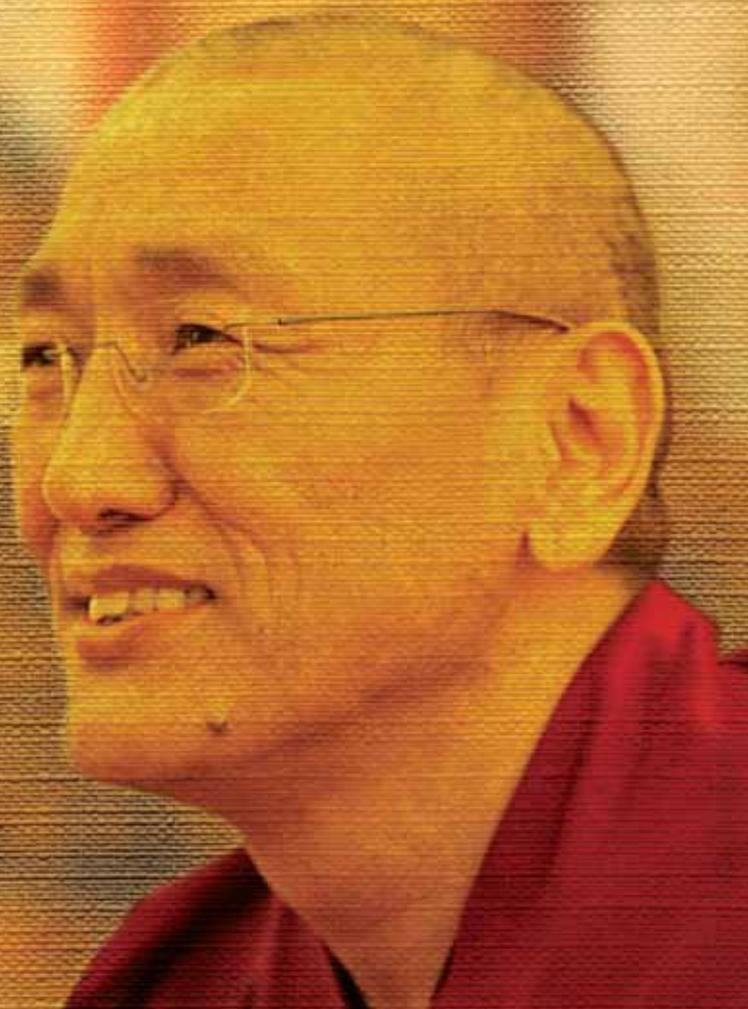


Daily Reflections

*Advice from
Khen Rinpoche Geshe Thubten Chonyi*





DAILY REFLECTIONS

ADVICE FROM KHEN RINPOCHE
GESHE THUBTEN CHONYI

Free Distribution



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Designed by Kennedy Koh

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INTRODUCTION

The Basic Program is a five year study program launched at Amitabha Buddhist Centre (ABC), an affiliate of the FPMT¹, in August 2003 at the request of its spiritual director, Lama Zopa Rinpoche.

This program, contrary to its name, was intended for serious students who were prepared to commit themselves to this demanding course. It is “basic” insofar as the syllabus has been conceived by Rinpoche to ensure that senior students, at the very least, have studied these essential texts he had personally selected.

ABC was able to launch this program because of the arrival on 25th October 1999 of its new resident teacher, Khen Rinpoche Geshe Thubten Chonyi. Small in stature, humble in demeanour, Khen Rinpoche’s appearance gave very little sign of his formidable scholastic reputation at Sera Je Monastic University, where he studied from the age of 18, until he emerged as the first Lharampa Geshe from Kopan Monastery (FPMT’s mother monastery in Nepal). Rinpoche said Khen Rinpoche was reputed at Sera Je as being someone who “has known” the Dharma, is widely respected for his exemplary behaviour and conduct and whose knowledge is like the mountain.

It should be noted that, at the present moment, there are only 38 geshe serving as resident teachers in the family of over 150 FMPT centres around the world. Rinpoche recently commented on the good fortune of the FPMT to have such excellent teachers:

“.....who are not just scholars in words, but beings who are actually living the practice. Sincere hearted, good hearted, this is an extremely important

quality for teachers, a very good model for students, for their inspiration for their studies, inspiration to have deep, clear understanding of Dharma, and be inspired to practice..... And that's the most important thing, without a qualified teacher then nothing happens, nothing is able to be developed.”²

ABC is therefore very, very fortunate indeed to be under the care and guidance of an exceptionally well-qualified teacher. Over the years, Khen Rinpoche has become father and mother, counselor, confidante, mentor, coach and the most perfect of spiritual guides and virtuous friends to countless ABC students as well as to many other devotees who come to consult him.

This book then is a compilation of Khen Rinpoche's opening remarks and motivations at the beginning of lessons offered in Modules 5 – 9 of the Basic Program³ to commemorate the eighth anniversary of Khen Rinpoche's arrival in Singapore.

These teachings offer valuable advice related to our Dharma studies and practice: how to check whether our practices are Dharma, the need for study and constant reflection on the Buddha's teachings, and how to overcome our afflictions and problems so that we can truly benefit others.

In Singapore, we all lead very busy and stressful lives, juggling personal, family and work commitments and it can be hard to make time to attend Dharma teachings. There is much food for thought contained in this compilation. So wherever you are - commuting on public transport, waiting for a friend at an appointment, between meetings – pull out this book and take a little sip of the Dharma.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank Ven. Tenzin Gyurme, who is our Basic Program translator, Cindy Cheng who first prompted her husband, Phuah Soon Ek, to transcribe

the Basic Program teachings, Fiona O'Shaughnessy who spearheaded the editing of the transcripts, Yap Siew Kee, Tara Hasnain and Cecilia Tsong who helped with proof-reading and the team of transcribers led by Phuah – Vivien Ng, Angie Xiao, Tok Sock Ling, Cheng Tien Yit and Alison Wong. The transcripts were further prepared for this compilation by Cecilia Tsong. We would also like to thank Lim Cheng Cheng and Tara Hasnain for their invaluable input and editorial suggestions.

May whatever merit is generated by publishing this book be dedicated to the long life and good health of our precious teachers, especially His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Khen Rinpoche Geshe Thubten Chonyi as well as to the immediate fulfilment of all their holy wishes. May the Buddha's teachings, especially the stainless teachings of Lama Tsong Khapa, flourish in the ten directions, and may Amitabha Buddhist Centre be free of all obstacles in spreading the holy Buddhadharma in Singapore exactly according to the wishes of Lama Zopa Rinpoche.

*The Editorial Team / Singapore
October 2007
Updated 2011*



¹ FPMT stands for the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition. To find out more, go to www.fpmt.org

² An excerpt from a talk given by Lama Zopa Rinpoche before and after Guru Puja at Tse Chen Ling, San Francisco, USA on 26th April 2007.

³ Modules 5 - 9 were conducted from 12th August 2005 to 11th October 2007. Modules 5, 7, 8 and 9 covered Chapters 1-9 of Shantideva's "Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds" while Module 6 was a commentary on the lojong (mind transformation) text, "The Wheel-Weapon." The audio recordings and edited transcripts of these modules can be found on the ABC website, www.fpmtabc.org.



BIOGRAPHY

Khen Rinpoche Geshe Chonyi has been the resident teacher of Amitabha Buddhist Centre since October 1999. He was born in Nepal in 1962 and was ordained by Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche in 1974 at the age of twelve.

Khen Rinpoche holds a Geshe Lharampa degree, which is the highest Tibetan Buddhist doctorate awarded to monks from Sera Je Monastic University. This degree requires at least 20 years of intensive study and debate and only the most outstanding students qualify to sit for the exams.

After graduating as a Geshe in 1997, Khen Rinpoche joined the prestigious Gyurme Tantric College for a year to further his studies on tantric Buddhism. He was awarded first position in his group for the highest Tantric Ngarampa (Master of Tantra) degree. He then returned to Kopan Monastery where he taught Buddhist philosophy.

With the support of Lama Zopa Rinpoche and the late Khensur Rinpoche Lama Lhundrup (then abbot of Kopan Monastery), Khen Rinpoche started teaching the five-year Basic Program at ABC in August 2003.

This first cycle of the Basic Program was completed in September 2009 with over 25 students graduating from this cohort.

Khen Rinpoche was then requested and kindly agreed to teach another cycle of the Basic Program for new students at ABC. The second cycle of the Basic Program began in June 2011.

In July 2011, Khen Rinpoche was appointed abbot of Kopan Monastery, in addition to his duties as the centre's resident teacher.

Besides being perfectly qualified to teach such a study program, Khen Rinpoche is also renowned for his ability in developing the students' analytical skills through discussions, debate and written assignments. Khen Rinpoche is held in great esteem for his illustrious conduct, vast learning and great kindness, wisdom and compassion.



WHAT IS DHARMA?



What is more important - the happiness of this life or future lives?

“What am I looking for - the happiness of this life alone or the happiness of my future lives?” This is a very important question that we must ask ourselves every day. When we are more concerned with the happiness of this life, whatever Dharma practices we engage in become impure because the mind is controlled by the three mental poisons of anger, attachment and ignorance.

If we are more concerned about our future happiness, then we have to think: “What can I do now that will definitely benefit me in my future lives?”

If we are honest with ourselves, we will find that instinctively, we are looking for the happiness of this life alone. As this is our main motivation for everything we do - whether we are reciting our daily prayers, listening to teachings, receiving initiations or consulting our gurus - all our actions are motivated by the afflictions and are only expressions of our desire to achieve the happiness of this life.

Because of this attitude, the Dharma practices we engage in may look like Dharma but in reality do not become Dharma and they will not benefit us in our future lives.

We need to shift our emphasis from focussing on the happiness of this life alone to placing greater importance on the happiness of our future lives. As Buddhists, we should accept the law of karma. Consider our lifespan. Maybe we can live till we are 60 years old, but compared to the duration of our future lives, we have to take rebirths for many eons to come. Based on this comparison alone, the happiness of our future lives is clearly far more important.

Whether we end up with good or bad rebirths depends on what we do in this life. If we end up with bad rebirths in our future lives, we will have to suffer for eons. Compared to the suffering we will have to endure then, this life’s suffering no longer seems so unbearable. Happiness in our future lives is definite, provided we create the causes now.

When our goal is the happiness of our future lives, then our actions will all become Dharma. Once they become Dharma, these activities will definitely benefit us in our future lives. Therefore, it is *very important* that we consider this very carefully: “Am I doing this for this life or for my future lives?” Whatever our answer may be, we then have to ask, “*Why* am I doing this for this life/my future lives? Which is more important - this life or my future lives?”

We should have the confident attitude: “What I am looking for is the happiness of my future lives.” What is the benefit of having this attitude? Because we place more importance on our future happiness, the three mental poisons will naturally weaken and we will experience more mental peace and happiness. Otherwise, when our motivation is focussed on the happiness of this life alone, the afflictions only become stronger, leading to more unhappiness, problems and suffering.

From my side, it is my responsibility to tell you this. But whether this advice benefits you depends on you. Just listening to the advice does not help. You need to think about it, not just once but *every day* until you have some feeling or experience in your heart.



The purpose of the Buddhadharma

There are *only* two goals for studying and practising the Buddhadharma - either the temporal goal of higher rebirth or the ultimate goal of liberation and full enlightenment.

There are no other reasons for studying and practising the Dharma. It is not for improving one's business, removing health obstacles or solving other worldly problems. The main reason is either to achieve a good rebirth or ultimate happiness, since we want happiness and not suffering. Obviously we also want the best form of happiness, which is liberation and full enlightenment.

It is so important to remember this and to remind and ask ourselves all the time, "Why am I engaging in these studies and practices?" We should not be mistaken and confused about our goal. When people come to the Buddhadharma with the expectation that it will solve their worldly problems and things do not turn out according to their wishes, they become disappointed and lose faith in the Buddhadharma, abandoning and criticising the teachings. This happens because of the lack of clarity about what one is working for, and being too short-sighted with regards to what one wants to achieve.

Working for a good rebirth as a human being or a god is a bigger goal than just being concerned about this life. When we work

at cultivating the causes for such a rebirth, this means avoiding negative actions and engaging positive actions. Such behaviour will naturally bring us fewer problems in our daily lives.



What is Dharma practice?

This is very important - we must ensure that whatever practice we do becomes Dharma practice. Often, we seem to be practising Dharma, but most of the time, that practice does not actually become Dharma.

There is a historical account of a conversation between Dromtoenpa - Lama Atisha's heart disciple - and a practitioner. One day, Dromtoenpa saw this practitioner circumambulating a stupa and he said to him, "It is good that you are circumambulating the stupa, but would it not be better for you to practise the Dharma?"

Upon hearing this, this practitioner thought that he should do something else. So, the next time Dromtoenpa saw him, he was reciting a sutra. Dromtoenpa said, "It is good that you are reciting this sutra, but would it not be better for you to practise the Dharma?"

This practitioner then thought that maybe Dromtoenpa was referring to meditation. He decided to go to his room and began to meditate. When Dromtoenpa saw this, he said to him, "It is good that you are meditating, but would it not be better for you to practise the Dharma?"

This practitioner was now thoroughly confused. He could not think of any other Dharma practices to do, so he went to

Dromtoenpa and asked him, “What should I do? What is Dharma practice?” Dromtoenpa replied, “You have to give up this life.”

What is the significance of Dromtoenpa’s reply?

1. It shows that Dharma practice is primarily done with the mind and not with the body or speech.
2. It shows that, in order to practise the Dharma, we have to give up our preoccupation with the happiness of this life, i.e., giving up the eight worldly dharmas because failing to do so means that our actions may look like Dharma but are not Dharma.

How do we give up our preoccupation with the happiness of this life? We have to reflect on how this human life of leisure and opportunity that we have is finite and will not last forever. Death will come. By reflecting on this repeatedly, we will be able to reverse the attraction to the preoccupations of this life.



Lessons from Lama Yeshe

I was twelve years old when I went to Kopan monastery. Lama Thubten Yeshe was still alive then and he taught us by making us memorise questions and answers he had written and pasted on the wall.

There were many questions but one I can still remember was, “*Why do we need to practise the Dharma?*” The questions were in Tibetan, and at that time, I was more familiar with my native dialect, Sherpa. Still, I memorised the question even though I did not understand its meaning. The answer was: “*We all desire happiness and do not want suffering. The only way to abandon all suffering is the practice of the Dharma. Therefore, we have to practise the Dharma.*”

Another question was, “*Just beating the drum, ringing the bell and performing the rituals – are these actions Dharma?*” The answer to that was, “*Beating the drum, ringing the bell and reciting mantras alone are not necessarily Dharma. Why? Because you can also teach animals to do these things.*”

At that age, the young monks were all preoccupied with games and playing, but since we had to pass our examinations and memorisation tests, we had to memorise the questions and their answers even though we did not fully understand their content.

I am telling you this story to emphasise that Dharma practice is performed primarily with our minds and not our bodies or speech. Reciting mantras, doing our daily commitments and prayers, knowing how to do some rituals - these things are not necessarily Dharma.

Practising the Dharma means improving our minds and weakening our afflictions, the nature of which is to disturb our minds, leading to suffering and unhappiness. Until the afflictions are eliminated, we will continue to experience problems and difficulties. The Dharma is the *only* way to eliminate afflictions.



The distinction between Dharma and non-Dharma

The way to make our practice Dharma is to reflect on *Lam Rim* topics such as the difficulty of obtaining a precious human rebirth and the nine-point meditation on death. These contemplations will gradually weaken our attachment to this life and also help us set a larger, more far-sighted goal. Gradually, all our actions will become Dharma.

Dromtoenpa was once asked, “*What separates Dharma from non-Dharma?*” His answer: “*When the activity you are engaged in becomes an antidote to your negative emotions and afflictions, that activity is Dharma. When your activities are not an antidote to your afflictions, then it is not Dharma.*”

We need to remember and reflect on these special instructions of the great Kadampa masters, especially the advice on the distinction between what is Dharma and what is non-Dharma. Whatever we do in our daily lives – our daily commitments, coming to class to listen to teachings and so forth – we must check to see whether these activities are Dharma or not.

If we find that we have been practising for years but are not getting anywhere, it is because our practice has not been Dharma. They have not been antidotes to our afflictions and the result is that we are stuck and unable to make any progress.



Beginning to overcome our afflictions

The advice of the great Kadampa masters, especially the advice pertaining to the differentiation between what is real Dharma practice and what is not Dharma, *is extremely important*. In a nutshell, Dharma is any action that is an antidote to our negative emotions. You *must* keep this in mind.

From the moment you consider yourself to be a Dharma practitioner, you should always relate the teachings to the state of your mind and check if you are working to defeat your afflictions. Whatever you do – be it listening to the teachings, doing your daily commitments, practising generosity and so forth - you should check: “Will doing this help to weaken or even destroy

my negative emotions?” and set the motivation, “I am doing this so that I can subdue my afflictions.” By sincerely setting such a motivation, the process of destroying our afflictions has already begun. Overcoming our negative emotions does not happen overnight. Although the realisation of emptiness is the direct antidote to them, we can start fighting them now with our determination and motivation.

When you listen to the teachings and find the advice useful or inspiring, try to put it into practice. Even if you are unable to apply the advice immediately, at the very least, think, “May I be able to do so in the very near future.”



Integrating the Dharma with our minds

Gyalsab Je’s message is: “*If you are someone who seeks liberation or enlightenment, you need to exert joyous effort especially when you have this human life of leisure and endowments; your faculties are complete; you are free of obstacles to your Dharma practice and you have the necessary conditions for your spiritual development. Having found this opportunity, you should not waste it but use it to engage in something beneficial for your future lives.*”

Our problem is that we do not integrate the Dharma with our minds. For example, we have heard countless teachings on the precious human rebirth but our minds remain unmoved. Instead of reflecting on the topic, we feel bored, thinking “I have heard this so many times.” There is no feeling for and little interest in this subject. We should not allow ourselves to end up in this state.

It is important that we do not simply look like a practitioner from the outside – doing our commitments, prayers and practices – but feeling empty inside. If our minds don't change, we will encounter many problems and much suffering at the time of death. It would be ridiculous if we finally ended up in the lower realms.

Therefore, whatever Dharma we engage in, make sure it becomes Dharma. Whatever virtuous actions we do, make sure they are virtue. We should check our minds all the time.



Transforming our minds for the better

The Kadampa masters said: *“The purpose of all the Buddha’s teachings, the great treatises and commentaries that clarify the meaning of those teachings is to help us transform our minds for the better. When the mind does not improve, then even if we strive for eons to accumulate virtue with our bodies and speech, it is very difficult for those practices to become causes for liberation.”*

This advice reminds us of the purpose of attending class and listening to the teachings, that is, to improve the quality of our minds. Regardless of the nature of our virtuous activities, we should always ask ourselves, “How does doing this help to improve my mind?”

Relying on mindfulness and vigilance when we engage in our Dharma practice, we should check to see if the practice is beneficial for our minds. If the mind does not change, it is like immersing a stone in water. No matter how long it stays there, the stone doesn't change.

It is important to generate a pure and correct motivation for attending these classes. We should always remind ourselves why we are here, that we are here to learn how to improve our minds. The purpose of studying the Dharma is not to use it to check the minds and actions of others. Using the Dharma against other people is a mistake. That is not why we study the Dharma.



STUDYING THE DHARMA



Seize this precious opportunity

*Leisure and endowment are very hard to find
And, since they accomplish what is meaningful for humanity,
If I do not take advantage of them now,
How will such a perfect opportunity come about again?*

*Just as a flash of lightning on a dark, cloudy night
For an instant brightly illuminates all,
Likewise in this world, through the might of Buddha,
A wholesome thought rarely and briefly appears*

(Verses 4 & 5, Chapter 1:
A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life by Shantideva)¹

We should contemplate the meaning of these two verses over and over again. Verse 5 describes our situation. It is very rare and difficult for us to generate virtuous thoughts or engage in virtue. Our primary concern is with the affairs of and the happiness of this life.

On top of that, it is even rarer for us to generate any interest or aspiration to study the profound teachings of the Buddha. The fact that we do have some interest in studying happens, as said in verse 5, through the power of the blessings of the Buddha on our mental continua. Combined with these blessings is the karma and merit we have accumulated in our past lives which has resulted in our interest in Dharma practice and studies now. If

we think deeply about this, it seems almost miraculous that we have the aspiration to study the great treatises and difficult texts of the Buddha's teachings. Since it has happened, we should not leave it at that.

Our aspiration to study must be sustained over time. This is important as we may be discouraged when studying this text, *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* becomes difficult, and the thought comes to give up our studies.

Practising the Dharma is difficult. Trying to study and reflect on the great treatises is even more so, but the main thing is not to give up, to waste this precious opportunity. Reflecting on verses 4 and 5, we should set ourselves a long-term goal and focus on achieving the happiness of our future lives.

There are many benefits of listening to the teachings. One well-known story is that of Vasubandhu and the pigeon. The pigeon used to sit on the roof of Vasubandhu's house. Vasubandhu, who was a great scholar of the *Abhidharma (Treasury of Knowledge)*, used to recite this text from memory. Simply by hearing Vasubandhu's recitation, the pigeon was reborn as a human and later also became a great scholar.

We are definitely far better off than the pigeon as we can listen to the teachings as well as understand, at least, part of those teachings. Then, in our future lives, we will definitely have the opportunity to continue to study the great treatises. The fact we have the chance to study this great text on bodhicitta now is

¹These verses are quoted from Shantideva's *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life* translated by Stephen Batchelor (published: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala, 1979). All subsequent references to this text will be from this edition. This text is also commonly known as *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*.

definitely due to the result of having accumulated virtuous karma in the past. We should rejoice.



***Advice from Gungtang Rinpoche:
Take the essence of your life***

“This advice is aimed at those who want to study the Great Treatises”: From the onset, Gungtang Rinpoche clarifies that his advice is not directed at Brahma, the worldly god with clairvoyance and the ability to know past and future lives, or the gods of the desire realm endowed with great wealth and many enjoyments. His advice is directed at those who have a clear mind and who aspire to study the teachings of the Buddha correctly.

“All of us are now enjoying all the favourable conditions for studying. We have obtained this precious human life of leisure and opportunities. Not only that, we have also met with the teachings of the Buddha. We have met with teachers who can show us the path. Furthermore, we are surrounded by Dharma friends who share the same interests and who are able to support us in our practice. So, all the necessary conditions are here now.

It is difficult to meet with such a perfect assembly of conditions again. Therefore, stop procrastinating in your Dharma studies and practise. Now is the time to take the essence of your life.”



Perfect conditions do not last

When we are in class, we should concentrate and not let our minds be distracted, or worse, fall asleep. Sometimes, we may be overcome by mental distraction or sleepiness due to fatigue but it

is important that we do not allow this to happen all the time. If this happens regularly, then we would have slept our way through the five-year program!

At the end of the class, if you were asked, “What did you learn today?” your answer should not be, “I don’t know, I can’t remember.” Again, this may happen sometimes because you are tired. But it should not happen all the time. At the end of each session, you should be able to say that you have learnt something.

We can say, presently, we have the ideal conditions for studying. For example, you have the company of your classmates, who attend class with you. While these conditions exist, we should try to make the most of this opportunity and pay attention, without being distracted. In the future, it is possible that there will be no teacher, translator or classmates. Then, even if you have the keen interest to study and learn, you cannot do so because the conditions are no longer there.



Benefits of studying the Buddhadharma

The numerous benefits of studying the Buddhadharma can be summarised in a single sentence: From studying comes the knowledge of what is right and what is wrong.

We understand the need to turn away from negative actions by studying the Buddha’s teachings and we begin to engage in positive, beneficial actions. Turning away from negativities is the practice of the ethics of restraint.

When we develop the higher training of concentration from hearing the teachings, we will be able to abandon all sorts of meaningless activities.

From listening to the Buddhadharma, we can achieve the sorrowless state of liberation through gradually developing the wisdom that realises selflessness. With that wisdom, we can abandon the self-grasping conception together with its seeds.



Advice from the Kadampa masters

The sun of Dharma has now arisen and is shining on our heads, yet we continue to engage in negativities and inappropriate behaviour. We should really be ashamed of ourselves.

Our appropriated contaminated aggregates are actually filled with unclean substances. Yet we cherish them so much and put in so much effort to pamper them. This is also very shameful behaviour.

After having purportedly generated bodhicitta, the wish to achieve enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, it is very shameful that we continue to criticise and put down others.

We should also be ashamed of the fact that having accepted the Mahayana teachings, we remain separated from compassion and wisdom.

And, having entered the vajra vehicle, the Vajrayana, we should be ashamed of the fact that we do not keep our commitments and remain lazy.

At this time when the sun of the Dharma has arisen and is shining on our heads, it is very shameful that we remain unable to improve the actions of our bodies, speech and minds through the processes of listening, reflection and meditation.

I think the main advice here is to listen to the teachings and practise them with the goal of changing and transforming our minds for the better.

There are people who think it is more important not to suffer now, “I don’t care about the future suffering as long as I do not have to suffer now.” This way of thinking is extremely foolish because if we are unable to bear even a small suffering now, how would we be able to endure the suffering of the lower realms?



The teachings as a mirror

When we look into the mirror and see dirt on our faces, we would remove the dirt. In the same way, the teachings are like the mirror reflecting who we are and the faults we possess, which we need to rectify. This is the attitude or motivation we should have towards our Dharma studies.

Just as we should try to clean up the dirty face we see reflected in the mirror, the Buddhadharma points out the kind of behaviour we need to change. Simply knowing our faults is not enough. Feeling depressed or discouraged when we discover our many faults is also not beneficial. We need to do something to change them.



Studying out of a sense of obligation

Studying and listening to the teachings should not be undertaken grudgingly as if one had no choice, like an obligation or like paying taxes. The Buddhadharma will not be beneficial when one has such an attitude. I think this is the reason why, in the teachings, it is said that one should not teach unless one is requested to do so.



Respect for the teacher

It is mentioned in the *Lam Rim* that just as one should have respect for the teachings, one should also respect the teacher. Ideally, one should think of the teacher as a spiritual friend. If this is not possible, at the very least, one should have some feeling of affinity or closeness to the teacher.

Respect for the teacher is important, as the purpose of listening to the teachings is to benefit the mind. If one harbours negative feelings towards the teacher, it is very difficult for the teachings presented to be of any benefit to one's mind. If it is not possible to generate some affinity for the teacher, at the very least, one should listen with a mind of equanimity, i.e., with an unbiased mind. Then the teachings may be of some benefit. That is why the Buddha had advised that one should not teach those who have resentment or anger towards oneself or those who hold wrong views.



Qualities of a proper student

What are the qualifications of a proper student? The great Indian master, Aryadeva said, in the *400 Verses*, that a suitable vessel for Dharma teachings is someone who is non-partisan or unbiased, intelligent and diligent.

Being non-partisan means that the student should not be biased, for example, thinking that one's views are superior to those of others or that others' views are mistaken. Instead, one should investigate if the teachings given accord with reality or not, accepting them if they do and rejecting them if they do not.

The student should also be intelligent, which means, in this context, having the ability and wisdom to discriminate between right and wrong. Simply listening to the teachings is not enough.

In addition, the student should also be diligent in seeking out and listening to teachings.

Considering these qualities in the reverse order, they work like this: when we are diligent, we will have strong interest in Dharma study and practice. We will make the effort to practise and to listen to teachings. When we do that, our wisdom to discriminate between what is right and wrong will increase and as that wisdom increases, we will also become non-partisan. Without discriminating wisdom, one tends to become more partisan and such bias only becomes the basis for sectarianism as well as conflict among different faiths.

All major religions came about to serve humanity and to bring peace and happiness to the world. The religious and sectarian conflicts we see today are not the fault of the religions themselves, but originate from the so-called followers who practise in a mistaken way. Therefore, regardless of the religion that we practise, we must study first.



Advice from Gungtang Rinpoche: Need for consistent effort

This is advice for those who are engaged in serious study of the Great Treatises and philosophical teachings of the Buddha. Gungtang Rinpoche advised that it is a mistake to expect, from the onset of our studies, to immediately become an expert in these topics. At the same time, it is a mistake to quickly forget what has been taught.

As these teachings are extremely profound, Rinpoche pointed out that we need to put effort into our studies. That effort should be constant like the flow of a river. We will not succeed in our studies if our exertions are erratic and irregular.

We need to constantly revise, review and recall what we have learnt. The topics in the earlier, present and future modules of this program are all interconnected. We will not succeed in our studies if we keep on forgetting the earlier teachings even as we listen to teachings on new subjects.

The best way to really learn is through discussion. When we are able to come to a firm conclusion on a certain subject, during the course of a discussion, by applying logic and reasoning, this

will remain in the mind for a very long time. In terms of what we can get from our studies, 25% comes from listening to the teacher, another 25% comes from self-study and the remaining 50% comes from discussion.



Advice from Gungtang Rinpoche: The thief of forgetfulness

Gungtang Rinpoche said: *“We put in great effort to listen to and study many teachings but we lose whatever knowledge we had gained to forgetfulness. It is like working very hard to accumulate wealth and possessions and having them all stolen by thieves and robbers.”*

Putting in so much effort in our studies and letting our knowledge be stolen by the thief of forgetfulness is like coming away empty-handed from an island filled with jewels.”

The only way to stop this situation from happening to us is to constantly familiarise ourselves with what we have learnt. Rinpoche’s advice is directed at serious students of the great philosophical treatises. One achieves nothing by constantly forgetting what one has learnt as one progresses from topic to topic.

Instead of simply relying on listening to the teachings, where everything can be easily forgotten within months, one should familiarise oneself with what is taught by constantly reflecting on what has been taught, thinking about the teachings and analysing the texts. The greater the familiarity, the less likely one will forget what one has learnt.



***Advice from the Kadampa masters:
Warding off procrastination***

The great Kadampa masters advise: *“Don’t think that something is difficult. By thinking this way, then this thought follows: ‘I shall not do it now. I’ll do it later.’ Avoid this attitude which is like a blind man finding and then losing the wish-fulfilling jewel. He will never find another wish-fulfilling jewel again.”*

This analogy can be applied to our Dharma studies and practice. Trying to study and practice the Dharma is not easy. But it is wrong to postpone doing so. Putting off studying a difficult text during the Basic Program essentially means that studying it will never happen.

Also, when we have all the conditions gathered here, we should apply ourselves to our studies because one never knows whether the opportunity will come again.

When we listen to such advice, it is not sufficient to say, “O.K. I will do it.” And still nothing gets done. That is pointless. The main thing here is to try our best to listen and study.

Everyone is different as all of us have accumulated different karma. When it comes to studies and practice, therefore, some will encounter more difficulties than others. When such obstacles arise, we have to think, “This is the weapon of my own evil deeds coming back to me.” Thinking in this way, it no longer matters whether we understand everything or not as long as we have tried our best.

There are some people who are prone to discouragement and disappointment. There is nothing to be said if you are discouraged from the start, without even having tried to put in some effort. But when you really try and you still don’t understand, something can be done to build up your self-confidence.

How do we know that it is a mistake to postpone our studies and practice? We grow older with the passing of time, not younger. As we age, our intelligence, mental agility and clarity decline. If we cannot study and practise now, how is it possible for us to do better in the future?



***Advice from Gungtang Rinpoche:
Make sure we do not waste our lives***

Gungtang Rinpoche said that we spend 20 years of our lives not thinking about the Dharma and another 20 years, thinking, “Oh, I must practise the Dharma,” but never doing anything about it. Then we spend another 20 years not being able to practise the Dharma, at the end of which we think, “Oh, I didn’t get to practise the Dharma after all.” In this way, we waste our entire lives.

When we examine our own lives carefully, we can see this describes our situation exactly. In the beginning of this module, we did not think of studying. Then we decided we needed to study, yet we did nothing about it.

It is your responsibility to ensure that what Rinpoche said does not happen to you. You have to make sure that this opportunity does not go to waste. You must pay attention when listening to the teachings. Otherwise, even though physically, you spend

five years attending classes, you end up knowing nothing. It is important that you try your best to pay attention when you are in class.



Dealing with difficult topics

Whenever you deal with more challenging topics, you must pay attention right from the beginning of the class because the material is all inter-connected. The more you concentrate, the more you will learn.

When you have been attending teachings for some time, especially those who have attended many teachings, you may be present physically but the mind is distracted. It is like that, isn't it? When you listen to songs, the mind is always concentrated but when you listen to the teachings, the mind is easily distracted. Over time, your attitude towards listening to the teachings becomes more flippant and that is not good.

Sometimes, you console yourself by thinking: "It is all right. It doesn't matter whether I understand or not. I will try to be better in the next lesson." This may work, but I think most of the time, things do not really work out this way. Whenever you are at any teachings, you have to make a pledge to yourself: "I'll try my best to listen and pay attention to what is being said."

There are also students who have unrealistic expectations. They expect to understand everything they hear there and now. This is impossible. What is needed here is perseverance. With those expectations, when they do not understand a few words, they get upset and uptight. This is pointless. If you really want to learn, then you must persevere.



Advice from Guntang Rinpoche: Practising contentment

Guntang Rinpoche advised that just as it is important to practise contentment in our daily lives, to be satisfied with who we are and what we have, practising contentment is also applicable to our Dharma studies.

We are all different - different parents, different genes, levels of intelligence and so forth. We should not expect to have the same results as others but should study according to our own level and be happy and content with what we achieve in our studies.

Some students may feel disappointed or discouraged when, at times, they do not understand the lesson. When that happens, one needs to reflect on contentment – to be happy with whatever one has understood.

It is the same with material wealth and possessions. Some people are wealthier than others. It is also important to think about contentment in that situation. These differences in levels of intelligence, wealth, etc. are the results of different karmas.

Some people put themselves down by thinking they are hopeless and incompetent, incapable of doing anything. This happens to a lot of people. It is completely pointless to do that. When one is already facing difficulties, there is no need to generate more problems for oneself, thinking, "I am so stupid" and so forth. How does that help to improve the situation one is in? We have to accept ourselves for who we are. Instead, we should think, "I have achieved what I wanted to do," and be happy and satisfied with that.

This is a city centre. Everyone is busy with their personal and work commitments. After a long day at work, we travel all the way here, twice a week, for classes. But it is only twice a week, for two hours per session, unlike in the monasteries where the monks can study full-time. That is their job. When we compare ourselves to these monks, obviously, we are far behind them. But we shouldn't put ourselves down. Rather, we should praise ourselves, recognising and accepting the limitations that come with being a city centre. We should be content with what we have achieved.

Practising contentment in this way brings happiness, peace and bliss. It is particularly helpful when we are studying together and we find some classmates being able to understand what we cannot. This is from my own experience when I was studying. Sometimes, when I saw other fellow students understanding certain things that I did not understand, I felt discouraged. At that time, I reflected on how all of us have different karma and felt happy with what I did understand. Thinking in this way helped me a lot.



Importance of recitation and preliminary prayers

We have been reciting verses from the root text after reciting the *Heart Sutra*. I thought this recitation will be beneficial as (1) it helps us to familiarise ourselves with the verses over time and (2) since this is a special text composed by the great bodhisattva Shantideva himself, simply reading and reciting the text generates great merit for us.

In the monasteries in South India, it is customary for the monks to gather and recite prayers for a few hours before any debate

session, making strong requests for success in their studies and debates. In the same way, we need to make extensive prayers for success in our studies.

In the great monasteries, there is a saying passed down from generation to generation that it is unnecessary for monks to perform special rituals or pujas to clear obstacles in their studies, as long as they apply themselves seriously to the recitation of the preliminary prayers made before the debates or when they gather to do prayers together. The monks are advised to set a good motivation and reflect and contemplate carefully when they do such recitations. Doing that alone will clear all the obstacles that might arise during the course of their studies.

We should engage in the practice of recitation in the same way. We should make strong prayers during the recitation and think, "May this recitation remove all obstacles and unfavourable conditions that may arise during our studies and practice."

We may wish to study and practise the teachings of the Buddha, but there are so many kinds of obstacles - outer, inner and even secret - that can occur. The best way to pacify these obstacles is to make very strong prayers combined with the very strong determination to continue one's studies.

It is possible that, sometimes, when reciting these preliminary prayers, we may get bored or consider the prayers to be a chore, failing to see why we are doing them. You should understand now that these prayers and recitations are very beneficial for us. In fact, since this text is composed by the great bodhisattva, Shantideva, the benefit and merit that one accumulates simply by reciting this text is inexpressible. We should remind ourselves of this when we recite the text or prayers, and perform them enthusiastically.

From the time we start reciting the *Heart Sutra* till the end of the lesson, when we dedicate the merits, this can all be considered virtuous action. We should do whatever we can to make the lesson enjoyable for ourselves from our own side and to engage in our studies enthusiastically rather than thinking that we are doing this out of obligation and without a choice, like paying taxes.



Advice from Gungtang Rinpoche: Reliance on the merit field

Guntang Rinpoche advises that during these degenerate times, when our minds are weak and we have so little merit, we need to rely on and make special requests to the deities and Dharma protectors, accumulate merit by doing practices such as prostrations, mandala offerings and so forth and purify our minds of obscurations by relying on the four opponent powers. These are the necessary supporting conditions for us to be able to continue and to have success in our study of the Great Treatises.

Intelligence alone or simply favourable conditions do not necessarily guarantee that one will complete one's studies. We also need to rely on accumulating merit and purifying the mind from obscurations, as well as making fervent requests to the merit field.

During the course of one's studies or practices, one will meet with all kinds of external and internal obstacles in the form of sicknesses and so forth. Therefore, it is important to make single-pointed requests to the merit field. However, the main thing that will see one through one's studies is one's determination and enthusiasm for studying. Without such enthusiasm and

determination, one may continue to come to class but, over time, one's interest will wane. Furthermore, without such enthusiasm and determination, making prayers may not necessarily be helpful.



Advice from Gungtang Rinpoche: Relying on valid texts

Gungtang Rinpoche advised that when studying the teachings of the Buddha, we must study texts that are unmistakable and free of error, as the bases for our analysis and investigation of the teachings. We should check whether the contents of these texts accord with the great philosophical treatises.

Relying indiscriminately on texts that do not accord with what is found in the valid texts and Great Treatises will only cause our wisdom to decline. We are not saying here that one cannot read commentaries or texts that offer a more accessible explanation. But those texts must accord with what is found in the valid texts and treatises.

Sometimes, we may find certain texts easier to understand without first checking their validity. Whatever texts or commentaries we study, we should be able to trace them back to the teachings of the Buddha. Whatever we read should accord with the great commentaries composed by the great Indian and Tibetan masters of the past.



NEED FOR REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS



Placing imprints in our mental continua

The essence of the Buddha's teachings is summarised in the three principal aspects of the path: renunciation, bodhicitta and the correct view.

Since we now enjoy the favourable conditions of having obtained this precious human rebirth and meeting the teachings, even if we cannot generate the realisation of the three principal aspects of the path in our minds, at the very least, we should put effort into placing stable imprints of these teachings in our mental continua.

Imprints can be placed in our mental continua through hearing, reflecting, meditating and familiarising ourselves with the teachings. How does this work? Imprints that come from hearing arise from the activity of listening to the teachings on the three principal aspects of the path. Without listening to these teachings, we would not receive any imprints through hearing. In the same way, this applies to reflection and meditation as well.

The strength of those imprints of the teachings would vary in power in dependence on the manner in which we engage in the activities of listening, reflection and meditation.

It is very arrogant of us to expect the teachings to come of their own accord into our minds, without our exerting any effort to familiarise ourselves with them. When we do not put in the effort from our own side to receive and familiarise ourselves with the teachings on the three principal aspects of the path, and to secure imprints of these teachings in our mindstreams, nothing will happen.

We need to remember that we have obtained this human rebirth now and we have some knowledge of what is to be abandoned and cultivated. Capitalising on this opportunity, we must place strong imprints of the teachings in our minds and keeping this in mind, we must then engage in the act of listening to the teachings.



Reaping benefit from the teachings depends on us

Whether the teachings will benefit us or not does not depend on the teachings. It depends on how we apply them, whether we reflect on them and mix the teachings with our minds. We cannot expect the teachings, from their side, to change our minds if we do not do anything with them. There are some people who think, "What is the use of coming for teachings? The Dharma is not benefiting me." This is not the fault of the teachings but rather reflects their failure to relate the teachings to their minds.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama often mentions that there is a noticeable difference between someone who accepts and practises the Dharma and someone who does not. Why? The person who practises the Dharma is a happier person who is more able to handle difficulties and problems when they arise, as compared to someone who has no faith or Dharma. Someone who accepts

the teachings should have the ability to apply the teachings for a beneficial purpose and to use them to deal with problems and difficulties.



Taking the medicine

The Buddha said in the *King of Concentration Sutra*:

I have explained this very good teaching.

Yet if you, having heard it, do not practise correctly,

Then just like a sick person holding on to a bag of medicine,

Your illness cannot be cured.

This verse applies to us because we may have listened to many teachings but we still find it difficult to reflect on their meaning and are unable to put them into practice. That is why we do not see any improvement in ourselves.

In fact, it sometimes seems that we are experiencing even more mental unhappiness and suffering than before. This is the fault of not having reflected properly on the meaning of the teachings that we have heard. We are just like the patient who carries around the bag of medicine without taking any. When we do not take the medicine, there is no way that we can recover from our sickness.

We need to reflect on the meaning of the teachings that we have heard, in order to remove our problems and the suffering which have been with us, and which we have endured for a very long time.

We need to understand that the Buddha is actually referring to us when he talks about the patient carrying the bag of medicine. We

need to put down the bag of medicine, open it and start taking the medicine. It is not enough to just hear the teachings. We must start reflecting on them.

We are now studying the text, *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*, which contains many wonderful pieces of advice and teachings. It may be difficult to put the teachings into practise immediately but, at the very least, we should reflect on the meaning of the words found in the text. We should not simply leave it at the level of listening or looking at the words. We have to try to reflect on the meaning of the words themselves.

It is important to reflect on, as much as we can and to the best of our abilities, what we have learnt, and the meaning of whatever prayers we may be reciting.

Why is it that we remain as we are and do not seem to change and improve? It boils down to the fact that we did not reflect on what we had heard.

All of us have to try our very best to reflect on the meaning of the words of the teachings that we had heard and try to improve our own minds, because improving the state of our minds is an individual responsibility.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche's holy wish for the centre is to produce good-hearted human beings, not simply students with some intellectual understanding of the teachings. That is his real wish. We should all try our very best to make this happen. It is not easy. It is difficult but we have to try our best.



Advice by Gungtang Rinpoche: Our sad situation

It is important to reflect *daily* on whatever you have heard and found beneficial from the teachings. Use whatever you have heard and apply it in your daily life. If you do not use the teachings in this way, you accomplish little by merely listening.

This is advice from the teachings of Gungtang Rinpoche called *Songs of Expressing Sadness*. In one of these songs, he laments that although, in reality, it is the guru who shows us the path and protects us in this life and all our future lives, in practice, we make our own decisions without relying on him.

We may think or even say that there is a need for us to rely on the instructions of our teachers and recognise that our guru is the embodiment of the three refuges. But, in our daily lives, we do not pay any heed to his advice or consider our teacher's instructions to be important.

Gungtang Rinpoche points out now we have attained this precious human rebirth of leisure and opportunities that is very difficult to achieve and which gives us the opportunity to accomplish so much. We know this and can even explain it to others. Yet when we examine our lives carefully, most of the time we are spending them doing meaningless things. When we reflect in this way and realise this, it is a cause for regret and something to be very sad about.

Rinpoche's advice is very good and beneficial especially if we are able to remember it in our daily lives. For example, when we can explain to others the benefits of this perfect human rebirth, but

do not put it to good use ourselves, then we are in fact wasting our own precious human rebirth.

In our daily lives we treasure our possessions and wealth and take great care to protect them from thieves and robbers. But we are not very careful with our life span, which is being exhausted and stolen every moment by the Lord of Death. We should be very sad about this also.

We also pursue and hanker after teachings and instructions on hidden phenomena, which are not perceivable or manifest, such as emptiness, bodhicitta, tantra and so forth. But we do not pay any attention to those instructions that deal with subjects that are very obvious and accessible, such as death and impermanence. Again, this is a very sad situation.

I am quoting some extracts from this set of advice as they are short and would be most beneficial if you can remember them in your daily life.



Proper reliance on the words of the texts

Just as an elderly person needs a walking stick to walk properly, we need to rely on and memorise the words of the texts in order to understand the meaning of the teachings. In order for us to really learn the teachings, first, we must have a really good grasp of the words of the text that we would have memorised¹.

But memorising the words alone is not enough when we do not pay any attention to or reflect on the meaning of those words. For example, if we sit in a puja, reciting the prayers without reflecting

¹ This advice was intended for those studying in the monasteries.

on their meaning, we are no better than parrots. This is not the correct way to do pujas. If we teach a parrot to recite “*Om Mani Padme Hum*” it can recite that 108 times quite easily. But that is about it.

Without reflection on the meaning of the words of the teachings that we have received, we will be unable to correct any wrong or mistaken understanding on our part. The teachings should be investigated in depth.

In order to study the scriptures of the Buddha, first, we must rely on the words. We must know the words of the text. But that alone is not sufficient. We must also reflect on the meaning of those words.

That way of studying is not done here due to the lack of time. In the monasteries, we memorize all the root texts that we are studying and read the commentaries. But here, when the different verses are being explained, at the very least, we can check whether we are able to understand the meaning of each of those verses.



The quality of the meditation

The difference between a Buddhist who has studied and reflected on the teachings extensively (hereinafter referred to as ‘A’) and a Buddhist who has done neither (hereinafter referred to as ‘B’) can be seen in the quality of their meditation. ‘A’ will be able to meditate in a very extensive way while ‘B’ will find difficulties in sustaining his meditation.

When reciting the refuge prayer, at the mere mention of “*Sang gyä*” (Buddha in Tibetan) ‘A’ will be able to reflect in the following

way: “Who is the Buddha? He is in the entity of the 4 holy bodies² and is someone who has eliminated all faults and perfected all his good qualities.” Being familiar with such reflections, ‘A’ is able to recall many different aspects of the refuge practice instantly and his faith in the Buddha increases.

When ‘B’ recites, “*Sang gyä*” however, he may only recall the Buddha as the historical figure who achieved enlightenment under the bodhi tree over 2,500 years ago. It would be difficult for someone like ‘B’ to have any deep sense of faith. If this is so for a person like ‘B,’ then obviously there would be even less faith in someone who has not even heard of the historical Buddha.

When ‘A’ recites “*chhö*” (Dharma in Tibetan), he will immediately understand that there is conventional and ultimate Dharma, and the object of refuge here is not merely the physical scriptures themselves, but their contents, which clarify the true path³ and true cessation⁴. Understanding that the Dharma is the actual refuge and thinking that, “This is what protects me,” will definitely increase ‘A’s’ faith. He will then generate the faith of aspiration, which is the mind that aspires to actualise the Dharma.

When ‘B’ recites “*chhö*,” he may only recall the physical texts and he is unlikely to have the same level of faith as ‘A.’

When ‘A’ recites, “*Tshog kyi chhog nam la*” (I go for refuge to the Supreme Assembly), he understands immediately that the Sangha Jewel refers here to all the arya beings, including the hearer superior beings, the solitary realiser superior beings and the bodhisattva

² The four holy bodies of the Buddha are the Truth Body (made up of the Wisdom Truth Body & the Nature Body) and the Form Body (made up of the Enjoyment Body & Emanation Body).

³ The antidotes to our afflictions

⁴ What we achieve once all our afflictions are abandoned.

superior beings. He knows the inconceivable qualities of these holy beings, and in particular, how the superior bodhisattvas practise at each level, actualising all the ten perfections and how they achieve the higher realisations on the path. Based on such understanding and knowledge, irreversible faith will arise in 'A's' mind towards these arya beings and he will aspire to emulate their example. 'A' will never give up his faith in the Three Jewels regardless of whatever conditions he may encounter.

When 'B' recites, "*Tshog kyi chhog nam la,*" he will only remember that the Sangha refers to the ordained community and he is reminded to be respectful towards them. With such limited understanding, it is very difficult to have real faith in the Sangha Jewel because it is difficult to see all ordained persons as pure and perfect and one may end up criticising them or questioning the benefit of ordination.

The difference between 'A' and 'B' is very clear from simply examining the quality of their refuge practice. The Buddhist who has studied will have stable and irreversible faith while the Buddhist who does not study will give up his faith easily when faced with the smallest obstacle.

We should put into practice, familiarise ourselves with and reflect upon whatever we have learnt. Even if we engage in extensive listening and reflection, it would not be beneficial without such mental familiarity.

Using the earlier example of refuge, we can apply it to other topics and see the difference between engaging in practice with understanding and with little or no understanding. When we realise the benefits of studying and reflection, the aspiration to do so will arise naturally from our own side. When this happens,

no matter what difficulties we encounter, we will try our best to come to class and listen to the teachings.

Lama Tsong Khapa said, "*At the outset, seek extensive teachings. In the middle, reflect on whatever you have learnt. In the end, day and night, put into practice the understanding of the teachings that you have ascertained. This is what I have done. You who want to follow after me should do likewise.*"



OVERCOMING NEGATIVE EMOTIONS



“There is nothing to fear other than my mind”

*The Mighty One has said that all such things
Are (the working of) an evil mind,
Hence within the three world spheres
There is nothing to fear other than my mind*

(Verse 8, Chapter 5,

A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life by Shantideva)

All the fears of cyclic existence and the three realms, the suffering we wish to avoid and the happiness we are seeking arise from the mind. Likewise, all qualities depend on the mind.

When you check all the scriptures, this is also their main message – that there is a need to discipline our minds. We can understand this from our personal experience. When the afflictions – anger, attachment, ignorance, pride, jealousy and so forth – arise, suffering and unhappiness are always the result. The stronger the afflictions, the greater the suffering. On the other hand, when we have less discursive thoughts, when the three mental poisons arise infrequently, when the mind is concentrated or focussed on benefiting others, there is more mental peace and we tend to be happier with fewer problems.

By reflecting along these lines, we will understand why it is said that all fears and worries originate from the mind. Therefore, we should protect the mind against non-virtue and guide the mind towards virtue, with mindfulness and introspection. When we fail to do this, although we yearn for happiness, we run away from the causes of happiness. Although we wish to avoid suffering, we pursue the causes of suffering.

We are controlled by our minds that, in turn, are controlled by the negative emotions that disturb our mental peace and calm. That is why we feel unhappy and suffer. We need to immerse our minds in virtue instead, because when this happens, happiness is the result.



Realising the nature of our minds

There is a saying by the great Kadampa masters: *“The difference between cyclic existence and nirvana comes from whether we have realised the nature of our minds or not.”*

Liberation may seem external, like a distant place. But it can be achieved on the basis of our minds. In the same way, cyclic existence is not an external phenomenon. It abides in our minds. As long as our minds are under the control and bondage of the afflictions, we remain in cyclic existence. We achieve liberation at that very moment when our minds are freed from the control of our afflictions. So liberation is not something far away or external, and once liberated, we will experience everlasting bliss and happiness.

With reference to the paths and grounds – from the path of accumulation through to the path of preparation, followed by the path of seeing, the ten bodhisattva grounds, the path of no more

learning and, finally, enlightenment – the difference between each level and each ground is primarily based on the qualities of the mind and its development. We assert that someone has achieved and is abiding in a specific path on the basis of their mental development, not their physical transformation. How do we differentiate between a bodhisattva and a non-bodhisattva? The difference does not lie in their external appearances but on whether that person has developed bodhicitta or not.

Another way of looking at the quotation is this: As soon as we have realised the ultimate nature of the mind, its lack of true existence, we are liberated from our afflictions.

Engaging in physical and verbal virtues (or positive actions) contributes to our mental development and this helps us one day to realise the emptiness of our minds. When we achieve the wisdom realising emptiness, we destroy cyclic existence. This is one of the benefits of realising emptiness.

When our self-cherishing attitude is very strong, it is very difficult for our actions to be virtuous. Furthermore, during the course of engaging in virtue, other afflictions such as competitiveness, jealousy and pride arise.

For example, arrogance and conceit may arise when we are doing retreat, “I am in retreat and they are not.” Also, during the course of this five year Basic Program, we have acquired some knowledge and understanding of the Dharma. That knowledge can be the condition for us to feel superior to others, thinking, “I know more than you do.”

It is important that our actions do not become the conditions for the development of jealousy, competitiveness and pride. These afflictions are harmful and therefore, we must learn how to apply the antidotes to overcome them.



Advice from Gungtang Rinpoche: Check the state of your mind day and night

Gungtang Rinpoche advises, “*If we want to make our days and nights meaningful, we should always check the state of our minds.*” No beneficial actions can result from a mind that is under the control of the three mental poisons (ignorance, anger and attachment). Therefore, we should always strive to keep our minds in a positive state, thinking constantly of how to benefit others. When our actions are motivated by a negative mind, it is questionable whether those actions can be beneficial.

It is important to set a proper motivation before we begin any virtuous activities, such as doing our daily commitments. We are advised in the teachings to begin always with the meditation on the breath to bring the mind to a state of equilibrium, especially when we find that our minds are agitated by anger or attachment. Otherwise, it is difficult to generate a positive state of mind while doing the practices.

When the mind is in a state of equilibrium, it is easier to prevent negative thoughts from arising, even though we may not yet be able to eliminate our attachment or anger from the root. It becomes possible for us to consider those we normally think of as enemies or objects of aversion as pleasant and as friends. When engaged in virtuous activities, we should pay heed to the objects of desire and the objects of aversion. We should sincerely dedicate the merit we accumulate from our practices to their welfare from the depths of our hearts. It is easy to habituate ourselves to dedicating our merit in this way compared to giving away material things such as our bodies.

When we dedicate all the roots of our virtue to our enemies, does that mean there is nothing left for us, that we are not going to experience the beneficial effects of those virtues? I don't think so. So, don't worry.

When we dedicate our roots of virtue sincerely in this way, it is difficult to say how much benefit will actually be received by the objects of our dedication but, without a doubt, we will benefit and see the improvement in our minds. We will definitely benefit because we can see that all our problems and sufferings arise from attachment and anger in our lives.

When we neglect checking the state of our minds, then no matter how profound or extensive our prayers may be, it is difficult for those practices to be beneficial even for ourselves. When we do not benefit from our practices, then it is difficult for us to benefit others.

Gungtang Rinpoche also said: *"If you wish, however, to make your life meaningless and empty, then by all means, please continue to spend your whole life being conceited and arrogant and spend your time partying, gossiping and shopping."*



Developing the virtuous mind

This is advice from the Kadampa masters: When our minds are virtuous and our motivation positive, then our physical and verbal actions will naturally be virtuous and positive. We will not harm but instead benefit others. Conversely, when our minds are in negative, non-virtuous states, it is very difficult to generate positive behaviour. We are most likely to give problems to others and be harmed by them in return. The Kadampa masters therefore

advise us to generate a good heart and develop a positive mind and motivation.

We are now studying the practice of exchanging ourselves for others and developing bodhicitta, the main point of which is to develop the virtuous, positive mind. A positive state of mind leads to positive and beneficial behaviour that helps us to become good-hearted, virtuous people. It is very difficult to change our minds overnight. We have to start reducing negative physical and verbal actions by reducing our negative states of mind. While we may not be able to completely remove such negativities, we can work towards reducing them.

What are the benefits of being good-hearted people? We will be protected by the worldly gods who delight in virtue and receive blessings from the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Temporal goals are easily achieved. When death comes, we will move on easily to the next life and achieve enlightenment very quickly.



The internal enemy

Lama Atisha said, *"When we can subdue our minds, then no external enemy can harm us. But if our minds waver, with the external enemy acting as the condition, our internal enemy will burn our minds. Therefore, defeat and destroy this internal enemy."* We cannot be harmed by external enemies when our minds are loving and compassionate but if we succumb to the three mental poisons, our mental peace is destroyed. It is not the external enemy, who acts only as the condition, but our afflictions which are responsible for the destruction of our mental peace.

It is the very nature of our afflictions to do this, so our real enemies are the internal ones, our afflictions, which are the real trouble-makers. We should therefore put effort into destroying them.

We need both mindfulness and introspection to protect and guard the mind. Mindfulness protects our minds by not forgetting what is to be abandoned and what is to be cultivated, and introspection is the part of our minds that checks to see whether our minds are up to virtue or non-virtue.

It is important to protect and guard our minds because only we know our own minds. No one else does. We are our own masters because only we know what is going on in our own minds. We need to check to see whether our minds are in a virtuous or non-virtuous state because only by protecting our minds will we be able to prevent ourselves from being stained by downfalls and faults and guard our three doors.



Need for constant and persistent effort (1)

The great Indian master, Chandragomin, said that when someone is very sick with a serious disease, e.g., leprosy, but does not take the proper medicine continuously over a period of time, then that patient will never recover from his illness.

This is analogous to the situation we are in. We have been controlled by the three mental poisons for a very long time. In order to free ourselves from this bondage, we have to familiarise ourselves with and meditate on the antidotes continuously for a very long time. Meditating occasionally when we feel like it will not work.

We also need to train in the complete path, not just doing the virtuous practices we enjoy and then hoping or expecting those afflictions to just weaken or disappear. It does not work like that. We have to meditate on the complete path.

We do engage in virtuous practices, but sometimes we feel that, despite doing all sorts of practices, we are not getting anywhere, we are not improving. This is how we may feel sometimes. Actually, things are getting better but we should not expect to see instant results. Sometimes, when we engage in certain practices, we expect to see results in a day, a month, a year or even a couple of years. It does not work like that. We may not be able to see very tangible results for quite a while.

Our afflictions are like the very heavy sicknesses of a patient. We have been harbouring these afflictions, the three mental poisons, in our minds for a very long time. In order to heal ourselves of these afflictions, we need to meditate and rely on the antidotes continuously for a long period of time. If we rely on the antidotes every now and then, as and when we feel like it, then we are not going to reap much benefit from them.



Need for constant and persistent effort (2)

The great Indian master, Chandragomin, said that the fruits of a fruit tree whose roots are always submerged in a pool of sour muddy water will be sour and not sweet. If we want the fruit tree to bear sweet fruits, fertilising it with just a few drops of sweetener will not work.

In the same way, we have been controlled by the three mental poisons since time without beginning. That being the case, hoping

for a major mental transformation by doing a little daily practice and some small virtues, and expecting fantastic results and a huge reduction in our suffering is completely unrealistic.

In order for us to attain the fruit of the state beyond sorrow, the cessation of all our suffering, we need to remove our afflictions from the root. Hoping to achieve this by some small exertions on our part is like expecting a harvest of sweet fruit in the above analogy.

Removing our mental afflictions is extremely difficult and requires reliance on continuous effort for a long period of time. Sometimes, we may feel this is an almost impossible task. It is natural for us to think in this way because it is true that the negative emotions have been with us since beginningless time, not just a few lifetimes. We are thoroughly familiar with them. It is as if the afflictions have merged with the very nature of our minds, making it impossible to separate our minds from them.

Although this may be the way we feel and how things appear to us, if we critically analyse the situation, we will find that this is not the case, because if we apply the appropriate antidotes, we will definitely be able to free our minds from these negative emotions.

Look at our lives. What are we doing everyday? Are we actively doing something to weaken our afflictions or are we actually strengthening them? If we are honest with ourselves, we find that not only are we not doing anything to overcome our afflictions but in fact, we are allowing them to become stronger as we encounter the objects and conditions which cause them to arise.

In order to destroy our mental afflictions, the only way is to put effort continuously into weakening and destroying them. If we

do not do this, there is no hope of the negative emotions ever becoming weaker or being destroyed.



Reflection on impermanence

The great Nagarjuna once said that someone who would put rubbish or vomit into a precious golden bejewelled container would be considered very foolish indeed. We should reflect on how this statement applies to ourselves.

Having achieved the precious human rebirth and met the teachings of the Buddha, we call ourselves Buddhists and take on the different levels of vows and commitments. Yet, instead of accumulating virtue, we spend our time committing negativities. That is both very unskilful and unwise and if that is our situation, we must do something to overcome it. Those negative activities arise due to the three mental poisons in our minds which we must work to subdue.

The stronger the negative emotions – our attachment to friends and loved ones and aversion and hatred towards our enemies - the more powerful will be the resultant negative actions generated by them. It is, therefore, very important that we work very hard to reduce the strength of the three mental poisons. We are not suggesting here that friends or enemies do not exist but we are trying to reduce the negative emotions we generate towards them.

One of the best ways of doing this is to reflect on impermanence. For example, to reduce our hatred towards an enemy, we should reflect on his impermanent nature, how he will definitely die one day and the uncertainty of that time of death. Our enemy will

probably be very fearful both at the time of death and during the intermediate state. He may also be reborn in the lower realms because of his own negativities. Reflecting how our enemy is controlled by his own afflictions and negative karma, it becomes possible for us to generate compassion instead of hatred towards him.

We can reflect in the same way to reduce our attachment towards our loved ones. They will also die one day and it is uncertain when death will come. They will experience suffering and fear at the time of death and in the intermediate state and take rebirth in the lower realms. Reflecting in this way, we substitute our attachment and desire for them with compassion.

We ourselves are also impermanent and we should reflect on the fear that we will encounter at the time of our own death. When we give in to our negative emotions, we create negativities that lead to great suffering and fear in the intermediate state, which will only throw us into the lower realms.

By reflecting on these different points, we develop renunciation. Of course, it will be very difficult for us to remove our afflictions from the root now, but by reflecting on these points, we can at least reduce the strength of those afflictions when they manifest. This is something we must do.

At this time, we have achieved this precious human body and the opportunity to listen to and discuss the Mahayana teachings. We understand that if we were to engage in negative actions, we would have to take rebirth in the lower realms. We accept the existence of the hells and the lower realms. We also accept the possibility of higher rebirths as humans and gods. Therefore, we are more knowledgeable than those who have no exposure to such teachings.

In spite of having such knowledge, when it comes to the actual practice of working to overcome our afflictions, instead of our reducing them, they actually become stronger. If this happens, we will be exactly as Nagarjuna said – very foolish and stupid. We must do something about this situation.

When we meet with difficulties, we should try to apply and reap some benefit from our Dharma knowledge. It seems that, sometimes, we are unable to do this, so that when problems come, our suffering seems to be even more intense and the bad experiences seem much more difficult to handle. This should not be the case.



Advice from Guntang Rinpoche: Overcoming the stubborn mind of self-cherishing

Guntang Rinpoche points out how we always cherish ourselves. It is this evil mind of self-cherishing that is our downfall. Only when we are able to overcome this very stubborn self-cherishing mind, which is as hard as wood, then enlightenment will not be very far away.

In the same way, we are always controlled by our three mental poisons which only lead to misfortune and our downfall. We desperately want happiness but our afflictions bring only problems and suffering.

The essence of Rinpoche's advice is that enlightenment can only be achieved when we are able to subdue our stubborn minds. Whatever virtues we do with our bodies and speech, they must ultimately lead to subduing our minds. If this does not happen, then there is no way we will achieve enlightenment.

There are students who say they have been practising for a long time – for 10, 20, 30 years – but they do not see any progress. This is the fault of not transforming their virtuous actions of body and speech into methods that will help them to subdue their negative minds. It boils down to this failure to transform their minds.



Our narrow-minded outlook

Mental suffering can only be reduced through adopting the correct mental perspective. The more we are able to think from different perspectives, the better equipped we will be to deal with our mental difficulties. Our mental unhappiness can never be solved by wealth, possessions or medication.

The reason why we experience mental unhappiness is because of our narrow-minded outlook. We tend to fixate on some small aspect of the problem. When we think in such a way, the mind will always remain narrow, tight and stressed. We need to widen our minds, make them bigger, more expansive and relaxed, by considering the problem from multi-faceted angles. Although it is difficult to experience immediate benefits from the mind-training techniques given in the text we are now studying, when we continue to listen, critically analyse and familiarise ourselves with the teachings, we will definitely experience some benefits and be able to reduce our mental suffering over time.



PRACTISING PURE PERCEPTION



Pure perception and the importance of respect for the sangha

It is difficult to say who is or is not a buddha or bodhisattva. The supreme method to avoid the pitfall of generating negative thoughts and actions towards them is to cultivate pure perception of all sentient beings, seeing everyone as pure. The best advice is to cultivate the attitude that all sentient beings are buddhas and to regard them as buddhas, to show respect with our bodies, speech and minds.

Even when we see faults in others, we should remind ourselves that these faults are conditioned phenomena and can be eradicated upon the application of the correct antidotes.

When practising pure perception, we pay respect with our bodies, speech and minds, first, to our spiritual master followed by the sangha community and then to all sentient beings.

There are many reasons why we should practice such pure perception:

1. We are from the same centre and should have mutual love and respect for one another.
2. We are all followers of the teachings of Lama Tsong Khapa.
3. We are all followers of the Buddha's teachings
4. We are all human beings and part of humanity.

5. We all have consciousnesses and are sentient beings.

When we practise pure perception by reflecting on these different levels of commonality, our ability to interact with others will be enhanced and we can make more friends. Our anger towards others will also be reduced.

In Singapore, the Chinese Mahayana community is extremely respectful to ordained people, often spontaneously bowing down at the feet of the monk or nun.

As long as someone bears the signs of ordination, that person is an object of homage and showing respect with our bodies, speech and minds is important, beneficial and necessary. When I mention this, people may misunderstand that I am asking them to show me more respect. That is not the point.

At this centre, we have had the opportunity to study the Buddha's teachings and practices in some depth and we have some ability to explain those teachings using logic and reasoning. Our external behaviour therefore should reflect whatever knowledge we may have. When we fail to show respect in the proper way, then there is a disparity between our knowledge and behaviour, isn't it? We need to close that gap.

We will accumulate negative karma when we criticise the sangha but we will create positive karma and generate merit for ourselves when we are respectful and relate to them in the proper way.

Sangha members are not perfect. But what makes them special is the vows they hold. It is not because they are free of faults.

When we say we should not criticise an ordained person, it does not mean that even when they engage in inappropriate activities,

we are not allowed to comment. One can respectfully approach the ordained person and ask, "I don't understand why you are doing this. What is your reason for doing this?" One can discuss the matter and seek a solution. That is the meaning of not criticising and belittling an ordained person.

Having mutual respect applies to everyone. All the students and members within the centre should have mutual respect for one another. When that is absent, we would go on to show disrespect to the sangha and once that happened, one would carry on to show disrespect to the gurus. If that were to happen, then we would be the ones to suffer the loss seriously.



Advice from the Kadampa masters: Never seek out faults of others but always look at one's own mistakes

The Kadampa masters advise that we should always look at our own faults, treating them as our enemies and never seek out the faults of others. Before we can positively influence and change others, we first have to change ourselves. Without improving our own minds, it is very difficult to change other people in a positive way.

"The faults" refers to our three mental poisons and our physical and verbal negativities. When we find ourselves doing inappropriate things that are not beneficial, we should correct ourselves by remembering, "This is not good and is unproductive. I should not do this."

We cannot change other people by looking at their faults and we cannot influence them in a positive way until we have improved

ourselves. Looking at other people's mistakes only causes our anger and negative mind to increase. Even if we have been in a positive state of mind, once we start finding fault, we feel agitated and unhappy, harming ourselves and subsequently others in the process.

When we point out their faults, people become irritated and angry. Their response may be, "Who are you to correct me? I can do whatever I want." We hurt them by instigating their anger and there is no benefit.

The masters also advised that we should hide whatever good qualities we may have, praising the good qualities of others instead. This means we should not be boastful, e.g. telling others, "I have studied for so many years; I am good-hearted; I have clairvoyance, you know." Why should we hide our qualities? Because boastfulness only increases our arrogance, conceit, pride and attachment. These are all negative emotions which will only hurt us in the end.

We should praise and concentrate on the good qualities of others instead of looking at their faults. When a person has a good heart, we should say so, "That is a good-hearted person." We should also proclaim those qualities, for by doing so, we will be able to see and recognise those good qualities more clearly ourselves. This benefits us in our development of bodhicitta and the good heart. There is a connection; the more we are able to see the good qualities of others, the easier it will be for us to respect them and develop the mind that cherishes them. These are the benefits.

When we consider the advice of the great Kadampa masters, we find it is really wonderful and beneficial. We are supposed to check our minds continuously day and night, but we do the exact opposite. Day and night, we appear to be practising virtue

and physically doing recitations but we do not check our minds. This is a mistake that must be changed.

Instead of seeing our own faults as our enemies, again we do the exact opposite; we always think we are in the right and we pick at the faults of others. In the same way, instead of hiding our qualities and praising others, we are boastful and we forget to praise the qualities of others, only seeing their faults instead.



FAITH



Why faith is crucial

All the different sutras and commentaries are the same in that they all point to faith as the very root of all virtuous activities.

It is extremely important to have this single-pointed faith in the presentation of the Four Noble Truths, the Three Jewels and in the law of cause and effect and so on because then mental transformation and improvement become possible.

Faith is important in all religious traditions. Look at our Christian friends. Because of their faith in God, their understanding of and conviction in God's work, they engage in so many beneficial activities to help others. In essence, they become better people.

It is the same with Buddhists. Those who have the faith of conviction in the Buddha's teachings also engage in virtuous activities such as practising generosity and so forth. Whatever religion we are talking about, it all boils down to faith.

When we have the single-pointed faith of conviction in the Three Jewels, we would naturally try to live our lives in accordance with Buddha's advice. Similarly, when we have faith in the law of cause and effect, we would live our lives according to those principles, striving to abandon that which should be abandoned and cultivating that which should be cultivated.

With faith, the aspiration for the goal of liberation and enlightenment would naturally arise and joyous perseverance in putting in the effort to achieve our goal would also arise of its own accord. We would not need someone to coax, force or encourage us. Laziness, the state of mind disinterested in virtue, would stop.

In dependence on joyous perseverance, we can then investigate: What are the things we should abandon and cultivate? Based on this analysis, after having ascertained what is to be abandoned and what is to be cultivated, the result is belief in that.

Leaving matters at the level of belief is not enough. Having ascertained this knowledge, we should remember and familiarise our minds with it. By using what we have ascertained as the object of our mindfulness, we can then develop single-pointed concentration.

The object of our single-pointed concentration becomes the basis for us to develop a special kind of exalted wisdom, which enables us to ascertain the nature of reality. This wisdom realising emptiness is the very tool we can use to cut the root of cyclic existence, i.e., the self-grasping conception, together with its seeds. This is the way to achieve liberation.

Before we can generate this exalted wisdom realising emptiness, we must first develop single-pointed concentration. In order to develop this concentration, we must first have the special kind of mindfulness that does not forget its object. What are we mindful of? We are basically mindful of an object that we have already ascertained.

To be mindful of an object, we have to first understand or realise

that object. Before developing that kind of mindfulness, we need to have belief, i.e., the mind that comes about after the valid cognition that has ascertained its object.

Before we can develop that kind of belief, we must first have the aspiration that is the impetus for us to realise that object in the first place. Where does this aspiration come from? We need to have faith. Without faith, we cannot generate aspiration. We can see then how faith is the root of all good qualities.

There are many different kinds of faith. There is the faith in the minds of those with sharp faculties and those with dull faculties. There are those who have blind faith and those whose faith arises only after analysis and reasoning.

We must have faith in the Buddha's teachings but before that can happen, we must first understand what those teachings are. We must study, listen, read, think and so forth and on the basis of such activities, we can generate irreversible faith. Irreversible faith can only be generated on the basis of investigating the teachings and understanding them using logic and reasoning.

We should then generate this motivation for listening to and studying the teachings: "Faith is the source of all the higher qualities, all virtuous actions. Since that is the case, in order to develop this irreversible faith in the teachings of the Buddha, I am listening to and studying the teachings."



***Advice from Gungtang Rinpoche:
Don't be like a hopping rabbit!***

Gungtang Rinpoche said once we are able to generate stable faith, then joyous perseverance for virtue would naturally arise. But if our faith is unstable, like a hopping rabbit - sometimes strong, sometimes not there at all - then even our prostrations, for example, will merely serve to whip up dust from the ground.

It is also important that we have strong and stable faith in our spiritual masters or gurus.

We also need to develop a strong and stable faith of conviction in the need to analyse and study the teachings of the Buddha. Having such faith in the importance of studying the teachings will help us to complete our studies. Then, no matter how busy we may be, we will always set aside time for our studies.

We will not accomplish or complete our studies if our faith in its importance is like that of a hopping rabbit - sometimes studying, and at other times, slacking off.

Once we have decided, from the very depths of our hearts, that this is something that is very good for us and we must do it, then naturally we will put effort into pursuing our studies. This is because we see for ourselves the need for and the purpose of studying all these subjects. It all boils down to whether we are able to generate in our own minds this determination from the heart. This will then determine whether the effort will spontaneously arise from our side or not.

Our faith in our studies should not be like a hopping rabbit. At the beginning of each module, we feel, “I must study as this is very important.” As the course progresses, however, so does our boredom. When that happens, nothing will be accomplished. The point here is that effort must be applied continuously.

We must keep this in mind. This is not to say that we will not encounter any difficulties during the course of our studies. It is not easy. But when we have this determination from the depths of our hearts thinking, “This is something I must do in this life and I should not miss out on this opportunity,” we will put aside time and the effort will come.

Without this determination from our own side, from the depths of our hearts, no matter how perfectly all the most favourable conditions come together for one to study, everything will be very difficult.



Developing faith depends on us

It is very important that we begin with studying extensively and then reflecting on and analysing what we have learnt. Only then can we gain firm ascertainment of the teachings, which should be followed by constant meditation on them. In this way, realisations can come and extraordinary faith in our teachers and in the great composers of the treatises will arise.

Different levels of faith are generated in this process. When we first listen to and have some understanding of the teachings from our guru, we develop some faith in him. Our faith in our guru deepens when we reflect on and ascertain the teachings we have received from him. Then, when we meditate and develop

some realisations based on his instructions, we will generate extraordinary faith in our guru. From there, we can generate irreversible faith in the lineage lamas going all the way back to the Buddha himself.

We can see from this that the power of our faith depends on whether we have done extensive studying, reflection and meditation. The greater the faith in our teachers, the greater will be our effort to put the teachings into practice. Then, we will definitely be able to pacify and remove our suffering.

The sutras say that faith is the foundation of all our virtue. A mind without faith cannot generate virtue just as a burnt seed is unable to produce a plant. When we strongly develop the correct kind of faith, our virtue will increase. For such faith to arise in our minds, we have to study, reflect and meditate on the teachings. We must understand the reasons for and the importance of studying in order to generate the determination to apply ourselves to our studies. We should aspire to be like Lama Tsong Khapa.

Our minds will not change or improve when our faith is weak and unstable and we do not practise properly. Faith comes when we taste and experience the teachings for ourselves and that experience can only come from reflection and meditation. Whether we develop faith or not depends on us.



ADVICE ON PRACTICE



The purpose of Dharma practice

The purpose of engaging in Dharma practice is to remove suffering and to improve our minds. When our Dharma practice leads to suffering, then I do not see the point in doing it. Dharma practice is essentially performed with our minds and should be done willingly from one's own side and should contribute to the removal of suffering.

When one understands the purpose, one would not feel forced to practise. Instead, the practice will be done with great enthusiasm.



Creating obstacles for ourselves

We should not be lazy when it comes to our Dharma practice or studies. Sometimes we think, "I am getting old, I am not intelligent enough to understand this, I do not have enough time" and so forth and we put ourselves down. Thinking in this way, we are hindering ourselves from taking advantage of the opportunity for Dharma studies and practice. Because of this way of thinking, we do not study and practise and become lazy.

We should not stop ourselves from our fair share of Dharma practice and studying. All of us are different. Some are predisposed towards anger, others towards mental distractions. The angry ones may think, "I am the angry type. There is no hope for me. It is impossible for me to meditate on compassion. Forget about it." Thinking in this way, they do not give themselves the opportunity to improve. Others may think, "My mind is so distracted. There is no way I can meditate and develop concentration." Again, thinking like this, they stop themselves from being able to change.

The point here is not to create obstacles for our own Dharma practice. Instead, we should open the door to our Dharma practice and studies. We have already discussed the human life of leisure and opportunity. We should reflect on this. All the good conditions are gathered together to enable us to study and practise and we also have the ability to do so. Remembering this, we should encourage and persuade ourselves to study and practise Dharma.



Time management

It is your responsibility to manage your time and to adjust your lifestyle in such a way that Dharma practice and studies can fit into your life in a comfortable and nice way without your feeling stressed. It is pointless to force and push yourself too hard. Then you become depressed and end up feeling that your Dharma practice and studies are making you suffer even more. It is pointless if you end up like that.

One has to expect some difficulties when it comes to practising and studying the Buddhadharma. Everything is difficult. The

moment you move your body to start doing anything, the difficulties begin.

Ours is a materially advanced and progressive society. But there are also many instances of mental frustration, stress, anxiety and mental suffering. These sufferings already exist. So we should not create more suffering with our Dharma practice and studies. That is never the point. The point here is to do things at a comfortable pace.



Our motivation

Whether the outcome of a course of action is positive or negative depends on the originating intention or motivation. A virtuous intention produces positive results and a negative intention produces bad results. Therefore, we should always rely on mindfulness and vigilance to keep our minds in a virtuous state. We assert that attending teachings is a virtuous act. However, if the motivation for listening to the teachings is not virtuous, then being present and listening to the teachings is not necessarily virtuous.

A beneficial motivation would be to think, “Whatever knowledge I get in class, I am going to blend it with my mind and try to practise it as much as possible.” When we make the effort to practise, we can have positive experiences that will give us the understanding and confidence that the Dharma we are studying and practising really works. What is the result of such positive experiences? Faith in the Dharma will naturally arise and faith in our virtuous friend and guru will be generated from the depths of our hearts.

The problem is that people attend but do not apply the teachings in their daily lives. When the teachings we hear remain simply at an intellectual level for us, without our practising them, it is very difficult for us to generate faith in the Dharma. We do not taste the Dharma. Without such faith, it becomes very difficult to talk about generating faith in our guru who gives us the teachings. But when we blend the teachings with our minds and try to practise them, then over time, the quality of our minds will improve; we become more good-hearted and so forth. Our faith in the Dharma and our guru also increase.

Therefore, it is important that before engaging in any action, we should ask ourselves, “Am I motivated by a positive or negative state of mind?”



The practice of offerings

When making unsurpassable offerings, we should think, “Just as the great bodhisattva Samantabhadra emanated countless replicas of himself, making offerings filling the entire space, to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas, I shall make offerings in the same way.”

Samantabhadra is not only a bodhisattva but an arya bodhisattva abiding in the grounds. Bodhisattvas like Samantabhadra made such extensive offerings in order to complete the accumulation of merit. Relying on the factor of wisdom is not enough to enable them to achieve the final goal of enlightenment, because they still have the obstructions to omniscience, and removing these obstructions require vast stores of merit.

If such a bodhisattva makes such extensive offerings to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas, it goes without saying that we ordinary beings, who are bound by our afflictions, must do likewise.

We need to make extensive offerings “in order to seize that precious mind” of bodhicitta. It is very difficult to generate bodhicitta especially when our minds are not purified of their obscurations and negativities. We need to accumulate the collection of merit so that the favourable conditions for generating bodhicitta can arise.



Prostrations

Prostrating with our speech means we offer praises to the buddhas with a melodious voice. Prostrating with our minds means reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha and generating faith towards him. Prostrating with our bodies involves touching the five points of one’s body to the ground or performing the full length prostration.

Our prostrations should always be preceded by reciting the prostration mantra, *Om Namō Manjushriye Namō Sushriye Namō Uttama Shriye Soha*. There are inconceivable benefits to doing this. By reciting this mantra, every prostration performed is equivalent to one thousand prostrations and the benefit is comparable to hearing and reflecting on the meanings of the three scriptural collections. It is said that when we prostrate continuously after reciting this mantra, we can achieve the path of seeing in this very life itself.

Whether we benefit from our prostrations depends on how well we perform them, our ability to sustain our visualisation and

keep our minds focussed on what we need to do with our bodies, speech and mind throughout the prostration. The quality of the prostration is most important, the quantity less so.

There is much to contemplate as we perform each stage of the prostration, placing our palms on our crowns, throats and hearts. We are also advised to visualise countless replicas of ourselves when prostrating. The main thing is to generate faith in the Three Jewels. We will reap the benefits if we reflect properly during the prostration.

Usually, our bodies are prostrating but our minds are distracted. Although we can still accumulate merit from performing such physical prostrations, obviously the merit we accumulate is far greater when our speech and minds are also engaged in the practice.

We are performing prostrations everyday and even if we cannot do many of them at the moment, we can, at least, make a commitment to make three prostrations in the morning and at night as a daily minimum. In this way, we accumulate six prostrations every day.

We should not feel this is a burdensome chore but, instead, we should contemplate and understand the benefits and prostrate voluntarily from our own side to the Three Jewels. Even with six prostrations a day, multiplied by whatever number of days we have left in this life, by the end of this life, we will have accumulated thousands of prostrations.



Advice from Gungtang Rinpoche: Reliance on the merit field

Gungtang Rinpoche said: *“In these degenerate times, when sentient beings have very little merit and our minds are so weak and degenerate, it is very important to make strong requests to our personal deities for blessings. We should work very hard at accumulating merit and purifying our minds of obscurations. It is important to make offerings, prostrations and engage in the practices of the 7-limbs.”*

Generally speaking, our motivation determines whether our actions are virtuous or not. When our motivation is virtuous, then our actions are also virtuous. But all actions performed in relation to the merit field or to the holy objects are exceptions to this rule. Even when we make offerings or prostrations to the merit field or holy objects with an incorrect motivation, we still accumulate a great deal of merit. This is due to the power of the merit field and the holy objects.

You should therefore grasp the opportunity to rely on holy objects and the merit field to accumulate merit and purify your karma, especially those of you who really want to study the Buddha’s teachings and complete your studies.

It is very difficult to complete your studies, no matter how hard you study, if you do not strive to do this. This is my own experience from my life in the monastery. There is no guarantee that those who are naturally more intelligent or who do well in their studies can complete them. Generally, those who work at accumulating merit, purifying their negative karma, and making whole-hearted requests to their gurus and special deities are the ones who make it in the end and successfully complete their

studies. Those who are more intelligent tend to take things easy and do not work as hard, whereas those who are not so intelligent realise that they have to work harder.



Supplication to the guru-deity

When we look at the example set by Lama Tsong Khapa in his life story, we see how extremely important it is to make requests continuously to one’s deity and to strive in accumulating merits and purifying obscurations in order to have some success in our practice, especially if we aspire to realise emptiness. Therefore, when we recite the *Heart Sutra*, the guru yoga of Lama Tsong Khapa, the prayer, *“Dependent Arising - A Praise of the Buddha”* and so on, we should recite them with the motivation of creating the causes for us to complete our studies and to accumulate merit.

When we make requests to our personal deity, we should do so by seeing the deity as inseparable from our root guru. This supplication should be made with single-pointed devotion as shown in the *Guru Puja*:

*You are my guru, you are my yidam,
You are the dakinis and Dharma protectors.
From now until enlightenment I shall seek no other refuge
than you,
In this life, the bardo and all future lives,
Hold me with your hook of compassion;
Free me from samsara and nirvana’s fears,
Grant all attainments,
Be my constant friend and guard me from interferences.*

(Verse 53)

We see here that the supplication to the guru-deity is not only to be cared for in this life but also in the intermediate state and all future lives to come.

In the monasteries we recite many prayers, sometimes doing so for one to two hours. The purpose of doing so many prayers is to accumulate merit for success in our debating and studies. Sometimes, we even recite the *Praises to 21 Taras* 70 to 80 times. By comparison, therefore, what we recite in class is nothing as the duration is very short. I thought it is good to give you some perspective. There are some students who may wonder why we are reciting so many prayers and they may feel bored. There are others who think reciting mantras is more beneficial than reciting prayers. Reciting prayers is definitely beneficial. There are only two possibilities: Recite mantras or prayers or do both. When you hold the position that one does not benefit, then you have to say that the other is also useless. This is my own view on this matter. I think that reciting mantras or reciting prayers brings the same benefit.



Focussing on three things

When we study the Great Treatises in our quest to understand and realise dependent origination, we have to focus on three things:-

1. Making whole-hearted requests to our guru-deity
2. Continuously studying and analysing the treatises and
3. Accumulating merit and purifying obscurations

Some intelligent students may think, “I have sharp faculties. I will be able to study these Great Treatises without accumulating merit.” Such students, who focus only on studying and do not

perform any purification practices or work at accumulating merit, may learn something but they will never be able to complete their studies. Instead, they will encounter many obstacles and find it difficult to understand the treatises, especially the teachings on emptiness.

Then there are those who do not study at all thinking, “Studying is not important. I will concentrate on accumulating merit and purifying my negative karma. That is enough.” There is no way such people can realise emptiness without listening to, studying and reflecting on the great treatises, especially the presentations on dependent origination.

Can we realise emptiness and the meaning of dependent origination simply by making requests to the guru-deities? This is also impossible. We may supplicate our guru-deities with single-pointed faith, “Please grant me blessings to realise emptiness.” But that alone will not bring the realisation we seek.

So, the three things must go together hand-in-hand: supplicating our guru-deities, studying and analysing the great treatises, accumulating merit and purifying negativities. This is what Lama Tsong Khapa did and we should follow his example.



Doing our own Dharma practice

Whether we are prostrating or reciting “*Om Mani Padme Hum*” it is our responsibility to make this beneficial for our minds by doing this happily and willingly from our hearts. It is a mistake to think that studying or listening to the teachings is purely to accumulate information and knowledge, leaving our hearts and minds untouched.

We have to do our own Dharma practice. We should mind our own instead of other people's business, focus on our practice and check our progress to see how far we have been able to apply what we have learnt. Dharma should be used to check up on ourselves, not others. It is not hard to find examples of good practitioners. When we look at the examples set by the holy beings, we should be inspired to strive and pray to be like them one day.



Lama Tsong Khapa Guru Yoga

*And please remain stable, without separation from my body, speech,
And mind, until I attain enlightenment*

This is an important prayer from the Lama Tsong Khapa Guru Yoga practice we have just recited. It is important for us to think and pray that Lama Tsong Khapa is in our hearts all the time. It makes a definite difference to our sense of being taken care of by him in all our future lives by being able to meet his teachings again. Meditating on the inseparability of the great Lama Tsong Khapa at our hearts is also one of the best ways of doing the protection wheel meditation to protect ourselves from spirit harms and the different kinds of obstacles.

We benefit from visualising with faith, Lama Tsong Khapa abiding in our hearts, as he embodies the protectors of the three lineages, Chenrezig, Manjushri and Vajrapani. This visualisation helps in developing a good heart since Lama Tsong Khapa is inseparable from Chenrezig. We also develop our wisdom because Lama Tsong Khapa is the manifestation of Manjushri and since he also embodies Vajrapani, it helps us to overcome our problems and obstacles. So if we do this practice with faith, we enjoy all these

benefits. Furthermore, it will help us to meet Lama Tsong Khapa's teachings again in all our future lives.

There is also a great difference when we meditate on guru devotion conjoined with entrusting ourselves to Lama Tsong Khapa abiding in our hearts. This is because Lama Tsong Khapa, embodying the protectors of the three lineages, is the definitive spiritual master. Relying on him as our protector, with strong faith and with the determination to accomplish all his wishes and advice, he becomes our ultimate object of refuge.

There are many different kinds of prayers we can do on top of the many commitments we may have. But it will be very beneficial if we can do this visualisation with this short practice of Lama Tsong Khapa Guru Yoga.



Increasing our happy thoughts

Gungtang Rinpoche advises, *“Even if you owned mountain-high piles of gold, enough to cover the entire country, at the time of death, you will not be able to bring along a single atom of it with you. On the other hand, by reciting a mantra like “Om Mani Padme Hum” just once, that can open the door to a good rebirth in your future life. Simply reciting “Om Mani Padme Hum” is very beneficial.”*

Analysing our situation more deeply, we can understand that material wealth cannot really benefit us, even in future lives. In fact, the more we own, the more we grasp at these things, increasing our self-cherishing and attachment which only create more negative karma that will not benefit us in our future lives.

Sometimes, we think, “I will definitely achieve something and I will be happier and more satisfied if I am rich in this life.” But if we profess to attach greater importance to the happiness of our future lives, then having this kind of worldly goal is incorrect. If we are concerned with this life alone, then that is a different matter. Otherwise, our goal should not be like that.

Reciting “*Om Mani Padme Hum*” is just an example. We should engage in our meditation practice and daily prayers or a single recitation of “*Om Mani Padme Hum*” with the conviction and single-pointed faith that we will definitely achieve happiness in our future lives. We need to generate that faith of conviction and be happy with whatever we are doing. Rejoice that we are doing this wonderful practice. It would be very good if we can do this.

The whole point of practising the Dharma is to remove suffering and misery. Some people think like this: “I am just a nobody in this life. I am poor and will probably stay that way. I will never amount to anything.” Thinking like that only brings unhappiness.

Practising the Dharma is to increase whatever happy thoughts we may have. We need to know how to be happy. We should think: “Even if I do not become rich, at least now I have the opportunity to study and practise the teachings and I am creating the causes for happiness in my future lives.” We need to generate this belief, to have this faith of conviction and to feel happy doing our practices by seeing the purpose in what we are doing. In his advice, Gungtang Rinpoche is telling us to practise the Dharma because it creates the cause for our happiness. As the *Lam Rim* says, at the time of death, only the Dharma helps.



Practice of Nyung Nay

I have been requested to talk a little about the Nyung Nay practice, especially on how to mix it with what we have learnt so far about generating the altruistic intention. Gungtang Rinpoche says that if someone were to ask this question: “If there is a very evil person who has accumulated a great deal of negative karma, what is the best and fastest way for him to create the cause for and to achieve enlightenment?” His reply would be, “*The best practice for such a person would be the Nyung Nay.*”

It was mentioned in the previous lesson that a single recitation of “*Om Mani Padme Hum*” definitely becomes a cause for us to experience happiness in our future lives.

Gungtang Rinpoche says that amongst all the mantras, the best one is “*Om Mani Padme Hum*” and reciting it with the Nyung Nay practice has skies of inconceivable benefits.

His Holiness often says that reciting “*Om Mani Padme Hum*” is a very good practice. He points out that when we recite the mantras of Medicine Buddha, White Tara or Dzambala, our motivation for doing so is somehow connected to the affairs of this life. We recite the Medicine Buddha mantra for good health or to get rid of sicknesses. We recite the White Tara mantra to clear life obstacles and for longevity and we recite the Dzambala mantra for wealth.

But when we recite “*Om Mani Padme Hum*” we do so solely with the motivation to benefit others and to develop a good heart. His Holiness said that it is a very good thing to recite “*Om Mani Padme Hum*” because the motivation is very good. That is why

we can say that “*Om Mani Padme Hum*” is probably the best of all the mantras.

Whatever we do, when it is mixed with the affairs of this life, it is difficult for these activities to be Dharma. For anything to be Dharma, it cannot be mixed with grasping at the happiness of this life. All the valid texts say the same thing.

In the Nyung Nay sadhana, there is the practice of the self and front generation of the deity. If you have received the Great Chenrezig initiation, on the basis of holding divine pride, you generate yourself as Chenrizig with clear appearance and you proceed with the rest of the practice.

The most important things to do in a Nyung Nay practice are:

1. Generating divine pride of oneself as the deity with clear appearance.
2. Seeing one’s fellow retreatants as the deity one has self-generated.

In this way, there is no basis for jealousy, competitiveness, pride, anger and so forth to arise. This is the ideal way of doing Nyung Nay.

The motivation for doing Nyung Nay should be to benefit others. The motivation should not be purely to purify sicknesses or spirit harm nor should it be to fulfil a commitment, so that one is only doing it out of obligation. Rather, the motivation for doing the Nyung Nay should be to purify our minds of obscurations and negative karma in order to quickly achieve enlightenment for the benefit of others. We usually do not think in this big way but only consider limited worldly goals. But when we focus on the big picture, then all the small obstacles will be eliminated along the way, without our having to even think about them.

Since the Nyung Nay is a Mahayana practice, it has to be done with the Mahayana motivation of benefiting others, without any self-interest. When we have the thought, “I am doing this to get rid of my obstacles,” that is a selfish motivation. When the Nyung Nay is done with such a motivation, it is questionable whether the practice is Dharma. When the motivation is insincere and does not come from the heart, the whole practice is no longer Dharma. Not only is it not Dharma, you have to spend two or three days suffering with no food and water, feeling tired and, perhaps, even generating anger.

So it is very important to try, as far as possible, to have the correct motivation for doing the practice. Of course, that is not easy because our self-cherishing is very strong. But the point is to try to have a good motivation as far as possible.

Relating the Nyung Nay to what we have studied so far, you should take the opportunity to reflect on the faults of the self-cherishing attitude. You should investigate from every angle how your self-cherishing attitude is the source of all your unwanted experiences, problems and suffering. You should also examine how cherishing others is the source of happiness.

During the Nyung Nay, you can start by practising with the persons sitting on your left and right, thinking how you are all equal in the sense of wanting happiness and not wanting suffering. Even if there had been some misunderstanding or conflict in the past with these people, think: “That person wants to be happy just like me. Like me, that person does not want to suffer.” On that basis, try to remove those feelings of resentment and aversion and try to help one another.

When you engage in the Nyung Nay practice, you do so with your body, speech and mind. Physically, you will probably be making

many prostrations. You will be using your speech to recite the prayers and mantras. When you are reciting the mantras, it is not like ordinary speech. You should remember the power and the benefits of reciting the mantra of Chenrezig. Mentally, you guard against the arising of anger and attachment for the duration of the Nyung Nay. The essential thing is to do the practice, as far as possible, always with the thought to benefit others and to try to minimise the thoughts of jealousy, competitiveness and so forth.

Generating oneself as the deity and also seeing the other participants as deities during the retreat means there would be no basis for anger to arise, since we should not be angry at a deity. Instead, you should cultivate mutual respect and consideration for one another. If you can do this, then the practical benefit will be that you can continue to be friends with that person even after finishing the Nyung Nay.



PRECIOUS HUMAN REBIRTH



Advice that is to be hammered like a nail into the mind

A faithful student went to his guru, a high lama, for advice that would be “hammered like a nail into the mind” i.e., advice which goes directly to one’s heart and brings about some real transformation. This is what his guru said:

First, we pay homage, “I prostrate to the venerable lamas.” If you have the desire to practise the Dharma, listen to these words.

This precious human rebirth that can fulfil great purposes is difficult to obtain and can easily be lost as the time of death is uncertain. Nothing else except the Dharma can benefit us in our future lives.

There is no point in just listening to the words – you must put them into practice. Don’t you regret all the precious time that you have already wasted in this life? Having accumulated so many negativities, you will be reborn in the lower realms. Once born there, it will be difficult for you to endure the inexpressible sufferings there.

If you want to practise the Dharma, you have to do it now. You are now sitting on the border between happiness and suffering. If you only accumulate negativities, you are opening the door to the lower realms. If that happens, it is not due to the fault of external demons or spirits.

When you live your life according to and not against the law of cause and effect, then taking refuge in the Three Jewels will be an infallible source of protection. From now on, go for refuge from your heart to the Three Jewels. From now on, whatever you do, let karma be your witness. If you knowingly jump over the cliff and expect someone to pull you up again, that is a vain hope. Renunciation, bodhicitta and the correct view are the essence of all the scriptures of the Conqueror.

The essence of the above advice is that if one knowingly accumulates negativities, that can only result in rebirth in the lower realms. Once there, we will find the suffering unbearable. Despite knowing this, we continue to hope that the Triple Gem will protect us by making prayers, “May I be reborn in Sukhavati, the Pure Land of Amitabha.” This is wishful thinking.

Having taken a human rebirth, all the favourable conditions are assembled now and it is important to place as many imprints as possible in our mental continua. From this very moment, we should try to make sure that virtuous imprints are placed in our minds. If we are unable to meditate and unable to place many imprints in our mental continua, at the very least, we can make aspirational prayers. But, instead of moving our minds towards the Dharma, we expect the Dharma to come to us. This is a very arrogant way of thinking.

The guru is the source of all the excellent collections, morality or ethics is the foundation of all the qualities, and keeping pure vows and samaya is the source of all attainments. It is not sufficient to leave it at that. One must actually make these conditions come about for oneself. While we have all the favourable circumstances, we should practise right now. When the Lord of Death catches us, it would be too late.

At the time of death, we will have frightful visions of the messengers of death. By then, it will be too late to do anything. We talk about and listen to the Dharma but it is very rare for us to put the Dharma into practice. If we practise whatever we know, even if it is a single piece of advice or a single word, we benefit. But if we know a lot but do not practise, then it is useless.



The worst kind of self-deception

Reflect on this: For most of our samsaric existences, we had been circling in the lower realms. This time, however, we have achieved a human rebirth. Not only that, we have even met the Mahayana teachings and, on top of that, we have the opportunity now to study this very wonderful, perfect text by the bodhisattva Shantideva that talks about the deeds of the bodhisattvas. Whether we understand everything in the text or not, we should rejoice at the mere fact that we have this opportunity to simply look at the text. So be happy and rejoice.

Listening to the teachings should be done joyfully and enthusiastically from your own side and not out of a mistaken sense of obligation, “Since other people are going for class, I should go too.” This is not beneficial at all. When we engage in virtue, we should be able to decide for ourselves as it would be meaningless for us to depend on others for this.

When we know how to think, we should be able to uplift our minds to make ourselves happy. Then, just listening to the teachings alone is, in itself, a joy. On top of that, if we can reflect or meditate on the teachings, then there is even more reason to be happy and to rejoice.

We should try not to waste our human rebirth. As mentioned in chapter 1, when we misuse and waste our human lives, there is nothing more foolish than this. It is the worst kind of self-deception.



Taking the essence

*Understanding that the precious freedom
of this rebirth is found only once,
Is greatly meaningful, and is difficult to find again,
Please bless me to generate the mind that unceasingly,
Day and night, takes its essence.*
(from “*The Foundation of all Good Qualities*” by Lama Tsong Khapa)

We should reflect on this regularly and, day and night, strive to take the essence of this meaningful opportunity that we have. Not only have we obtained a human body but our faculties and senses are all complete. We have the opportunity to listen to and study Dharma teachings. When we reflect deeply on this, we will be amazed at and rejoice in our good fortune.

While all the conditions for us to study and practise exist, it remains up to us to study or practise the teachings.

It is questionable whether we will obtain such a rebirth again in our next lives. As the prayer says, “*The precious freedom of this rebirth is found only once, is greatly meaningful and is difficult to find again.*” Since we have obtained such a rebirth, it is important that we do something meaningful with it. We already find it difficult to practise with all the conducive conditions we have. There is no guarantee that our faculties or senses will be complete or perfect even if we were to obtain another human rebirth.

Practice will become even more difficult then. So, we need to study and practise right now.

I know many of you recite this prayer, “*The Foundation of All Good Qualities,*” on a daily basis but you should not leave it simply at that level. You should reflect on the meaning of the verses, especially the one dealing with the precious human rebirth. By doing so, it encourages you to practise the Dharma.

Every day, we can see for ourselves the instability of this human life. We are not immune to sickness. Many people are well one day and sick the next and within a short time, they die and move on to the next life. While we are still healthy, we should not postpone our Dharma studies and practice, as it will be too late to do so when we suddenly fall ill. We may wish to practise the Dharma then but our bodies will not allow us to do so. The same applies to our studies. They should not be postponed. When we have the time, it is good to continue to come to class to listen to the teachings and to apply and put into practice, as much as we can, whatever we have learnt.



DEATH AND IMPERMANENCE



Advice from Gungtang Rinpoche

Gungtang Rinpoche said: *“We can see with our own eyes that, at the time of death, there is no difference between the young and old. One has to go on to the next life.*

When people die suddenly, even though we may witness this with our own eyes, our minds remain unmoved. We continue to believe that we will live forever and that we will not die soon. We have to overcome this mistaken conception.

Until we are convinced, “I will definitely die one day,” there is no way we can generate the path or any realisations in our minds. If we are unable to generate deeply from our hearts the realisation that death is certain and the time of death is most uncertain, our Dharma practice will remain only at the level of words.”

In other words, it is only when we have generated the realisation of our impending death and the uncertainty as to when it will happen will we be motivated to engage in wholesome activities and direct our minds towards virtue. Whatever practices we are doing – be it cultivating conscientiousness or trying to defeat our negative emotions – when we meditate on death and impermanence, we will definitely be able to do those practices.

We may be interested in the profound teachings on emptiness and the generation and completion stages of tantra. However,

when we do not train our minds gradually in the proper way, when we do not put effort into the preliminary practices, such as this essential meditation on death and impermanence, then we will remain in a rut and never progress in our Dharma practice. Without this realisation of death and impermanence, we can forget about the subsequent realisations of the path, as they will not happen.

Reflecting on death and impermanence does not mean seeing how people are dying but using these experiences as examples for ourselves. The main thing is to reflect on how we will definitely die one day and how this is the very nature of our existence.

Without meditating on death and impermanence, even when we engage in virtue, that virtue will be imperfect and impure, as it will be mixed with the negative emotions. Our virtue will not become Dharma and, instead, become one of the eight worldly dharmas.



OVERCOMING ATTACHMENT TO THE BODY



Only as supports for practising virtue

The Buddha said that the body is, by nature, unclean and arises from impure causes. Our bodies are appropriated, contaminated physical aggregates which have to experience the sufferings of old age and death. At the very end, they only become food for vultures and worms.

We foolishly see our bodies as pleasant, as objects of attachment and we accumulate so much negative karma in order to sustain them, using them for meaningless activities. But, when the time of death comes, the Lord of Death will take them away from us against our wishes. When the great practitioners examine the body, they see no reason to be attached to it.

How should we sustain our bodies then? Remember the analogies of giving the servants wages when the servants work, or seeing the body as a boat for coming and going? We should sustain our bodies with the motivation of using them to engage in virtue.

Guntang Rinpoche said the same thing in his collection of advice. He described the body as like an autumn flower which deteriorates a little with each passing day. Therefore, there is no point in being attached to it and it is a mistake to sustain it

out of attachment, as we will only accumulate negative karma by doing so.

No one is saying we should not take care of or sustain our bodies but we should not do so out of attachment. We need to sustain the body and we should know how to sustain the body. We should ensure that our bodies become supporting conditions for us to engage in virtue. That is how we should care for our bodies.



Grasping at unclean phenomena as clean

An example of our attachment to unclean phenomena is sexual desire. Our strong desire for the bodies of others is due to our erroneous conception grasping at them as clean when, in reality, they are unclean. Once we understand the filthy nature of the body, there is no basis for the arising of attachment.

The Buddha mentions in the sutras that our bodies are filth-making machines. We know this is true when we analyse this further. Our whole body is filled with so many unclean, unpleasant substances that it seems to be no more than a filth-producing factory. Yet, we have strong attachment to our own bodies. We need to meditate on this and when done well, it can definitely reduce our attachment to our bodies.

The sutras mention that the childish, grasping at unclean things to be clean, will even eat snot and pus, just like maggots who consume pus produced by the body due to their attachment. The sutras also mention that, when we leave our bodies alone – if we didn't wash our bodies – they would stink. Yet we remain attached to our bodies as bees to honey.

One of the commentaries says that it is one of the greatest signs of our confusion and ignorance that we are attached to the bodies of others. This attachment is like someone taking refuge at the foot of a tree at night. In the darkness, he cannot see that the tree is surrounded by piles of dirty things and he may even sleep on top of this filth. At sunrise, when he can see clearly what he had slept on, he will be disgusted at the sight. In the same way, when we reflect and meditate on and realise the unclean nature of our bodies and the bodies of others, we will also be repelled and disgusted. Our attachment will then be reduced.



Our bodies are like hotel rooms

Gungtang Rinpoche reminds us that our bodies are like hotel rooms which we stay in for a limited period of time. Yet, for the sake of this “borrowed” body, we do many things to protect, improve and make it happy. At the end of the day, what does this “I,” the guest of this hotel room that we cherish so much, get in return? How much real happiness has this guest experienced? What about the suffering and the problems encountered by this “I”? We need to think about this.

We grasp at the body as being the “self” or belonging to the “self.” Based on these conceptions, we engage in many activities to ensure its happiness and freedom from suffering. But the suffering and problems persist and we never experience any everlasting happiness. Therefore, by understanding that our bodies are like hotel rooms, we should overcome our attachment to them.



JOYOUS EFFORT



Generating joyous effort

In “*The Placement of Mindfulness*,” Buddha said that laziness is one of the bases for the generation of all our mental afflictions. Anyone who has laziness in their mental continua will find it difficult to engage in virtue. In order to overcome laziness, we have to rely on joyous effort.

To develop joyous effort in our minds, we have to eliminate its obstructing factors by relying on the favourable conditions for generating this quality. We also need to generate the four powers that are conducive conditions for its development.

What are some of the obstacles that prevent us from developing joyous effort?

We understand the need to practise Dharma and we know that we can practise but nothing gets done at the end of the day. Why does this happen?

1. We procrastinate and postpone the practice to some time in the future, thinking, “I still have time and I will do it later.”
2. We are completely overwhelmed by our attachment to worldly activities.
3. Due to our low self-esteem, we think, “I can’t do this” and become discouraged.

To overcome the laziness of procrastination, we should reflect on how our bodies are disintegrating quickly as we move towards death. When death occurs, due to our failure to engage in any positive actions, we will fall into the lower realms. We should also remember how difficult it is to obtain this human life of leisure and opportunities.

To overcome the laziness of attachment to worldly activities, we should reflect on how Dharma practice is the source of happiness in both this and our future lives. The meaningless pursuit of reputation and worldly goals will only cause our virtue to degenerate and generate more suffering for us.

The other obstacle that prevents us from developing joyous effort is the thought, “I can’t do this. It is beyond me.” To overcome this, there are three different antidotes.

Some people become discouraged, thinking, “The Buddha was an exceptionally capable person. How can I ever hope to achieve his limitless qualities?” In this instance, we should reflect on how the Buddha attained buddhahood. In the beginning, the Buddha was like us. But he worked very hard and improved himself from life to life till he finally attained enlightenment. All the past buddhas were once ordinary beings like us. Buddha points out that if inferior beings such as animals and insects can achieve enlightenment, then obviously we can achieve enlightenment if we exert ourselves.

Others are discouraged at the thought of the extensive practices of the bodhisattvas such as the sacrifice of one’s limbs, in order to achieve enlightenment. But the Buddha never expects us to make such sacrifices. In fact, he stipulates we should not do so until we have perfected our practice of giving - when giving away our bodies would mean no more to us than giving away

a plate of food. We will not experience any difficulties then. By reflecting like this, we will be able to overcome this form of discouragement.

Yet, there are still others who are discouraged by the thought of how the bodhisattvas have to take rebirth repeatedly in cyclic existence and suffer there in order to benefit sentient beings. But when the superior bodhisattvas (who have achieved the direct realisation of emptiness and have abandoned all their afflictions) take rebirth in cyclic existence, they do not experience any physical suffering. Because of their direct perception of emptiness, all samsaric sufferings appear illusory to them and they do not experience any mental unhappiness. These superior bodhisattvas are, therefore, both physically and mentally happy when they are abiding in cyclic existence. Again, there are no grounds for this form of discouragement.

By depending on the various antidotes, we can overcome all the different forms of discouragement.

We also have to cultivate the four powers conducive to the development of joyous effort. We rely on the power of aspiration to generate joyous effort for the first time. Then, we rely on the power of stability (or steadfastness) to prevent this joyous effort from degenerating, rendering it irreversible. When engaging in virtuous work, we should do so with great delight and enthusiasm by cultivating the power of joy, which is like the joy of a child completely engrossed in play.

Having developed joyous effort, we also have to be skilful in its application. In the process of cultivating virtue, we may overtax ourselves and our health may deteriorate. We then need to cultivate the power of relinquishment and suspend our activities, either temporarily or completely.

Some texts mention two additional powers that are also included in the root text though they are not explicitly named. These are the power of earnest application and the power of mastery. We need to generate very powerful antidotes to overcome our negative emotions. In order to do this, we have to generate the power of earnest application where we apply ourselves to the cultivation of mindfulness and vigilance. Through such application, we gain mastery over our bodies and minds, which can then be employed for virtue as and when we wish. Negative emotions are easily subdued. This is the power of mastery.

Developing joyous effort makes it easier to accomplish calm abiding. On the basis of calm abiding, we can then cultivate special insight focusing on emptiness. This becomes the direct antidote to our negative emotions, which can be removed from the root.



Why joyous effort does not come easy

Gyalsab Je said that those of us interested in seeking liberation need to develop joyous effort in order to enter into and bring the path to completion. Entering the path alone is not enough. Once we embark on the path, we need to apply joyous effort to bring the path to completion. In order to develop joyous effort, we need to rely on the four powers:-

1. the power of aspiration
2. the power of stability (or steadfastness)
3. the power of joy and
4. the power of relinquishment

The reason why joyous effort does not come easily for us and we are unable to develop the four powers is due to our lack of

clarity with regard to what we really want. We are not clear about our own goals and what we are looking for. We are stuck in this confusing situation. Therefore, joyous effort does not arise in us. In order to develop joyous effort, first, we need to have the stable faith of conviction in karma. This is what the first power, the power of aspiration, means. This power is developed on the basis of having this stable faith of conviction in karma. We have to reflect on karma: its nature, its causes and its effects and generate a stable faith in its workings. Only then will we have the basis for developing joyous effort.



Advice from the Kadampa masters

The great Kadampa masters said: *“All sentient beings possess buddha nature, but when they do not make the effort to awaken it, there is no way they can obtain a higher rebirth, liberation or enlightenment.”*

Butter comes from milk but simply staring at the pot of milk will not turn it into butter. The milk must be churned. The same applies to our aspiration to higher rebirth, liberation and enlightenment for the sake of sentient beings. Although we have the potential to achieve all these, we must put in the effort to awaken that potential by practising the Buddhadharmā. Otherwise, nothing happens.



SUBDUING ANGER



Main obstacle to generating a good heart

The main obstacle to becoming a good-hearted person is anger. Anger is the opposite of the good heart and is very harmful. It has harmed us in the past, it is harming us now and it will harm us in the future.

We can see how anger harms us in this life, disturbing our mental peace, making our relationships difficult. But it does not stop there. The results of anger will also harm us in the future as we accumulate very powerful negative karma, which will propel us into lower rebirths in our future lives. Anger harms in the past because all the roots of virtue accumulated in the past are destroyed when we get angry.

Mental unhappiness causes anger to arise in our minds and it arises when:

1. others create problems for our loved ones and ourselves, or
2. we and our loved ones are prevented from getting what we want, or
3. we see that everything is going well for people whom we dislike.

Is there any point in becoming unhappy with these conditions? It is not going to make our problem disappear. On top of that, it makes us miserable. If matters can be changed for the better,

there is no reason to feel unhappy. If we cannot do anything about the situation, again, we have to stop our minds from becoming unhappy since that serves no purpose at all but only generates additional suffering for ourselves. The point here is to keep the mind happy.

For the other party who is creating difficulties for us, our unhappiness does not rid us of this person or make him change his mind towards us. It is even possible that our unhappiness will make him happier.

Some of the reasons we have mentioned can be reflected upon in meditation, which helps us to familiarise ourselves with these lines of reasoning. There is no better meditation than familiarising ourselves with the antidotes to anger. Then, when anger arises in our minds, we can recall them and apply them immediately. Of course, we may not be successful in the beginning, but if we persevere, and with greater familiarity with such thoughts, we will improve.

You should do this on your own by spending some time – maybe 15-20 minutes – thinking about these points in stages, sorting them out in your own mind while reflecting on your own experiences.



Meditation exercise (I)¹

First, recall a time when anger or hatred arose in your mind. Did you feel happy or was the feeling unpleasant? When you encounter some problems and you are feeling upset and angry, or there is a lot of hatred in your mind, examine that feeling and experience. Is it good or bad?

It is very obvious when we look at our own experiences. We can conclude that when we are angry, there is a lot of unhappiness in our minds which we neither want nor need. That being the case, we have to think of ways and means to get rid of such mental unhappiness.

It is very beneficial when we have faith in the Buddha's teachings and the workings of karma. It is obvious that anger disturbs and makes us unhappy. Worse still, anger destroys a thousand eons of virtue that we have accumulated in the past. It is also obvious that as soon as we are angry, or when the anger has been festering in our minds for a long time, it blocks the generation of a virtuous state of mind, making it very difficult for the mind to be positive and virtuous. Anger also harms us in the future, by causing us to take rebirth in the lower realms. We should reflect deeply on how anger harms us in these different ways.

Next, we examine the causes of anger. What makes us upset – a person, an incident or a situation? As mentioned in the text², the cause of anger or hatred is mental unhappiness. Do our experiences accord with what is said in the text? Is it true that anger is experienced when the mind is unhappy in some way? It becomes clear that first we feel unhappy, then that mental unhappiness leads to anger or hatred.

We then have to examine what is causing our unhappiness. The text points out that the main cause of mental unhappiness is attachment to the eight worldly dharmas. For example, we feel unhappy when someone behaves in an unfriendly or abusive way towards us. Because the “I” or “me” is harmed, we get angry and unhappy.

¹This meditation was set as a piece of homework to be done by the students.

²Chapter 6 of *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds* by Shantideva.

Let us take as an example the experience of being verbally insulted by someone. We first become unhappy, then anger and hatred follows. The condition for that mental unhappiness and anger is hearing those unpleasant words.

At that point we should reflect: “The words have already been said. Can my anger change what has already occurred? Sooner or later, my critic will finish what he has to say.” So think: “Are we able to change the situation by remaining angry? Can the insults be retracted if we continue to be angry?” Thinking in this way, it becomes clear that getting angry serves no purpose at all. The insults have been uttered. The words cannot be taken back. Our anger is useless as we are unable to change the situation. Furthermore, our anger only disturbs and makes our minds unhappy.

There would be some purpose to our anger if it could eliminate the situation that is upsetting us. But we can see that is not so. Our anger also has no effect on the other party who is insulting us. Instead, we are the ones experiencing the mental unhappiness and disturbance.

After examining this from every possible angle, the conclusion has to be that anger does not serve any beneficial purpose whatsoever. It only harms and makes us unhappy. Based on this conclusion, we should be convinced that anger is bad for us and be determined not to give in to it in the future: “I must try to stop my anger from arising.” We must remember, “I have to be very careful to take care of my mind, especially when anger is about to arise.”

We should not think like this only occasionally but we should rely on our mindfulness and vigilance all the time. When we become habituated to this way of thinking, together with our

application of mindfulness and vigilance, it will become easier to stop anger from arising.

Everything we see or experience seems to exist very solidly from its own side. Anger arises based on that appearance. At the present moment, we may think there is no way we can curb our anger. It is very difficult to subdue anger completely, but even then we can familiarise our minds with the antidotes, by meditating on some of the points I have mentioned. With greater familiarity, we will definitely be able to stop anger from remaining in the mind for long and even when it arises we will be able to stop it quickly. This is definitely achievable.

If we do not train our minds in this way, we will continue to live with our anger, becoming angrier with each passing day. The days become months, the months become years. When we do nothing about our anger, we spend our whole lives like that.

It will not take you longer than 10 minutes a day to reflect on these points. You should reflect on them daily for at least a week. This is not optional. This is something you must do. After a week, if you find it beneficial, then, of course, you can continue with the reflection. But you must try this out for at least a week. 10 minutes is not a long time. It is your responsibility to put aside those 10 minutes. When you see its usefulness, you will be motivated to do it and you will be able to make the time. But if you do not want to do it, you will not be able to find any time, even if you are not working, and free the whole day.

Some students wonder what our studies have to do with their lives. They do not see its usefulness or benefit. That is understandable. We can study and listen to many teachings, but when we do not reflect on them and try to apply them to our daily lives, we always remain the same. Therefore, we have to critically analyse

how our studies can be integrated into our lives. When we do not meditate in this way, the teachings will never benefit the mind. This is my way of persuading you to do this homework.

You may have a lot of daily commitments but it remains to be seen whether the mind changes as a result of merely reciting prayers and doing sadhanas alone. I think it is very difficult for the mind to improve when you simply spend all your time doing prayers without doing any reflection. But when you spend just 10 minutes every day, continuously for, say, a month, thinking about how to stop anger, you will be able to assess its usefulness at the end of the month.

Whether this happens or not depends on you experiencing it for yourself. Please do not misunderstand; I am not saying that you should discard your commitments and stop your daily prayers. Since you have made the promise to do so, you have to continue with your prayers, but do them happily.



Meditation exercise (2)

This is another piece of meditation homework for you to reflect on for the next couple of weeks. Put aside 10 to 15 minutes every day and reflect on the following points. If you can, reflect on all of them in the sequence given. If you do not have the time, then choose and meditate on the points you find most useful.

1. Visualise on the crown of your head your meditational deity and root guru. Remember that your meditational deity is inseparable in nature from your root guru.

2. Next, generate the motivation for doing this practice: “In order to achieve the enlightened state of my guru deity, I must perfect my practice of patience.”

3. Visualise that you are surrounded by all sentient beings, including your enemies who are in front of you, and make a mental pledge: “Even if all sentient beings were to rise up as my enemies, I will not be angry with them.” Making this kind of mental promise is particularly beneficial and helpful if you can sustain this mental commitment for the duration of your meditation session. You can promise to keep this commitment for 10 minutes, a longer period of time or even for a whole day, like the way you observe the eight Mahayana precepts.

4. In dealing with anger, it is imperative to reflect on the faults and disadvantages of anger. It is mentioned in the text, “*There is no transgression like hatred.*”

Anger not only destroys merits accumulated in the past, present and future but when anger is present in the mind, there is no room for virtuous states of mind to arise. For instance, when we dislike and are angry with someone, we are unable to rejoice even when that person is doing a virtuous action. Due to the presence of anger in our minds, we are unable to see the good qualities of that person. It also becomes difficult to generate positive thoughts towards the people who are close to our object of anger, such as their friends and relatives. It is also said that anger prevents the generation of higher spiritual qualities.

The opposite of anger is the practice of patience. As mentioned in the text, there is “*no fortitude like patience.*” With patience, we have the mental space to generate positive thoughts even towards our enemies.

5. Anger arises when we are harmed in some way, be it our bodies, possessions or reputation. Focusing on our enemy, we should check (1) whether it is the nature of that person to harm us or (2) whether that tendency to harm us is adventitious (i.e., not inherent)?

If it is the nature of that person to cause problems for us, then there is no reason to be angry with him. Such anger would be like begrudging fire for having the nature to burn. When you put your hand in the fire, your hand is burnt. It would be foolish to be angry at the fire.

Different people have different natures. If the object of our anger is a troublesome person who usually speaks harshly, understanding that that is his nature, we will be less likely to become angry when he behaves badly. Even if anger arises, we would be able to stop it quickly and not be so bothered. We can see this from our own experience.

We may know that person to be good-hearted but due to certain causes and conditions coming together, he/she gets angry and harms us. This would be an adventitious fault on the part of the person. It would be good to find out why that person is behaving in such a way and not be angry or upset with him.

6. Now focus on ourselves. We want happiness and do not want suffering yet we allow ourselves to get angry with other people. Our behaviour contradicts our wishes and is completely inappropriate.

We are unable to bear being harmed in little ways and become angry, but our negative response means that we are accumulating the propelling /throwing karma for ourselves to be reborn in the lower realms. We destroy our own roots of virtue. We should realise

how extremely foolish we are. Why? Because we are choosing to not sacrifice small sufferings to ward off the greater suffering of rebirth in the lower realms. When we endure small sufferings (by not becoming angry), then we do not have to experience the greater suffering of rebirth in the hells. So we need to correct our foolish behaviour.

7. Next, let us focus on our bodies, which are the bases for experiencing the pain of being harmed by weapons and so forth.

Our bodies are as fragile as a water bubble, unable to bear even the prick of a thorn. When attacked, besides the attacker and the weapon he uses, our bodies also contribute to the experience of pain. The very existence of this body lends itself to suffering. If we did not have such a body in the first place, we would not be harmed when attacked. Therefore, both the external conditions and our bodies are equal in contributing to our experience of pain when we are attacked. Since that is so, there is no reason for us to be angry only at the attacker or his weapon.

We tend to place the blame entirely on the attacker and never blame our own bodies. We need to stop thinking like this by understanding that the mere existence of our bodies plays a part in our experience of suffering and pain.

We have looked at some of the ways to weaken anger by focusing on :

1. our enemies,
2. ourselves, and
3. our bodies.

Many reasons are given in the text, but they can be condensed into these three points above.

8. In addition, if you can, reflect on how the enemy has no freedom but is controlled by other factors. He gets angry and engages in harmful activities because he has no choice. But this is not how the enemy appears to us. We see him as being very solid, existing inherently without depending on causes and conditions, and we react by getting angry with him. We can stop this by reflecting on how he does not exist independently but is also subject to causes and conditions. We should see the enemy as an apparition or a dream. As long as the causes and conditions come together for the production of an event, that event will happen.



GENERATING BODHICITTA



Bodhicitta is the most powerful of virtuous minds

Where is there a comparable virtue?

Where is there even such a friend?

Where is there merit similar to this?

(Verse 30, Chapter 1

A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life by Shantideva)

The bodhicitta mind is the most powerful amongst all virtuous states of mind. Nothing is comparable to its strength and power. It can remove all the sufferings of all sentient beings and establish them in the state of bliss. It is able to provide sentient beings joy and happiness and remove the darkness of ignorance from their minds.

When we praise bodhicitta as being the most powerful mind, capable of removing the ignorance that obscures the minds of sentient beings, how does this work?

We should understand that the bodhisattva, with his strong bodhicitta mind, considers our condition. Since we sentient beings are ignorant with regard to what should be abandoned and how to abandon that and what should be cultivated and how to cultivate that, the bodhisattva teaches us these points without mistake. This is how the bodhisattva removes our mental ignorance.

Bodhicitta is also praised as an unequalled virtuous friend. Here, one can understand a virtuous friend to mean a good friend. The bodhicitta mind is praised as the most supreme amongst our virtuous friends because it is able to protect us from all harms and enable us to accomplish benefits, not only for ourselves but for others.

This verse also says that there is no merit comparable to bodhicitta. This means that, by relying upon bodhicitta, one can easily accumulate extensive amounts of merit and will continue to do so, from moment to moment. Having the bodhicitta mind naturally causes us to engage in virtue and to pacify all negativities. It is mentioned that as long as we have the bodhicitta mind, we will continuously generate merit even when we go about doing our usual activities such as sleeping, walking, sitting and so on. Therein lies the power of the bodhicitta mind. Since we aspire to attain buddhahood, we need to accumulate merit and the supreme method for doing this is through the practice of bodhicitta.

Therefore, we should contemplate over and over the inconceivable benefits of bodhicitta, till the aspiration to generate bodhicitta arises in our minds. Realising the need to cultivate bodhicitta, we will be inspired to put in every effort to do so. We should pray continuously to generate bodhicitta within this lifetime and also to rely constantly on effortful and sustained practice.

By remembering that the bodhicitta mind is the most powerful virtue, the most powerful friend and the most powerful merit, we engage in listening to the Buddha's teachings with the intention to practise and cultivate it. Due to the force of this motivation, we receive infinite benefits from listening to the teachings and are also able to do so with a joyful mind.



Fulfilling the wishes of others

*It is like the supreme gold-making elixir,
For it transforms the unclean body we have taken
Into the priceless jewel of a Buddha-Form.*

(Verse 10, Chapter 1
A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life by Shantideva)

When we achieve the state of full enlightenment, we will be in a position to fulfil all the hopes and wishes of sentient beings and help eliminate all their sufferings. What would enable us to achieve this state? It is generating bodhicitta in our minds.

The bodhisattvas take rebirth in samsara, using their unclean, impure bodies to benefit others, unlike the hearers and solitary realisers, who abandon their bodies to get out of samsara, in pursuit of their personal liberation.

The bodhisattvas are able to take on such samsaric rebirths for the benefit of others due to their great compassion and complete abandonment of self-cherishing. The hearers and solitary realisers are unable to do so because they are not free from their self-cherishing attitude.

When self-cherishing is absent, one is able to work solely for the benefit of others, so the weaker one's self-cherishing is, the greater will be one's ability to benefit others. The stronger one's self-cherishing, the more difficult it will be for one to work for others. Basically, it all boils down to whether one has bodhicitta or not. So, we should try to develop bodhicitta and once it is generated, strive to ensure that it does not decline but work to strengthen that virtuous mind.



Bodhicitta and the practice of the perfections

*Should even the myriad beings of the three realms
without exception
Become angry at me, humiliate, criticise, threaten or even kill me,
I seek your blessings to complete the perfection of patience
not to be distraught,
But to work for their benefit in response to their harm.*

*Even if I must remain for an ocean of eons in the fiery hells of Avici
For the sake of even just one sentient being,
I seek your blessings to complete the perfection of joyous effort,
To strive with compassion for supreme enlightenment
and not be discouraged*

(Verses 103 – 104, *Guru Puja*)

These verses from the *Guru Puja* show that even when all sentient beings turn against us, instead of returning harm for harm, it is actually possible to develop patience when there is bodhicitta in our mental continua. When we train our minds in the method of exchanging ourselves for others, we develop loving kindness and compassion for all sentient beings, which then enables us to behave in the manner mentioned in these verses.

When we look at such verses, we find it very difficult to comprehend that such a thing is possible; it is just beyond our mental capacity. We think in this way because we have yet to develop bodhicitta in our mental continua. Once we have generated bodhicitta, instead of being disturbed, our minds will remain very calm and we can work for the benefit even of those who harm us.



Bodhicitta as medicine and wish-fulfilling jewel

*The panacea that relieves the world of pain
And is the source of all its joy*

(Verse 26, Chapter 1
A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life by Shantideva)

Shantideva said that bodhicitta is the cause of happiness and joy and is like the great medicine for all sentient beings of the six realms. When we are able to develop bodhicitta in our own mental continuum, we can obtain the higher rebirths of humans and gods and progress from there towards liberation and full enlightenment.

Bodhicitta is also like the medicine that eliminates all our sufferings. Once bodhicitta is generated in our minds, our mental sufferings will definitely be reduced. In the same way, when bodhicitta arises in the minds of other sentient beings, they will also be able to reap the benefits of gaining higher rebirths of humans and gods, and the opportunity to achieve liberation and enlightenment as well.

You may wonder, "What are the benefits of developing bodhicitta?" The benefits of bodhicitta are inexpressible. In short, bodhicitta is like a wish-fulfilling jewel. It is stated in one sutra that if the benefits of bodhicitta were to take a physical form, the entire space of the three thousand great world systems would not be able to contain it.

Bodhicitta is like a wish-fulfilling jewel because it is able to eradicate the poverty of all sentient beings. Our own sufferings

With bodhicitta, we will also be able to develop the kind of joyous perseverance that is mentioned in the *Guru Puja*. We will have the courage, determination and the joyous perseverance needed to benefit other sentient beings.

Whether the practice of the perfection of patience and joyous perseverance can be cultivated in our minds depends on whether we can develop the altruistic intention, bodhicitta. Bodhicitta is a mind that cherishes others more than oneself, forsaking one's own purposes and placing others' welfare before one's own.

Because the bodhisattvas have such unbearable compassion for sentient beings, they have tremendous determination and are able to work with a happy mind for countless oceans of eons to help just one sentient being. We find it difficult now to work for the benefit of even one sentient being because we do not have such a mind and we become easily discouraged. The opposite happens when we have bodhicitta. Then, even if we had to spend an eon to benefit a single sentient being, we would happily do so.

There are six perfections:-

1. The perfection of generosity
2. The perfection of ethics
3. The perfection of patience
4. The perfection of joyous perseverance
5. The perfection of concentration
6. The perfection of wisdom

Whether we are able to develop these perfections depends on whether we are able to develop bodhicitta in our minds. Until that time, even when we do practise generosity, it will not become the perfection of generosity.

will be reduced as we will no longer become the causes for others to generate negative karma and by our causing others to develop bodhicitta, they too can be freed from their sufferings.



More qualities of bodhicitta

The bodhisattvas constantly train in the practice of bodhicitta and are not discouraged when they encounter hardships, such as famines, financial difficulties or sickness. Instead, they use these conditions to remind themselves to refrain from engaging in negativities and creating negative karma. They are able to transform whatever negative conditions they meet with into the path of reinforcing and strengthening their practice of bodhicitta. Regardless of the level of hardship, the bodhisattvas will not resort to negative actions or creating negative karma to make things easier for themselves, eg. they will not lose their temper just to get some temporary relief from their suffering.

The bodhicitta mind of the bodhisattva is therefore called an extremely precious holy mind. In general, there are different kinds of virtuous minds that we can cultivate or practise. However, this bodhicitta mind is praised as being like a wish-fulfilling jewel that can remove the poverty of impoverished sentient beings. Samsara and the lower nirvana of the arhats are extremes that the bodhisattva tries to avoid.

Bodhisattvas are praised as worthy objects of refuge because they are, *“that source of joy/Who brings happiness even to those who bring harm.”* The true bodhisattva does not retaliate or take revenge against those who harm them. Instead, the bodhisattva makes every effort to establish that person on the path to liberation and omniscient buddhahood. Therefore, the bodhisattva possessing

the mind of bodhicitta is praised as the *“source of joy”* and all happiness.

By understanding how bodhisattvas transform all negative circumstances into the path, how they never return harm for harm and how they only strive to place beings in the state of buddhahood, we can see the qualities of the bodhicitta mind. When we are able to generate the bodhicitta mind, we will be able to receive the same benefits as those associated with bodhisattvas. Our bodhicitta becomes the supreme basis for naturally restraining ourselves from creating negative karma. Because we have yet to generate such a mind, presently, we find ourselves creating negative karma all the time.



The enemy, our self-cherishing attitude

*The moment an Awakening Mind arises
In those fettered and weak in the jail of cyclic existence,
They will be named a ‘Child of the Sugata,’
And will be revered by both humans and gods of the world.*
(Verse 9, Chapter 1
A Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life by Shantideva)

As soon as bodhicitta is generated in one’s mind, one’s status becomes exalted, regardless of whether one is young or old, male or female. As a bodhisattva, one acquires a different name (a child of the Sugatas) and becomes an object worthy of homage, prostrations and respect by all humans and worldly gods. This happens because of the generation of bodhicitta and not because one had a better rebirth, lineage or gender or was born wealthier than others. One becomes a bodhisattva primarily because of one’s state of mind.

The whole purpose of engaging in mind training is to develop bodhicitta, the altruistic intention to become enlightened for the benefit of all sentient beings. There are two ways of doing this; one is by following the seven-fold cause and effect instructions, and the other is by following the instructions on exchanging oneself for others. *The Wheel-Weapon* text presents the latter system and gives instructions on developing love and compassion through the practice of “tonglen,” the practice of giving and taking.

The main obstacle that prevents us from developing bodhicitta is our self-cherishing attitude. Until that is abandoned, there is no way we can develop bodhicitta. What we are trying to do here is to learn these instructions for developing bodhicitta because when we achieve this, we can overcome our self-cherishing attitude that is the source of all our problems and sufferings.

We should pray, “May I and all sentient beings develop bodhicitta. I will cause this to happen by myself alone. Please, guru deity, bless me to be able to do this.” We are adapting the prayer of the four immeasurables and substituting the words for developing bodhicitta.

When we pray, “May I and all sentient beings develop bodhicitta,” that is only at the level of prayer. Although it is important to pray for this, we will never get anywhere by leaving it at this level. It is impossible to develop bodhicitta in this way.

So, then, we have to go on to the next line that says, “I will cause this to happen by myself alone.” Here, not only are we generating the aspiration to develop bodhicitta, we are actually saying, “I am going to do something about it. I am going to develop bodhicitta.”

But even that is still not enough because when we try to develop

bodhicitta, we will meet with all sorts of obstacles and difficulties. Therefore, we have to seek the blessings of the guru; we recite the last line of the prayer, “Please, guru deity, bless me to be able to do this.”

We should remember this motivation and aspiration when listening to the teachings on the instructions for developing bodhicitta. When we do this, it will be of great benefit.

When you finish your work or as soon as you are about to set off for class to listen to the teachings, you should immediately generate this motivation. Quickly generate the thought, “I am going to class to learn about the instructions to develop bodhicitta.” With this motivation, each and every single step we take towards the centre causes us to accumulate an immeasurable amount of merit.

When you are in class, you should again generate this motivation, “I am listening to these teachings because I want to learn how to develop bodhicitta.” As you listen to the teachings, pay attention and keep this motivation very close to your heart. As mentioned in the first chapter of *Engaging in the Bodhisattva Deeds*, when it comes to purifying any kind of negative karma, even the heaviest karma, there is nothing more powerful than developing the mind of bodhicitta.

Most of the verses in *The Wheel-Weapon* state that the real problem is our self-cherishing attitude. Whatever problems we experience are the results of the karma we have created in the past under the influence of our self-cherishing attitude. If you are looking for someone to blame, blame the self-cherishing attitude. The instructions say that other people are actually very precious and kind. If there is a problem, then it is our own self-cherishing attitude.

Most of the verses also point out how the different kinds of sufferings are the results of our own karma, “It is the weapon of my own evil deeds turned upon me.” We try to take all these unfavourable conditions into the path and throw them at our self-cherishing attitude to try to reduce the strength of this self-cherishing attitude.



The mistake of not having a bodhicitta mind

When we read the text, *The Wheel Weapon*, we may feel that everything we have been doing had been inappropriate or wrong. It is natural to feel this way because the purpose of this text is to point out our faults, the mistake of not having a bodhicitta mind.

We should understand that what this text is trying to tell us is that, without the mind of bodhicitta, naturally we would always remain sentient beings with faults. Therefore, when we read mind-training texts that seem harsh in this way, we should not feel discouraged or depressed. We should understand that it is natural for us sentient beings to have faults. However, we should move beyond just seeing our faults to understand the true purpose of having our faults exposed in this way. We should strive to generate bodhicitta because, as long as the bodhicitta mind is not present, our faults will remain.

This text explains the practice of bodhicitta. Since we are not bodhisattvas yet, it is only natural that, at our level, the practice seems to be very difficult. The main purpose of this text is to inspire us to work for the generation of bodhicitta. This text tells

us over and over again that the more powerful our egoistic mind, the more faults we incur. Therefore, it advises us to be inspired to reduce the intensity of that egoistic mind and, instead, to nurture the mind that cherishes others.



WISDOM REALISING EMPTINESS



The two wings of the bird

Lama Tsong Khapa said in *The Three Principles of the Path*:

*Although you practise renunciation and bodhi-mind,
Without wisdom, the realisation of voidness,
You cannot cut the root of samsara.
Therefore, strive to understand dependent origination.*

Although there are many inconceivable benefits and advantages to developing the altruistic intention to become enlightened for the benefit of all sentient beings, if we do not develop the wisdom that realises selflessness or emptiness, there is no way we can free ourselves or others from samsara (or cyclic existence), to achieve the state of enlightenment. Therefore, developing bodhicitta alone is not enough. We must also develop the wisdom that realises emptiness, because of the reason given by Lama Tsong Khapa in the above verse.

The very root of samsara is the self-grasping ignorance: our grasping at the self of the person, conceiving the person as existing by way of its own character and our grasping at the self of phenomena, conceiving phenomena as existing by way of their own character.

In order to destroy these self-graspings, we must develop a mind that can counter such ignorance, realising how its mode of

apprehension is mistaken and wrong. This is the only way to cut the root of samsara.

These two are called the method and wisdom aspects of the path. In order to fly, a bird needs a pair of wings. Having one wing alone is insufficient. In the same way, in order to achieve the state of full enlightenment, we need method and wisdom.



Dependent arising & lack of inherent existence

Lama Tsong Khapa said in *The Three Principles of the Path*:

*One who sees the infallible cause and effect
Of all phenomena in samsara and nirvana
And destroys all false perceptions
Has entered the path that pleases the Buddha.*

First, we need to understand how all phenomena including samsara and nirvana arise dependently, i.e. they came about through depending on something else. Understanding that, we then understand that things do not exist in the way they appear to our minds. When we look at phenomena, we grasp at them as being truly existent. We have to understand that phenomena do not exist in this way. With this understanding, we would have entered the path that pleases the Buddha.

A good understanding of dependent arising enhances our ascertainment of the law of cause and effect - the better our understanding, the greater will be our ascertainment of the law of cause and effect, that when we engage in positive actions, we will experience happiness; when we engage in negative actions, it will lead to suffering.

Through understanding how all things do not exist inherently, we will see how the law of cause and effect work and exist conventionally. It will also help our understanding of dependent arising, that conventionally there is such a thing as dependent origination.

“Not existing inherently,” means that all phenomena exist by depending on something else and on that basis are given labels. This understanding of dependent arising would enhance our understanding of the working of the law of cause and effect. Believing things exist truly contradicts this law, that causes lead to effects.

It is very problematic when we believe phenomena exist inherently from their own side. For example, if the seed exists inherently, then it is very difficult to explain how it can transform into a plant. When we assert that lower realms or good rebirths exist inherently, it is difficult to explain how we can move from one realm to another. When we say sentient beings exist inherently, it becomes difficult to explain how sentient beings can become buddhas. In the same way, if a baby or young person exists inherently, then it is very difficult to explain how that person will age.

We must not leave things at that but really try to figure them out in our minds. For example, when we assert that a youngster inherently exists, it is tantamount to saying that that he will never get old. We have to understand why there is a problem with such assertions and how that problem comes about.

DEDICATION

Through the merit created by preparing, reading, thinking about and sharing this book with others, may all teachers of the Dharma live long and healthy lives, may the Dharma spread throughout the infinite reaches of space, and may all sentient beings quickly attain enlightenment.

In whichever realm, country, area or place this book may be, may there be no war, drought, famine, disease, injury, disharmony or unhappiness, may there be only great prosperity, may everything needed be easily obtained, and may all be guided by only perfectly qualified Dharma teachers, enjoy the happiness of Dharma, have love and compassion for all sentient beings, and only benefit and never harm each other.

THE FOUNDATION FOR THE PRESERVATION OF THE MAHAYANA TRADITION

The Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) is an international organization of Buddhist meditation study and retreat centers, both urban and rural, monasteries, publishing houses, healing centers and other related activities founded in 1975 by Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche. At present, there are more than 130 FPMT activities in over thirty countries worldwide.

The FPMT has been established to facilitate the study and practice of Mahayana Buddhism in general and the Tibetan Gelug tradition, founded in the fifteenth century by the great scholar, yogi and saint, Lama Je Tsong Khapa, in particular.

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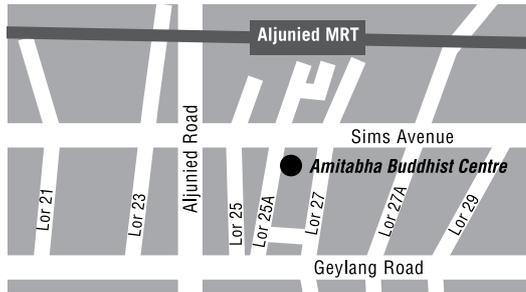
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The Buddhadharma is the true source of happiness for all sentient beings. Books like the one in your hand show you how to put the teachings into practice and integrate them into your life, whereby you get the happiness you seek. Therefore, anything containing Dharma teachings or the names of your teachers is more precious than other material objects and should be treated with respect. To avoid creating the karma of not meeting the Dharma again in future lives, please do not put books (or other holy objects) on the floor or underneath other stuff, step over or sit upon them, or use them for mundane purposes such as propping up wobbly tables. They should be kept in a clean, high place, separate from worldly writings, and wrapped in cloth when being carried around. These are but a few considerations.

Should you need to get rid of Dharma materials, they should not be thrown in the rubbish but burned in a special way. Briefly: do not incinerate such materials with other trash, but alone, and as they burn, recite the mantra OM AH HUM. As the smoke rises, visualize that it pervades all of space, carrying the essence of the Dharma to all sentient beings in the six samsaric realms, purifying their minds, alleviating their suffering, and bringing them all happiness, up to and including enlightenment. Some people might find this practice a bit unusual, but it is given according to tradition. Thank you very much.

TO FINDOUT MORE ABOUT ABC

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