LOJONG SHENPA SHIDREL
The Mind-training of Parting from the Four Attachments

by Sachen Kunga Nyingpo
Commentary by Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche

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Parting from the Four Attachments

Sachen Kunga Nyingpo’s *Lojong Shenpa Shidrel*
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With commentary by Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche

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Parting from the Four Attachments
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Lojong Shenpa Shidrel, or The Mind-training of
Parting from the Four Attachments

If you are attached to this life, you are not a person of Dharma.

If you are attached to cyclic existence, you do not have renunciation.

If you are attached to your own purpose, you do not have bodhichitta,
the thought of enlightenment.

If grasping fixation arises, you do not have the view.

Sachen Kunga Nyingpo
Homage
O master with all your kindness,
Yidam deity with your compassion,
In you I take refuge from the depths of my heart:
Grant me your blessings, I pray!

Promise to Compose
Behaviour that goes against the Dharma must be stopped.
And so, in order to practise the Dharma correctly,
Here is the instruction on *Parting from the Four Attachments*
Which now I shall offer to your ears:

*If you are attached to this life, you are not a true spiritual practitioner.*
*If you are attached to samsara, you have no renunciation.*
*If you are attached to your own self-interest, you have no bodhichitta.*
*If there is grasping, you do not have the View.*

1. Relinquishing Attachment to This Life

The first step is to relinquish attachment to this life.
Discipline, study, reflection and meditation
Undertaken for the sake of just this life –
Give them all up, for they are not the Dharma!

To begin with, to practise discipline is to possess
The cause for reaching higher realms,
The stairway to liberation,
And the remedy that eliminates suffering.
Without discipline, nothing is possible.

But if it is observed out of attachment to this life,
You have the root cause of the eight worldly concerns.
You criticize those with poor conduct.
You are envious of the truly disciplined.
It turns your own discipline into mere hypocrisy.
And it sows the seeds of birth in the lower realms.
So give up this fake and fabricated discipline!
A person who pursues *study and reflection*
Possesses the wealth of acquiring all knowledge,
Holds a torch that dispels ignorance,
Knows the path on which to lead living beings,
And has got the seed of the dharma-kaya.
Study and reflection, then, are indispensable.

But those who pursue them out of attachment to this life
Possess instead the riches of pride and arrogance,
Scorn for those of lesser learning and contemplation,
And envy for all who accomplish genuine study and reflection.
Forever seeking disciples and wealth,
They own the root cause for reaching lower realms.
So give up study and reflection motivated by the eight worldly concerns!

All those who train in *meditation*
Possess the remedy for negative emotions,
The basis for accomplishing the path to liberation,
The wealth of realizing the natural state
And the seed for attaining buddhahood.
Meditation, then, is indispensable.

But those who meditate with only this life in mind
Find busyness and entertainment even in seclusion,
And turn their recitation practice into meaningless talk,
Disparage those who truly study and reflect,
And are jealous of other meditators,
While their own practice is pure distraction.
So give up your meditation on the eight worldly concerns!

2. Relinquishing Attachment to Samsara

In order to attain nirvana, beyond all sorrow,
Abandon attachment to the three realms of samsara.
And in order to *relinquish attachment to the three realms*,
Reflect on the faults of samsaric existence.

First, there is *suffering upon suffering*
Which is the suffering of the three lower realms.
Contemplate this deeply and you will break out in goose pimples.
If it actually befalls you, it will be beyond your power to endure.
But by failing to practise the virtue of restraint,
You keep on tilling the fields of the lower realms.
And there, wherever you find yourself, how dreadful it will be!
Contemplate the suffering of change,
And how you can fall from higher to lower realms,
How Indra, lord of gods, can be reborn as an ordinary mortal,
The sun and moon can turn dark,
And the emperor of the world can be reborn as a humble servant.
Such examples are to be trusted as they come from the scriptures,
Yet they are hard for ordinary beings to comprehend.
So just look then, with your own eyes, at the changes among humans:
The wealthy turn into beggars,
The powerful grow weak,
Out of many people, only one survives,
And so on, beyond our mind’s imagining.

To contemplate the suffering of conditioning,
See how there is never an end of things to do.
And suffering is found among the many and the few,
Among the well-off and the starving alike.
Our whole human life is spent preparing.
And in the midst of our preparing, we are swept away by death.
But not even in death is there any end to preparation,
As once again we begin making ready for the next life.

How perverse they are who keep clinging
To this heap of misery that is samsara!
When free from such attachment, there is nirvana,
And in nirvana, the attainment of lasting bliss.
I sing of my realization—freedom from attachment to this life and samsara.

3. Relinquishing Attachment to Our Own Self-Interest

Yet to liberate myself alone will bring no benefit,
For sentient beings of the three realms are all my fathers and mothers.
How disgusting to leave my parents in the thick of suffering,
While wishing and seeking for just my happiness alone!

So may the suffering of all the three realms ripen on me.
May my merits be taken by sentient beings,
And through the blessings of the merit of this,
May all beings attain buddhahood!
4. Relinquishing Attachment to Self-Existence

Yet no matter how far I have progressed in the Dharma, As long as there is grasping at self, there is no freedom. To elaborate in more detail: If you grasp at existence, there is no liberation. If you grasp at non-existence, there are no higher rebirths. If you grasp at both, you are just ignorant. So do the best you can, to remain in non-duality!

All things and events are the domain of the mind. So without searching for a creator of the four elements, Such as mere chance or an almighty god, Do the best you can to rest in mind’s innermost nature!

The nature of appearances is like a magical illusion And the way they arise is through interdependence. That’s the way things are, which cannot be expressed in words. So do the best you can to dwell in a state which is inexpressible!

By the merit of this virtue of having explained The Parting from the Four Attachments, May all the seven classes of living beings Be led to the perfect ground of buddhahood!

This instruction on Parting from the Four Attachments was composed at the glorious Sakya monastery by the yogin Trakpa Gyaltsen.

[Rigpa Translations, 2011]
Parting from the Four Attachments
TALK ONE

Shakyamuni Buddha teaches that all of our phenomena are circumstantial, and that our circumstances depend on our motivation. So firstly now, we have to tune our motivation.

As the expounder of this teaching, I too have to, first of all, tune my own motivation. When I utter these words and offer some explanation, my motivation as a teacher – or should I say, my motivation as a vessel conveying these teachings, ought to be solely or as much as possible based on bodhichitta. At the very least, it ought to be based on a good-hearted wish to benefit others, and not based on a wish to accumulate disciples, or fame, or material possessions, or to make a good impression. And this is what I shall be reminding myself of again and again in the days ahead as I present the Shenpa Shidrel.

Likewise, your motivation as the hearers of this teaching is also very important. Each of you will receive or interpret the teachings according to your personal motivation. For instance, if you wish to increase your knowledge, or finish a thesis on Mahayana studies or a PhD on Parting from the Four Attachments, then with such motivation, you will hear the teaching accordingly. And if you are here because you hope Mahayana teachings may be therapeutic, then of course with such motivation, you will hear the teaching according to that wish.

This is a delicate issue. When discussion turns to the topic of tuning one’s motivation, we tend to assume that, of course, we do already have the right motivation or intention. But this assumption deserves a closer look because, for better or for worse, it is our motivation that determines what kinds of expectations we have.

For instance, suppose you are undergoing a crisis in your life: let’s say you are suffering from insomnia, and are wishing to escape from and to numb your emotions. To be honest, coming to hear these teachings is probably not going to cure your insomnia, or lift your depression, either. Your hope may be dashed. All the time and energy spent coming here may turn out to have been a waste, and an utter disappointment.

However, if you are motivated by a wish to understand the vast and infinite Mahayana path, and to gradually begin to practise and then to apply the teachings, that might be a more realistic wish.
THE PURPOSE OF BUDDHISM IS NOT TO MAKE US HAPPY

Buddhism is favourably portrayed in various media linking it with non-violence, and also with happiness. But this reputation is a concern, because the purpose of Buddhism is not to make us happy; the purpose of Buddhism goes beyond happy and unhappy; the purpose of Buddhism is to achieve enlightenment. This point will be emphasised by Manjushri and Sachen Kunga Nyingpo and Jetsün Trakpa Gyaltsen.

It is disheartening to see books on Buddhism shelved in the self-help section among books about relaxation and aromatherapy. However, it is difficult to say why it is disheartening; it is difficult to say because it is politically incorrect to be a critic of peace and love and smiles and so on. But these days, if the word happiness is in the title of your book, and if it has a Buddhist angle, it’s almost guaranteed to be a best-seller.

If we come to Buddhism for a healthy mind, what is our motivation? Why do we wish for a strong mind, a controlled mind? To be a good manager? To be a good leader? If we come with such a wish, we may learn a few insights into leadership, but Buddhism is not particularly designed to train us to be successful leaders. On the contrary, Buddhism is designed to ruin our career in management. If management and leadership were so important, Siddhartha would have never left Kapilavastu where he had the golden opportunity to manage a whole country.

It is easy to say that we have the right motivation, but we have to check carefully to make sure that this is indeed the case. Are we here to listen to these teachings with the goal of reaching enlightenment? We all like to answer yes to this question, don’t we? But we should ask ourselves do we honestly wish to achieve enlightenment. Seriously, contemplate this.

For me, the idea of enlightenment is not that attractive. Samsaric success and gain and influence and the games we play are more attractive. I’m very much in favour of samsara, and in favour of enlightenment as a romantic ideal with a golden hue, radiant and omniscient; all of that is fine. But really only at times of distress, such as when I am flying on a plane and it encounters turbulence, do I ever think about enlightenment. As soon as I’m safely back on the ground and surrounded by friends or family, then desire for attention and gain again holds sway over me, and I don’t give enlightenment a second thought.

Not only that, sometimes I even question the desirability of the state of enlightenment. From an emotional point of view, the amazing qualities that enlightenment is said to have are tempting. But seriously ask yourself do you honestly want to be omniscient. There will be no more surprises once you’re omniscient. You cannot enjoy the mystery of a good detective novel, because
you already know how it ends. You can’t enjoy the novelty of anything. You can’t discover a new food, because you already know how it tastes. You can’t enjoy gossip, why? Because you already know all the details.

From our deluded point of view, enlightenment sounds utterly boring, a place that is stripped of excitement, no excitement at all. So who would want to be omniscient? And because we might have such mixed feelings, it’s important to clarify our motivation. Let us remember to tune our motivation every now and then, but especially at the beginning of each session.

INTRODUCING MANJUSHRI

I studied mainly Buddhist philosophy at Sakya College under the excellent guidance of Khenpo Appey Rinpoche for almost five years. He asked me to consider giving these very teachings here, and of course I said yes, because we are obliged to fulfil the teacher’s wishes. But as some of my colleagues here know, I was a below-average student. Mostly I was reading Tintin comics. Strangely, Nepal was the first place I taught to a few Westerners. I don’t know why they even listened to me. I hardly spoke English and didn’t know anything.

So many of my teachers came here and have their seats here: at present, Khen Rinpoche and Khenpo Appey Rinpoche. Of course, the seat of Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche is nearby. Also, Tenga Rinpoche from whom I have received many teachings is here, as well as Kyabje Trulshik Rinpoche.

This is a holy place, a very sacred place. Despite the chaos of a broken sewage system and power outages and water shortages, Nepal and especially the Kathmandu area have an inexpressible quality of blessedness. From the moment we arrive, we feel that we have to be on our best behaviour. The atmosphere itself seems to demand a measure of mindfulness from us.

For those of you who have not yet connected with the Sakya lineage, this is your opportunity to forge a connection now. And what more wonderful way to begin your journey on this infinite Mahayana path than with Manjushri himself.

Devotees of Manjushri revere Lojong Shenpa Shidrel, or The Mind-training of Parting from the Four Attachments. It has been preserved and sustained by the lineage of the Manjushris, sometimes referred to as Jamyang Sakya, meaning the Manjushri Sakypas, such as Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, Jetsün Trakpa Gyaltsen and Sakya Pandita, and the many present-day masters of the Manjushri lineage. For the record, I received transmissions from H.H. Sakya Trizin, and a quick transmission from Deshung Rinpoche, and then thorough
teachings from Kyabje Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, as part of the Damngak Dzö, or The Collection of Spiritual Instructions.

For the newcomers, let me introduce you to Manjushri. In relative terms, Manjushri appeared as Buddha’s chief disciple among the lay disciples. But in the Mahayana sutras, Manjushri is also present seemingly as the narrator of all the Buddha’s activities. By narrator, I don’t necessarily mean in a verbal manner, but narrative in his manner of manifestation.

In some sutras, it is held that the manifestations of death, old age and sickness, and the bhikshu and so on all were enacted by Manjushri to serve as timely reminders to the young bodhisattva. For instance, Shakyamuni Buddha’s biological father Suddhodana is considered in the Mahayana sutras to be Manjushri in person. When the realities of old age, sickness and death first activated Buddha’s renunciation mind, those were also manifestations of Manjushri. And the bhikshu who inspired the Buddha to become a wanderer: that too was Manjushri’s manifestation.

Manjushri seems to be quite busy because not only did Manjushri serve reminders to the Shakyamuni Buddha; it is believed that Manjushri in the role of a disciple will also be serving reminders to all the coming nine hundred and ninety-six Buddhas; and not only reminding but also teaching them and imparting signs.

The way Manjushri taught was not in the ordinary way. In the sutras, there is an account of Shariputra or Kashyapa, in the presence of Shakyamuni Buddha, asking Manjushri, “What is emptiness? What is shunyata?” Manjushri just remained silent for some time. And then Buddha affirmed that Manjushri’s answer was the right answer.

By contrast, on another occasion Manjushri shouted it out. Some Mahayana sutras expressly rule out the teaching of shunyata to ordinary people, because the message of shunyata is too vast; if one is not properly matured, it can be misleading. And yet, on this occasion Manjushri deliberately and extremely loudly shouted out the truth of shunyata. About 500 unprepared people were so shocked that they rejected the Mahayana path, which as a consequence meant they would be reborn in the lower realms. Another bodhisattva confronted Manjushri, “What a mindless act! How can a bodhisattva like you do such a thing?” Buddha Shakyamuni intervened, saying Manjushri actually had performed an amazing act by having foreseen that, despite the near-term suffering it would cause, in the longer-term this seed of understanding shunyata would bear fruit – and, therefore his action was indeed justified as bodhisattva activity.

It is clear from accounts in many sutras that Manjushri has a unique style of teaching. Maitreya, the future Buddha, said that ten million bodhisattvas of
equal standing with Maitreya cannot even begin to fathom how Manjushri places one foot after the other. Though these accounts are often very flowery and colourful, they are not merely mythical stories. They are profound symbolic teachings that point to the nature of wisdom, and wisdom is the highest value of the Buddhist path. As Shantideva said, if not for the sightedness of wisdom, then the path of generosity, discipline, diligence and so on is blind, and not a valid path.

Obviously wisdom is essential, and the figure of Manjushri represents or symbolises or is the embodiment of the wisdom of all the Buddhas. This is why the symbolic Manjushri is so revered by panditas, scholars and saints of the past, present and undoubtedly of the future. Witness the rush of tulkus in Tibet all claiming to be an incarnation of Manjushri. So far no Tibetan lamas are claiming to be Shakyamuni’s incarnation, that I know of. But Manjushri’s incarnation is definitely in vogue, and many tulkus like to have a Manjushri credential on their resumes.

Some of you may understandably be skeptical that at the age of twelve, Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, while in a six-month retreat had a visit from Manjushri who taught him Shenpa Shidrel. Maybe it is just a fantasy like *Alice in Wonderland*. Yes, of course, you should be sceptical. That’s one important freedom that Buddha allowed. We are free to test and analyse. However, the account of Sachen Kunga Nyingpo’s vision of Manjushri when he was twelve actually illustrates the Mahayana teachings very well. The Mahayana as well as Shravakayana buddhadharma teaches that the Buddha is not external, and the ultimate Buddha is within oneself. Therefore we have concepts like *tathagatagarbha*, which is quite an important training. Sachen Kunga Nyingpo had this one-pointed trust in and acceptance of buddhanature; likewise, he had one-pointed trust and devotion towards Manjushri. And it was due to this trust and its resulting merit that a projection of Manjushri could actually enter his visionary dream and teach this.

Of course, if the teaching given by Manjushri did not make logical sense, or if it only dealt partially with some aspects, or did not present a gradual path leading all the way to enlightenment, then one could say this is just the incomplete, vague dream of a 12-year old Tibetan boy who was probably pressured to go on a six-month retreat.

But when our innate buddhanature is accompanied by merit, often even a minor encounter can inspire our compassion, love, bodhichitta. The sight of a horrendous massacre, if accompanied by a degree of merit, can ignite renunciation mind. It can spark love and compassion towards the ignorance of sentient beings, and we can kindle that spark further. An ugly picture of a mutilated corpse in Gaza or Iraq can accomplish what a bodhisattva’s manifestation accomplishes: it can spark or provoke thoughts of compassion.
which are the source of all enlightened thought. From this angle then, it is quite conceivable that someone with total devotion to Manjushri might dream or envision Manjushri coming to teach.

*Parting from the Four Attachments* is a complete Mahayana teaching. In it we find everything we need. In Tibet, among many lojong or mind-training teachings, such as the *Jonang Tija*, the *Shenpa Shidrel* is a popular one. When Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thaye, under the guidance of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, assembled the *Damngak Dzö*, or *The Collection of Spiritual Instructions*, he selected *Lojong Shenpa Shidrel*, or *The Mind-training of Parting from the Four Attachments* to be the first *damngak* or pith instruction of the collection.

**GRASPING IS ANTITHETICAL TO THE VIEW**

Here we are given these four benchmarks of best practise: if you have attachment to this life, you are not a practitioner of Dharma; if you have attachment to samsaric life, you don’t have renunciation mind; if you have attachment to yourself or selfish concerns, you are not a bodhisattva; and, if you have grasping, you don’t have the view.

I heard that when H.H. Dalai Lama was teaching on the *Bodhicharyavatara* in France, he taught the ninth chapter first. Usually the ninth chapter is taught after the eight previous chapters have laid the groundwork, followed by the dedication, but H.H. Dalai Lama said that according to Nagarjuna there is a tradition of teaching the view first. And I’m going to take that reverse approach here too, why? First of all, I’m assuming you are all smart people and critical, as you should be. And what do I mean by “smart”? By smart I mean already attuned to the message of these four benchmarks, as one who is born a Buddhist or is drawn to dharma practise from past lives is attuned.

But suppose I tell an average modern, Guardian-reading, Observer-reading critical thinker, “You shouldn’t have attachment to this life.” Of course, their immediate response will be, “Why not?” And naturally, the subject of realms such as hell and hungry ghost and so on would be problematic when they ask “Where is hell?” And the subject of reincarnation would also be problematic. Suppose I say, “You should practise the dharma in order to help sentient beings.” Their next question is “Why care about sentient beings?” And if I answer that they should care because all sentient beings have been their mother in past lives, that’s sure to get a good laugh.

Besides, modern people even question why one should have compassion towards one’s mother. Many angry kids have the attitude ‘Why should I love my mother? My mother and father just had sex and made a baby they didn’t
even want. They neglected and ignored me.’ Because of this sense of grudge, the “mother sentient beings” approach isn’t always very persuasive.

To explain the first benchmark that a person of dharma is not attached to this life, it is necessary to refer to the fourth benchmark, which is that one who has the view has no grasping. Their next question is “What’s wrong with grasping?” Let’s face it, if not for grasping, there would be no economy. Who would buy all the stuff? Who would do business? Restaurants and stock markets would collapse if there were no grasping. Greed and grasping drive economic growth.

From Calvin Klein to Coca-Cola, our whole culture teaches us to grasp and fixate. This message is the exact opposite message we get from the fourth benchmark which warns that if we grasp, the view is lost. But in the modern world, if you do not have grasping, you could end up poor and jobless; you could end up an outcast of society. Given this seeming conflict of interests, we need to come to terms with why it matters that grasping is antithetical to the view.

THE PRESENCE OF SHENPA MEANS THE ABSENCE OF RATIONAL MIND

Shenpa Shidrel, or Parting from the Four Attachments is the subject of many commentaries, not because it is famous, but because this pith instruction is such a striking-to-the-point type of teaching that it attracts a large following, I think. We have gathered a few commentaries such as the brief synopsis by Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo, and I will be consulting commentary and songs by the great Trakpa Gyaltsen.

You know, from the ultimate point of view, the great masters such as the five founders of the Sakyapa lineage are all equally great, of course. Yet deluded beings like me have preferences, and for a long time Trakpa Gyaltsen has been my absolute favourite. His songs and his counsels are very pith instruction-oriented and straight-to-the-heart teachings that I try to delve into as deeply as possible.

Different translators translate the title differently. Language is such a challenge, a serious challenge. Translating the words, idioms, phrases is quite difficult. Even the word shenpa poses a challenge. Translating shenpa as attachment may be technically correct, or we could substitute the word “desire” or the word “grasping”. This range of definitions raises the issue of precision in translation. Language is always evolving, of course, and the meanings of words evolve, and sometimes lose their potency from overuse. The Buddhist use of the word “attachment” may be a good example of a word that has been overused, to the point where it no longer has the impact that it should have.
So shenpa could be translated as attachment, or also grasping or desire or even infatuation, but crudely speaking, we could say shenpa is like having a crush on somebody or something no matter how silly that we feel we cannot do without. For instance, suppose we buy an iPhone. Then suppose we see a cover for the iPhone, and from that moment forward we covet one so much that we can’t even sleep. I’m speaking from personal experience.

Shenpa could also be translated as madly “in love”. And anyone who has ever been madly in love knows from experience that rational mind goes right out the window. Logic is turned inside-out so that even if your partner smells like a rotten egg, to you they smell like sweet sandalwood. The logical, rational sober mind is locked out, isn’t it? When we have shenpa, when we have attachment or grasping or we are infatuated and have a crush, we have lost our senses. Shantideva has a whole chapter about how ignorant beings are enslaved by their emotions.

Shenpa also has the characteristic that the object of our shenpa haunts us. For instance, I was shopping in Berlin and a vintage European leather valise in the window of a second-hand shop caught my eye. And then for days and months and, in this case, even a year later my mind still often went back to the memory of that valise, and I had a twinge of regret at not having bought it. So, of course, the next time I was in Berlin, I went straight to that shop, and the shenpa was so strong that I didn’t even try to negotiate the price. This is the haunting quality of shenpa: no matter how much we try to re-direct our attention elsewhere, the object of our desire manages to find its way back into our mind.

In this day and age, we always want to know what is in it for us, whatever it happens to be. Will it make our living situation better? Will it enable us to speak to our husband or wife more harmoniously? We have to know how giving up our selfish attachments will profit us so that our dharma practise will not turn out to have been a poor investment.

To counter that business-like outlook, we have to reach a firm conclusion that shenpa is the poorer investment. Shenpa is such a beautiful and very powerful word. Shenpa is at the root of our emotions. It is shenpa that activates our paranoia and also our temporary bliss. Please note that the presence of shenpa means the absence of rational mind, as exemplified by the state of being infatuated or madly “in love”: you are intoxicated, you are not sober. You miss the point, your vision is blurred. Your judgement is impaired, your view is distorted. Shenpa is a corruption, it’s not pure.

Suppose we substitute the term madly in love for the word “attachment” – if you are madly in love with this life, you are not a dharma practitioner; if you are madly in love with samsara, you have no renunciation mind; if you are
madly in love with your own agenda, you’re not a bodhisattva; and, if you have the condition of being madly in love, you do not have the view –Does this alternative wording offer a fresh way to understand shenpa?

As I said earlier, the fourth benchmark will be a reference for us throughout this study. In the Mulamadhyamakarika, Nagarjuna says,

\[
I prostrate to Gautama  
Who through compassion  
Taught the true doctrine  
Which leads to the relinquishing of all views.
\]

You see, when we read the phrase, “If you have grasping, you do not have the view,” we automatically think that means there must be a particular view which is the right view, a higher and more profound view, but this is a mistake. According to Nagarjuna, the ultimate aim of buddhadharma is to transcend all views whatsoever. As long as we hold any view at all, we are not yet enlightened. Of course, this touches on a profound and delicate subject which we will revisit again and again.

To return to our question, what is in it for us if we practise this Mahayana path, the answer is simple: don’t we all want to be happy? Let happiness be our incentive then. Don’t we all want to live happily ever after? Happiness is what we struggle to find in everything we do in this world: science, economics, politics, philosophy – all our human activities in one way or another are geared to securing happiness, individual and social. This quest for happiness is the driving force of our lives.

And Buddhists are no exception. Yes, as newcomers to the buddhadharma, we are drawn by our quest for happiness. We all arrive with fatigue and exhaustion towards the samsaric world of suffering, tired of our monotonous routines repeated over and over and over again. We have been there, seen this and done that; we are sick and tired of samsaric life, and we arrive searching for if not eternal then at least long-lasting happiness.

Manjushri tells us that if we want to be happy, we have to shed all four categories of shenpa, because as long as we have attachment, we are not going to be free from pain, anxiety, hope, and fear. So you see, the Buddhist path is quite down-to-earth. It isn’t an abstract mystical religion; it is eminently practical. People pursue fair trade and ecology and saving the earth and harmony, but if only their endeavours were spiced with even a pinch of Shenpa Shidrel, the overall condition of the world would definitely improve. And this strategy does not rely on the divine intercession of celestial figures to save us. It relies on the clear evidence that abandoning our attachment to these four objects has beneficial effects. Scientifically and rationally we can
observe improvements in our lives. And if many individuals can abandon their collective attachment, society as a whole is bound to improve.

CONTENTMENT IS A FRINGE BENEFIT OF RENUNCIATION

Again, the word “renunciation” is very overused and tarnished with misunderstandings. Nowadays, the idea of renunciation does not interest young people because the mere word instantly conjures an image of living in a cave and eating nettle soup. Who would want to do that? Actually even I don’t want to do that. I like to update my computer and see the latest movies. No, the word renunciation does not resonate in this modern world when it is understood in a mistaken way. But understood correctly, we see that renunciation is the best policy.

For a simple example, consider this: everybody wants to have a big balance in their savings account because we think that having a lot of money will make us secure and happy. Now, in the second benchmark, based on the statement that if one is attached to samsara, one has no renunciation, we are told to practise contentment.

Contentment is a wonderful psychological training. Someone whose billions are never enough is always discontent, and that discontentment makes one feel, in effect, poor. But someone whose few hundred bucks in the bank is felt by them to be enough is, in effect, rich. Since one is free of worry, one is content; and that contentment is the first in a series of advantages of renunciation.

Since you feel content and aren’t driven to strive for more, you have less stress. Since you don’t have to follow dodgy pranayama masters to relieve your stress, you save hundreds of dollars. Since being free of stress is good for your health, that means fewer doctor bills, saving you hundreds more dollars. Since you’re content with your naked iPhone, even if it is scratched, you save however many dollars a cover costs at the store. And furthermore, since you refrain from buying an iPhone cover, causing the maker of iPhone covers to scale back production, indirectly you are helping to save the planet. And since you are not spending all your time chasing after attachments, an extra side-benefit is that you have free time.

Free time is rare, which is unfortunate, not only because we lack free time to practise a spiritual path, but even on the mundane level, we don’t even have free time to notice the ordinary details of our lives. Have you ever even looked at your dining table? Probably not, and why not? Because who has the time to even look at a dining table, right?
And lastly, since speeches meant to sway our opinion will no longer make sense, we won’t be susceptible to philosophical, religious or political brainwashing. And although this immunity is not complete enlightenment, it is quite close. You would be quite close. To achieve even that not-quite enlightenment would certainly make the practise of the partings more than worth your while.

So to return to our question, what is in it for us if we practise these partings from the four attachments, the answer is that big savings and stress relief are in it for us, and as added bonuses, we help the environment, enjoy free time and also gain immunity to undue influences.

Of course, for a serious dharma practitioner, our aim in applying the Shenpa Shidrel is not to save money and relieve stress and so forth. Our ultimate aim is and should be and must be to practise these four partings in order to reach enlightenment, because until we reach the fully enlightened state, we remain bound by suffering.

But please don’t imagine that you will only part from the four desires after three countless aeons: don’t think like that. If you start to apply the Shenpa Shidrel today, you will begin saving money and relationships and trees and time right away…

**MENGAK CUTS TO THE CHASE**

The words of the infinite teachings of Buddha are known as the sutras, and the numerous commentaries upon the Buddha’s teachings are known as the shastras. In general, these are the two categories of buddhadharma. However, one other category that is very popular and is especially treasured within the Sakya, Nyingma and Kagyu schools of Tibet is known as mengak, that is, pith instructions or spiritual counsel.

Of the three categories, the sutras of Buddha’s words are too infinite and too profound to fathom. Chandrakirti says that until we achieve the first bhumi, we ordinary beings cannot thoroughly understand the words of the Buddha. Even just to understand the mere words of Buddha is such a huge challenge. That brings us to the second category, which are the shastras written to elucidate Buddha’s words, but shastras can be very grand and complex. And that brings us to this third category of mengak or pith instruction which is like a field guide of advice especially for practitioners. Shenpa Shidrel is classified as mengak so it is treasured as a precious resource.

To illustrate how precious mengak is to our practise, let me use a personal analogy: I don’t know how to ride a bicycle. Even after many practise sessions learning to synchronise my body and the bicycle, I still haven’t quite
learned, though it’s getting better. One option might be to learn all about the science of bicycles, and learn where the first tyres were made and who invented the bicycle and so on. But what help would all that information be if I just want to learn how to ride? Or, given the time, another option might be to learn many theoretical teachings from beginning to end, but who has that kind of time? I just want to learn how to ride a bike.

For that, I need the expertise of a master bicyclist who can see my potential as a bicycle aspirant unique in terms of my devotion and diligence, and sense of timing and balance, of course. On that basis, the master bicyclist offers me custom-made pith instructions. These may involve seemingly unrelated disciplines such as, for instance, that every time I ride a bicycle, I should have a shot of tequila first, which might seem unorthodox. However, alcohol may be prescribed because I’m too hyper and need to be sedated in order to have better balance. Or suppose I’m afraid of scraping my knees on the cement: a shot of tequila might make my worry vanish.

This is why pith instructions like the Shenpa Shidrel are so precious: in a short time, a master bicyclist and a devoted student can achieve bike-riding, without first learning the history of the bicycle or ploughing through endless texts.

DISCIPLINE IS NOT A BURDEN, SHENPA IS A BURDEN

According to Vasubandhu,

*Observing discipline, and having heard and contemplated the teachings, One applies oneself intensively to meditation.*

*(Treasury of Abhidharma)*

In a similar vein, Nagarjuna says that *tsultrim* or discipline fertilises the ground where we can plant, for example, the potato of practise and it will bear fruit. If we plant a potato on a naked table, how can we expect a good crop? But if we plant in fertile soil, a good crop is more than likely. And it is discipline which gives the soil its fertility.

Unfortunately, the very thought of discipline is often a frightening one: OMG, what if the master tells us to become a monk or nun? Or to abstain from chicken, or quit drinking boiled water, or who knows what? That fear saddles the idea of discipline with an unpleasant sense of burden, which is unfortunate, because discipline is crucial. By contrast, discipline in Sanskrit is *shila*, which has a pleasant sense of cooling.
Modern-day people are often faced with a tendency to depression, and this is despite having all the latest conveniences. I have concluded that most of our depression comes from a lack of even mundane discipline, never mind religious discipline. We are free to do whatever we like, yet we don’t even know where to begin or how to proceed. But you may find that even a simple discipline like tidying your room each day between 7:30 and 7:45 actually softens your chronic depression.

To extend the analogy, in the fertile ground of discipline we plant the sprout of töpa, meaning we listen to teachings and read texts, which is vital to do. Near the end of the Uttaratantra, Lord Maitreya stresses that it is vital to hear and read as much as we can in order to gain access to the spiritual path. And furthermore, if we are serious followers of dharma, merely hearing and reading are not enough; we have to contemplate. And by contemplate I mean we have to determine whether this path is a suitable one, and whether we are able to follow it. We have to ask does this path make logical sense, or is it all just a big misunderstanding. Just because the Buddha supposedly said so, we cannot simply trust that what we hear is the truth. We have to analyse for ourselves if this path of dharma applies to us, and so contemplation is a must.

Suppose we have an hour to practise: the first fifteen minutes, we should listen to or read dharma; for the next fifteen minutes, we should contemplate, since hearing and contemplation deserve equal time; and for the last thirty minutes, we should practise meditation. If you are serious about following the path of dharma, you have to meditate. To hear and contemplate but not meditate is like reading the menu over and over but never ordering; what is the point? You must meditate. And what is meditation? Meditation is remaining completely and one-pointedly with our sure confidence in the dharma, which we gain from hearing and contemplation. More about that later.
If you are attached to this life, you are not a person of Dharma.
If you are attached to cyclic existence, you do not have renunciation.
If you are attached to your own purpose, you do not have bodhichitta,
the thought of enlightenment.
If grasping fixation arises, you do not have the view.

TALK TWO

Two indispensable methods or skills need to be honed in order to attain enlightenment: one skill is in purifying defilements, and the other skill is in accumulating merit and wisdom. If we closely examine the path of the Buddha, we discover that it largely consists of honing these two skills. And such an important attribute of the path as skill in gathering merit can begin to be honed this very minute. This very minute merit is gathering, if your motivation to hear and read these words is right, and if my motivation to share them with you is also right.

Right motivation is not a wish to stuff ourselves with more and more knowledge. Nor is right motivation a wish to satisfy our anthropological curiosity. What makes right motivation right is having the genuine, kind-hearted wish to help others to attain enlightenment. With this sincere wish, Shantideva says that even if you fall asleep during the teaching, you still accumulate merit effortlessly. So with this understanding in mind, once again let us tune in to that noble wish, and arouse the right motivation.

This attitude of wishing enlightenment not only for oneself but for all others as well may come across as rather abstract to many of us. I stumbled on to this Earth and into a rather hard-line Buddhist family almost half a century ago, but even for me this concept or attitude of wishing enlightenment for all sentient beings is vague and abstract 99.99% of the time.

The great Nyingmapa master Patrul Rinpoche said that wishing enlightenment for all sentient beings is actually much easier than wishing enlightenment for a particular person. For many of us, this is the case. But we should not be discouraged because beginners like us have to begin at the beginning.

Our starting point is known as aspiration bodhichitta; at least we can wish to one day have the wish of bodhichitta, and this is the simplest and most beneficial course we can take. Wishes are the engine of the world, you know. Wishes have such power. A wish can energise powerful action. A strong and determined wish can energise heroic courage.
And the benefits of practising aspiration bodhichitta are many. For example, someone who practises aspiration bodhichitta at the very least cultivates the virtue of humbleness. Since wishing or aspiring is, in effect, admitting that one has not yet achieved one's wished-for aim, aspiration expresses the virtue of humility, which is so fundamental. Humility marks the beginning of becoming a perfect vessel for practise and study.

Even though it may seem too idealistic or romantic to wish for the enlightenment of all sentient beings, that wish is one that we should not renege on. We can let go of everything else, but aspiration bodhichitta is essential. If we can keep that virtuous wish consistently front and centre, sooner or later we will mature as a courageous and bold bodhisattva.

WILLINGNESS TO EXPOSE OUR FAULTS IS KEY TO PITH INSTRUCTIONS

Once when Jowo-je Palden Atisha was in Tibet, he visited his student who faithfully made offerings, under the impression that he was practising the dharma. But Jowo-je Palden Atisha advised him, “You should practise the dharma,” as if the student were not already doing so. So the student went to circumambulate the stupas because surely that would be practising the dharma. But the next time they met, Jowo-je Atisha again told the student, “You should practise the dharma.” So the student tried various mantras and mandalas and so on, but Jowo-je always said the same advice. Finally, the student gives up and says, “You keep telling me I should practise the dharma, no matter what I do. If none of these methods are practising the dharma, then what is it I should do?” Atisha said, “Give up concerns for this life.”

Atisha Dipamkara’s comment to his student is saying exactly the same thing as the first benchmark, “If you are attached to this life, you are not a person of Dharma.” This is a huge statement. You might think that if you quit your job and say goodbye to your family to become a nun or monk in a monastery here that then you will have at least accomplished the first parting from the four desires, but don’t kid yourselves. This so-called dharma practitioner is living proof that that is not always the case.

Considering life in general, and the matter of fame in particular, we see so much hypocrisy. As valuable as old culture and traditions are in some respects, they can also introduce an element of hypocrisy. For instance, I didn’t wear my Che Guevara t-shirt today, and why not? Because I do care about my appearance, especially in Kathmandu, since I still rely heavily on approval from the Tibetans, you see. For this reason, I have to be careful here and behave myself. So my good behaviour is actually not a sign of good discipline: it is a sign that I don’t want to be an outcast. Because of my attachment to this life, I fear that if my Tibetan colleagues talk behind my back and spread rumours about me, then I will lose all my disciples. I might
lose all my friends and be unable to find another job. My only concern is for my own welfare.

And likewise in that same vein, I tell myself that my attachment to an old valise is not so bad, rationalising that it is just a valise after all, plus since it’s second-hand, I am also helping the environment by recycling, right? You see, hypocrisy is incredibly subtle and so cunningly insidious, and this I know from experience.

For example, I think it was quite honest and unhypocritical of Osho Rajneesh to have forty-nine Rolls Royces, whereas were someone to offer me forty-nine Rolls Royces, my hypocrisy would oblige me to accept only one, because I would want to make a humble impression.

By the way, the Lojong Shenpa Shidrel teaching is a mengak or pith instruction, as we know, and in the Kadampa tradition, one of the most essential aspects of a pith instruction is that we must be willing to expose our own faults as practitioners. In my case, I have to beware of hypocrisy. Humility can become such a calculated game, and we Tibetans play this game a lot.

For another example, I exercise my hypocrisy by shying away from titles and thrones, out of a phony sense of humility. But to be quite blunt, the Kagyupa and Nyingmapa lamas in particular are often quite fond of high thrones and high titles and other regalia. You are welcome to quote me, it’s no secret. There are just so many His Holinesses these days. Especially in Taiwan, the room is so full of His Holinesses, to the point of absurdity.

Now be that as it may, for many years I was a critic of lamas who sought high thrones and high titles. That is, until I had a humbling experience a few years ago when it suddenly struck me that these Tibetan lamas, who with my very, very limited perception I saw as competing for the highest throne and the highest title, were actually much less hypocritical than me, and why? Because they didn’t even pretend to be humble, which was actually more honest than my false modesty. This inside glimpse was so embarrassing, to say the least.

Giving up attachment to this life is not as simple as giving up a job, family and possessions. Any time we feather our nest to make it more comfortable, any time we fortify our nest, that expresses attachment to this life. Just because we shave our head to become a nun or a monk does not mean we automatically abandon all our attachment to this life. Our hair and our attachments are like apples and oranges. Most of us lose our hair sooner or later, yet our attachment to this life still persists.
TAKING REFUGE IN ACCEPTANCE OF THE TRUTH

In answer to the question what one should do in order to follow the path of abandoning attachment to this life, Trakpa Gyaltsen says,

First, in order to gain non-attachment to this life, you must put aside the non-religious person’s manner of practising moral conduct, hearing, contemplation and meditation which are performed for the sake of this life.

One needs discipline in order to overcome attachment to this life. One needs discipline, but this modern world is so inhospitable to discipline. Society is not helping us. Television doesn’t help us. Advertisements don’t help us. Modern schooling is not helping foster discipline either: it actually fosters an ever-growing appetite for more stuff. From an early age, kids are taught not only that they want but that actually they need stuff like a cover for their iPhone.

In the midst of all this wantingness, discipline is a challenge. Most of what we buy, most of what we build, most of what we plan is totally useless, but this disconnect arises due to lack of discipline. And even mundane, secular, worldly disciplines can guide us to a relatively content and non-dysfunctional lifestyle.

However, on the spiritual path, our discipline aims higher than material and domestic comfort. Our discipline aims for enlightenment, and on the Mahayana path that means enlightenment not only for ourselves, but for everyone; and, fulfilling this aim absolutely demands a quantum leap in our discipline.

At this point, many commentaries approach the subject of taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha. Taking refuge is the epitome of discipline. If one is serious about following this spiritual path, one takes the vow of refuge just as we did at the start of these teachings. We said,

Until the attainment of enlightenment, I take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

If we are serious, we take that heartfelt vow. Taking a vow is a major step, enabling us to more quickly accumulate merit. For instance, most human beings don’t take a vow to not kill, but the average person still doesn’t go around killing people or animals at random. Yet unless one makes a conscious vow, no merit is accumulated by not killing. Suppose we kill no sentient beings simply because we don’t have the time, or the energy, or a weapon, or because it bores us or is too much of a hassle to bother? True, we don’t create the bad karma of taking life, but also we create no good karma; we are simply not taking life, that’s all. But if we take a vow to not kill as part
of our vow of refuge, from the instant that vow is taken, every moment that we are not engaged in killing, including even when we doze off, merit is continuously being accumulated; which explains a vow’s importance.

Discipline is the foundation of our practise. Of the many methods there are to train our self-discipline, all can be synthesised within the discipline of taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha from the bottom of our hearts. By doing so, most other self-disciplines will naturally follow. Therefore, taking refuge is the first step in all three yanas.

There are three motivations for taking refuge: the first is out of fear; the second is out of devotion or trust; and, the third is out of compassion. In the hierarchy of motivations, taking refuge out of fear is the lesser, out of devotion or trust is better, and out of compassion is the greater.

Refuge is another word in the English language that has lost some of its nuance from overuse. Generally, the idea of taking refuge has a connotation of taking shelter: if we are afraid of getting a sunburn, we take refuge under an umbrella. But chamdro or the Buddhist practise of refuge has more of a connotation of acceptance. Acceptance of what?

Acceptance of, for instance, the fact that whether we like it or not, all compounded things are impermanent. This fact was pointed out by the Buddha, but the fact that all compounded things are impermanent would still be factual even if Buddha had never pointed it out. In the Prajnaparamita sutras, Buddha said that regardless whether Buddhas come or not, the reality of phenomena is unchanging. All compounded things are impermanent, no matter what. Accepting this fact of life, accepting its logic and truth and immutability, is the actual taking of refuge in a more profound sense.

Likewise, we take refuge in acceptance of the fact that all emotion leads to pain, of the fact that all phenomena have no inherently existing nature, and of the fact that nirvana is beyond all extremes. And likewise, we take refuge in acceptance of the fact that there is suffering, the fact that there is a cause of suffering, the fact that there is a cessation of suffering, and the fact that there is a path to abandon suffering. Taking refuge in the dharma actually boils down to taking refuge in acceptance of the truth.

Of course, deluded beings like us can and should take symbolic refuge by placing a Prajnaparamita text on the shrine and offering prostrations, flowers and incense every day, but that symbolic refuge is second-best. According to Buddha himself, taking refuge in contemplation of the meaning of the Prajnaparamita for a single minute is incalculably better even than feeding millions of Buddhas for millennia. We hear of this in the Vajracchedika or Diamond Sutra, in the Avatamsaka or Flower Ornament Sutra, in the Lankavatara Sutra, and the list goes on.
BUDDHA-NATURE IS NOT OTHER THAN THE ESSENCE OF OUR MIND

From a Mahayana point of view, the ultimate object of refuge is Buddha, but this ultimate Buddha is not defined by biographical details like place and date of birth, caste, eye colour and marital status, of course not: these limited criteria are just creations of the human mind. Of course, Buddha is a historical figure, but the ultimate Buddha is none other than the three kayas. And though we speak in terms of three kayas, as if there were three divisible kayas, that is only for the sake of comparative study. But within this framework of three kayas, it is always said that the dharmakaya Buddha is the real or ultimate Buddha.

And where is this dharmakaya Buddha? Where can we see him? What is his nationality? What passport does he hold? The answer is simply that the dharmakaya Buddha is none other than the buddhanature we have heard so much about.

And where is this buddhanature? It is not other than the essence of our mind.

And the best way to take refuge in Buddha is to take refuge in acceptance of the truth of the fact that buddhanature is not other than the essence of our mind.

Of course, the next-best way to take refuge in Buddha is by relying on symbols, such as statues, paintings and monasteries as skilful means to remind us of our innate buddhanature. But next-best way to take refuge or not, these symbols of Buddha that we revere do nonetheless offer necessary encouragement to people like us.

Evidently as late as during Ashoka’s time, it is said there were no statues of Buddha, and physical icons were discouraged. Now in museums, we see ancient sculptures of Buddha with a small throne and a bodhi tree symbolising the Buddha’s enlightenment, and beside the throne is a deer and a dharmachakra wheel symbolising the teachings of Buddha, and a low couch symbolising his parinirvana.

A word of caution: just because you have heard me say that the dharmakaya Buddha is our buddhanature which is the essence of our mind, please don’t now assume that statues and prostrations are superfluous. You would be deceiving yourself and you’d end up taking neither ultimate nor even symbolic refuge in the Buddha, so beware.

You may wonder why there are three sources of refuge and not four, or five, or two. Or you may understand why we take refuge in the Buddha and refuge in the dharma, but wonder why we should take refuge in the sangha. If so, Maitreya’s Uttaratantra is the text to study. He addresses why the Triple
Gems of Buddha, dharma and sangha are necessary, in amazing sloka after sloka.

The expression *Triple Gem*, also known as Buddha, dharma and sangha, is an expression of path language, according to how someone on the path sees. Whoever seeks enlightenment needs a path, and that path has texture, which is the sangha as the most tangible and reachable of the Triple Gems. Buddha is not reachable by phone to answer our questions; dharma is available in books, but we can’t really expect that carrying a *mahakaruna* compassion and love sutra in our pocket will cool our hot temper, for instance. Although it may help to a certain extent, a text is not a companion we can confide in.

Sangha introduces the human element of fellow refugees with whom we have trust in Buddha and dharma in common. But the term *sangha* does not only refer to the sangha of ordinary beings. The ultimate sangha are the Mahayana bodhisattvas who have reached the first bhumi, and the arhats who have already entered the stream. It is based on their quality of virtue that the ultimate sangha is designated as ultimate, and traditionally they are the pillars of the sangha and the upholders of the path.

Taking refuge in sangha, as well as in Buddha and dharma, we commit to the path. Imagine that sangha and dharma or the path are like a boat. To cross open water, we need a boat. Of course, once the other shore is reached, we have to disembark; that boat has fulfilled its purpose. For the time being, though, we need this boat of refuge in dharma and sangha. Just be aware that the one and only ultimate object of refuge is the Buddha, according to Maitreya.

**BUDDHISM HAS NOTHING IN COMMON WITH MONOTHEISM**

Earlier I remarked that discipline naturally follows from wholeheartedly taking refuge in the Triple Gem. Now let us consider how discipline arises from taking refuge in the dharma. By taking refuge, again, we mean genuinely accepting that all compounded things are impermanent, and that the phenomenal world is interdependent, depending on causes, conditions and effects which depend on causes, which depend on causes. If one takes refuge in acceptance of the truth of these facts, then one naturally has the self-discipline to not act in ways that contradict that truth, such as by harming others. If we act harmfully, that is a sign that we have forgotten that facts like cause, condition and effect, and interdependence are the truth.

Once we have taken refuge in the dharma, it makes no sense to simultaneously practise another path that teaches extreme views. At inter-faith religious conferences, in order to be friendly and not offend others, I tend to just go along with the idea that all religions share the same ultimate
hope of reaching heaven and all that. But Buddhism definitely does not share a hope of reaching heaven, which is not at all to say that religions that do are junk.

The great Nyingmapa master Longchenpa said that any religion that teaches right from wrong is an indirect teaching of the Buddha, so we cannot dismiss another religion based merely on its belief in an after-life.

Each religion and path has its own distinct character. Buddhism happens to be a path of non-duality, free from extreme beliefs. Some people say they practise both Buddhism and Christianity, but these two paths are incompatible. Pairing them together makes no sense. Extreme beliefs such as in a truly and permanently existing god, a truly existing heaven, a truly existing soul that is tainted by sin, such beliefs are the very antithesis and contradict the crux of Buddhism. So one really has to choose between Buddhism and non-Buddhism.

If we are going to Kathmandu, we have to take the road to Kathmandu; if we are going to Delhi, we have to take the road to Delhi; but we cannot go to Kathmandu and to Delhi at the same time. Taking refuge in the sangha, and taking refuge in extreme views are mutually exclusive paths.

As refugees, we are not supposed to regard people who follow extreme views as our spiritual companions, not to say we can’t go out for a beer and talk. But a spiritual friend is supposed to be one who won’t mislead us with extreme views and bizarre philosophies.

Realistically, how could a so-called bi-religious person possibly believe in both a non-theistic path of interdependent origination, and in a truly existing monotheistic path at the same time?

In monotheistic discipline, one has to strictly follow their scripture in order to be saved, or else face eternal damnation. Whereas the Buddhist discipline of allegiance to the truth is very practical and very logical and entirely up to the individual; it’s a choice we make, and why? Because it makes sense to us that if we want to achieve a degree of freedom, then we have to embrace this discipline which is free from all extreme views. The credibility gap between the monotheistic path and the non-theistic path really is irreconcilable. The bottom line is that Buddhism has nothing in common with monotheism.
DISCIPLINE MUST BEAR THE FRUIT OF A NOBLE BIRTH

One needs discipline to overcome the sufferings brought about by *shenpa*. Even to overcome the relatively minor suffering of post-pasta depression from over-eating takes discipline. By exerting the discipline of a low calorie diet of vegetables and salad, we lose weight and feel lighter. Refraining from fattening food all day, we feel a sense of accomplishment, and not too much anxiety. But this sort of narrow discipline to check our over-indulgence is a rather limited sense of discipline.

Just like Lord Manjushri, in three short lines Trakpa Gyaltsen elucidates the gist of correct discipline:

*To begin with, moral conduct is explained to be endowed with the root that accomplishes the higher realms, the ladder which attains liberation, and the antidote which abandons suffering.*

Here he identifies three characteristics of correct discipline, beginning with the criterion that a discipline ought to at a minimum bear the fruit of a noble birth. Birth in the human realm, the jealous god or *asura* realm, and the god realm are classified as noble or higher births, and why? Noble or higher birth is called noble or higher not because animals are discriminated against, or because of a caste system. This ranking, so to speak, is purely based on one’s ability to think rationally and to see the truth, and to discern between what to accept and what to reject.

Among the three higher realms, Buddhists have a preference for a human birth; not just any human birth, but one advantaged with the ability to understand the dharma. And even within the human realm, some births are ranked as more noble than others, by virtue of their greater understanding.

Meanwhile, animals have no understanding of right and wrong. When birds see a bug, they just gulp it down with no hesitation, because for them a bug is food. Likewise, some religions claim that animals have no soul so humans are free to gulp them with no qualms, because for them animals are food. Yet if we startle animals, they run away, which means that animals have a fear response, just like we do, and that animals dislike what we dislike. We have a vulnerability in common with animals that draws out our empathy, which is so beneficial, because this empathy is fertile soil to grow compassion and love and even bodhichitta in the human realm.

A noble birth is said to be noble because it is born with the wherewithal to know right from wrong, and to understand the causes of suffering and the causes of happiness, and so on. Therefore, Trakpa Gyaltsen says that correct discipline must bear fruit of a noble birth.
Moral conduct is...the ladder which attains liberation,...

The second criterion of discipline is that it must function as a stepping-stone on a path that arrives at enlightenment. What a profound statement. With one brilliant phrase, Trakpa Gyaltsen illuminates the truth that discipline alone is not enlightenment, which is vital to realise. Many people are so attached to discipline. They think of discipline as an end in itself, instead of as the means to an end. Trakpa Gyaltsen says that discipline is a means to approach only, not to be confused with actual enlightenment. We should assess our discipline according to this criterion.

Among the laity, Buddha prescribed many disciplines, such as the discipline of refraining from killing. But how does not taking life lead to a higher birth and eventual enlightenment? Here is how: if we are motivated by a wish to kill or harm others, that means we don’t fully understand the law of cause, conditions and effect. And due to this not understanding, we plant seeds of poisonous plants expecting to harvest medicinal fruit. However, the truth of the law of causes and conditions is unyielding: if we harm others, we will certainly endure the consequence of a lower birth.

Whereas if we refrain from killing, that discipline is a path that will certainly bear the fruit of higher or noble birth: we will meet qualified teachers; we will appreciate the teachings of love and compassion; we will be inspired enough to delve into the teachings further and to put them into practice. Therefore not taking life is an example of a discipline that qualifies as a stepping-stone on a path leading step-by-step to enlightenment.

Every Buddhist discipline, from the Vinaya to the Tantrayana, meets this qualification. And conversely, nowhere in Buddhism do we find an irrelevant discipline such as one that condemns naked feminine toes as sinful and dictates that women must wear socks. Do you see what I’m getting at? Wearing socks is not going to help us be reborn in a higher realm, is it? How does wearing socks advance anyone any closer to enlightenment?

The third criterion of correct discipline is that it ought to be

...the antidote which abandons suffering.

This is a very significant qualification: a valid discipline must be an antidote to anxiety and pain. This means that discipline is not meant to be a form of self-inflicted torture like self-flagellation. On the contrary, the correct discipline of buddhadharma acts as an antidote to and not as a cause of pain.

So these three criteria are the essential qualities that Buddhist discipline should possess.
The moral conduct of one attached to this life is endowed with the root which accomplishes the eight worldly dharmas,...

Morality and discipline that stem from attachment to worldly life and performed for the sake of gain, for the sake of fame, for the sake of respect, for the sake of recognition, for the sake of publicity, all this so-called discipline is contrary to correct or true discipline.

...contempt for those with inferior discipline,...

Some vegetarians, for instance, look down on non-vegetarians as if they’re spiders. They are so condescending. Therefore, in effect, their discipline is in the service of pride, serving as a means of feeling superior over those whose discipline they deem unsatisfactory.

...and jealousy of those who possess discipline.

Selfish discipline also incites rivalry. First you meet someone deficient in discipline and snub them, of course. Then you meet a disciplined fellow vegetarian and feel competitive and claim that your practise of vegetarianism is the purest, and that your fellow vegetarian’s practise is less pure than yours. So your discipline or morality is in the service of envy and jealousy.

One’s own discipline becomes a hypocritical display.

Self-serving discipline is a hoax. Whatever the discipline, if the vegetarian or the monk or nun, the householder or Tantrika wear their discipline on their sleeve, only to turn into a vicious monster behind closed doors, that practitioner is a hypocrite; and, such discipline is invalid since it bears the fruit of a lower birth. Instead of offering us a path to enlightenment, it plunges us into an abyss of hypocrisy. Hypocritical discipline is an albatross that we must jettison.

MEDITATION IS NOT A BURDEN, SHENPA IS A BURDEN

One of the obstacles modern dharma students face is their resistance to meditating. But this observation isn’t meant as a criticism. In this present degenerated time, your interest in hearing the dharma is so wonderful; the effort you make to take notes on what you hear is so wonderful. Nevertheless, if we don’t meditate, not only do we not get enlightened, but also our knowledge of buddhadharma is stunted. Meditation sharpens our questions, and also sharpens our doubts. For now, our doubt is rather pathetic, but meditation sharpens our dull and stupid doubt into valuable and profound doubt.
Earlier I was critiquing the Nyingmapas and Kagyupas; now it’s the Gelugpas’ and Sakypas’ turn: their practise of meditation appears to be in decline. They are so in love with study and argument and expounding that unfortunately meditation is not a high priority; unfortunate because meditation is so crucial to progressing along the path. In Tibetan culture, it is drilled into monks and lamas like me to favour reading, rituals and pujas above meditation, and sadly, younger monks even tend to smirk at the mention of meditation, dismissing it as a practise that Westerners do.

This seminar is intended to be a retreat of sorts. In Tibetan, the word for retreat is tsam, which means to stay within a boundary. Ideally in retreat, we are not supposed to cross the boundary outside presentness by straying into the past or the future. In order to meditate, one needs to, in effect, draw a boundary of retreat around oneself to isolate or confine body and mind. Sure, we can isolate ourselves by going to the mountains or the forest. Sitting under a tree or in a cave in solitude can be a great boost. But isolation need not mean only retreating into literal solitude.

The essence of lü wen or isolating our body is embedded in the very act of sitting up straight in Vairocana’s 7-point posture, thereby isolating ourselves from our bodily urges such as the urge to scratch, the urge to yawn and the urge to fidget. If our phone rings, we don’t make a sound. If we conveniently remember leaving a window open, we don’t move a muscle. Instead of shooing away a mosquito on our nose for fear of malaria, we leave it alone.

Basically, we isolate ourselves in the sense that we shun our pet distractions, and expose our insecurities in the process. No matter how wild our mind might get, all we do at this point is continue to sit, because since our body is confined, mind will always find its own way back.

Sitting still, we breathe in and out as usual. In most Tibetan meditation instructions, unlike Burmese or Sri Lankan style, our eyes remain open, readying us for Tantric practise in the future. So we may blink as necessary. And we may swallow saliva as necessary. Otherwise, we do nothing else whatsoever. Please yawn, scratch and squirm now before we begin. For the next twenty minutes we will meditate. Do not yield to bodily impulses. And if your mind gets anxious for the time to be over, just watch that mind of impatience.

Are we ready? Starting now.
If you are attached to this life, you are not a person of Dharma.
If you are attached to cyclic existence, you do not have renunciation.
If you are attached to your own purpose, you do not have bodhichitta, the thought of enlightenment.
If grasping fixation arises, you do not have the view.

TALK THREE

We are not a dharma practitioner if we are attached to this life. In order to accomplish non-attachment, we begin by laying the foundation of discipline. The supreme method of self-discipline is the taking of refuge in the discipline of surrendering to the Buddha, dharma and sangha. This short and pithy benchmark condenses many elements of all three vehicles into a simple phrase.

Our attachment to this life is hard to drop, yet dropping it is fundamental to the path. Our habit of attachment is so strong that, as much as we may consciously aspire to drop our samsaric thinking, unconsciously we always slip back to our old habit; we have to be vigilant. Even within our Tibetan way, it is the case that even among the sanghas, our approach to the dharma, if we examine, often refers to our worldly attachment.

For instance, many Tibetans like to invite lamas and monks to come and do prayers at their home. Usually the object of the prayers is for a worldly aim, such as for winning the lottery or for harmony in one’s family or success in one’s business. But the objects of the puja are infinitely various, and may include help for dreamers who suffer from nightmares, and for sick people who suffer from mysterious illnesses. The lama performs a mo, which is like a doctor’s diagnosis, and a certain puja is prescribed like a medicine. Of course, I’m not belittling this custom; it is a wonderful connection to the Buddha, dharma and sangha. But it can often be a sign of attachment to this life which, by the way, I myself am prey to.

Recently I was stricken by a medical crisis requiring hospitalisation and surgery. Though of course I had seen and heard ambulances, I never before had the experience of being transported inside one. Of course, all thoughts of non-attachment to this life were gone. I dared even to bother the great masters such as H.H. Sakya Trizin with questions about what hospital to have the surgery at, and what doctor, what day, and what time. Strictly from the spiritual point of view, this indicates a still-strong attachment to this life on my part. For a week or two I was taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha, but doing so with a worldly aim. In just such a way, our approach to taking refuge tends to be for the sake of our worldly wishes, and so we get hooked again.
It is not going to be easy to abandon our attachment to this life. "Chamdro", the discipline of the taking of refuge in the Three Jewels, should form the basis of our practise, once we begin to understand that we will not be able to abandon attachment on our own.

We tend to seldom reflect on the dharma, except sometimes when nothing is going right, and everything is falling apart; and then, only for a few moments: this pang of inspiration, this glimpse of renunciation mind caused by our pain, loss and anxiety doesn’t last long, because unfortunately these misfortunes almost always get fixed. And as soon as our life goes back to normal, the moment things are working again, the moment that someone talks to us and we are the centre of attention, unfortunately renunciation mind vanishes.

It’s not easy to abandon attachment to this life. To do so, we have to rely on taking refuge in the Three Jewels to protect us from its strong undertow, and this reliance is crucial. Remember, even slight attachments obscure our view, and with it, our common sense and rationality, and therefore inevitably we suffer. It’s because we accept this inevitability of suffering arising from attachment as a straightforward fact that we take refuge. Taking refuge is a strategy, like dharma practise in general is a strategy, such as "Parting from the Four Attachments" is a strategy to defeat the four categories of "shenpa" and better manage our lives.

Based on the "Upanishads", Channakiya’s "Attashastra" talks about four indispensable strategies towards life. Loosely translated, the first of the four strategies is that life ought to have a quality of being fun and enjoyable, which is an ideal rule since fun and enjoyment are what we like to have. The second strategy aims for wealth enough to gather the means and establish this fun. The third strategy is how to mobilise the discipline to actualize this fun: of course, any successful MBA understands this discipline of making money and having fun.

But the fourth strategy, although it is forgotten in our modern world, acknowledges "maya", or illusion. We can have strategies for fun and wealth and fulfilment, but we must never lose sight of the fact that these three strategies are, at the same time, based on illusion. At the end of the day, such discipline and wealth do not work; at the end of the day, fun is very relative. Whereas if we can really digest this fourth strategy towards "maya" or illusion, then at that point we are nearly perfect managers of our lives.

See, if we take refuge in the Triple Gem for the sake of long life, for wealth, for success, even for the sake of Barcelona to win: whatever ridiculous entreaty we can come up with, you name it, that plea is a symptom of our attachment to this life. Suppose we pray to the Triple Gem to live long; but by “live long” we really mean “live forever,” don’t we? If we have any say, we want eternal life. And yet everlasting life is not even a remote possibility.
Buddha himself observed that all compounded things are impermanent. Not only is beseeching Buddha to grant us never-ending life a sign of attachment to this life, but also it contradicts and defies reality.

Taking refuge and practising dharma are the means to overcome whatever attachments we have. To say that if we have attachment to this life, we are not a dharma practitioner is another way of saying that, if we are unfamiliar with the maya aspect of life, we are not a good strategist; we are not a good life manager. We are like blind optimists who are bound to stumble into a pit of misery and disillusionment. This is why a path of non-attachment is crucial. Difficult as it is, we must shed our attachment to this life, but how?

REFUGE WITH A NEAR-THEISTIC AND ALMOST RELIGIOUS FOCUS

The grand attitude that we need is translated from the Tibetan as motivation or intention. Our practise of dharma is an expression of our sober intention to practise the dharma. And since having the good intention is all beginners like us can do, that good intention is an important stepping-stone on our path. We have to train our motivation to turn away from worldly attachments and turn toward a noble wish, but how?

Here is the classic Mahayana instructions: as a practitioner of motivation, one should always pray for long life and prosperity only while also praying that these gifts or advantages will be of benefit to the dharma. For instance, if we are praying for long life and freedom from sickness, that is fine; but we should also weave our hope to practise the dharma and help others with these gifts into the prayer we are praying. Then our motivation is trained in a gradual way.

I will tell you a secret: this time during the league championships, I found myself praying “Barcelona must win.” Actually I like Barcelona very much, everything about the team. And how did I justify my prayerful request? “Please all the dharmapalas and protectors let Barcelona win, because if Barcelona wins, it will ease my mind; and when my mind is at ease and calm, then I’ll practise the dharma; whereas if Manchester United wins, I may be depressed for weeks and neglect to practise the dharma.” So that put a positive spin on my otherwise mundane wish.

When we find ourselves praying for long life, good health, success, luck, we need to have this nobler intention along with our mundane purpose. This is classic Mahayana advice for struggling dharma practitioners. Those who are already good at not getting distracted by frivolous matters like Barcelona versus Manchester United have nothing to worry about. But once addicts like me know that there is a match coming, then no matter whatever else is happening, we have to watch.
During the league championship final I was staying at a Zen temple, which by the way had a strict curfew that forbade us from leaving the temple grounds. And I knew that this match was scheduled. This temple was a 45 minute walk from the closest bar where the broadcast of the match would be shown on television. I had to break the curfew, but luckily the shoji doors have no locks, and luckily the match was to be televised in Japan at three in the morning, so everyone was asleep as I slowly inched the shoji door open. The temple was surrounded by Zen stone gardens, so I did have to trespass on the raked gravel, because I lack renunciation mind even to refrain from a single championship match.

Sometimes I worry about death; worry that if I reincarnate as an animal, then I will not learn of the dharma and I will not meet my gurus; worry that I may be reborn in a place where football has never been invented, a depressing prospect for an addict to contemplate. To shed these worries of worldly attachment is more easily said than done, of course. We have to train an opposite attitude, by aspiring to selfless non-attachment, and this aspiring is called möpa, meaning one who is a practitioner of intention and motivation.

By the way, applying the practise of motivation is not an excuse for us to be lazy and take the easy way out by shirking the infinite activities of a bodhisattva. The practise of motivation is not an escape from bodhisattva activity, but in fact it is the very doorway that opens upon all the infinite activities of a bodhisattva. People like us who are practising motivation should observe the discipline of taking refuge with a near-theistic and almost religious focus.

We take refuge by reciting the refuge formula, “I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha,” preferably in our own language. It doesn’t always have to be that we recite liturgies composed by the lamas of the past: although it is recommended that we do recite traditional refuge prayers, because they are soaked with blessings. But we can make up our own refuge prayer like, “I take refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha. Please protect me from all kinds of suffering, problems, accidents, diseases, bad news and bad dreams.” We can also take refuge in a Mahayana way by praying, “Please protect me from my selfishness.” You can even take refuge like this: “I take refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha, so that one day I will gain confidence and actually yearn to take genuine refuge in the Triple Gems with the right motivation.”

If you want to elaborate, you can place a statue of Buddha or a dharma text, such as Vajracheddika Sutra or Heart Sutra or even the Lojong Shenpa Shidrel, on the shrine, if that is a support. You can offer a single flower, if you have one; you can even envision that flower multiplied into billions of flowers, if you want to. But if no incense, flowers and water are to be had due to circumstances, such as while flying on a passenger jet, then you can
visualise vast offerings, as a practitioner of motivation; though, of course, it’s not as if a certain vast quantity of flowers will bribe the Triple Gem.

THE ATMOSPHERE OF TAKING REFUGE INSTANTLY

Our practice of right motivation is not limited only to making offerings and recitations, but every activity in our daily life, as much as possible, should be imbued with this atmosphere of taking refuge. For instance, suppose a dharma text is on the floor: we definitely do not step over it, but we lift it to a respectful place. Of course, the dharma text has no wish to be respected, but it can serve as a reminder of our nobler purpose. That brief moment of respecting the text reflects that we have the merit to tune in for at least a moment, meaning the discipline is working.

Or suppose we see monks in yellow or red robes. This too could serve as a reminder and prompt us to offer respect, and to rejoice that those monks in the street choose to follow their humble noble path. Of course, doubters may ask how we know that they are real monks. But according to many Mahayana texts, Buddha Shakyamuni said that unless we are enlightened, we have no way of knowing who is or is not a bodhisattva. The monks may be real or not real, but at the very least their robes are banners of the dharma, reminding us of our own higher aim.

Statues can also be helpful reminders: we can sculpt a statue, if we know how, or we can buy one in a shop, or commission a sculptor to sculpt one. The dharma text, the monks, and a statue are examples of outer reminders; but even more important are the inner reminders. The practise of remembering the Buddha doesn’t rely on a bronze statue; it relies on our sense of being in the presence of the Buddha as we visualise him seated before us. Even if we can’t see the buddhas and bodhisattvas with our own eyes, we rely on a mood of confidence that they are present.

Taking refuge in the dharma is not only the practise of placing sacred texts on the shrine; it is the practise of reading them as well. The sutras mention various methods: to listen to and to read the dharma are two ways – incidentally, even reading the dharma when our mind is busy thinking about something else may remind us and further our practise of taking refuge in the Triple Gems – and also, to write down the letters, to give and make offerings, to memorise and explain, to recite and reflect, and to meditate: these are the ten forms or methods of dharmic conduct whose merit is said to be immeasurable.

A short sutra called The Recollection of the Triple Gem states that remembering the Buddha, dharma and sangha is actually the quintessential form of chamdro or practice of taking refuge. Remembering the Buddha
doesn’t mean only bringing the Buddha to mind detail-by-detail: envisioning a throne, inviting the buddhas to come and sit, making offerings, praising; all that ritual is unnecessary. At random flashes during the day, reminders such as the name of Buddha Shakyamuni, or remembering Buddha folding his robes, talking to Subhuti or walking barefoot in the streets of Magadha begging for alms can come to mind, and evoke the mood of taking refuge instantly, as readily as rituals and chanting mantras can.

Likewise, remembering the dharma doesn’t only mean bringing the dharma to mind detail-by-detail, such as mentally articulating that all compounded things are impermanent and all emotions are pain and so on. Well, how then should we practise the dharma and lead our lives? It is suggested that we get into a routine in the morning before work or in the evening after work. Of course, sitting before a shrine and chanting a mantra one hundred times is a good practise, but practise has to continue outside the shrine room as well.

I suggest that after your formal meditation, later on as you are catching a taxi or entering a restaurant in the midst of everyday life, whenever you happen to flashback to Buddha folding his robe, for example, let that count as “one.” Later on, maybe after arguing with a friend or after haggling for a good bargain, if in the midst of your mood of regret or victory you flashback to the truth that all compounded things are impermanent, count that as “two.” There is no place or time that is off-limits or inappropriate: even on the toilet or while you are showering, if you flash back to the Triple Gem, count that as “three.”

In between practise sessions, try to recall the Buddha, dharma and sangha five times during the course of each day for now; in a week, you could increase that to six. And by gradually increasing the frequency of your remembrance of the Triple Gems, your attachment to this life will gradually decrease, until eventually you are no longer fooled by maya.

What happens then? We practise the discipline of the taking of refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha again and again. As Shantideva noted, we gradually get used to that non-attached and unfooled state of mind, but it does take some getting used to.

In light of the above, my advice is never hold a mala to practise by counting fifty thoughts of the Buddha in a row, then finish and contemplate: that doesn’t work actually, though it has some merit. But repeatedly tuning in to the mood of taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha at random moments in daily life has far greater merit.

This is a valuable exercise: make a habit of remembering. As we develop this good habit, what will happen? One benefit of bringing the Triple Gems to mind again and again is that our attitude towards life changes: what used to
be a big deal is not a big deal anymore. What used to work us up no longer gets us worked up. Whatever used to drive us crazy, such as fame, shame, praise, blame, loss, gain, pleasure and pain, quits driving us crazy.

Slowly, slowly we become indifferent to the eight worldly dharmas. Whether we lose or win makes no difference to us at this stage. The eight worldly dharmas cease to matter to us. We become seasoned dharma practitioners with good life-management skills. Our general outlook is that everything is fine, whatever the outcome, however things work out: therefore we are not driven by worry, and therefore we are happy, and then people start to notice.

When we are easygoing and friendly, because we have no agenda and no triggers that make us go crazy, then we’re a very likeable person to be with. Whatever we say may have a big impact on people. Then we are beginning to become quite an effective bodhisattva. This sums up the benefits of calling the Triple Gem to mind again and again.

HEARING AND CONTEMPLATING RIGHTLY

How should we slowly abandon our attachment to this life: by engaging in a positive discipline, which to begin with is the practise of taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha. After that, once the discipline of refuge practise has taken root, what should we do next: the practises of hearing, contemplation and meditation. Trakpa Gyaltsen prods us again in order to reinforce that hearing, contemplation and meditation are not optional; they are necessities.

By means of engaging in hearing and contemplation, we gather the wealth of enlightenment, but only if this hearing and contemplation is motivated by a wish that our hearing and our contemplating will dispel ignorance and benefit others, and most importantly, a wish that our hearing and contemplation will be the seed of the dharmakaya.

If we are motivated by a wish to gather academic credentials and scholarly knowledge, for instance, isn’t that indicative of our attachment to this life? Basically, we should not hear and contemplate the dharma motivated by a wish to advance our career, spiritual or otherwise. If our discipline to hear and contemplate the dharma is not motivated by a wish to dispel our ignorance, but rather by a wish to fatten our egotistical pride, this discipline is incorrect; it cannot be a stepping-stone on a path leading to enlightenment.

This is a big problem for many Rinpoches like myself, khenpos and so-called learned monks, and now many students of Buddhism in Europe, the U.S. and China, who may seem to be very learned, but the learning we have learned by diligent study and contemplation often seems skin-deep and motivated by a
wish to build our brand, instead of a wish to go against the ignorance of ego. Ambitious and prideful motivation creates a host of problems.

Just as many lamas are fond of high thrones and high titles, in the West many people are fond of doing a so-called three-year retreat: who knows what they do for three years, but when they come out, suddenly they have a marketable skill, since spiritual methods are in popular demand. As long as sentient beings are slaves of their emotions and insecurity, the spiritual business will be brisk.

Wearing a disguise, I have gone to hear some of the Western Buddhist teachers present the dharma – for a large admission fee, I might add. And I must say that most of them deliver quite good information, because they are fairly learned. I have been impressed, but not that impressed – of course, like favouring Barcelona over Manchester United, that is based on my limited perception. But insecurity and pride seem to ooze from their shoulders, rather than a halo.

If our path of learning is driven not by a wish to dispel ignorance and help others, but is driven instead by our worldly agenda, then that path of learning endangers our enlightenment.

A sign that one has heard and contemplated the dharma with right motivation is that one is free of pride, tame and humble, and knowledgeable; and a sign that one has meditated rightly is that one is free of insecurities and conflicting emotions.

Right hearing and right contemplation are right because they bolster our ability to help others. Hearing and contemplating that hinges on attachment to this life only bolster our pride, and is not right discipline. Due to pride, we wield our arrogance against those who haven’t heard and contemplated; and due to insecurity, we wield our envy against those who have.

If our discipline is spoiled by a wish for worldly wealth and status, it is a toxic discipline, because it leads to a lower not higher rebirth, according to Trakpa Gyaltsen. If our discipline of hearing and contemplation is motivated by attachment to this life’s eight worldly concerns, that discipline should be thrown away.

THERE IS SOMETHING TO GET USED TO

Our next subject is the discipline of meditation practise. After we establish the right discipline of hearing and contemplation, the next phase is to establish the right discipline of meditation. By the way, we are still speaking in the context of the first benchmark, “If you have attachment to this life, you
are not a person of Dharma.” The question is how to abandon attachment to this life. The subject of meditation is quite vast, vaster than the common image of meditation as sitting straight in a quiet place with our legs crossed and all that.

Meditation is not strictly about taking a certain posture in a certain kind of environment; meditation is more expansive than that. In the Buddhist language, we make a distinction between the meditation and the post-meditation phases of practice; but post-meditation practice is an at least as important, if not more important phase of the spiritual path as meditation proper is.

Maybe the simplest way to describe the practice of meditation is to say that it is a process of adjusting. Adjusting to what? Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thaye said of meditation that there is no thing to meditate upon, however there is something to get used to. Basically all the dharma practices and methods, from simply offering incense to circumambulating and all the exotic rituals, all are designed to help us get acclimated to the truth.

Here again we refer to the fourth benchmark. Because it is our view which decides what is truth and what is not truth, beginners must invest time and energy in hearing and contemplation.

At the risk of over-simplifying, let us say that the view one has is like an idea. An idea is very strong. In our everyday lives, ideas are driving forces. It is an idea that creates or is the ground of our values. An idea forms our view of what has value and what has no value. And, of course, an idea results from causes and conditions.

Let me illustrate: reading Vogue’s ideas about what has value may influence us to adopt its view that being slim has value: if we accept as truth that “slim is good,” that becomes our view. In keeping with this view, we read Vogue magazines, renewing our subscriptions again and again; we socialize with fellow Vogue types; we go to coffee shops where Vogue people go. These Vogue-centered practices are the Vogue person’s type of hearing and contemplation to learn all the Vogue-oriented knowledge.

With this view, one goes on a diet, cuts down on pasta and rice, joins a gym, lifts weights, starts jogging, drinks odd juices: all this discipline is motivated by the wish to trim one’s waistline. And all these Vogue-driven disciplines are the Vogue person’s type of meditation, diligently practising rituals that reinforce the Vogue view that “slim is good.”

The gurus of the Vogue mandala are the fashion designers, the supermodels are like deities, and the sangha of the Vogue mandala are all the fellow dieters who share a faith in odd juices and with whom the Vogue person mingles and
networks. This regimen of Vogue-istic discipline is similar to recollecting the Triple Gem, except that it is the recollection of the Vogue-generated gem that one is aiming for: to achieve the perfect figure. This valuation of slimness is the central idea that informs our view.

We arrive at this view by hearing and contemplating Vogue, and analysing whether we are sympathetic to the Vogue message or view. Once we decide that we agree with Vogue’s view, we will be motivated to go to great lengths effortlessly and even joyfully to achieve that aim which Vogue stands for, and that we have come to value.

And in a similar manner, if we decide that we agree with Trakpa Gyaltsen’s view of parting from one’s attachment to this life and to one’s self and to samsara, we will be motivated to go to great lengths effortlessly and even joyfully to achieve that aim of non-attachment which Shenpa Shidrel stands for, and that we have come to value.

The purpose of a view or idea or value is usually that it promises to satisfy and gratify us once we reach the goal: for example, it promises conditional confidence, depending on our slimness, and conditional happiness, depending on others admiring our skin-and-bones physique. But the value of slimness depends on one’s changeable view, of course. Worldly views change all the time. In times past, plump and shapely figures were the valued norm: the view was “plump is good,” sensual and abundant. In today’s culture, that value is reversed.

Contrast such a changeable fashionable view with Manjushri’s changeless observation that if we grasp, we lose the view: since this basic premise is actually the case, its truth doesn’t change, and it will always be true and worthy of value. The view of non-grasping spares us from all the unnecessary suffering that the view of grasping causes; and, it never goes out of style.

The grasping in the phrase “if we grasp we lose the view” refers not only to grasping in a gross manner, such as grasping our laptop or sports channel. This pith instruction warns us that even if we grasp at a virtuous ideal like enlightenment, still we lose the view. Any grasping whatsoever, even grasping a concept such as emptiness, obstructs our view.

Furthermore, Buddha Shakyamuni told Kashyapa that an ego the size of Mount Meru is not as harmful as grasping a concept of emptiness the size of a sesame seed.
THE ART OF ANALYSIS

Think of Buddhism like a bar of soap. Soap is supposed to clean away dirt, and in the process of cleaning, a bar of soap shrinks as the dirt it washes also shrinks away. Both dirt and soap are consumed in the process of washing. The Buddhist path is designed to eliminate defilements, thereby eliminating need of the Buddhist path. The dharma is like a bar of soap that melts away as it cleanses. In the end, we even have to scrub any souvenirs left over from our beloved Buddhism before we can reach enlightenment.

To understand the view, we have to transcend our normal logic somewhat. We have to contemplate and analyse, with the help of a teacher and of books such as Chandrakirti’s Madhyamakavatara, Dharmakirti’s commentaries, and Aryadeva’s 400 Stanzas of Madhyamika; and let’s not forget Nagarjuna’s Mulamadhyamaka-karikas. Also, Shantarakshita’s Madhyamika Alankara is a very important text, especially if you love logic.

In these texts, great masters of the past have given us tools to analyse, and presented us with examples of how to conduct a logical analysis. Out of their compassion, in order to demonstrate the process of analysis, and in order to establish the view, their texts record the arguments between the great Hindu philosophies of the Samkhyas and Charvakas. The arguments among the Cittamatra and Prasangika and Svatantrika schools are recorded as well.

We should not treat these arguments as merely philosophical entertainment. They are wonderful models to teach us how to skilfully practise the art of analysis. These analytical tools and skills may boost our confidence enough in the view of emptiness that, for example, we are moved to say “So, this is it. There is no further to go.”

Eventually we will have to analyse even the analytical process itself, until it melts away like soap in water; otherwise, analysis and contemplation will only end when all thought ends. Eventually we will have to come to the conclusion that the mind of analysis has to be transcended, since it is only a means, and not our final destination. Once we have that firm conviction, that is when the discipline of meditation comes into play.
If you are attached to this life, you are not a person of Dharma.
If you are attached to cyclic existence, you do not have renunciation.
If you are attached to your own purpose, you do not have bodhichitta, the thought of enlightenment.
If grasping fixation arises, you do not have the view.

TALK FOUR

This teaching did originate in the form of a vision, but it shouldn’t be considered revelatory in the sense of introducing any new element of the dharma never before revealed. Neither Sachen Kunga Nyingpo nor his followers make any claim about its originality, but do say that this text is consistent and not at odds with Buddha’s teachings. It’s quite an important distinction, this distinction of modesty, whereas throughout history many would-be prophets have strived to patent new religions or systems of teaching as their own ingenuity.

The *Bodhicaryavatara* is another gem like *Shenpa Shidrel*, and right at the beginning, Shantideva hastens to say that the text that follows has all been spoken before, and expresses gratitude for the kindness of his masters, giving them all the credit.

But modesty is the exception among spiritual entrepreneurs who often take all the credit, acting like their teaching is uniquely their own and arose solely from their own spiritual prowess. Nevertheless, their claim of ownership is indisputable, since it cannot be proven or disproven.

For example, I cannot assert definitively that nowhere in this world is there another human being who looks and talks exactly like me. I cannot assert this because I haven’t examined every single human being in the world, and therefore have no proof to base such an assertion on.

Similarly, I cannot assert definitively that a spiritual entrepreneur’s teaching is not their unique epiphany, because with my deluded perception, it may only appear to me to be derivative and borderline plagiarism.

For instance, by not acknowledging Shantideva and Atisha Dipamkara and others as the original sources of his examples and logic, the author of *The Power of Now* gives the impression that his thesis and insights have sprung forth as a totally new thing under the sun.

Plagiarists should thieve with skill so that at least their thievery is untraceable. Not only do many spiritual entrepreneurs seem to be inauthentic,
in my limited view: their practise of plagiarism could also stand some improvement.

The gist of Shenpa Shidrel was taught by the Buddha and it does not mark the advent of a new religious movement. The conceit of so-called originality is anathema to the great masters like Sachen Kunga Nyingpo. For example, the thrust of the four partings is not original; it is found in the sutras, abhidharma and vinaya and therefore is consistent and not at odds with Buddha’s teaching.

From the Mahayana point of view, it is only after we have taken refuge vow to the Buddha, dharma and sangha that our disciplines of hearing and contemplation and especially our discipline of meditation mature into virtues. Prior to taking the refuge vow, our meditation practice is not even a virtue! It’s just a technique to calm our mind. Not to say that we should not meditate in order to calm our mind, but if the function of meditation is only that, we could as well calm our mind by enjoying a sauna or massage or walking in an English garden to relax.

Without a vow, whatever calms us down could be called meditation, but it could not be called virtuous; the vow empowers the practise. Meditation is a vital necessity, but spa meditation motivated by a wish to make our mind healthy and calm may actually be counter-productive. Our attachment to health and calm may be self-defeating. Spa meditation is advertised as a tonic to soothe our nerves, but it is attachment to this life that makes us nervous. Say we pursue our agenda for serenity: our very attachment to our agenda stresses us out, so our agenda backfires.

OUR ULTIMATE AGENDA IS TO NOT LET GO

The pithy first benchmark from Sachen Kunga Nyingpo is not a religious or supernatural idea. It is a very scientific and rational thesis: Given that attachment to this life is the mother of all our stress, therefore attachment to this life has to be cut – because otherwise, even if we meditate, our meditation will be all but futile; because otherwise, reading the sutras while our mind is wandering would be all but futile; because otherwise, even if we seclude ourselves in solitary retreat, in reality we are not secluded from our agenda.

Meditation motivated by worldly concerns makes one arrogant and contemptuous of one’s fellow hearers and contemplators, and makes one envious and competitive toward one’s fellow meditators. Though it is labeled as meditation, it is in reality just a glorified distraction. Whereas, meditation which does let go of attachment to worldly concerns is therefore no longer
subject to the distractions that always come along with such attachment. It’s so logical, you see.

In Tibetan, one word we have for meditation conveys a sense of equanimity, and of non-duality, and also conveys a sense of leaving alone and not meddling. This leaving alone in equilibrium is not possible for us to do in our lives of attachment, because our worldly concerns depend on us meddling.

Deep inside our agenda, our ultimate agenda is to not let go of this worldly life, and it is by that act of not letting go of our agenda that we plant the root of distraction: that very agenda itself is the first distraction.

Shantideva says that in order to achieve enlightenment, we need wisdom; we need to recognise, understand, and realise the truth according to the buddhadharma. That means we need to come to a good understanding of the selflessness of phenomena, and the selflessness of the self. That kind of insight wisdom can only be accomplished once we have a well-established and stable grounding in shamatha, meaning calm-abiding. Calm abiding has to precede insight wisdom, because shamatha first helps to make our mind more manageable.

At the moment, our mind is unmanageable and rather stiff like a piece of wood that we cannot bend to our will. For us, when anger flares, we cannot simply make up our mind to count down from ten to zero and stop our anger. And neither can we simply decide to make ourselves be angry at will. But when the causes and conditions are present to aggravate us, even though we try so hard not to, we get angry.

Often our mind just seems to have a mind of its own, so to speak. Whatever mind comes up with, we just have to live with it; it has no on and off switch, but it does have a sort of life cycle. A mental factor like anger starts out very small, and then if the causes and conditions are right, anger grows bigger and bigger until it peaks, and then the old age of the anger ebbs and ebbs weaker and weaker, and finally dies. But this ebb and flow of anger is due not to the power of our meditation, but to the natural pattern of impermanence.

We say time heals, which time may in fact do. But time does not make our mind more agile or soft. It makes our mind even more dependent on the causes and conditions that it is subject to. Conditions change and what disturbs us one day is not disturbing the next. Whether it does or does not disturb us depends in part on the condition of what kind of mood we are in.

One moment we’re in a bright mood having breakfast, and the next moment, for no apparent reason, our mood turns foul. Is it the cereal? Is it the milk? Is it the weather? Whatever the reason, the fact is that our mood darkens or brightens according to seemingly random causes and conditions. Our mood
just obediently follows wherever conditions direct it. The good news is that our mood is the effect of conditioning, so if conditions change, our mood changes too.

Calm abiding is a challenge, because our mind is very tight. What makes our mind constantly tight and inflexible is our attachment to this worldly life. Attachment to our worldly agenda dictates how we react to situations and emotions. This is why in the first eight chapters of his *Bodhicharyavatara*, Shantideva attacks attachment in all its varied forms and from every direction.

The process of abandoning attachment to this life and thus becoming a dharma practitioner begins with the discipline of taking refuge in the Triple Gem, as we know. With this vow for our foundation, we practise hearing, contemplating, and meditating, with special emphasis on the preciousness of human birth, and the precariousness of our life in the face of impermanence.

THE FOUR REMINDERS

*First, this precious human body, free and well-favoured, is difficult to gain and easy to lose. Now I must do something meaningful.*

A fortunate human birth is seen to be precious by virtue of its being gifted with understanding and an affinity for the dharma, whereas a less fortunate human birth gifted with neither understanding nor an affinity is not seen to be precious.

In the same manner, whatever deepens our understanding and strengthens our affinity for the dharma is seen to be virtuous, whereas whatever pollutes our understanding or drains our affinity for the dharma is seen to be unvirtuous.

Human birth is valued even above birth in the god or asura realms. Although these higher births are far more powerful, better equipped and financed, they are not seen to be precious. Beings in the god realm, for instance, enjoy the gift of longevity, but that gift is not seen to be virtuous. Because longevity is not a path to understand the truth, birth as a god is not seen to be precious.

Special powers and endowments are insignificant in weighing whether a human birth is a precious human birth or not. This is good food for thought: ask yourself honestly how precious is your human birth. Yes, we may be a Buddhist practitioner; we may have a dharma library; we may even have met great masters: but still, we should question whether the quality of preciousness actually describes our human birth.
Yes, we have a privileged birth as a human being, meaning we have some understanding of good and bad, and linguistic skills that make dharma open to us. If we were a maggot, for instance, we would not be so lucky. But how lucky we are not to be born in a place where not even the words Buddha, dharma, sangha, interdependence, emptiness, compassion and non-duality have ever been heard of, and have no meaning at all.

And yes, we are lucky to have met masters who teach us dharma. In theory, we are privileged and lucky and advantaged. But in practise, are we taking full advantage of our privilege and luck to make our human birth a precious human birth? If our answer is no, then our human birth is not a precious human birth, but rather a merely human birth. It is up to each of us to conduct a very personal self-critique.

Generally speaking, yes, we all do have precious human births. But individually we have to contemplate this subtler meaning of precious. We have to ask ourselves frankly is our human birth a precious human birth, or is it not a precious human birth? What if we discover that the subtler quality of preciousness is missing from our human birth?

In that case, in order to mature our merely human birth into a precious human birth, we would have to grow our understanding and deepen our affinity for the dharma, until we decide that the subtle quality of preciousness is no longer missing.

Second, the world and its inhabitants are impermanent. Especially the life of beings is like a bubble. Death comes without warning; this body will be a corpse. At that time, the dharma will be my only help. I must practice it with exertion.

Then next would come the contemplation of impermanence, as follows. This human body will not last forever. Impermanence will strike one day without warning. So we cannot waste this precious opportunity. From this moment on, we cannot afford to think that we have years left to finish our work, and that then we will settle down on a mountain and do retreat. We can’t take anything for granted, because realistically, death could come at any time.

The Kadampas often remind us that first of all it is meaningfulness that makes a human birth precious, and secondly, that death is real and unpredictable. Most of us like to ignore the truth that death is real and unpredictable.

Third, when death comes, I will be helpless. Because of past karma, I must abandon evil deeds and always devote my time to virtuous actions. Thinking this, every day I will examine myself.
The third reminder is that our own death is a guaranteed fact, though we are rarely willing to face that fact. The second and third reminders stress the reality of our inevitable death, as a counterweight to our habit of worldly attachments.

Once we fully appreciate the preciousness of this opportunity, we will have learned that our attachment to this life’s eight worldly concerns of fame and shame, praise and blame, loss and gain, and pleasure and pain, is a waste of our precious life, because these concerns are meaningless.

*Fourth, the homes, friends, wealth and comfort of samsara are the constant torment of the three sufferings, just like a feast before the executioner leads you to your death. I must cut desire and attachment and attain enlightenment through exertion.*

In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Patrul Rinpoche says that we must practise the dharma as urgently as a hungry yak searches for food. When a hungry yak sees a single blade of grass, it doesn’t wait to find more plentiful grass to eat; the yak just eats the grass.

Reflecting on our precious human birth, and on the truth of impermanence, will fuel our sense of urgency and intensify our path.

**LIFE IS FOR THE DHARMA, OR VICE-VERSA**

That we should practise the dharma with an attitude of urgency is quite important advice. You see, for many of us dharma practitioners, only large gestures grab our imagination. For instance, walking through a stupa is a good reminder to boost our sense of urgency, because a stupa symbolises the Buddha’s enlightened mind, and is blessed and consecrated and venerated by many great masters, even in our own time. All we can do is make a humble gesture of placing our palms together and bowing respectfully.

But some of us may worry that such a humble gesture is not large enough. We forage in our imagination for a grander gesture, failing to express our reverence in even a humble manner. Like the hungry yak that walks past the humble blade of grass, we lack urgency. We fantasise about washing the stupa or offering a hundred thousand lamps or inviting monks to pray for an entire day. These grand gestures are imaginary, of course, yet the thoughts of them divert us: one ends up not only not offering a grander gesture, but not offering even a humble gesture.

Typically, we are too busy and have no time for grazing a humble grass blade of virtue, and our grandiose plans harvest no virtue, either. It is up to us to seize every opportunity to put the dharma into practise. We should not ever
belittle a small virtuous action, never! It is small virtuous actions that we need
to perform to gather the merit that will then form the foundation of greater
virtuous action, which is greater by virtue of its being stainless, because it is
selfless.

So a dharma practitioner must look beyond this mortal life. If we are
absorbed in mundane life, we are an ordinary person whose dharma practise
is a mere fixture. By analogy, to make our office work efficiently, we need a
fax machine, computer, desk, chair and so on, to serve practical functions.
Similarly, an ordinary person’s dharma practise functions as a coping
mechanism, to deal with matters that machines and furniture cannot. But if
we pray for success and health and wealth and so on, then our dharma
practise is only selfish wishful thinking. This type of utilitarian interest in the
dharma is a great danger for dharma practitioners, the ordained sangha and
Rinpoches alike.

In brief, we have to embrace the life of dharma only for the sake of
enlightenment. We should never grasp the dharma for the sake of a worldly
aim. We may think that we know better than to go astray in this way, but
don’t be naïve; going astray in this way is not at all uncommon. We err by
seeing dharma practise as a support for our mundane life, instead of seeing
our mundane life as a support for dharma practise.

One great master composed a beautiful prayer, and in a section of that prayer,
from the depths of his heart, he prays never to be reborn as a tulku or a
Rinpoche. It’s very moving, because I pray this way myself every day,
seriously. It can be tricky for a Rinpoche with monasteries and Khenpos to
not go astray. The line is so thin! We have to really answer if our life is for
the dharma, or vice-versa. So thin! In my experience, it often seems to be the
other way around.

TO SHARPEN THE PRECISION OF OUR GUESSWORK

In Nagarjuna’s Mulamadhyamaka-karikas, in its homage he praises the
Buddha’s speech as the definitive teaching. This is not just a poetic
expression of devotion. Nagarjuna’s praise acknowledges Buddha’s authority
as the only qualified teacher. Even the tenth bhumi bodhisattvas are not fully
qualified. Naturally, that disqualifies an ordinary, deluded sentient being like
me, who teaches with speech that is very ordinary and defiled.

If we are not alert, our motivation may become defiled by wishing for power
and possessions, followers and offerings. Only on rare occasions do ordinary
teachers like me have a kind impulse and from compassion we are inspired to
teach for the benefit of others. Even then, though, non-sublime teachers have
a very limited skill set. What is a non-sublime teacher to do? We have to
approximate. We have to make our best educated guess; that’s our only option.

Even tenth bhumi bodhisattvas can only make educated guesses. My skill set and guesswork basically amount to repeating like a parrot what has been taught. The guesswork of a bodhisattva on the path of application is quite sophisticated, and the second bhumi bodhisattva’s guesswork is more sophisticated, and the third is more sophisticated than the second, and so on, up to the tenth bhumi bodhisattva whose guesswork is the most sophisticated.

Every sentient being is said to have a unique element or mental framework of intention and interpretative powers; and this element or frame of mind changes on a constant basis every moment, according to our temperament. Each of us experiences the particular element of sense-consciousness and motivation that we happen to be predisposed to experience.

For example, there is a story about a physician, a nun and an arhat who interpreted the sound of Buddha’s cough differently. Likewise, in Saranath, when Buddha taught “Know the suffering” and “Abandon the cause of suffering”, five monks who were present heard these truths in a very literal way, meaning one should know the suffering and then abandon the cause of suffering.

Some Tantric practitioners called vidyadharas who were present heard the same speech, but understood the meaning differently. When Buddha spoke the first noble truth, they understood him to be saying that samsara is blissful, and when Buddha spoke the second noble truth, they understood Buddha to be saying that emotions can be taken as the path.

The monk’s understanding and the vidyadhara’s understanding could hardly be more different, yet each way of understanding was beneficial to monks and vidyadharas alike, according to their elements, we could say.

The Four Noble Truths is not like a religious document; it is a scientific method. We can observe in everyday life that none of us interprets the same data in the same way. For example, we assume that we hear what another person is saying, but what we hear depends on what we interpret and assume to be the meaning of what is said. This is quite an important qualifier. Even in the sutras, Ananda always begins, “Thus have I heard,” meaning that this is the meaning he has gleaned, but the meaning may vary from hearer to hearer, according to one’s elements.

We can only take an approximate guess at the definitive meaning. Guesswork is like intuition: if our dinner guest is French, we guess that red wine is a safe choice that our guest will appreciate. If our dinner guest is Chinese, we guess that a spicy noodle dish will be comfort food our guest will enjoy. To
improve our skill at guessing, there are many formulas designed by past masters as teaching tools, such as helpful categories to sharpen the precision of our guesswork.

For instance, the Kadampas have a formula to distinguish among worthy vessels for the dharma. By the way, a worthy vessel is seen to be worthy by virtue of their having decided that this life is not worth attaching to. And the formula generalizes the entire variety of types of worthy vessels into the categories of greater, lesser, and conventional types, in order to teach them accordingly.

By the same token, the entire variety of types of emotions are similarly simplified into general categories like anger, jealousy, desire, passion, aggression and ignorance. These simplifications are generalisations, and such generalisations serve a useful purpose by tracing the broad outlines of a given field such as, for example, emotions or vessels. But only a Buddha can know how to remedy the most subtle specific human emotions that we don’t even know of or have names for.

Of the three types of worthy vessels, the lesser type are motivated by a wish to achieve rebirth in a heavenly realm with power and affluence: which is still attachment to worldly life, though not to this present worldly life but to the next life. Conventional types are not motivated by a wish to achieve a higher rebirth: their wish is to achieve enlightenment, but only their own; everyone else is on their own. And the greater vessels are motivated not by a wish to achieve personal enlightenment, but by a wish for all beings to achieve enlightenment.

GOOD AND POWERFUL MASTERY OVER OUR MIND

Trakpa Gyaltsen also has a beautiful formula where he distinguishes not greater, lesser and conventional vessels, but among three types of realms: one is the desire realm; the second one is the form realm; and the third one is the formless realm.

Within these three realms, everything that is samsaric exists. But to put this into perspective, please note that in sharp contrast to the desire realm, the form and especially the formless realms are virtually indistinguishable from enlightenment. Only an expert can tell them apart.

The formless realm is so blissful, almost free of emotion, omniscient, clairvoyant, radiant, free of hunger and free of thirst; it is highly attractive. But that is only a guess, because not only is enlightenment a distant possibility, we have not yet even had a taste of the formless realm.
And not only is the formless realm in the distance, we have not yet even tasted the realm of form. But if we did taste the form realm just once, we would forget about enlightenment and only look for that taste which is nearly identical to enlightenment.

It is like the difference between Prada shoes made in Italy and Prada shoes made in Bangkok: there is no detectable difference, except that Bangkok shoes are so cheap! Form realm and formless realm are like knock-offs of enlightenment, and they too are so cheap, in the sense that if one tries hard, in only three or four years one can acquire the taste of form and formlessness.

You don’t have to cut off your limb to feed a tiger, you don’t have to do all this ngondro business, you don’t have to follow a sadistic guru, none of that. Shamatha and the samadhis will suffice to acquire that taste.

In places like Burma and Sri Lanka I have seen many people who may not have intended to but who seem to have experienced this near-enlightenment, who exude a quality of shinjang, which roughly translates as perfection or mastery.

Whereas, at present most of us have no shinjang, and therefore we are at the mercy of our biology: less than six hours of sleep leaves us feeling sleep-deprived the next day, for example, and skipping breakfast and lunch makes us feel faint because our blood sugar is too low.

But intensive shamatha practise does yield a good and powerful mastery over our mind, and its dependency on bodily influences wanes. I have met vipashyana students who are refreshed by a small meal of two spoonfuls of rice and milk, and remain fresh and energetic as ever. Chopping wood and carrying water for the monastery, they need little sleep and yet they are always so fresh. Their intuition is near-clairvoyant, and their presence is vibrant and enlightenment-like.

The point is this: even if we do shed our attachment to this mundane life, if we intentionally seek exotic tastes and states, we shall remain a lesser worthy vessel, because the scope and focus of our practise is too narrow and too shallow.
If you are attached to this life, you are not a person of Dharma.
If you are attached to cyclic existence, you do not have renunciation.
If you are attached to your own purpose, you do not have bodhichitta, the thought of enlightenment.
If grasping fixation arises, you do not have the view.

TALK FIVE

Let us now arouse our proper motivation as hearers of the dharma who are motivated by having seen the futility of samsara: by having seen that samsaric activities have no intrinsic value; and, by having seen that a path leading to enlightenment has immeasurable value. And, secondly, our proper motivation for hearing the Mahayana is the wish that our hearing the dharma will bring benefit to all sentient beings.

There are actually many many millions of categories of practitioners, and as a general rule all practitioners fall into one of three subcategories: greater, lesser, and conventional. Accordingly, Buddha taught three approaches to the dharma, teaching to each practitioner that vehicle which best met the needs of the individual: and this means no vehicle is superior, and none is inferior.

Buddha says that aspiring bodhisattvas should never commit the worst non-virtuous act, which is abandoning the dharma; and, treating the Shravakayana and Pratyekabuddhayana as inferior yanas with a prideful attitude is regarded as abandoning the dharma. Especially on the Mahayana path, an inclusive and non-chauvinistic attitude to all the teachings of Buddha is a must.

To the lesser-capacity vessels, Buddha presented a path that practises abandoning the ten non-virtuous actions, and applying the ten virtuous actions or thoughts, to secure a favourable rebirth. To the conventional-capacity vessels, Buddha presented a path that practises in three ways: the practise of discipline, the practise of meditation, and the practise of wisdom. To the most-able vessels, Buddha presented a path that practises bodhichitta mind, the six paramitas and so on.

Again, please note that each of the three paths Buddha presented to the three types of vessels is predicated on the practitioner having overcome attachment to this life; and, each of the three paths is practised only in the interests of non-attachment, and not in this samsaric life’s interests.
COMMON SENSE VERSUS WISDOM

The world is now actually valuing so-called common sense more than wisdom is valued, which is so unfortunate, spiritually speaking, because valuing common sense leads to the devaluation of wisdom. Common sense relies on samsaric logic, whereas wisdom transcends the logic of this life. Wisdom emphasises the illusory aspect of the world and the fact that, in the long run, nothing lasts. Whereas common sense emphasises results which are all worked out in advance with mathematical precision.

A spiritual path must really transcend the path of common sense. Spiritual common sense has to be transcendent and uncommon common sense, not the usual common so-called sense. Of course, common sense has some very practical advantages, but one serious disadvantage is that common sense is baffled by the concept of non-duality.

Trakpa Gyaltsen says that in order for a path to be a truly spiritual path, it has to be a path that parts from attachment to the logic and reasoning of samsaric life. A path that encourages and boosts the common logic of cyclic existence is not a spiritual path, actually, whereas a path that goes against the tide of common knowledge is far more promising.

BENCHMARKS AND VEHICLES

For your information, there is a certain correspondence between Shenpa Shidrel’s four benchmarks and the three vehicles or yanas: the first benchmark warns that if one has attachment to this life, one is not a practitioner of dharma, and that lesson actually corresponds with the essential teaching of the Theravada vehicle.

The second benchmark warns that if one has attachment to the desire, form and formless realms or dimensions of samsara, one has no renunciation mind, and that lesson corresponds with the essential teachings of the Mahayana.

The last two benchmarks warn us that if we are attached to self, we are not a bodhisattva, and that if we grasp, we lose the view, and these lessons correspond with the essential teachings of the Vajrayana.

So here in the Shenpa Shidrel we have the quintessence of all the teachings of all three vehicles, condensed into four lines.

These last two benchmarks are unique features of the Mahayana teachings. To qualify as Mahayana, teachings have to place equal emphasis on skilful means and on wisdom. If one happens to be a non-Mahayana practitioner, then one can emphasise the wisdom aspect, since one’s sole aim is to opt out
of samsara. And indeed, one can exit samsara by emphasising the wisdom aspect.

But on the Mahayana path, one’s motive is not solely to exit samsara, and therefore wisdom and skilful means receive equal emphasis. Of course, we do wish to escape from the trap of samsara, but we also wish to avoid the trap of nirvana, whereas non-Mahayana practitioners take refuge in the Triple Gems to protect them from samsara only.

Mahayana bodhisattvas take refuge in the Triple Gems not only to be protected from samsara, but for protection from nirvana as well. Because of their wisdom, they are repelled by samsara, and because of their compassion, or in this case, because of their skilful means, they are repelled by nirvana. Such is the balanced stance of the Mahayana bodhisattva.

In a parallel way, the third benchmark, which says that if we’re attached to self then we’re not a bodhisattva, corresponds with the skilful means aspect; and, the fourth benchmark, which says that if we’re grasping then we have no view, corresponds with the wisdom aspect. So these two benchmarks together articulate the vital twin aspects of skilful means and wisdom.

This may be the first time some or many have heard of abandoning attachment to self being referred to as a skilful means. More about this profound way of characterising the abandonment of self later. The point is this: if we take Trakpa Gyaltsen’s advice to heart and abandon our attachment to the four objects of attachment, we will be lead on a qualified Mahayana path.

SO-CALLED TRULY-EXISTING ULTIMATE TRUTH

Broadly speaking, Mahayana speaks of two confusions or two defilements: one confusion or defilement is finding and then clinging to a self or ego and its possessions; and, the other confusion is finding and then clinging to a so-called truly-existing and ultimately real object.

The Prasangika Madhyamikans, and Shantideva, Chandrakirti, Nagarjuna and Aryadeva all agree that if we analyse and analyse and analyse with our logical and analytical tools of examples and analogies, and finally we have found an object that is truly-existing and ultimately real, that found object is most emphatically not the ultimate truth.

Chandrakirti does not mind if we search for a truly-existing ultimate truth, but he does mind greatly when we think we have found one. Chandrakirti minds greatly that the Cittamatrans, for example, search and examine and dissect
and finally find that it is the mind which is a so-called truly-existing ultimate truth: he will prove it to be neither truly-existing, nor ultimate, nor true.

And the same goes for the other schools like Sautrantika and Vaibhashika, who also identify an ultimate entity: he will turn their own arguments against them. And likewise, the Samkhya school is a branch of Hinduism that also identifies an ultimate entity of self. But we should not ridicule the Samkhya or even the Charvakas as naïve or primitive.

The Charvakas don’t believe in past lives and future lives, and basically they don’t believe in karma, the doctrine of cause, condition and effect. However, the Charvakan arguments are not easy to refute and defeat. It’s so unfortunate that the Charvaka philosophy is hardly mentioned in Chandrakirti’s Madhyamakavatara, where only a few stanzas are spent refuting their views.

Actually the Charvakas have made a valuable contribution to Indian philosophy. Before the Charvakas arrived on the scene, the brahmanical view predominated which held that its values such as the caste system, hierarchy, God and so on were sacrosanct and fixed. With their sharp-minded arguments, the Charvakas dismantled many religious and societal fixations.

All the schools have a good aptitude for courageously dismantling faulty reasoning. For instance, the Vaibhashika school dismantles the myth of a creator god really mercilessly and expertly. In fact, the Madhyamikan logic to dismantle the belief in a truly-existing, independently-existing god is indebted to their earlier logic.

Although they analyse and dismantle erroneous beliefs and values, in the end, each school still clings to belief in its own erroneous finding of a truly-existing particle or entity or object. Madhyamika is revolutionary in this regard: it dares to assert that whenever we identify an eternal principle or element, we are in error.

EMPTINESS AND CLARITY

We might wonder then, given that any analysis that finds an ultimate object of analysis is apparently an error, what about the path? Why offer prostrations and incense? Where do these gestures fit in? What is the point of receiving teachings like the five paths of buddhadharma and taking refuge, if everything is inconclusive and non-truly-existing?

Chandrakirti has an amazing answer: whatever ordinary people such as cowherds accept as conventional truth, that is not the result of analysis, he can accept. This echoes a quote of Buddha from the Sutra of the Meeting of
Father and Son, where Buddha clearly says that he has no dispute or issues with ordinary people, and has no wish to debunk the conventional truth.

The fourth benchmark which says that if we have grasping, we lose the view, is basically a teaching on shunyata: the whole lesson – that form is emptiness, and that emptiness is also form, and that form is no other than emptiness, and that emptiness is no other than form – is basically embedded within the fourth benchmark.

It is said that ultimate truth cannot be spoken, listened to, thought about, contemplated; one cannot meditate on the ultimate truth, because ultimate truth is unfathomable; which is why our language fails to express the unspeakable. Language is so useful for describing the describable, but it is not that useful for describing the indescribable.

Most of us tend to equate the idea of emptiness with an act of negation that wipes what is said to be empty out of existence. We stray into a conceptual trap, and our mind can go into a downward spiral and deteriorate. Remember, a mountainous ego is a minor problem compared to a sesame seed of misconception concerning emptiness, which is far worse.

But it’s very difficult not to misunderstand emptiness to be a negation. As a counterweight to balance the emptiness aspect, let us consider its counterpart aspect of clarity. This is not my innovation, by the way. These twin aspects of emptiness or shunyata, and clarity, are frequently alluded to in the sutras.

Don’t ever forget: Just because nothing exists truly, that doesn’t mean there is an absence of clarity. Emptiness is not like a vacuum; emptiness is not like wood that goes up in smoke until all is consumed and none is left; emptiness is not like water that goes up as vapour until all is consumed and none is left; emptiness is not like that.

Emptiness is not the annihilation of anything; it is not nihilistic; it is clarity, clarity and emptiness simultaneously. Ideally, one should have two mouths in order to speak the words emptiness and clarity at the same time. But since I have just one mouth, I have to say these words one word at a time, first one and then the other. And this is unfortunate, because the order in which I say the words will cause some people to be swept up into the emptiness aspect of appearances, and others to be swept up into their clarity aspect.

By the way, falling into one aspect or the other is not new; it is an old problem. In fact, lineages or traditions sprang up that emphasise either one aspect or the other as the primary one. We can safely say that the schools which emphasised the “form is emptiness” aspect have tended to minimise the “emptiness is also form” aspect. On a humorous note, one could say that
schools which were swept up by “form is emptiness” were too impatient to hear the rest of the speech.

The emphasis on the “form is emptiness” aspect became very popular at Nalanda and slowly, slowly migrated to northern India, and Tibet. And now I think in the West it is emphasised also. Whereas those schools that minimised the “form is emptiness” aspect, but were swept up by the “emptiness is form” aspect, tended to migrate to China and Japan, or so it would seem.

And according to each school’s emphasis, complementary styles of teaching evolved, and each has its own titular deity-in-chief, so to speak: Maitreya reigns over the “emptiness is form” crowd, and Manjushri reigns over the “form is emptiness” crowd.

APPEARANCES ARE EMPTY, YET THEY APPEAR

Why is it so difficult to talk about emptiness and clarity? Let me try this example. Suppose you look at a mirror and see your face. Now, has your face physically moved into the mirror? No, the face that appears in the mirror is not your physical face. Your face is not there, it’s just a façade with nothing behind it, a flat reflection. Your face appears but your face is not truly there.

It is difficult to balance the empty aspect of appearances with their clear aspect. One factor that influences our favouring the clear aspect of our reflection in a mirror is this: every time we glance at a mirror, the same face always appears to be looking back at us, and never a stranger’s face, or any other miscellaneous object, for that matter.

And this consistency reinforces our sense that the reflection we see is a true reflection, because if it were not a true reflection, sometimes our face might appear, but sometimes a banana, for example, or a newspaper might appear instead of our face. Mirrors would then be undependable, if that were the case.

Another factor that inclines us to favour clarity over emptiness is this: when you put on lipstick, you don’t paint it on the lips reflected in the mirror, but you use the reflected lips as a reference to paint your physical lips. Because there seems to be a one-to-one correspondence between our face and its reflection, our perception again tips in favour of the clarity aspect.

The mirror is like a web or matrix, interwoven with emptiness and clarity: the emptiness of one’s reflected face, which is not one’s actual face, yet it appears, is woven with the clarity of one’s face, which is reflected as one’s face and nothing else. One needs to hear about and learn and bear in mind
that, although appearances do appear with clarity, also appearances are emptiness.

Chandrakirti, Nagarjuna, Asanga and their crowd all agree that this is how everything is; everything that we perceive is constructed in this way. Now, forget about the mirror. Here is another example of how the empty aspect of appearances is given less attention while the clarity aspect is given more.

You are looking at me, but actually it is likely that you have filtered out the emptiness aspect of my appearance, why? The reason is that the clarity aspect of my appearance, after appearing here for five days in a row, seems reasonably stable and truly existent, which lends an air of realism.

And consensus is another factor used for establishing appearances as truly-existing and solid. If you ask around whether Rinpoche is really up here in the front of the room, almost everyone will say that yes, of course, he is there. So consensus also lends an air of realism, because there is a group agreement that I am here.

Another factor contributes to the clear aspect of my appearance outshining the empty aspect, and that factor is the evidence of my activities. That I have been speaking at length for days, and that there are recordings to prove it, lends a further note of realism. Durability, consensus and activity are three standards we use to corroborate appearances as solid reality.

By confirming our perceptions in this way, we let the clarity aspect of appearances overshadow their emptiness aspect. But sometimes, we let the emptiness aspect overshadow the clarity of appearances, which is the descent into nihilistic nothingness. Now this is, of course, quite a difficult point to explain.

Remember, in the Mahayana there are two defilements: one is clinging to one’s self or ego, and the other is clinging to an object of belief found as a result of analysis. For instance, if you observe and investigate and analyse the reflection in the mirror, and come to the conclusion that the reflected face does not exist, that is an unfortunate error.

Similarly, if you conclude that the reflected face does exist, based on its appearance in the mirror, whereas bananas, for example, do not appear, that is also an unfortunate error. Deciding that the reflected face does or does not exist is an error, for the very reason that both decisions are an object of belief found after analysis; in either case, we have constructed a thesis.

Nagarjuna famously argues, “I have no thesis, therefore I’m innocent.” Yes, every conclusion we draw is a thesis. For instance, if we conclude that the reflection does not exist, that taking of a position, in this case one of negation,
is our thesis. And if we take the position that the reflection does exist, based on the observation that moving our face moves the reflected face too, then that is our thesis. Grasping to one’s thesis is the second confusion or defilement.

FOUR DHARMAS, FOUR BENCHMARKS, FOUR SEALS

The first defilement of clinging to the self or the ego corresponds with Shenpa Shidrel’s third benchmark – that if one is attached to oneself, one is not a bodhisattva – which is the path to purify the confusion of self-clinging. The second defilement of clinging to one’s thesis or agenda corresponds with Shenpa Shidrel’s fourth benchmark – that if grasping fixation arises, one does not have the view – which is the path to purify the confusion of clinging to one’s thesis.

The first verse of the Four Dharmas of Gampopa is “Grant your blessing so that my mind may be one with the dharma,” which is basically an inspirational prayer that corresponds with Sachen Kunga Nyingpo’s first benchmark, “If you are attached to this life, you are not a person of Dharma.”

The second verse, “Grant your blessing so that dharma may progress along the path,” is an aspiration to succeed on the Mahayana path, by not grasping either samsara or nirvana, and by going beyond nirvana and samsara – that corresponds with the second benchmark, “If you are attached to cyclic existence, you do not have renunciation.”

The third verse, “Grant your blessing so that, following the path, confusion may be clarified,” is the path to uproot and clarify the confusion brought about by clinging to the self, corresponding with the third benchmark, “If you are attached to your own purpose, you don’t have bodhichitta.”

And the fourth verse of Gampopa’s Four Dharmas, “Grant your blessing so that confusion may dawn as wisdom,” corresponds with the fourth benchmark, “If grasping fixation arises, you do not have the view.” Lord Gampopa and Sachen Kunga Nyingpo so skilfully summarise the whole pith of the dharma into a concise and easy-to-remember stanza.

It is said that in order to defeat one’s confused attachment to samsara, most importantly one needs to reflect on how futile the desire, form and formless realms of existence are. We are supposed to be detached from samsara. But in order to have such detachment, we first have to get thoroughly familiar with the pitfalls of samsara. Once we clearly see the faults of samsara, and once we clearly see the futility of samsara, then nausea towards samsara arises naturally. Therefore we need to learn to recognise and to be aware and to beware of the faults of samsara.
Whenever we wander in samsara, there is always suffering: either suffering of suffering, or suffering of change, or all-pervasive suffering. Suffering is another word that is used too broadly, misleading many people. The meaning of suffering comes into play when we study the four seals or pillars of buddhadharma.

That all compounded things are impermanent, the first seal, by and large everybody accepts. The third seal says that all phenomena are emptiness, and the fourth seal says that nirvana is beyond extremes or concepts: these last two seals seem to be often glossed over, because we rather not have to think about such inconvenient facts.

But the second seal, which says that all emotions are suffering, always upsets people. Everyone passionately disagrees, and many people even try to correct me, suggesting that emotion may not be quite the right word. And actually I think they may be right, to a certain degree, since the Tibetan word sakchey has a larger meaning than the word emotion has.

Of course, people are willing to grant that the negative emotions cause us to suffer. But serious doubts arise that positive emotions like devotion and inspiration, creativity and ecstasy are also forms of suffering. The sticky love that we are all familiar with is, of course, suffering, but even a dharmic emotion like love or compassion is inevitably a form of suffering.

We have to ponder the Buddhist definition of suffering in order to address such questions and come to terms with them. Suffering is a consequence primarily of impermanence: impermanent means that whatever is assembled will fall apart eventually, it’s just a matter of time, and time means uncertainty, and invariably uncertainty means suffering.

It may come as a shock to learn that even the tenth bhumi bodhisattva’s meditative state is conditioned by all-pervasive suffering, although it is suffering of a quite sophisticated and subtle order; but this is clearly stated in the Mahayana sutras and shastras.

And since even the most sublime beings do still experience the subtlest form of suffering from even the most virtuous emotions, then without a doubt ordinary coarse emotions must of course cause suffering.

SO-CALLED HAPPINESS IS ALSO SUFFERING

The category of suffering has three branches, and when suffering is defined according to this model, we find that what we define as so-called happiness within the three realms of existence also fits the definition of suffering. What
we generally mean by suffering only partly refers to the suffering of suffering.

You need to understand that Buddha never said that one has to abandon the suffering; Buddha said that one has to examine and know where suffering comes from, in order then to be able to abandon the cause of suffering. This distinction would be well worth our time to ponder and come to a sure understanding of.

Of course, when Buddha says that one must know suffering, he does not mean one must know in only a scholarly way, though that may be one way to know; he has a more intimate knowledge in mind. By saying that one must know the suffering, he is pointing out in the same breath that our habitual mind does not intimately know the suffering.

In fact, we don’t even recognize suffering to be suffering, and therefore we mistake suffering to be happiness. There are countless such examples. Most so-called happiness only means that suffering is temporarily weakened, and this relative relief is called happiness. That’s one way to understand the genesis of happiness.

Another way to intimately know suffering is to establish that our experience of bliss or happiness is by nature transitory, and is not an absolute and permanent basis of happiness. Let us take ice cream, for a simple example: eating ice cream may be blissful, but it is only a temporary happiness which depends on the conditions of having ice cream to eat with a flavour one likes.

When the ice cream is exhausted, or if one over-indulges, then the conditions have changed, and happiness will turn into unhappiness. Whatever we grasp as a source of conditional happiness will eventually turn into its opposite. All of our possessions and social status will one day be scattered. One day our happiness based on popularity and net worth will sour.

Shantideva says that the work it takes to amass a great fortune costs one dearly in distress and struggle. However, we don’t see it that way, normally. We don’t recognise distress as distress, but instead we mistake distress to be happiness: watching our balance at the bank go up and up is our idea of happiness, never mind the blood, sweat and tears that our wealth is costing us.

There is a good chance that our big savings account has cost us a few friends; we may have cheated a few people, and stepped on a few toes along the way to make money. Our wealth has cost us a great deal of hardship and tension, but we don’t see it that way: our blind optimism sees only the improbable happiness of one day making our first million dollars.
It is nearly impossible to stack three strawberries one on top of the other. Yet sometimes, we may succeed in balancing one on top of one on the bottom, which unfortunately encourages us to pursue the improbability that a third strawberry can be balanced on top of the first two. Once in a while, unfortunately, this third strawberry will momentarily balance on top of the other two: unfortunate because it encourages the illusion that a stack of three is doable. This is how we are always striving to turn our fantasies into facts.

Buddha’s first of the four noble truths, Know the suffering, is such an important proclamation. In fact, this is a defining doctrine of the Buddhist path, as well as of the Hindu and Jain paths. Whereas Western religious doctrine tends to proclaim the abandonment of suffering, Buddha never says that we should abandon the suffering, only that we should abandon the cause of suffering. Once again, this is a critical distinction to note.

Time and the passage of time play a major role in the genesis of suffering. The element of time introduces the element of uncertainty; time equals uncertainty, so uncertainty is always the case, which is problematic, since it means we can never let our guard down and relax. We can never really have absolute confidence about anything. All we ever have to go on is guesswork.

Since we have been taking the same route between here and Kathmandu for twenty years, we might guess or expect we will reach Kathmandu, based on our past experience. But because of the element of time, with its possibility of contributing conditions such as the roads, weather, breakdown or collision, we are never guaranteed to reach Kathmandu. Every trip is uncertain.

THE SUFFERING OF SUFFERING

The suffering of suffering broadly includes the hell realm, hungry ghost realm and animal realm. But please rest assured that belief in a physically existing hell, for instance, is not mandatory. Shantideva clearly says that the hell realm, and any other realm for that matter, is basically a state of mind and not a literal and material place.

Realm may not be the best word, because speaking of six realms sounds like we are speaking of six physically-existing places. Dimension may be a better word. It may be better if we refer to the six dimensions or the six phases, rather than to the six realms: since a dimension has no fixed location or boundaries.

Right now, we are considered human beings; we are conditioned; due to causes and conditions, we inhabit a human style or dimension. Therefore, as humans, we do not hunger for green grass, since we do not inhabit an animal style or dimension. Basically, realms are phases or dimensions that our mood
passes through; and in our human experience, we pass through many moods daily.

This morning you get up and, for no apparent reason, you are in a bad mood. Everything irritates you; nothing makes sense. Our mind is so absorbed in that realm or dimension or phase or mood of negativity and distraction that the taste of breakfast doesn’t even register on our awareness. But that negativity is a passing phase that is slowly going to change as conditions change.

First, afternoon heat and high humidity make us lethargic and because of that, our bad mood is a lethargic and lazy bad mood. Then, lethargy and laziness numb our anxiety and switches us out of this stressed-out mood into a sleepy mood, or any other mood or phase: and so we continue to cycle through realm after realm, round and round like being caught in a revolving door.

Here is another example. In the morning, the alarm clock sounds, and we really don’t want to get out of bed, but we have to, and so we get up. And when we’re so groggy with brain fog, in a state between asleep and awake, we transit through the animal realm, we could say. Then we shower and shampoo and splash on cologne. We put on our suit or outfit, and we check ourselves in the mirror many times; our vanity tells us that we look good, or that we are presentable at least. And with that confident mood of being presentable, we transit through the god realm, we could say. And when we encounter our boss with our colleague who we fear is outshining us, we transit through the asura or jealous god realm, we could say. When at the end of a stressful day at work we’re informed that we’re fired or laid off, and we slam doors and pick a fight with our spouse, we transit through the hell realm, we could say.

So you see, the six realms do not refer to six geographical places; there is no realm of hell to be found deep below the earth’s crust, though some sutras do allude to a literal hell: but this is a skilful technique to bring very illiterate ordinary beings closer to the truth, otherwise known as teachings that require explanation, or expedient teachings.

The six realms are psychological zones, and are therefore experienceable as states of mind at any given time, one after the other, in an unending continuum. Here is the point: whichever of the six realms that we happen to be cycling through, all realms are affected by the suffering of suffering, meaning that uncertainty operates across all the realms or moods.
THE SUFFERING OF CHANGE

In the bardo teachings, it is said that our mind is like a feather in the wind which has no choice but to go in whatever direction the wind blows. One has no control over it; which by the way does not mean that the direction our mind goes is predestined: there just happens not to be any countervailing wind of karma to counter that prevailing karmic wind.

Suppose that you have left your job and town and country and come to Kathmandu to follow a spiritual path, with the expectation that now you’ll finally have the chance to practice. Then suppose as you are circumambulating the stupa, you meet a beautiful Bolivian girl or a Mexican boy, and fall in love: right then and there the whole chain reaction of samsara starts all over.

Even if you renounce the trappings of job and home and town, nevertheless you may still be side-tracked from your spiritual journey, even while circumambulating the stupa at Boudhanath, by a new romance you never saw coming. You never do know with certainty what is coming next. The karmic wind just goes wherever it goes, with no advance notice.

Similar derailments occur many times in our lives, and are always bound to occur. If we have enough countervailing karma, then, yes, we can stay on track; but if we don’t, we are like a feather in the wind. A feather in the wind is such a good image, because it perfectly illustrates our predicament of being blown about by the winds of uncertainty.

Today’s friends are tomorrow’s enemies. Today’s enemies are tomorrow’s friends. The “homes, friends, wealth and comfort of samsara” are all uncertain, as the fourth reminder reminds us, and even the continuity of our beliefs is uncertain. We are simply borne away when the karmic wind blows, unless we have enough weight to anchor us.

We may identify ourselves as Buddhists now, because we have been persuaded by the logic of Nagarjuna and Chandrakirti, but that does not in any way mean that we will never regress back to childish or primitive beliefs about reality. You might imagine that lapsed Buddhists must be extremely gullible individuals, but we all have this trait of gullibility.

For instance, you are listening to me attentively at the moment. But in the time it takes to snap my fingers, a small karmic wind tomorrow may shift the balance and tip the scale so you want never to see me again in this life. It is within the realm of possibility that we may become worst enemies; this is entirely possible. Any situation is always that volatile and completely fluid.
Nothing is certain, and that is the common thread running throughout the suffering of suffering. Within the limbo of basic uncertainty that we endure, we suffer our routine suffering of daily life. So much suffering. So much suffering makes me sigh deeply. Not getting what we want, and getting what we don’t want, we suffer, regardless of the realm we transit through.

Much of our suffering of suffering derives from our sense of deprivation, and entitlement; we feel deprived of what we want but do not have. We always feel poor, not just poor in money but poor in every respect: poor in friendships, poor in experiences, poor in luxuries, poor in the basics. And we fear not keeping up with others, and being left behind.

This is what we refer to as poverty mentality, this mind-set or sense or dimension of perpetual impoverishment: it is a great handicap. This state of mind makes us covetous and rivalrous and mires us in discontentment, and the attitude of feeling sorry for ourselves and our lot in life is one of the most frequent complaints we suffer from in the human realm.

The second origin of much of our suffering of suffering is our habitual sense of constant motion in our lives: we are always absorbed in our agenda and we never rest. Even when we’re on vacation, our mind never rests. Even when we’re unemployed and have leisure time, our mind never ceases to crank its agenda of self-preservation.

Trakpa Gyaltsen says that when the suffering of suffering associated with the hell realm, hungry ghost realm or animal realm ambushes us in a large-scale attack, it can be unbearably painful; it can overwhelm us, which is understandable. But then why do we still persevere in perpetuating the cause of even further suffering? Our behaviour is mystifying, because it is so irrational.

Constantly engaging in non-virtuous action, which obviously leads us to more suffering, makes no sense. Ironically, we diligently practise the discipline of suffering as we exercise our ignorance. And by practising our non-virtuous discipline, we perpetuate the causes and conditions that perpetuate our perpetual suffering.

We have covered much of the ground of the suffering of change in the context of suffering in general. But the suffering of change tends to be more visible and conspicuous. The higher born can suffer a lower rebirth, and mighty Indra can be reborn as the lowest slave. Change is a certainty: that even the sun and the moon will lose their shine one day is a certainty.

The fact remains that the wealthy have countless times through the ages been reduced to poverty, and countless times the powerful have been reduced to powerlessness. Great clans have been reduced over countless generations to a
few remaining members, and then one last member, and then no surviving members.

But these scenarios may be hard to imagine: such radical changes seem like remote events. So Trakpa Gyaltsen says that we need not refer to such dramatic reversals of fortune or a heavenly apocalypse to appreciate the suffering of change: we have only to look no further than our own human situation, since our perceptions and our values are changing all the time.

ALL-PERVASIVE SUFFERING

All-pervasive suffering, from our mundane point of view, may not even seem like suffering at first glance. Yet it is the case that as soon as our dualistic mind splits self and phenomena, suffering begins. The root of samsara is clinging to the self or ego. Yet even after we crush and destroy our clinging to the self, as long as we cling to phenomena, we shall still suffer.

Arhats and first bhumi bodhisattvas are not even samsaric beings, they are sublime beings who have abandoned samsara, yet even they do have a degree of suffering, because there is still a need to progress on the path. The first bhumi is just that, the first bhumi, and not the second bhumi. One has to progress to the second, to the third, to the fourth, all the way to the tenth, and then one has to enter the path of no more learning. Until we reach non-dual enlightenment, we will still be clinging to some degree of duality of self and phenomena, and to that degree, we will be suffering accordingly.

Another approach to all-pervasive suffering is found in the fourth seal, “Nirvana is beyond extremes,” which is understood to mean “Enlightenment is peace.” This, of course, misleads many people who have a conventional understanding of “peace” as in “peace and quiet”: peace such as a koi pond, Zen garden, mountains and waterfalls; and “quiet” as in no noise or traffic, on a weekend getaway with a “do not disturb” sign on the doorknob.

For others, the peace that is thought of as enlightenment is thought to be personified by one who smiles and walks gently and is mindful in all his or her conduct. These concepts of peace are extreme ideas, because the so-called peace depends on particular conditions.

Nirvana is not that kind of peace; nirvana is beyond extremes and conditions based on the duality of self and phenomena. The peace that is enlightenment is based on the non-duality of no self and no phenomena: it is peaceful because it is free of duality, which is the source of all conflicts.

Let’s go back to the mirror. The moment we step back and accentuate our perception of the clarity of our face over our perception of the emptiness of
its reflection, conflict is a given; and conversely, the moment we accentuate our perception of the emptiness of the reflected face over our perception of the clarity of our face, conflict is a given.

Depending on whether we accentuate the emptiness aspect or the clarity aspect of appearances, we will stray into one of the extreme ideas of either nihilism or eternalism. And then we will construct a thesis, either a nihilistic or an eternalistic one, which will be in opposition to others’ theses, and conflict will ensue.

Nirvana, on the other hand, has deconstructed all the dualism between appearance and emptiness, between self and phenomena, and in the absence of opposing poles, conflict is also absent. Free of extremes, the peace of nirvana is non-dual and unconditioned, and it is free of friction because nirvana has no thesis or agenda to push.
If you are attached to this life, you are not a person of Dharma.  
If you are attached to cyclic existence, you do not have renunciation.  
If you are attached to your own purpose, you do not have bodhichitta,  
   the thought of enlightenment.  
If grasping fixation arises, you do not have the view.

TALK SIX

First of all, most of us don’t even know how to refrain from grasping, or in  
other words, how to defeat attachment. Even when we consciously aim for  
non-grasping and non-attachment, that very aim itself often becomes the  
object we unconsciously grasp and attach to: whereas wisdom mind is free of  
aims and grasping, and is therefore non-dualistic.

To us who haven’t even caught a glimpse, not even a pale imitation of a  
glimpse of non-dual mind, the idea of non-dual mind sounds so hypothetical.  
How can the taste of salt be conveyed to someone who has never tasted salt?  
How can wisdom mind be conveyed to us who have never tasted such  
freedom from aims and grasping? It is next to impossible.

Yet even we who have no direct experience of non-dual mind can sense that  
non-duality is what we need to plumb. As long as we remain bound to our  
thesis or agenda or aim, we are bound by conflicting emotions and non-  
virtuous deeds; and, therefore we are also bound to keep experiencing the  
karmic consequences of our misdeeds, in the depths of samsara.

The nearest experience we have of wisdom mind is the practise of  
mindfulness. All the way from the Shravakayana to the Tantrayana, the  
practise of mindfulness is fundamental. Of course, the meaning of  
mindfulness is more and more nuanced as each successive yana approaches  
from a slightly different angle, which diversity is wonderful.

So mindfulness is of the utmost importance. It is the closest we can simulate  
wisdom mind’s non-grasping, non-dualistic view. Ordinary beings like us  
must learn how to create favourable conditions to stimulate and feed our  
mindfulness, because conditions are the only medium for change that we have  
to overcome our chronic unmindfulness.

The Zen master’s example tells us that a thorn can be used as a tool to prick a  
thorn from our skin. The thorn of unmindfulness and conditioned responses is  
pricked with the thorn of mindfulness and counter-conditioning: it is up to  
each of us to condition ourselves to tune in to mindfulness. And we do this by  
arranging frequent strategic reminders to do so in our daily lives.
Whether it’s a bumper sticker on our car or an amulet around our neck, whatever will attune us to mindfulness, we are encouraged to do: it is like tying a string on our finger to remind us not to forget the thing we want to remember. And that stroke of mindfulness reminds us in turn to be mindful of the Triple Gem, and mindful of taking refuge.

In a sutra, it is said that if we recall and are mindful and observant of the Triple Gem, that is the epitome of all the yanas; mindfulness is the common thread running through. A variety of visual aids such as stupas, prayer flags, rosaries, statues, shrines, cushions, libraries and monastics in robes can symbolise and remind us of the Triple Gem, and of renunciation mind.

And special days in the liturgical calendar like today are another way we have of reminding ourselves of the Buddha, dharma and sangha: it isn’t that tomorrow we can forget all about the Triple Gem, you understand; it’s just that today we especially remember the Triple Gem. So we take advantage of any and all means available to tweak our memory.

Today is observed as the anniversary of Buddha Shakyamuni’s enlightenment, and today is also observed as the anniversary of Buddha’s parinirvana; and, according to certain interpretations, today is the anniversary of the day Buddha first taught the dharma as well. These three amazing events in the life of the Buddha converge on a single day as a super-reminder of the Triple Gem.

So on this special occasion, let us do whatever we can to remind ourselves of the Triple Gem, because to remember the Triple Gem is the superior way to gather merit. And, according to the Mahayana, the supreme way of gathering merit begins with the actual planting of the seed of bodhichitta in one’s mindstream.

Shantideva says in the second chapter of the Bodhicharyavatara that once we really understand bodhichitta, we are so shocked to have missed the obvious; we wonder how we could not have seen earlier. As Shantideva and many other masters say, that shock acts on us like alchemy that changes the base metal of pre-bodhichitta into the pure gold of bodhichitta.

A heartfelt wish to secure enlightenment for all sentient beings can actually turn ordinary daily activities into virtuous activities, and merit is easily gathered. We need to plant an auspicious bodhichitta virus in our system. This bodhichitta virus is the best way to gather merit, because at the same time, bodhichitta interferes with our anti-meritorious ways and they malfunction.

Bodhichitta is the critical outlook. Of course, simply wishing enlightenment for all sentient beings is praiseworthy; that alone is wonderful. But in order to
empower that wish as an engine of virtue and merit, we must take the bodhisattva vow.

The planting of bodhichitta has two steps: the first step is to purify our minds of aims and agendas and theses, which are the weeds we have to clear before we can plant the seed of bodhichitta; and, the second step is to gather the merit that will fertilise our minds and encourage the vigorous growth of bodhichitta.

So as a gesture of purification, we recite this three-part sutra, which also happens to be one of the core Mahayana sutras. And then, as a gesture to grow our merit, we recite the seven-limbed prayer, and all that. By the way, I'm also going to take the bodhisattva vow, because this is a splendid chance to grow merit ten million-fold on such a significant day as Saga Dawa Duchen.

BODHISATTVA VOW PRELIMINARIES

Picture that all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas are in front of you. Have confidence that they are there, even though you may not see them. When you open your eyes you may only see the wall in front of you, but be confident that Buddhas and bodhisattvas are in front of you. And also, picture that you are in the midst of a reverent throng of all sentient beings as far as the eye can see, and all are in the presence of the same Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

This bifocal emphasis is a wonderful feature of the Mahayana, known as the two fields: the field of sublime beings, and the field of sentient beings. Emphasis on each field is equally important in order to increase our merit. Sentient beings, by the way, are not looked upon as a lower field, and sublime beings are not looked upon as an upper field. But in fact Shantideva says that sentient beings are like the beloved children of Buddha, and therefore we have a duty to serve their best interest and look after their welfare.

Before the field of sublime beings, and in the midst of the field of fellow sentient beings, we make a gesture of confession of all our misdeeds, and by doing so, we purify them. We confess all our misdeeds with genuine remorse for any harmful consequences we have been responsible for, past and present. Then we make a solemn promise that in the future, we shall refrain from behaving in these non-virtuous ways, which we confess and regret.

Now, to request the bodhisattva vow, we make a mandala offering to the assembly of sublime beings. When taking the bodhisattva vow, it is our store of merit that fertilises and enriches the soil in which the seed of bodhichitta is planted. In the Sutra of the Fortunate Aeon, we hear stories of how great bodhisattvas of the past, wishing to take the bodhisattva vow, went to their
masters to request, and their masters would coach them that before the vow is given, the aspirant has to cultivate merit by making an auspicious offering.

There is a beautiful story about a bodhisattva who was so poor that he had nothing to offer, but it so happened that the master who would bestow the bodhisattva vow was a potter by trade, and so the master made a deal with him: if the aspirant worked at kneading the clay in the pottery studio for a day, that service would serve as his offering in lieu of a material offering. In another story, a penniless aspirant offers the master a great leaf for scooping water, and that is sufficient.

And Shakyamuni Buddha went to Dipamkara to request him to bestow the bodhisattva vow and was coached by him to make an offering first. However, the bodhisattva was penniless. In the course of wandering, he met a beautiful girl selling flowers, but he had no coins to pay for a flower to offer to Dipamkara. The girl would only agree to give him a flower for free on condition that he would agree to be her husband for the next five hundred lifetimes. And the bodhisattva told her this would be a difficult promise to keep, because one day he would be a bodhisattva who would have to be willing to offer his own limbs, and who would even have to offer her to a beggar, if a beggar were to ask. And the girl said that that would not present any problem; and, she decided to take the bodhisattva vow too. Of course, the bodhisattva incarnated as Shakyamuni Buddha many aeons later, and his wife of many lifetimes incarnated as none other than Yasodhara.

Since mandala offerings are an engine for gathering merit, we recite the short mandala offering several times, and then we recite the thirty-seven heap mandala offering once.

Then we offer the seven staples or basic necessities that are needed on a regular basis for everyday life. Some items are outdated, such as water for washing feet, but this is the tradition, and we will observe that way.

Next, we chant a short dharani or mantra, which is very significant; especially those who study Vajrayana will relate to this. Nagarjuna says that for those who can accept emptiness, everything is acceptable. With this open acceptance as one’s view, there is not a single thing on this earth that cannot be offered, because the true nature or the essence of every single object that we can think of is invariably emptiness.

No object is disqualified as an invalid offering by reason of its being unclean, such as even a used tissue or dirty socks. Of course, from the ultimate point of view, a Kleenex and a gold coin share a single essence. But also from the relative point of view, Buddha has no preference for gold or for tissue. Therefore, we make these offerings not to enrich the field of sublime beings, but rather to enrich our store of merit.
Chanting this dharani, please picture that all the substances of earth are now offering substances. Then you can enlarge that picture by imagining, for example, that one lamp is multiplied into countless lamps, and that one stick of incense is multiplied into billions and billions of sticks of incense. Use your imagination, be creative.

Then we offer robes and alms to the bhikshus and bhikshunis, and then to the lay bodhisattvas and the Buddhas in the form of sambhogakaya, we offer earrings, nose rings, and by all means, yes, offer iPods, Shazam, Cadillac. I usually offer Saks Fifth Avenue and Macy’s, because they are my idea of quality offering substance; we all have our own ideas. So now please imagine offering all these infinite gifts to the field of sublime beings, and recite this offering mantra three times.

The gesture of offering prostrations is highly significant. It is one of the most important gestures of offering we can make. Prostrating signifies that one has at least a shred of humility: we respectfully bow down and symbolically offer our body, speech and mind. In fact, the Buddha’s venerable ushnisha is thought to be an expression of his humility and respectful veneration and countless acts of prostrating to and circumambulating his master. So now we shall do three half-prostrations, due to space constraints, as a gesture of surrender.

TAKING THE REFUGE VOW

The taking of refuge is next. Do not think that you are taking refuge in me; that’s emphatically not the case. To take refuge in me would be an immediate violation of the refuge vow: by taking refuge in the Buddha, you vow not to regard any unenlightened being as an ultimate object of refuge. So philosophically speaking, you would already be contradicting your vow. You are taking refuge in the Buddha, dharma and sangha. I am merely a matchmaker, so to speak. I cannot protect you; I am only the middleman.

Some people think that, once they have taken refuge with a lama or tulku or khenpo, they are bound to this person as their guru. Guru is a generic term that refers to a teacher or one who has a certain wise mastery of a body of knowledge. In India and Nepal, the culture honours the lineage of elders; dancers and musicians will often bow at the feet of their dance or music gurus before a performance, which is so touching. Even the carpenter guru and the driving instructor guru are respected as teachers who transmit beneficial information for practical life.

That said, guru in the Vajrayana sense means one who has a wise mastery of the buddhadharma and who can show the path of liberation. The Vajrayana guru is not only a master instructor; the guru manifests as the very path and as
all of phenomena at that stage. The guru dissolves into us, meaning that the
guru and you are not two. That is the ideal view of guru.

So I am only the middleman. Taking refuge with me as your preceptor will in
no way whatsoever bind you and me as teacher and student. Make sure to
understand this clearly. I mention this in order to clarify the matter in my own
mind as much as to clarify the matter for you. You will not be under any
obligation to me. This ceremony doesn’t involve any guru-disciple dynamic
at all.

Since I have no red hot branding iron to burn my guru logo on your hide, you
are free to seek teachings wherever and whenever you can; you and I will not
be having an exclusive relationship after this vow; you are free to study with
as many gurus as you wish. We can quite safely say that there is a tradition of
studying with many gurus.

I am said to be an incarnation of a master named Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo,
who is said to have studied with more than one hundred fifty teachers from all
the lineages, including Bon. His sometimes-teacher and sometimes-student,
Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thaye, is said to have had nearly as many. And
Jamyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö had over seventy gurus.

That said, let us continue. As a foundation for the bodhichitta, we take refuge.
Most of you have already taken refuge, I know, but please participate. For
those who are taking refuge for the first time, visualize that Buddha is your
witness: here is a statue of Buddha for inspiration. Don’t think of this statue
as a statue made of bronze or gold, motionless and unblinking. Imagine that
you are in the sacred presence of Shakyamuni Buddha, and offer three half-
prostrations.

Now we fold our hands in anjali and recite these refuge verses. And now we
vow to take refuge in the Triple Gem. Since this is a Mahayana ceremony, we
take refuge from now until we bring all sentient beings to enlightenment.
Now recite the refuge verses twice more. At the end of the last recitation, we
will pause, and then I will snap my fingers. Think that as of that very instant,
you formally take refuge, and are now a refugee, effective immediately.

TAKING THE BODHISATTVA VOW

Now we take the bodhisattva vow, in an abbreviated version. Picturing all the
Buddhas and bodhisattvas in front of you, and all sentient beings surrounding
you, think that for the sake of all these sentient beings’ enlightenment, with
the tathagathas as our witness, we are taking the bodhisattva vow. Thinking
this, we will recite the seven-limbed prayer three times.
In order to arouse relative bodhichitta, first we have to simulate that arousal by practicing aspiration bodhichitta, and pledging to manifest as medicine, bridge, water, breeze, ministers, ferry: whatever is necessary in order to introduce sentient beings to enlightenment.

Then as a gesture of arousing application bodhichitta, picture that you increase exponentially from one form into billions of forms with myriad endowments and qualities, in order to help sentient beings worldwide that much more immediately with all the necessities of life, and especially one necessity which, of course, is the path of liberation.

Now as a gesture to arouse ultimate bodhichitta, let us pause for a few moments, and keeping a slight distance from whatever thoughts may arise, let us simply watch them. Don’t make any judgement in favour of good thoughts or against bad thoughts. Don’t try to eliminate or to elaborate upon thoughts. Just watch them and do not interfere or speculate or embellish.

Now we each declare the following:

_Today I have become the heir or heiress of the Buddha. Today I have planted the seed of bodhichitta, which one day will mature as the qualities of Buddha, and the wish to bring about the enlightenment of all sentient beings will ripen. Today my life has become fruitful. Today this human birth is made precious and meaningful. Today I have become a son or daughter of the Buddha. I now belong to the clan of the Buddha and shall act according to the dignity of that clan to carry out my duty, which is to liberate all beings. At the very least, I shall not bring disgrace upon my noble family._

Now request the fields of sublime beings and sentient beings to rejoice, because today a new servant of humanity is born. Request all these beings to take delight, because we have made this public declaration of our commitment. Let us celebrate that the usefulness of our lives is now in the service of a noble purpose.

Now we declare to all the powerful gods and guardian deities that they are obligated to help us in our limitless efforts to help limitless sentient beings, because we are now legitimate heirs and heiresses of the Buddha.

Now we recite a promise to preserve this precious compassionate wish of bodhichitta. Once again, we make offerings, praise, confess and so on, but we will do a short version, and recite an abbreviated seven-limbed prayer. Then we declare our gratitude for having been granted the vow. And then, to close the ceremony, we recite the dedication of merit prayer.

But there is one further ritual of offering our body, speech and mind symbolically to the Triple Gem of Buddha, dharma and sangha: with these
scissors I will snip a bit of hair, only if you want me to, and give the hair back to you, to offer at a very holy place, if possible.

There is a story that when Nagarjuna was a bodhisattva, he cut his hair and spread it around the local area, and everywhere that a hair touched the ground, a tree grew on that spot. Now even a simple gesture like spreading our cut hair on the earth, with our limitless wish of bodhichitta, can bear fruit, since we are all alchemists now.

One last detail: first-time refugees will receive a name to mark this auspicious occasion. We have inscribed the names in Sanskrit, by design. Please refer to the front row for English translation.

FLOCK OF BIRDS LIKE A STAIN ON THE SKY

Now let us resume our Lojong Shenpa Shidrel journey from where we paused in the course of parsing the second benchmark, “If you are attached to cyclic existence, you do not have renunciation.” If we are attached to the desire, form and formless realms or dhatus of existence, we have no renunciation mind. And in order to evolve renunciation mind, it is imperative to clearly see the disadvantages of samsara.

The disadvantage or the futility of samsara boils down to the three types of suffering, which we have been studying. There is one aspect of all-pervasive suffering that we need to explore further: in the language of practise, yes, we can use words like defilement, obscuration, emotion and so forth. But that said, we are always strongly advised to practise the disciplines of hearing and contemplation further and further, and to delve more deeply into the meanings of words.

The classic Buddhist expressions are very valuable. In Tibetan, these defilements are also called jikpey tsok. Jikpey is such a poetic word. Jikpey describes a volatile state of decaying, moving, eroding, rusting, wearing out, and constantly changing position, colour, shape and function from moment to moment. Tsok basically means being in that condition or that state of jikpey or volatility. This is a very potent word, one that will enhance your study of Tantra in the future, if you choose, as will the word phowa.

By defilement, we mean our perception is defiled or stained or blinded by emotion. Because of emotions, phenomena that are in a continuous process of falling apart are wrongly perceived as truly-existing phenomena.

Let me illustrate: a great flock of birds in the distant sky appears to be a black spot, which is a distortion, because that spot is actually fragmented into as many parts as there are birds in the flock; it is not one indivisible stain. And,
from the Buddhist point of view, everything is like that: everything is composite, and in constant motion, and dependent on conditions.

Likewise, our flock of deceptive thought patterns, which are composite and ever-changing and conditional, we deludedly perceive to be solid and partless and real: and it is this deluded pattern of perception with no basis in reality that is the definitive definition of defilement.

Similarly, if we misperceive a scarecrow to be a human being, then our perception has no basis in reality, since the scarecrow only appears to be human because it is at a distance.

Because of the distance that we are from the object of our defiled perception, our perception is distorted: we don’t see transitory collections, so-called because they’re ephemeral and composite phenomena, as transitory collections; we see transitory collections as entities in their entirety.

We have distorted perception, like seeing a black spot on the sky as a partless whole, though it is composed of hundreds of birds; or, like seeing a rice tassel from a distance as a partless whole, though it is composed of hundreds of grains. This is the most accurate definition of the meaning of the word defilement.

The catch, though, is that transitory collections work, like a microphone works, like a body works, though they are composite and conditional. And because composite phenomena function, we forget that they are only transitory collections in the process of breaking down.

For instance, though you are perceiving me as a partless whole, in reality you are seeing a collection of transitory elements, which are disintegrating even as we speak: we misperceive fleeting elements to be partless wholes, permanent and independent. This is the very meaning of defilement, and such obscuration occurs in every sphere of our existence.

YESTERDAY’S HAND AND TODAY’S HAND

Another common example of a transitory collection, which we misperceive to be a partless whole, is our hand. We think of this hand as virtually permanent, in that we think of it as the same hand we had yesterday; we think this hand is identical to the hand that we have had for forty years. And to that extent, we think of this hand as a constant unit, even though really it is arranging and rearranging all the time. Never mind yesterday’s hand: this morning’s hand and this moment’s hand aren’t even exactly the same. My hand of a minute ago is not identical to this hand sixty seconds later: it has already aged. The skin
dries out and needs moisturizing lotion, for instance, meaning that skin is not a constant skin; it is affected by conditions.

Secondly, we misperceive a transitory collection of skin and blood, veins and pus and so on, to be a whole partless self-enclosed unit we call a hand. We act as if there were an enduring object to designate as a hand, when in fact “hand” is only a convenient label for a temporary phenomenon made of bone and sinew and ligament. The fact is that when we shake someone’s hand, we do not knowingly shake their knuckles and cartilage and flesh: we shake their hand as a whole integrated hand, and not as an aggregate hand made up of its parts.

Thirdly, we think of transitory collections as independently existing and self-sufficient entities, which is demonstrably untrue: for example, this innocent yellow flower and my hand have a co-dependent relationship. And this is how everything is in relation to everything else.

This appendage at the end of my arm depends on an enormous set of conditions. This transitory collection called a hand is not an independent self-contained unit, but a composite of variables that depend on conditions. Because of its inconstancy, divisions, and dependency, this transitory collection cannot be said to be a truly-existing phenomenon: its so-called existence depends on a mentality that misperceives temporary phenomena to be truly-existing.

Basically all the objects of our defiled perception are lies, and we collect a treasury of all these lies, and we celebrate this treasury: this is the epitome of defilement. We’re bound to suffer in a web of self-deception and disappointment as long as we’re afflicted with this defiled perception.

Can you understand that, for instance, if we conceptualise and solidify the distant black spot in the sky as a single cohesive entity, then we have an expectation: we expect the phenomenon we are looking at to cohere. But as the black spot nears, we clearly see that the stain is not a single stain like an inkblot; it is a composite of dots and space, and when the dots get closer, we see clearly that the stain is a flock of crows in the sky, which disappoints our first impression.

Frankly, every bit of sentient experience suffers from this cycle of confusion which is all-pervasive. You see, the Buddhist explanation of suffering is so profound. It goes well beyond the realm of physical complaints, such as headaches and nasty rashes.

We suffer because we are confused. We are confused because we have mistaken ideas about what is true and what isn’t true. And these mistaken
ideas stir up conflicting emotions based on foolish beliefs, which in turn are bound to inflict pain at some point.

All-pervasive suffering persists through the bhumis, though to an ever-decreasing degree; but even the tenth bhumi bodhisattva’s meditative state is still afflicted with the most subtle degree of defiled perception and confusion; and therefore, it is also afflicted with the most subtle degree of suffering: because everything, including even the path and the fruit, is transient and has to be transcended to shed the most subtle levels of human suffering.

There is a refrain that recurs in Trakpa Gyaltsen’s text that I have neglected to mention:

“How sad that unfortunate people attach to a mere semblance that is no more than a composite and dependent and temporary gathering of conditions.”

The ancient expressions are very very sweet. For example, the measure of a short period of time is expressed as the length of time it takes to drink a cup of tea: it occurs in the context of a caveat, acknowledging the great merit to be gained from many years of study and practice and recitation, whereas it then goes on to say that meditating even only for the few minutes it takes to drink a cup of tea is actually vastly more meritorious and beneficial. Such a folksy way to measure a brief session of meditation strikes a poetic chord in our mind, don’t you think?

A dharma practitioner does not have to live in a cave and have an austere lifestyle. We are a dharma practitioner if we can simply meditate for as long as it takes to drink a cup of tea.
If you are attached to this life, you are not a person of Dharma.
If you are attached to cyclic existence, you do not have renunciation.
If you are attached to your own purpose, you do not have bodhichitta, the thought of enlightenment.
If grasping fixation arises, you do not have the view.

TALK SEVEN

If we are grasping to samsara, we have no renunciation mind. Grasping is the view of non-renunciation, whereas the view of renunciation is one of non-grasping. If we grasp to this life, we lose the view; and if we grasp to samsara, the view is lost; and, if we grasp to self or ego, again the view is lost.

Whether we grasp to this life or to samsara or to our self, what matters most is that grasping arises at all, not the object of the grasping. The fact that we grasp at all is the downfall of the view, as the fourth benchmark sums up nicely; whereas the view of non-grasping is like our precious eyesight.

The most accessible method to cultivate renunciation is to know, vividly and intimately, the drawbacks of samsara, which result in the three kinds of suffering. This is one way we have to train renunciation mind, because by thoroughly familiarizing ourselves with the pains of samsara, we slowly lose our appetite for samsara.

A second and more important way to train renunciation mind is to actually see through the veil of samsara and see that the samsaric view is not an inherently-existing veil: that elevated understanding of the view is such a valuable asset to have.

Suppose you are dreaming, dreaming that you are a prisoner suffering so much pain and anxiety and torture, dreaming up a plan to escape. But better than planning to escape from your dream prison would be to simply see through its seeming bricks and mortar, and realize that the prison is intangible and only a dream, making an escape unnecessary at all.

That element of almost x-ray vision to see through samsara is a must-have, if not now, then eventually. This vision is so important because otherwise, in the absence of renunciation mind, we needlessly endure self-inflicted torment based on our dream of samsara.

To be clear, we renounce samsara not because samsara is too sinful or sacrilegious or unholy or evil; we renounce samsara because in fact samsara does not even exist, which is a much more profound perspective.
Think of it this way: in the dream prison, you are bound by dream shackles. But from the point of view that samsara is a dream, the effort to escape the shackles of samsara is unnecessary. In fact, the very effort to escape is the cause of further pain, and it’s a ridiculous, useless pain since the shackles we long to escape from do not even exist.

So this is the insight pointing to the non-existence of worldly life and samsara and our self-agenda that we must have, in order to utterly renounce attachment to this life, and samsara, and self. Of course, for beginners like us, learning to think of samsara as a prison is a very valuable training. Renunciation is basically a mind-training to reduce the value we place on samsara.

The more we value samsara, the more difficult it is to let it go. But by hearing and contemplating again and again, we gradually learn to devalue our attachment to samsara, and to value our detachment from samsara. So you see, we cannot simply summon the mind of renunciation with the push of a button.

In the Twenty Thousand Verses, one bodhisattva tells the Buddha that he is feeling very sad. And Buddha was pleased to hear this, because the qualities of sadness, renunciation mind, devotion, and confidence in the view are what in Tibetan are referred to as “the wealth of the sublime,” which, like material wealth, is so difficult to acquire.

Intellectual knowledge of buddhadharma is actually much easier to acquire. By studying and receiving teachings and analysing and reading books, one can easily acquire a wealth of knowledge. But a wealth of genuinely sad renunciation is a rare treasure indeed.

Minerals like diamonds and gold are not as difficult to extract as the diamond and gold qualities that we call the wealth of the sublime. In order to achieve sublime wealth, we need to train our mind to value sublime qualities as worthy of the effort necessary to cultivate these qualities.

For instance, if we are on the brink of starvation, the effort needed to climb a mountain would only be worthwhile if there were food waiting for us at the top. Not even diamonds and gold could induce us, because diamonds and gold are inedible, and their value is erased.

Whereas, if we are on the brink of samsaric chaos, the effort needed to climb the mountain of renunciation is felt to be worthwhile because there is food of sublime wealth waiting for us at the top. And because diamonds and gold of samsaric chaos are indigestible, their value is erased.
Samsaric values are not a risk only for lay practitioners. Lamas and monks are at even greater risk of falling prey to spiritual materialism: because we are responsible for and loyal to the wealth and health of the monasteries, statues, shrine objects and all of that, our samsaric attachment might be camouflaged as spirituality, which is clearly a risk factor.

Lay people’s handling of their wealth and property is not mixed up in their minds with any spiritual pretences of holiness and virtue to live up to; whereas in the monastic situation, virtuousness is expected. However, a very fine line divides what is beneficial for meeting the needs of sentient beings, versus what is beneficial for meeting one’s personal desire, and lamas must walk that very fine line.

RENUNCIATION IN A DEGENERATE AGE

Nowadays, just to survive, one needs basic services like telephone and electricity, because the present social structure depends on utilities as a life-support system. Most people in so-called developed countries work so hard to survive financially. Because modern life depends on essential services, we need to earn money to pay the bills.

One or two fortunate ones may have the means and favourable conditions to go to solitary caves or remote mountains or isolated valleys. Yes, a physical distance from worldly life is possible, and yes, our body may be in a cave or on a mountain or in a forest. But despite leaving the world behind, nonetheless worldly life can sneak into our retreat. Solitude alone doesn’t qualify us as a renunciant.

So in this day and age, how are we to interpret and practise renunciation? We have to turn our worldly values upside-down, by exhausting or withdrawing the value we place on the objects of samsara and, in effect, renouncing them. At that point, we are free to evolve spiritual values.

There is a parallel shift of interests in the life cycle of a man or woman, from childhood to old age. To a kid, his or her toy is so valuable, but later in life as an adult looking back, the toy is insignificant; it has lost whatever value it once had to the child she or he used to be.

All through life, our interests shift from one age-appropriate toy to the next. As we go through our teens, let’s say fast cars and iPod and video games are what we value most. And then at mid-life, let’s say our interests shift again, and job security, cruises and social networks are what we value most: whereas our interest in video games and their value to us is a thing of the past.
Renunciation mind demands a similar shift in our values, but that shift in values is not all that demanding since, as we can see, our values are shifting all the time. In our nineties, our values and interests will have shifted: all of our past values and interests will no longer be valuable or interesting. In our old age, tablecloths, walking sticks and salt-shakers may be what we value most. The point is this: all during our lives, our values continuously shift; old values fade away, and new values take their place, and this process parallels the demands of renunciation mind.

This determination to shake stale values and take on fresh ones is what it takes to be a follower of the buddhadharma. Is discarding your Armani suit and wearing maroon clothes going to help? No, renunciation is not about changing your appearance in a superficial way. Renunciation is about changing, on a fundamental level, your core values, and releasing or renouncing earlier values that are of no further interest.

As practitioners, we have to lose interest in samsara, the way a kid loses interest in a toy, so that therefore samsara loses its value to us. We have to cultivate disinterest in worldly life, and cultivate interest in renunciation mind. This is the view that we need to develop in order to exhaust our samsaric values.

As the second benchmark says, attachment to samsaric existence is the opposite of renunciation mind. We readily agree that samsara equals suffering, and say that of course we wish to escape from suffering. Well, nobody wants to suffer; even small insects don’t want to suffer. But that wish to not suffer is not what is meant by renunciation.

Of course, we don’t like the obvious samsaric pains, but we do like the samsaric pleasures of glory and games and beauty. And despite knowing that sooner or later they are bound to wither, we are still so reluctant to let go of these pleasures. It takes a concentrated effort to decrease the value of samsaric pleasures in our estimation.

We do this by emphasising the pain and anxiety which are the invariable aftermath of our samsaric pleasures. It is easier to accept the worthlessness of samsaric pains, because obviously pain is painful, and pain is not an interest we value. It is more difficult to accept that samsaric pleasure is worthless, because pleasure is pleasurable, and pleasure is an interest we do value.

But we have to understand very clearly how samsaric pleasure invariably leads to samsaric pain. With this understanding, we are not tempted by and can then renounce the samsaric pleasures that we know lead to samsaric pain, as readily as we renounce samsaric pain outright.
Now recall that defilement means perception that is stained or distorted by emotion: it’s baseless, it has no basis in reality; it’s an optical illusion. It’s a misperception of temporarily gathered conditions that we misconstrue to be changeless and singular and elemental.

That cognitive dissonance of defiled perception is bound to give you pain, and that tension between how things appear and how things are is called samsara. Basically samsara is an effect of this sensory confusion; samsara is a vague and confused state of the mind and the senses.

From the Buddhist point of view, if we can unseat our defilements of corrupted perception, as a bonus that unseating also unseats or disengages us from karma. Purifying our perception defiled by emotions purifies our karma as well. And consider this: karma alone cannot give rise to samsara, whereas emotion can; and, with the help of karma, it does so even more efficiently.

So we have to be especially vigilant towards emotions. We tend to under-emphasise the impact emotions have, and over-emphasise the influence karma has. But emotion is the catalyst of samsara, and that warrants taking a closer look. The Mahayana tradition identifies six root emotions or defilements, and twenty sub-defilements or sub-emotions.

The root emotions are desire or passion, aggression and ignorance, of course, and then particular to the Mahayana are the root emotions of pride, doubt, and biased view. Pride is the thought that we are more and others are less than us.

Doubt is the thought that basic truths according to Buddha’s own words may in fact be false: doubting the logic of truths such as that all compounded things are impermanent, that all emotions are pain, and that everything is inherently non-existent. Having doubt about the very trueness of the truth is a most stubborn and dangerous defilement.

And the sixth root emotion might be named biased view, if by biased we mean that the presence of any view whatsoever is by definition a biased view. Remember, any view or thesis or agenda or emotion obscures our perception, and can be a root cause of samsara; whereas the defect of misperceiving a hand or a flower to be real and solid cannot by itself be a cause of samsara.

It isn’t only hands and flowers that we misperceive as real and permanent; we misperceive as real and permanent all the transitory collections we experience through sight, sound, taste, touch, smell and mind; but more subtly, we could say it is the five aggregates, which transitory collections are composed of, that we misperceive to be real and existing.

Just as a flower or a hand consists of a collection of aggregates, our self is composed of five aggregates, namely form, feeling, perception, formation,
and consciousness. And just as we misperceive flowers and hands to be truly real, we also misperceive the self to be truly real; and, this misperception is the utter root of samsara.

Clinging to aggregates that we label as a flower and clinging to aggregates that we label as a hand don’t cause samsara, but such labelling of and clinging to aggregates is a misperception that does obstruct our path to enlightened omniscience. However, viewing impersonal aggregates as a personal self, and then treating this aggregate self as if it exists, is at the very core of samsara.

To cut the root of samsara, we have to unplug or decouple the bonds among the five aggregates that seem to impersonate a self. Just as the form of our body is a composite of many parts that is always changing, so too is our feeling, so too is our perception, and so too are our karmic formations and consciousness composite and always changing.

This bundle of unstable elements brought together in a momentary composition is the weak basis on which we designate a person we refer to as “me” and “myself”, and then we identify with that identity a hundred percent. This identification of aggregates as a real and existing person is the cause of samsara, and also the cause of rebirth, and also the cause of defective perception.

This cause of so much suffering needs to be abandoned. This sums up the sixth root emotion or defilement of impaired perception. Clinging to the self is the root cause of samsara, but karma is the condition or contributing factor which sets samsara in motion. Everything that we project from our ego-clinging habit is, of course, samsara.

Even at the level of the form realm or formless realm, our view is still to some small extent an expression of this spoiled perception which imputes solid existence where there is only a transitory collection. All of which is to say that if we have any attachment to samsara, we have no renunciation mind, meaning our perception is to that extent warped, so we suffer accordingly.

To be quite clear: let’s say your meditation practise matures and you go beyond the kamadhatu or desire realm, and you achieve the form realm or rupadhatu. And then maturing further, you even transcend the rupadhatu and achieve the arupadhatu or formless realm. But even with such maturity and achievement, if your perception still has the slightest bias in favour of this wrong view, if you treat transitory collections as essential and true at all, that means you haven’t yet fully achieved renunciation mind.
BODHICHITTA IS A MUST

Some of us may be wondering why having compassion towards all sentient beings is necessary. Is it just because it is said that they all have been our mother in past lives? That is not a good enough reason, some would say. It isn’t a good enough reason, because by the same reasoning, all sentient beings have also just as many times been our mortal enemy in past lives.

So therefore by that logic of compassion for motherly sentient beings, why not follow the logic of hostility against all sentient beings who have not only mothered us and but also murdered us in past lives? I want to give a voice to questions like this because scepticism about bodhichitta is not unreasonable, but peer pressure may keep sceptics from asking such questions.

From the moment one promises to bring all beings to enlightenment, that promise is impossible to keep; making such a promise seems to be an act of willful self-deception. It’s simply wishful thinking, isn’t it, since it is unrealistic under any imaginable circumstances, no matter how much time or how much effort one dedicates?

On the bodhichitta path, if we are not careful, the practise of bodhichitta can turn into an idealistic concept like so-called world peace: there is no such thing as world peace; it’s just not possible at all. In all of history, has world peace ever been established or declared as a global phenomenon? Peace prizes are awarded, conferences are held, but world peace seems no closer.

In fact, the possibility of world peace seems more remote than ever. The chance of a world war breaking out seems more likely than the chance of world peace ever breaking out. Riots and chaos and violence can be fomented, but how can we foment harmony and peace and kindness? Bodhichitta must never degrade into a sterile ideology of vague daydreams and hyperbole.

Other critics argue that, if everything is mind, as the Cittamatrans and Yogacharans argue, then it follows therefore that all sentient beings are no more than projections of our own mind. They argue that the bodhisattva vow may not be as selflessly motivated as it might appear, because in a sense serving all beings who are projections of one’s mind is serving one’s own self-interest.

The point is that we don’t want to shrink bodhichitta down to mere idealism. Bodhichitta is the root of the buddhadharma. Shantideva says in his second chapter that if there is no bodhichitta, there is no enlightenment and no path to enlightenment.
Many of us do accept that all sentient beings have been our parents. Given our acceptance of that as a fact, and given that in most cases our parents have taken care of us when we were helpless and dependent, it therefore strikes us as fair that we should take care of all beings who helplessly wander and suffer in samsara.

How can we leave them behind in samsara? How can one only wish enlightenment for oneself alone? Such enlightenment sounds hollow and unfulfilling. But for some, this logic may not be acceptable; it may not click for modern people.

The sticking point I think may be due to a failure to understand dependent arising, or *tendrel*, which is the observable fact that all phenomena arise dependently, due to the interdependent relationship of their own specific causes and conditions.

To know and appreciate bodhichitta, you have to know and appreciate the law of dependent arising. If you cultivate a knowledge and appreciation of the law or the philosophy of dependent arising, then you will learn why bodhichitta is a non-negotiable view.

Dependent arising or interdependence does not refer to a system whereby we help extinguish our neighbour’s burning house, expecting our neighbour would do the same if our house ever catches on fire. In this context, interdependence condenses all the Buddhist teachings into a single term: everything is dependent arising or *tendrel*, which literally means connection.

Buddhism enjoys a popular image as non-violent, peacefully sitting straight, mindfully picking one’s teeth with a toothpick, and walking slowly and deliberately as someone with Alzheimer’s might walk. But the subject of Buddhism should not be reduced to such clichés alone.

Buddhadharma is much more vast and deeper than that. Our understanding of dependent arising may be slippery at first, but if we hear and contemplate again and again, we will gain a glimmer of understanding; and, that understanding is a requirement for bodhichitta to flower.

Once you begin to understand dependent arising, you will then realise why bodhichitta is a must, and that bodhichitta is not just an idealistic, politically correct, bleeding heart type of fantasy-based state of mind where everyone smiles at each other.

But bodhichitta is not synonymous with being nice in a conventional way. Bodhichitta is not the wish to *please* all beings; it is the wish to *liberate* all beings from suffering. Just because, for example, a lama never loses his
temper, that is not a good reason to assume he honestly has compassion and has achieved great bodhichitta.

After all, if we assume that a lama with a good temper therefore must have bodhichitta, are we then to just assume that a lama with a bad temper must not have bodhichitta? Or are we to assume that the lama who has a bad temper therefore also has great bodhichitta? The latter assumption would be a sign that the meaning of *tendrel* is beginning to dawn in our mind.

But if we assume bodhichitta occurs only as a genteel and courteous manifestation, that is a sign that the meaning of bodhichitta is not yet dawning in our mind: ours would be a fantasy-based, not reality-based bodhichitta.

Here is a classic example: Tilopa told Naropa to follow him if he wanted teachings. And then, when they met a king with his queen and their retinue on the road, Tilopa said that if he, Tilopa, had a disciple, that disciple would have thrown the queen down and dragged her around on the ground. So Naropa immediately did so, and the king and his followers beat Naropa nearly to death. Then Tilopa heals Naropa, after telling him to get rid of the habit of believing in an “I” and to look into the mirror of his mind instead. This is an example of tough bodhichitta in action.

Bodhichitta cannot be selective, nor can it be narrowly defined as certain behaviours or dress codes; it has to be expansive and all-inclusive and responsive in appropriate ways to every situation that presents itself.

Once you develop appreciation for the web of dependent arising where all beings and all things are inter-related, bodhichitta will inevitably evolve. And not only will you naturally develop loving-kindness for all beings whom we appreciate and at whose good fortune we rejoice and whom we encourage, but also loving-kindness even towards the stones and trees and mountains.

**LOVE, COMPASSION AND NON-DUALITY**

The question is why do we have to cultivate love and compassion. The answer is that this method is the safest way to train our minds, by exercising the closest emotions we have to bodhichitta.

What is compassion? At the root of compassion is an experience of having a glimpse of what someone else is experiencing. Our sense of empathy is moved when we vicariously experience someone else’s suffering; and, because of that, the compassionate wish of sympathy arises.
So, understanding the basic inter-relatedness or the inter-connectedness of the world as we know it, and training our mind towards love and compassion are two methods which will initiate us on our path of bodhichitta. The way kindling initiates a wood fire or the way a pilot light initiates a gas flame is the way thoughts of loving-kindness initiate a bodhichitta flame. These are the elementary or entry-level Mahayana steps that we can practise.

Love is basically wishing others happiness and the cause of happiness, while compassion is wishing others freedom from suffering and the cause of suffering. This twofold spark can easily ignite the mind of bodhichitta. Bodhichitta is, of course, far greater than ordinary love and compassion. Ordinary love and compassion is only wishing others some vague generic happiness, whereas bodhichitta wishes to liberate all sentient beings from samsara.

And because we are in the desire realm, emotions such as love and compassion already are familiar and available to us. Therefore, we can exercise and strengthen these muscles, which will sharpen our sense of empathy, which will bring us to a sense of the equality of self and other, which will lead us to an understanding of non-duality.

Bodhichitta and non-duality are like two sides of the same coin. Where there is bodhichitta, there is non-duality; where there is non-duality, there is bodhichitta. Bodhichitta without non-duality is not possible; non-duality without bodhichitta is not possible either. Bodhichitta is automatically present from that moment when we discover the depth and the breadth of non-duality, or in other words, dependent arising.

One final segue: what do we mean by “all”, as in “all sentient beings”? Most of the time, in our mind, “all” means all the Chinese, all the Indians, all the Brazilians, all the Indonesians. But the Tibetan word for “all” is translated as measureless, beyond measure, immeasurable. Often the word immeasurable makes us think of an object that is so vast that it cannot be measured.

But the immeasurable “all” of Buddhism has no reference to infinite size or number. “All” refers to the whole world of apparent phenomena, with the knowledge that even though that world is apparent, that world is also empty. Understanding emptiness gives the definition of “all” a new and greater meaning.

So you see, training our mind to recognise interdependence or dependent arising, and training our mind to embrace an attitude of love and compassion is not a shallow idealistic daydream. The bodhichitta impulse to liberate all sentient beings is not a lofty theory; bodhichitta actually operates in practise; bodhichitta can be achieved. Training for one minute results in a minute of progress; training for one month results in a month of progress.
In the chapter on *samadhi* or meditation, which is the chapter on mindfulness, Shantideva explains this very thoroughly. And remembering that our mind-training can bear the fruit of bodhichitta is a very important support for our practise.

**ARHATSHIP AND BODHISATTVAHOOD**

Once we have abandoned our attachment to samsara, we come to a fork in the path: one way leads to a reachable destination, while the other way leads us to a more aspirational destination. Too often, Mahayanists assume a certain conceit, and consider the Shravaka path to be a poor substitute, as if one were somehow shirking the real path.

Too often we have a smirking bias looking down at arhatship, but the arhat state is said to be extremely powerful, and blissful; it is very attractive, and it sounds tempting.

Chandrakirti likens the arhat and pratyekabuddha states to “island-like enlightenment.” In ancient times, Indian adventurers made voyages to the middle of the ocean to look for jewels. Sometimes, after months of seeing only the sky and the ocean, they would get tired. And if they came across a small island, they felt happy and wanted to settle down there for a while. But according to the Mahayana point of view, eventually they have to continue on their journey.

It is said in the sutras that arhats can remain in the *nirodha* state of utter cessation for aeons, which is not a disadvantage to my ears, considering that it is also said that in the fullness of time, buddhas and bodhisattvas awaken them by shining rays of light on them. So at the end of *nirodha*, positive phenomena are almost guaranteed.

Furthermore, an arhat basically has left samsara behind, so arhatship is quite a safe destination that one can aim for. So having abandoned our attachment to samsara, arhatship is one option or aspiration available to choose. Our second option is to go the other way and commit ourselves to the greatest aspiration of all, which is to achieve fully enlightened buddhahood for all beings.

One of many ways that the state of Buddhahood outshines the state of arhatship is described in terms of ability or quality. Even on a mundane scale, things are sorted according to quality. We judge the quality of, for example, an espresso machine based on its life expectancy, ease of care, country of origin, aesthetics and so on; and, based on its qualities, we place a value.

Similarly, if we comparison shop between arhatship and buddhahood, we find that the quality of buddhahood, or the fully enlightened state, is the greater
value, in two ways. First, buddhahood is greater because it brings greater benefit to oneself; and secondly, it is greater because it brings greater benefit to others, than does arhatship.

Another drawback of arhatship is that although arhats have abandoned samsara, many are still bound to reap the results of causes and conditions that they have gathered in the past; and therefore, arhats are bound to have certain shortcomings, such as insufficient clairvoyance to anticipate poisonous ash in one’s drinking water, for instance, or insufficient omniscience to know where one’s late mother has been reborn.

Let me remind you that someone who has less than perfectly enlightened quality is, by virtue of their shortcomings, still affected by all-pervasive suffering that comes from misperceiving transitory collections to be truly existing phenomena, even if it is only to the slightest degree.

Another point in buddhahood’s favour is that the purpose, so to speak, of enlightenment is generally to propagate benefit for all sentient beings; and one really has no choice in the matter, once one has seen the reality of dependent arising.

And therefore, without a doubt buddhahood is an aspiration that we must earnestly attempt to realise. In simple language, if one has no understanding of dependent arising, then one’s practise of bodhichitta is fantasy-based; it is groundless. In other words, if one has no bodhichitta and is motivated only by one’s own enlightenment, then fully enlightened buddhahood is not possible.

It is impossible because within the buddhadharma, non-duality is the ultimate view, and therefore, actually there is no such person as “only myself” to be enlightened. And in fact, the wish of enlightenment for “only myself” is self-defeating, since it only obstructs our path to enlightenment.

Chandrakirti says that arhatship and pratyekabuddhahood are not fully enlightened states, but that they are designated as enlightened states anyway, in order to encourage a certain type of person. Likewise, Maitreya in the Uttaratantra says that ultimately there is only one vehicle, and that is Mahayana; the other vehicles are there to serve as entry points to the path for beings with diverse emotions. This user-friendliness of the early yanas is often remarked in the shastras.

BEYOND NIHILISM AND ETERNALISM

The appearance of our face in the mirror is actually none other than the union of emptiness and clarity. But because of dualistic mind, we always segregate emptiness from clarity. So, what happens?
If we are swept up into the emptiness aspect of phenomena, then we slide into nihilism. So for this type of person, Buddha emphasised teachings on self and the aggregates. For instance, he would recount stories about his past lives as a bird and as a monkey and as a king and so on, as if there were a continuous person who transmigrated from life to life. This approach is most beneficial to those with a nihilistic streak.

And for those with an eternalistic streak, who have been swept up into the clarity aspect of the phenomenal world, Buddha emphasised teachings on emptiness. For those who could only partly understand emptiness but not fully and completely, Buddha taught a partial view of emptiness, one that refutes the extreme view of true existence, with an emphasis on egolessness and *shunyata* and so on.

All the teachings of Buddha are organized into one of three types of occasions that are known as the three turnings of the wheel of the dharma. Although Buddha, of course, has no intention like we have, let us for the sake of discussion say that Buddha’s intent in teaching the first sermon or the first turning of the wheel of dharma at Varanasi was mainly to encourage the abandonment of non-virtuous thoughts and deeds.

And let’s say that later at Vulture Peak Mountain, for the Mahayana audience, the intent of Buddha’s second turning of the wheel was mainly to discourage attachment to a self, with emphasis on emptiness free of characteristics: form is emptiness, emptiness also is form; emptiness is no other than form, form is no other than emptiness.

Then at different places, Buddha’s intent, so to speak, in turning the third wheel of the dharma was mainly in order to undermine the ground of any and all views, including even the view of emptiness.
If you are attached to this life, you are not a person of Dharma. 
If you are attached to cyclic existence, you do not have renunciation. 
If you are attached to your own purpose, you do not have bodhichitta, 
the thought of enlightenment. 
If grasping fixation arises, you do not have the view.

TALK EIGHT

Once again, periodically we should remind ourselves to arouse not only the proper motivation, but also the proper attitude. Many teachings show us the importance of a positive outlook with many examples to illustrate that the main pitfall that we need to beware of is a negative attitude, which is likened to a poisonous vessel: even amrita or divine nectar becomes poisonous in a contaminated vessel.

And what is that negative attitude that contaminates the vessel of one’s mind? Sachen Kunga Nyingpo’s benchmarks tell us that it is one’s toxic attachment to this life and to samsara and to one’s own selfish agenda which pollutes whatever it comes into contact with. So let us check and correct if necessary our attitude as we listen to these teachings: we should be quite sure that our vessel is non-toxic and beneficial.

Many dharma students and practitioners have been in the Buddhist ethos for a long time or even since we were born, making us liable to become gradually desensitized or jaded with respect to buddhadharma. In fact, our mind’s habits seem to toughen despite our exposure to dharma. We grow a thick skin that makes us numb and shameless and dumb.

We ask questions like is it okay to be attached to emptiness; is it okay to be attached to the path? Can’t we at least have one vector for our attachment? Because our minds become so rigid and brittle, we cannot think outside the box of attachment.

For years and years, lifetime after lifetime, we are ruled by patterns of habits and attachments, kleshas and non-virtuous deeds: our confidence in and enthusiasm for the dharma may seem too small to reverse the trends of aeons. But between our past conditioning which is like a giant, and our confidence in dharma which is armed only with a humble slingshot, there is an epic battle, especially for beginners.

We have to learn to be patient and learn to appreciate even the slightest spiritual progress. Even though you may not meditate, and even though you may not contemplate, if at least you can listen to the dharma and pay some attention to what you are hearing, this will make a positive dent in your
samsaric armour: that would be a small but not insignificant victory to celebrate.

Even learning basic information about the facts of life can be counted as a victory and progress, especially if it puts a dent in our denial of the basic fact that death is real and comes without warning.

Of course, we have endless stubborn negative emotions. It’s not going to be easy. But as Saraha says, the most beautiful quality of mind is that like gold it can be refined and purified and transformed, meaning that mind can manifest in ways beyond its present impurities; and, meaning that the pure gold quality of bodhichitta and the Mahayana path is actually within our reach, and is not an unachievable fantasy.

We are not getting any younger, and our friends who just a few days ago seemed to be in perfect health may send us news of their terminal diagnosis today. I have noticed that people who are not dharma-literate often seem to have an unrealistic attitude regarding the certainty of death, acting as though death could be warded off with long-life charms and long-life buns and long-life peaches and long-life figures with long white beards.

All their lives they live in denial of death’s inevitability as if death just won’t happen, so that when death does come, they’re unprepared and shocked; they never knew that death was always right around the corner. Their distress is painful to witness. But we can’t really say, “Look, the truth is that you are dying,” because there is a blank space in their minds where their awareness of death should be, and so they suffer.

And although people with some honest news about death and impermanence are better informed, of course they are still grasping to life. Of course, if a scalper has a ticket good for a hundred extra days of life, they will gladly pay an exorbitant price. But people who have learned about the truth of impermanence seem to be more willing to accept hard facts as facts.

Such a modest breakthrough as progressing from denial of impermanence to acceptance of impermanence must never be underestimated, or scorned. One has to be patient, because the bodhisattva path is gradual; at the same time, it’s not quite a snail’s pace. Our efforts to overthrow the habits of aeons definitely make slow but sure progress, like a seed that is sprouting.

IF BODHICHITTA WERE A FLOWER

Even if we fertilise the soil, and ensure warmth and moisture, if the seed does not sprout, no flower of bodhichitta can grow. The seed has to germinate first: the slow-motion breakthrough of a compassionate wish cracks the seed open.
And, given the right conditions, one instant of bodhichitta is certain to flower as the enlightenment of many, many sentient beings.

Even the simple act of refraining from harming others is potent, and many acts of such restraint act like warmth and moisture to soften up the bodhichitta seed. Merely having a second thought before killing a cockroach will dent the seed; even just that slight hesitation and awkwardness before taking the life of a small insect will have a cumulative good effect.

You see, right now if our mind does not place any value on the life of a cockroach, and it is too inconvenient to bother catching it and taking it out, and we have paranoia about cockroach flu, then we will crush the bug. We are willing do whatever it takes to make ourselves comfortable; our attitude is always “me first”.

At the moment, we are convinced that “myself” is so precious. But this conviction will slowly weaken with practise: our appreciation for the preciousness of the lives of all sentient beings will keep increasing in strength to the point where it begins to feel very awkward and strange and inappropriate to harm others at all.

And likewise, it may one day begin to feel very awkward and strange to actually cherish and defend this imaginary “myself”. With practise, we may one day feel as embarrassed for cherishing a fake self as we would be to step outside naked in public and in broad daylight.

Then a day will come when even offering one’s body, even cutting limbs and lips and ears to offer relief from suffering is no longer unthinkable: with no hesitation, and enthusiastically and with the greatest joy, we shed our self-driven agenda and emerge with a selfless compassionate wish to free all beings from samsara.

Such a day-and-night change in one’s attitude might sound impossible, but this shift is possible, although it won’t happen overnight. Shantideva says that anything strange can become routine by gradually step-by-step getting used to the habit.

My advice is to be regular always, regularity is key: even five minutes of daily reflection on bodhichitta has greater value than reflecting on bodhichitta twenty hours a day for a month, if after that month passes one forgets about bodhichitta for a year. Consistency every day is how we can gradually day-by-day get used to the idea and get into the habit of bodhichitta.
ACCELERANTS TO MAKE BODHICHITTA BLAZE

The path to all human skill and mastery follows a process of repetition and familiarization. For instance, someone who has never tasted alcohol can get used to and into the alcoholic habit by following a gradual daily routine: start by drinking half a spoonful every day, then increase to a spoonful a day, then two spoonfuls, then four and then eight and so on. In a matter of months, you will develop into a master alcoholic.

So likewise, don’t underestimate the cumulative effect of consistently training and graduating from small to ever-larger doses of virtuous thoughts and deeds. In practise, taking a vow is a method that shows how an incremental drop-by-drop practise can bear fruit.

See, now we have taken the vow to not harm others. Prior to taking the vow, our pacifism was fruitless, because it wasn’t dedicated pacifism, but rather almost pacifism by default: we didn’t kill other beings not because we’re accomplished practitioners, but because we were too lazy or cowardly or apathetic. But this abstinence from killing, due only to our inaction, was sterile in terms of its bearing fruit of merit, because it was unmotivated.

However, once we take a vow, then thereafter and for as long as we live, even when we are sleeping, every moment that we are keeping our vow by not killing, we are gathering merit, because we are inspired by proper motivation. So, the effect of many such small virtuous thoughts and deeds is considerable, and not to be belittled: they inch us closer to the truth.

To cultivate bodhichitta, we cultivate love, which is not only wishing all sentient beings happiness, but also the cause of happiness, which is a unique twist. However, we can’t simply wish for some vague generic happiness: that’s not what is meant here by love.

Love is wishing not only for beings’ happiness but also for its cause, because if we wish only for beings to have happiness, that will invite chaos: how will we know what each individual’s interpretation of happiness is? One person’s idea of happiness could be someone else’s idea of suffering. So we simply wish all beings to have happiness according to each their own idea of happiness; and secondly, we wish all beings to have the causes that support such happiness.

Simultaneously, we also cultivate compassion, which is basically wishing all sentient beings to have freedom from suffering and from the cause of suffering. And again, since each individual interprets suffering according to his or her own idea, we simply wish all beings to have freedom from suffering according to each their own idea of suffering; and secondly, we wish all beings to have the causes that support such freedom.
Chandrakirti even offers a beautiful praise of compassion to begin his *Madhyamakavatara* before offering praise to Buddha, saying that compassion is crucial in the beginning, as a seed of virtue; that compassion is crucial in the middle, as a source of nourishment on the path; and, compassion is crucial in the end, as the driving force of buddhahood.

Compassion is the engine that actually manifests benefit for all sentient beings. There are many methods to arouse compassion. Try to apply them all. We human beings have a habit of wanting to switch methods every other day because we get bored with the same old method. But nevertheless, consistently exposing ourselves to the thoughts of love and compassion in small doses every day is the recommended procedure.

Usually, our compassion is touched by the effects of misfortune. When we see a sick beggar, for example, or when we are moved by scenes of bloodshed and grief, we feel a compassionate wish to free all the victims from their personal hell. Ordinary compassion is touched by the visible signs and evidence of sentient beings embroiled in suffering.

The Mahayana, of course, does acknowledge and sympathise that suffering sentient beings are engulfed in the end of a process which has led up to their current suffering. But Mahayana is more sympathetic to the cruel irony that even while suffering sentient beings wish for happiness, they are busily gathering the causes and conditions of future suffering. This thought could work very well as an accelerant to make our compassion blaze.

**TO LIBERATE ALL BEINGS, ONE HAS TO BE A BUDDHA**

Avalokiteshvara says that beings in the animal realm, the hungry ghost realm and the hell realm are so pitiful, because they are suffering from pain that is the result of past causes. But beings in the human realm, the god realm and the asura realm are in no less a pitiful situation, because they are in the process of gathering causes and conditions for inevitable suffering to follow. And seen in this way, every sentient being is a deserving object of our compassion, with no exceptions.

Another method or focus for us to reflect on to develop compassion, and also patience is this: never forget that all the sentient beings we meet have no real control over their impulses; they are not free actors. Their lives are actually driven by emotional forces which they are powerless to resist.

Suppose you are attacked by an attacker who is attacking you because a third person is threatening to kill your attacker if they refuse to attack you: who is to blame? In a case like this, your anger is not towards your attacker, because you understand that he is powerless; he is desperate to save himself. The
anger, or the impatience as the case may be, that we feel would be aimed at
this third person who orders our attacker to beat us.

This is the understanding we need when we behold sentient beings: they have
no self-control; and they helplessly obey the commands of their dictatorial
emotions. So who can we hold that against, whose fault is that?

This birds-eye perspective on the average state of mind that beings suffer
from is a good lens to concentrate our compassion. Likewise, this lens can
bring our patience into focus, and patience is one of the most effective virtues
to generate merit.

Our attachment to our self and our agenda is the opposite of bodhisattvahood;
and, to counter that attachment, we generate bodhicitta. To generate
bodhicitta, broadly speaking, we practise two methods: aspiration
bodhicitta, and application bodhicitta.

As beginners to application bodhicitta, we can practise meditations on the
equality of self and other, and on the exchanging of self and other. There are
detailed explanations of these vital exercises to cultivate bodhicitta in the
appendices of the *Bodhicharyavatara*.

Our practise of aspiration and application bodhicitta is motivated by a wish
to make others happy. It is more than just a wish, though. We are motivated
by a sense that it is our duty; it is our job to free others from suffering and
usher them to enlightenment.

Now, wishing to dispel suffering and to offer happiness for all beings is noble
and kind, but who can make this wish come true; can you, can I? Certainly no
ordinary person like me can do this. So who can fulfil this duty? Powerful
gods? No, even great gods and demi-gods such as Brahma and Indra and
Agni are under the influence of anger and jealousy and pride and the rest:
many, many legendary stories inform us of this.

Can arhats fulfil this powerful bodhicitta duty? No, because even the arhats
have certain sublime shortcomings, such as less than ultimate enlightened
qualities of omniscience and clairvoyance, for instance. So who can possibly
fulfil this beneficial wish?

The answer is that only one state of being is capable of performing that
monumental task, and that state of being is the state of fully enlightened
buddhahood. So therefore, in order to be able to carry out one’s sacred duty to
liberate all beings, one *has* to be a buddha; for the sake of all sentient beings,
we must attain enlightenment. And this altruistic incentive is the gist of
aspiration bodhicitta.
Once again, it is bodhichitta that transports us to the fully enlightened state. Only through practicing bodhichitta can we attain the state of Buddha. But our practise is prone to be undermined by the habitual patterns we are always falling into again and again. Therefore, a bodhisattva faces many obstacles.

WHAT IS A BODHISATTVA TO DO

Take refuge. Pray to the Buddha, dharma, and sangha. Accumulate merit. Purify the defilements. Devote as much time and energy as we can to practise bodhichitta. Make every effort to embrace the ten virtuous actions. Abandon the ten non-virtuous actions as much as possible. Dedicate the merit of whatever virtuous action you do. Rejoice at others’ virtue.

Beginners and lay bodhisattvas should follow this general outline. These practises are adequate or more than adequate to bring our aspiration bodhichitta to maturity. These are not patronizing instructions. This is concrete advice about the methods that can be practised by aspirng bodhisattvas who have worldly occupations, and have no vocation to live as renunciants.

But those who have time to spare and are more seasoned, and who are attuned to the infinite scale and visionary breadth of bodhichitta may progress to application bodhichitta practise, which is arousing confidence.

Never think that enlightening all sentient beings is beyond your ability because it is too difficult and endless a task. Never doubt your ability to keep this noble promise. Regard doubt as cowardly thinking and laziness.

In order to counter negativity, generate the confidence that proclaims, “Yes, I can do it. I will do it alone if need be.” Embrace that courageous intent that all the bodhisattvas of the past have embraced and that all future bodhisattvas will also embrace.

Abandon the four negative acts. That is, do not deceive noble beings; do not spread mean gossip about a bodhisattva; do not cause a person who does a virtuous act to have misgivings and doubt about its virtue; and, do not misinform others with the intent to deceive them. These are the four negative acts a bodhisattva must refrain from.

Abide by the four positive acts. That is, do tell the truth; do introduce and guide sentient beings to the Mahayana path; do encourage fellow beings to cultivate the beneficial wish of bodhichitta; and, do praise the sublime qualities of bodhichitta and bodhisattvas. These are the four positive acts a bodhisattva must comply with.
THE SEVEN-BRANCH OFFERING

One of the best methods to practise application bodhichitta is to perform the seven-branch offering. All the innumerable approaches one can take to gather wisdom and merit are condensed in this seven-branch prayer.

The first branch is prostrations, humbling oneself in a gesture of surrender to deflate your puffed up prideful ego. Visualize hundreds, thousands, or even infinite manifestations of your own body, which then join all sentient beings of the three realms in prostrating to the buddhas and bodhisattvas.

The second branch is offering, not only material offerings such as lamps and water and incense, but also mentally offering all of space and all substances found on earth, which is an effective practise to reverse miserliness.

The third branch is confessing all one’s negativity, downfalls, and non-virtue, past, present, and future, with intense shame and regret, and pledging before the field of sublime beings not to engage in such acts again.

The fourth branch is rejoicing from the very depths of your heart in the glorious virtue of the Victorious Ones and the bodhisattvas who turn the great wheel of the dharma; and, rejoicing in the virtue of sentient beings which gathers merit and leads to liberation; and, rejoicing in all the virtuous acts you did in the past, are doing in the present, and are bound to do in the future.

Buddha said that if all the mountains were stacked onto one scale, and if all the merit from rejoicing others’ kindnesses and their ripple effects were stacked on the other scale, the merit of rejoicing would outweigh the mountains.

For instance, if we meet somebody who has abundant joie de vivre or physical beauty or who has a talent we wish we had, instead of indulging in envy and resentment, we should rejoice at their talent, beauty, and enjoyment. This sense of appreciation is one of the easiest ways of gathering merit, and it acts as a strong antidote to neutralize the venom of jealousy.

The fifth branch is requesting to teach, asking the buddhas and bodhisattvas to turn the wheel of the dharma. This of course would apply to formal teaching occasions, though verbal teachings are not the only form of teaching. We may think we have no local buddhas and bodhisattvas to ask to teach us. Still, we must direct our request to the field of sublime beings as we envision them, and with heartfelt prayer supplicate them to turn the wheel of the dharma, again and again and again; this is one of the best ways of increasing our merit.
By doing so, we are keeping the channel between us and sublime beings open, and we are training our receptiveness to teachings, formal and situational. One possible effect of our greater receptivity could be, for example, that the next day we open a dharma book and understand a passage we didn’t understand before.

For that matter, teachings can manifest in non-language ways as well. The phenomenal world as it unfolds can be our teacher, that is, if we have the eyes and the merit to perceive that way.

The sixth branch is asking the buddhas and bodhisattvas to remain in samsara and carry out the welfare of sentient beings until samsara is emptied, by mentally multiplying our body many times and supplicating again and again, until they consent.

Finally, for the seventh branch we dedicate all the merit we have ever gathered and that we shall gather, as well as the present merit of offering: we dedicate all the collective merit to the cause of all beings attaining the state of buddhahood. And this dedication of the merit is so important because it is an effective countermeasure to the risk posed by having a wrong view.

These are the seven branches of application bodhichitta, which are guidelines for people like us who are not advanced enough to make such a grand bodhichitta gesture as offering our limbs for hungry tigers to eat. These seven practises are offerings we can easily make. You can practise according to a specific text, like the beginning of Samantabhadra’s prayer, or any liturgy you choose. You can even improvise your own liturgy to support the activity of the seven branches, such as prostrating, offering, confessing, and so on, whether in action or in visualized form.

OUR BELIEF OR DISBELIEF IS OUR VIEW

As scientists, as philosophers such as existentialists, as corporate decision-makers, we may fancy ourselves as being non-believers, and even take pride in our supposed non-belief. But even the act of reasoning itself can become an object to believe in, and the reasoning we arrive at can also be an object of belief.

Even in the realm of logic, reason has to yield to its own version of belief in order to have a useful reference point; it has to have its own version of devotion and trust and confidence. The ultimate truth can only be intuited through devotion. In other words, logical analysis can bring us from A to B or C, but it cannot convey us all the way to Zed: that distance between C and Zed has to be bridged by devotion.
Logic is not expansive enough to span the path; logic is in fact a very sophisticated technique to train oneself to be an idiot. The conclusions we draw become our so-called beliefs, based solely on blind devotion to our presumably sound logic. And if, on the other hand, we happen to conclude that no sound basis for belief inheres anywhere, then that assumed baselessness of belief itself becomes the basis of a belief.

Either way, as we have heard, whether we believe or we don’t believe, our belief or disbelief is our view, and having any view whatsoever means one doesn’t have the ultimate view. But all we can do is rely on our beliefs, and at some point we have to make a decision based on them. We just have to trust our judgement, and follow our argument through to its logical conclusion.

This matter of belief is a critical issue, because devotion to a belief can be a beneficial tool, as well as an impediment. The Kagyupas say that devotion is the head of meditation, renunciation is the foot of meditation, and awareness is the body of meditation. And devotion to belief at least is better than devotion to doubt; doubt is the worst obstacle, as if one could take refuge in doubt.

This belief in doubt is like the defining characteristic of ignorance, just as the taste of saltiness is the defining characteristic of salt. Salt has the form of crystals and it has a taste, but when we refer to salt, it is only the taste that we are referring to. Whether it is brown salt or pink salt is immaterial; it is the taste that defines it.

Likewise, ignorance may occur in brown or pink crystals, but the defining characteristic of ignorance is its core of doubt. And likewise, the belief in bodhichitta is like the defining characteristic of an enlightened attitude, just as dependent arising is the defining characteristic of understanding the truth.

The doubt is an expression of our resistance to the truth, and is also a sign of laziness; but our doubt makes sense as a defence mechanism of ego to oppose the threat that truth poses. And likewise, bodhichitta is an expression of our acceptance of the truth, and is also a sign of effort; and, bodhichitta makes sense as a strategy of selflessness to oppose the threat that doubt poses.

And the sharper our meditation gets, the sharper our doubts get: we can articulate and champion our doubts that much more convincingly. So in this atmosphere of dharma practise versus the forces of doubt, what do we need? We need a source of inspiration who is an example and role model we can emulate. In all walks of life, we see the importance of learning by example.

Yes, we do ask the buddhas and bodhisattvas to turn the wheel of the dharma and to remain in samsara for our sake, but that could strike some of us as too abstract or too esoteric. And yes, we do have unprecedented access to texts in
every field of dharma study readily available online to buy and read and analyse, but that could strike some of us as too dry and too academic.

Ethereal beings and sublime teachings do not really reach us to the threshold of unshakeable conviction. For that, we need the living example of a human being. Otherwise, the path of dharma might strike some of us as plausible in theory, but unproven in practise, leaving room for doubt whether a state of mind beyond rational logic and concepts is even a true possibility.

THE PROOF OF ENLIGHTENED PRESENCE FAR OUTSHINES THE PROOF OF LOGIC

Some beings do offer living proof that fruition on the path of non-duality is not only plausible but is indeed humanly possible. His Holiness the Gyalwa Karmapa XVI Rangjung Rikpe Dorje is one who provided proof by acting as just such an example. Tibetans can be very critical, especially the intellectuals. Some considered the XVI Karmapa to be not particularly well-versed and found fault with his reading of texts and with his philosophical discourses.

But opining on whether His Holiness’ performance met or did not meet a certain standard of erudition was totally missing the point. His message was not so much in his oral presentation or his body language. His whole manifestation was an embodiment of the dharma. He had a commanding presence, we could say. He was awe-inspiring to be near.

The atmosphere in his presence when he would appear suddenly on the throne and at other unexpected moments was electric. He didn’t have to speak in order to teach; his presence demonstrated the teachings wordlessly. But that is in retrospect; in my youth, maybe words mattered more. I didn’t fully appreciate wordless teachings, and only later in life did I begin to appreciate that teachings don’t need to be in the language of philosophy.

And I was not the only one who experienced Karmapa’s presence to be illuminating. Of course, the Tibetans felt this way, but even stubborn egomaniacal intellectuals from Western universities would stop in their tracks when they saw His Holiness. And though no dharma was spoken, a shift would take place, and a new vista would open.

Looking back, I see how influential that experience of being in the presence of great masters can be. It is all the proof one needs that enlightenment is indeed within the realm of the humanly possible, and such a direct experience can act as a pivotal rite of passage.
The proof of enlightened presence far outshines the proof of logic. Logic may convince us for a single morning, but once we leave this hall, this influence may vanish without a trace; it slips our mind, whereas the influence of Karmapa’s mere presence remains alive in our memory for decades.

The first time I saw him, I was a very young monk in Rumtek Monastery. When sometimes he would speak to us, his manner was affectionately tough and his tone of voice had a wrathful edge. He might ask where you had been or what you were up to, but it would sound rather stern and challenging.

On that first occasion, His Holiness Karmapa gave me two presents – a lion made out of granite, and a deer made out of wood. He told me to keep them and he would pray that I would grow up to embody certain qualities of a deer and a lion, which slip my mind at the moment. I have to confess that the deer has gotten lost, unfortunately, but I still have the lion.

Whenever I think of this encounter, it’s quite a powerful memory. The thought of that lost wooden deer bothers my conscience, and also fans my paranoia. I worry that if the lost deer was for protection to guard my share of compassion, then by losing it, I may have also lost my best chance of ever ripening bodhichitta in my being.

I was very lucky to have had an old attendant who used to be Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö’s student, and he was very kind to me. He brought me to many great masters, and I had the good fortune to receive many teachings from the sixteenth Karmapa. Thanks to my attendant, once I had an opportunity to circumambulate the stupa following His Holiness at two-thirty in the morning, when he could walk anonymously and not attract a crowd.

THE THREE LEVELS OF PERCEPTION

There is a teaching called the three levels of perception which is an ideal companion to Lojong Shenpa Shidrel. This schematic view of the three levels of perception is very beautiful actually. It’s a wonderful map to give us an aerial view of the terrain of perception. On the spiritual path, we need a chart to show us the key points at a glance.

This view of the three levels of perception offers us a simple three-part process. From beginning with impure perception, one goes through the middle phase that is a mixture of pure and impure perception, and then one enters the end phase, which is perception that is pure.

To put it bluntly, perception matters a great deal. In fact, if not for perception, there is no means to even have an experience. Perception is the only means we have of knowing the world. To be clear, the meaning of perception here
refers not only to visual perception: any sensory experience of sound, taste, touch and smell that is experienced by our mind is also a perception.

The classic Mahayana example that is often used to illustrate this three-part paradigm of impure, pure/impure, and pure is the example of the conch. The first of these, that is, impure perception is likened to an eye disease that misperceives, for example, a conch that is not yellow to be yellow in colour, so one believes firmly that it is yellow.

That’s how the Virupa lineage defines impure perception: impure because, first of all, the subject has a pathology, which distorts one’s vision. And, secondly, one’s belief in the false appearance of what is not yellow to be yellow is, of course, an impure perception. This imperfection or impairment of one’s vision is the ground level of the three levels of perception.

Now suppose a person with this yellow vision is diagnosed by a doctor who says, “Look, you have yellow vision and are not seeing the true colour of things because of your faulty perception.” And now suppose that based on his diagnosis, the doctor prescribes medicinal herbs and offers dietary advice and exercises to treat the disease.

At this stage, the patient still sees the conch as yellow, but understands that the appearance of the conch is affected by his having yellow vision, and not because the conch is yellow, which is progress. And to cure this, we take pills and follow the doctor’s orders. We have to be patient and give the medicine a chance to work and gradually nurse our eyesight back to health.

So a process of healing has been initiated; the disease process has been introduced to the process of wellness, and the balance between disease and wellness begins to shift. So whereas the first part of this three-part process is the ground of impure perception, this second part is the path level of perception that we follow to recover from our impure perception, in a state of flux between disease and wellness, between impure and pure.

Then one day the patient is cured and the actual colour of the conch is the colour that the patient sees. Of course, for the sake of discussion, we have to grant that the actual colour of the conch is white. But what matters most is this point: after the cure, the yellow conch has not ceased to exist, and why? Because the yellow conch never truly existed; it was always, right from the beginning, an illusion. So how can what has never existed cease to exist?

As our vision improves, we may have the impression that we are seeing less and less yellow and more and more white. But the perception of less yellow and more white is actually an illusion, since yellow never was yellow, and white never was not white, to begin with.
And the baseline of a white conch is only necessary as a reference in order to establish the non-yellowness of a yellow conch: otherwise, there is no context for the issue of yellow conch or not-yellow conch to arise.

You and I are looking at the phenomenal world through the lens of our diseased perception. We are seeing illusory transitory collections dependent on conditions as true and real and one. Our perception is defiled or stained or blinded by emotions; we are sick with emotions.

Like a doctor diagnosing our illness, our master or guru points out to us, “What you see is not what it appears to be.” Hearing this once, of course it doesn’t change our perception overnight: our idea of beautiful is still beautiful; our idea of delicious is still delicious. But an alternative view has been heard, and a remedial process of practise has been set in motion to strip away the layers of defilement, and reveal the purity and clarity of perception that emotions obscure.

This is the experiential perception of yogis and yoginis whose armour of impure perception has been dented by the blunt instrument of the truth. And in due time with diligent practise one day when our impure perception exhausts, we realise that the objects of our impure perception were only ever mirages. This is an important discovery.

This insight is expressed by Nagarjuna who praises Buddha for observing that there is no such thing as a nirvana that requires the abandonment of samsara, and that it is none other than the non-existence of samsara which is nirvana.

At a basic level, our perception is the only way we have of knowing everything that we think we know about life and reality. Our so-called everyday lives are no more than a continuous flow of perception; that’s all we have to work with. Perception is the process we use to determine our position in relation to everything.

All we practitioners need to do is change our perception, which in turn will change our relation to everything. The process of re-educating our perception requires us to change our mind. Right now, we are used to thinking that what we see is definitely how it is in reality. So we have to re-train our perception and get used to thinking that what we see is definitely not how it is in reality, and learn that our perceptions only appear to us as we misperceive them to be, as sensed through our fog of emotions.

The practise of these two activities, of decreasing our confidence in “how it appears” and of increasing our confidence in “how it is,” is what makes a spiritual path spiritual. Even in our mundane world, we have folk wisdom that “appearances can be deceiving.” But in this case, yes, all appearances are deceiving. We need to transcend that yellow vision of our impure perception.
A GLIMPSE OF TANTRA

There is a question about having attachment to this life making one not a dharma practitioner, and that, given this is the case, how are we then to regard the concepts of long-life initiation or pilgrimage to Maratika where Guru Padmasambhava attained the deathless body? How does wishing for longevity or even an immortal state not contradict the first benchmark?

Tantra is so deep and so vast. Buddhism, especially Mahayana Buddhism is vast, of course it is, but next to Tantra, Mahayana seems almost finite. Tantra is inconceivably vast. Tantra is not confined to rituals and mudras and mantras. Tantra is a civilization all its own.

Yes, in the Tantric practises there are aspects like long-life pills, long-life initiations, and long-life deities. But it’s important to know that this invocation of such deathlessness is directly linked to the mental sphere of non-duality. When non-duality is the norm, there’s no experiencer of death, there is no dying, and there is no death.

In non-duality, one has slipped outside any reference to conventional time, and therefore, one has also slipped the bonds of the conventional details that take place within conventional time, such as birth and death and old age and sickness: details that are the emotion-stained mirages of our impure perception.

But having said all this, on the other hand, tendrel or dependent arising is always in effect. The Tibetan usage of the word tendrel sometimes carries a nice sentiment of auspiciousness. But strictly speaking, tendrel means the coming together of the right causes and conditions to develop a particular effect.

So, in the Tantra, our approach to actualize non-dual deathlessness is a process of bringing together the tendrel of right causes and conditions that would favour such an outcome. And in the process of approaching, we also gather the tendrel of right causes and conditions to develop what are called the supreme attainments and the ordinary attainments.

As an ordinary attainment, yes, you may attain a long life full of many birthdays, but almost as a side-effect of approaching to non-dualism; this is quite possible. But long-life abhishekas and long-life pills can also act as stepping stones in a process of gathering the tendrel of right causes and conditions leading to the realization of the non-duality of death and life, which is what deathlessness is said to mean.

Guru Padmakara and Princess Mandarava are said to have achieved that deathless state, though instead of achieved I would suggest they manifested.
For our deluded sake, Maratika is said to be where they are said to have achieved or manifested the wisdom beyond self and selflessness.

And therefore, if followers of Padmasambhava’s lineage go with fervent devotion to Maratika, such a visit might very well bring together the *tendrel* of right causes and conditions that would favour one’s living a long and healthy life.

This is quite possible, because of dependent arising, or the emptiness of *shunyata*. Once we can accept that the original ground is emptiness, then everything is acceptable. And we can progress along the path on that basis, knowing that progress is possible given the right conditions.
If you are attached to this life, you are not a person of Dharma.
If you are attached to cyclic existence, you do not have renunciation.
If you are attached to your own purpose, you do not have bodhichitta,
the thought of enlightenment.
If grasping fixation arises, you do not have the view.

TALK NINE

Now we come to Sachen Kunga Nyingpo’s fourth benchmark: if you grasp, the view is lost. Shunyata, emptiness, and dependent arising have come up in a tangential way during the first three benchmarks, but these wisdom teachings come into focus during the fourth.

This isn’t easy material to fathom at the best of times. The way the words work in Indian logic may strike some like an alien language at first. If you are unfamiliar with the Middle Way approach to ultimate truth, that way of thinking may be tricky to decipher at first, but after a while it begins to register.

The Tibetan word naljor is roughly translated as “yoga”, which in English is associated with stretching and postures. However, naljor has a larger meaning than physical exercises. Nal actually means “being natural”, and jor means wealth or richness. So naljor is the richness or the wealth of being natural.

As human beings, we need to have various wealths – mundane, materialistic wealth; mental or spiritual wealth of love, compassion, knowledge, intelligence, diligence, patience and so on; the bodily wealth of beauty, well-being, sex appeal, radiance and so on. To this list of wealths we add another, which is naljor, the wealth of being natural.

In India or Tibet, we refer to practitioners of meditation as yogis and yoginis, meaning they have this richness of being natural. But what is meant by “natural”? Naljor suggests a state which is our unfabricated, natural norm before fabrications arise; that state is our normal human state.

Of course, normal is a relative term in relation to abnormal, and everyone’s idea of what is normal and what is abnormal are different. In the present context, normal is the unaltered state of naturalness that Trakpa Gyaltsen is pointing to as the alternative to our usual state of grasping to our fixations.

The wealth of a natural composure is highly valued by great masters of the past. Maitreya in the Uttaratantra says of this natural state that it needs nothing to be eliminated and needs nothing to be added; it is already
complete, if we would just leave it alone by leaving it as it is. Maitreya says that once we know the meaning of “as it is”, then we will be liberated.

And Shantideva describes this state of naturalness in the thirty-fourth stanza of the wisdom chapter of the *Bodhicharyavatara* as he is slowly, slowly ascending into the air:

*When real and non-real both*  
*Are absent from before the mind,*  
*Nothing else remains for mind to do*  
*But rest in perfect peace, from concepts free.*

What is it that distracts us from and complicates the natural state? What is keeping us from that state of nature *as it is?* Our dualistic perceptions and thought processes are what hinder us; of course, it always traces back that our dualistic way of seeing and thinking obstructs our view.

The state of dualistic mind posits and postures and attaches names, which is the antithesis of the state of naturalness. Once we conjure a self from the natural state, and we get attached to this self, that is the original attachment which sets the stage for all the attachments that come after.

Wisdom mind is the default position of mind before we invent and attach ourselves to a self. The state of wisdom mind is our basic and natural and original state of mind. That state is the status quo before the dualistic splitting of self and phenomena takes place. Buddhas are endowed with this wealth of natural being in their every pore. And those who gradually train to cultivate this wealth of naturalness in their beings are known as yogis and yoginis (*näljörpas* and *näljormas*).

Wisdom mind is the ultimate view, whereas grasping mind is the deceptive view. Now, when we hear that wisdom mind is the ultimate view, we automatically assume there is an object called wisdom mind which is viewed by a subject. But what else could such a so-called subject consist of, except wisdom itself? What else could the view of non-grasping consist of, except wisdom?

From the ultimate view, thinking that everything is emptiness is not ultimate; it is still grasping. You are tampering with and superimposing a concept of emptiness on everything. Grasping the thought that everything has ceased to exist and has disappeared is still grasping to a concept. And that is not emptiness meditation at all.

Chandrakirti actually condemns such a conceptual posture towards emptiness or *shunyata*, on the grounds that emptiness is not the annihilation of anything. It’s *not* like a bulldozer that dismantles the mountains, dismantles the house,
dismantles the table, dismantles everything there is and then we think that everything is gone and everything is emptiness. Emptiness is never like that, of course. That sort of conceptual negativity denies and defies the clarity or appearance aspect of relative truth, and makes a nihilistic assertion of nothingness.

Trakpa Gyaltsen clearly says that those who grasp at apparent phenomena as if they truly exist won’t be liberated; but those who grasp at non-existence will not only have no liberation, of course, but they will not even have a higher rebirth. And those whose view vacillates between these two extremes are similarly affected.

COLD WATER POURED INTO BOILING WATER

We wish to cultivate this wisdom mind which grasps neither existence nor non-existence. We do so by methodically shedding the attachments which obscure our wisdom, such as attachment to this life, attachment to cyclic existence, and attachment to our self-centered agenda; and, in the process of shedding or dismantling these, the wisdom that was obscured by them begins to shine through. And this shedding process is enabled through the practise of contemplative analysis, by means of examples and analogies.

Only the Tantric tradition says that wisdom mind actually can be prompted without relying on analysis and examples, and claims to have more effective analogies to stimulate the wisdom. In Mahayana Buddhism, to arrive at this view of non-grasping and find this wisdom mind, one has to learn first how to analyse, with the support of example and analogy. Then one has to learn to support one’s analysis with the words or lung of the Buddha. That is the Mahayana way which we are following right now.

And, in order to digest all these different analyses and analogies, we practise the disciplines of hearing and contemplating. Now, the Mahayana analyses of Chandrakirti, Nagarjuna and Shantarakshita, as well as Buddhapalita and Bhavaviveka offer many techniques for analysing and establishing this view of wisdom mind. In this case, view refers to a view which is an object of perception; and, wisdom refers to a subjective experience.

We train our view by analysing and illustrating with examples, such as the face reflected in the mirror, and the example of a mirage, the example of a rainbow, and so on. We train our view to see the world as an illusion, like a rainbow, like a dream. And we further train our view by hearing and contemplating the words of Buddha – ideally, by engaging with sutras that require no interpretation, direct sutras such as Prajnaparamita sutras that are straightforward and can be understood literally.
Tantra, of course, claims to have much more efficient examples, while the method of analysis is quite similar. And, in fact, some Tantric schools claim that examples are not always needed to awaken the wisdom. The Sakya tradition of undifferentiated samsara and nirvana, the Kagyu tradition of mahamudra, and the Nyingma tradition of mahasandhi all agree that for a certain type of student with the right disposition, and in the right situation of having a master with a degree of realization, no analogies are needed to introduce the wisdom mind of non-grasping.

According to Tantra, it can, under the right conditions, be introduced directly through pointing out instructions. Each lineage has its traditional emphasis and style to their approach, which diversity is wonderful, because it offers a variety of methods to meet every need. And even within the Kagyu lineage, there are so many distinct traditions, and each has its own protocol of what is said and how it is said and in what order it is said. But all these are differences only of style. They are equal in substance, and no particular style is better or worse than another.

In this twenty-first century, we should not be using words like Sakya, Nyingma, Kagyu, Gelug, which are customary Tibetan names. I prefer to characterize the lineages by their heroic figures, such as the Virupa lineage, or the Padmasambhava lineage. Words like Sakya, Nyingma, Kagyu, and Gelug seem dry and unhelpful as names that do not capture the spirit of the lineages.

For instance, Nyingma is a name that differentiates the lineage according to time, as the old translation school. Sakya is a reference to a seat, which isn’t very evocative for the average person. I may well be in the minority, but naming lineages, for example, as Virupa’s tradition, or as Drokmi Lotsawa’s tradition, or as Sachen Kunga Nyingpo’s tradition, sounds to me like a more inspirational way of naming. Speaking of Milarepa’s tradition and Tilopa’s tradition, and Naropa’s tradition, and Padmasambhava’s tradition, and Vimalamitra and Yeshe Tsogyal’s traditions has much more resonance for me than the institutional-sounding name of Kagyu.

The Virupa tradition first introduces the view that the world as we know it is merely our perception; and, all phenomena are mind’s perceptions. This is the entry level, or the ground. Next, the view is introduced that this mind of ours, which is synonymous with the perceptions of mind, is merely an illusion, which is the path. And then the view is introduced that this illusory mind of perceptions is beyond words, which is the fruition. This is how Virupa’s tradition skillfully approaches the introduction to wisdom mind, and it’s wonderful because it gradually establishes the view of non-grasping.

How are we to understand the meaning when we hear that illusory mind is beyond words? Unless the student has superior faculties of intelligence and
devotion and virtue, it is so difficult to glean the profound meaning of such a statement. It is not simple to fathom the meaning of the statement that mind is like a mirage; it is an enigmatic thing to say.

But the gradual path is a very practical design. First of all, it establishes that our perceptions are none other than the perceptions of our own mind. Learning to regard our perceptions and mind as synonymous is easy, unless one is indoctrinated with a strictly theistic view.

Trakpa Gyaltsen says that for those who believe in a creator being, an all-powerful and all-knowing judge who rewards and punishes the human race, it is especially difficult to recognise that all one’s perceptions are simply the workings of one’s own mind perceiving that way.

Most of us can understand that mind is perception, and perception is mind, but our habit is that we often forget this understanding, which is like the password to the Mahayana view.

In the Vajrayana, there is a mode of perception known as pure perception. For us, seeing the phenomenal world in its purity as deity, and hearing sound as mantra, is impossible for now. We can only superimpose our concept of deity onto our perception of phenomena.

For instance, we may try to imagine that our friend is endowed with extra arms and heads, but that isn’t pure perception, by the way; that is a thought process, it is contrived: we are making up a story. Whereas, pure perception evolves from this Mahayana recognition that whatever we perceive is merely our mind’s contrived perception.

But we have a habit of letting that recognition of the truth slip out of sight and out of mind. We forget, for instance, in the midst of our domestic dispute, that the agenda we are arguing for has no objective truth. We forget that our seemingly valid complaint has no objective validity, but is only valid in the eyes of our defiled perception.

Yet simply remembering this fact has an immediate calming effect, just like cold water poured into boiling water. This insight of recognising that our knowledge of the world is known to us only through our impure perception is the gateway to many enlightened qualities. And this insight that our so-called knowledge is merely our biased view, based on our emotions, is actually easy to establish.
LIKE A DAM MADE OUT OF WATER

In the *Pramanayuktinidhi*, as Sakya Pandita is establishing the Cittamatran view, he walks us through the reasoning to acknowledge that all perceptions are our mind’s alone. That the object of perception and the perceiver arise simultaneously is one example of the reasoning to support the view that mind consists of perception and perception consists of mind.

For instance, some of you may never have seen or heard of me before this present occasion. Until now you haven’t known of my existence. Two years ago, to your mind I did not exist within the scope of your world. Of course, in retrospect you can say that I must have existed two years ago because I appear to be a certain age, and so therefore I would have had to be my two-years younger self two years ago.

You assume that to have reached my present age means that I must have existed as a baby at one time, even if you were unaware of my existence up until now. You assume that I have been existing all along; that is your perception. But that perception is only based on your projection of me in the present, and extrapolating a past from it.

You can imagine all sorts of things. You can fast-forward your projection of me ten or twenty years into the future; it is all a matter of your perception. Therefore, in Mahayana Buddhism, especially within this Cittamatran approach, an object does not exist independently from a perceiver of the object; it only exists to the extent that it is perceived to exist by a perceiver.

Sound exists when there is a perceiver of the sound, and not before. If there is no perceiving eye or ear consciousness, no perception of light or sound is seen or heard. In other words, the perceived object and the perceiving subject are inseparably intertwined and interdependent; and, no object can pre-exist a subject to perceive the existence of that object.

This logic is fairly easy to understand once we start to see the pattern of the reasoning. But, of course, as I said, we will forget. We will, of course, forget this intelligence, because the counter-intelligence of our habits is not in the habit of recognising self and phenomena to be dependently arisen and non-dual. Our habit is to separate our self from phenomena, which leads us to conclude that subjects and objects do exist as independent entities.

But the pronouncement that *everything is mind* has been watered down through too much casual usage, and it has no power at all nowadays. *Everything is mind*: it is spoken in a whispery poetic way. But it’s not a romantic notion. It’s simply a statement of fact that everything mind knows of the world, it knows because mind perceives it to be that way.
Apparent phenomena are our perception, and our perception is our mind. And because of this, the same object that appears to us as beautiful, desirable and perfect may appear as ugly, terrible and disgusting to someone else. And similarly, an object that attracts us today may sicken us tomorrow.

According to Virupa’s tradition, first we should acclimate ourselves to this norm that everything as we know it is merely our mind’s perception. This perspective has a positive grounding effect on us, and we should get in the habit of not forgetting it. And once we are confident that mind is perception, then secondly, we look within to establish that the mind of perception is illusion. We have to look for the owner of this mind; we investigate this mind. And once we are confident that mind is illusion, then thirdly, we will be more receptive to the ultimate norm, which is the view that this mind of illusory perception is beyond words.

Again, this does not mean that objects of perception do not exist outside our mind. Emptiness is like a conundrum until we get familiar with this logic and it starts to make sense. After all, since I can smell the flowers, since I can taste a grape, since I can touch this pen, how can all these be empty? If I jump from this window, I will definitely die; if I miss lunch today, I will be hungry: so how can everything be emptiness?

The answer is easier once we understand that the world is our perception, and the world as such has no inherent existence of its own. But without such understanding, we have questions like if everything’s emptiness, why should we aspire for enlightenment? If everything is emptiness, if enlightenment is emptiness, if I am emptiness, what is the point of following the path? In this way, we go astray, misunderstanding the meaning of emptiness.

A similar misunderstanding may arise regarding the fourth benchmark, which cautions us that if we grasp, the view is lost. So what are we supposed to do? Are we supposed to bring our mind to a standstill, since mind is the agent that performs the grasping? Are we supposed to block the flow of discursive thoughts? I believe that it is because emptiness has been misunderstood that certain traditions do practise to silence their thinking mind; but that’s just not possible.

Nyoshul Khenpo has kindly given me many teachings related to meditation. He has a wonderful analogy on this point. He says that trying to stop the flow of thoughts through one’s mind is not only like attempting to stop the flow of a river. Furthermore, it is like trying to do so by building a dam made out of water – because the very effort to obstruct thoughts is itself a thought that we grasp, and by that grasping we obstruct the wisdom view of non-grasping. It’s just not possible.
When we talk about not dwelling in the past and not looking forward to the future and being in the present, many people automatically assume that we are entering the sphere of dzogchen or mahamudra or mahasandhi. But this is absolutely not the case. It is simply the case that nowhere does Buddha ever say that we can dwell in the past or we can dwell in the future.

On the contrary, not dwelling in the past, not dwelling in the future, and being present but not dwelling in the present is the Buddha’s quintessential advice throughout all the yanas, from first to last. Nor does Buddha ever advise us to arrest our discursive mind. In fact, intending to arrest our thoughts is a self-defeating aim because the intention to arrest thought is itself a thought.

WISDOM IS TO FIRE AS THOUGHTS ARE TO WOOD

To make fire, we need wood. Just as wood is the fuel source of fire, the mind’s thoughts are the fuel source of wisdom. To fuel wisdom, we need thoughts: no thought means no wisdom, just like no wood means no fire. If we were to stop thoughts, which isn’t possible but if we did, then we’d have no vehicle or fuel to reach wisdom mind. Stopping thoughts should never be our goal.

When we hear that if we grasp, we lose the view, we might misunderstand this to mean that we have to ban thinking any thoughts, but this would be a big mistake. The fourth benchmark requires some explanation.

When Manjushri says that if you have grasping, you do not have the view, he doesn’t mean grasping as in a gross or common sense of attachment. He doesn’t mean that if we are attached to our iPhone or to our house, we do not have the view, of course not. Common grasping to this life and cyclic existence and to one’s self-centeredness has already been addressed by the first three benchmarks. The grasping which Manjushri refers to in the fourth benchmark is more pervasive, because it includes the whole sphere of dualistic thought, wherever there is a thinker and a thought and an act of thinking.

Some people may be wondering if all this non-grasping is leading to a semi-vegetative state where there is no thought activity at all. This, of course, is not possible, because thoughts never end. But if we are neither to grasp nor oppose thoughts, what are we to do?

According to Trakpa Gyaltsen, when a thought comes, we just watch it, the same way an objective observer or impartial witness watches. Do not react to or engage with the thought, just watch it. If an angry feeling arises, watch it, and keep a safe distance. A safe distance means that when anger arises, we do not react by thinking, “Ah, this is anger”, and therefore we are not forced
to think all the subsequent thoughts that would inevitably follow once we do attach the label “anger.” Just watch means just watch and do nothing else.

When we attach a label, such as “anger” or “devotion,” we are beginning to grasp, and that is the opposite of just watching. As soon as we pin a thought down in words and labels, then we have lost the view of just watching; we are grasping again. Needless to say, if we react to the thought “Ah, this is anger” with further thoughts such as “Oh, this is really bad. This is a negative thought. I have to get rid of it,” of course our grasping will expand and spread.

Likewise, when a loving feeling arises, and if we then react to the thought “Ah, this is love” by thinking “I am so happy. I am so excited. I must try to cultivate this. I must try to remember this,” then of course that very thought process is like the sound track of grasping, and we will lose the view of just watching, or non-grasping.

What is non-grasping? Whatever thought comes, we watch it; again and again and again we watch it. The example here is of small children looking at fresco paintings of peaceful and wrathful deities on the monastery wall, looking at them with an open mind and with no mental commentary to distract them: they just watch.

By learning to just watch, we slowly, slowly train our mind to turn toward the wealth of being natural, by training mind not to grasp, and to let thoughts be. Once we grasp and label and handle a thought, we are manipulating, and our interference in the free flow of thought is like a dam that causes the river of thoughts to back up and spread out. And when the thought pool changes colour, shape, and size, it catches our mind, because it’s a changing landscape and story.

We can get so distracted by this story while we are supposedly meditating that twenty minutes can go by and we are still in the story – forty minutes can go by and we are still in the story. But it is harder for non-meditators. Ordinary people are not lost in thought for only twenty or forty minutes: for lifetime after lifetime, they are distracted by a seamless web of stories, always lost in thought.

Again, many great masters of the past have noted that at the present time our experience is not one of just watching. Dudjom Rinpoche gives meditation instruction in his Mountain Retreat text which takes our tendency to space out into account. In meditation, when a thought comes, and we recognise it as a thought, that means we are meditating; and, when a thought comes, and we do not recognise it as a thought, that means we are not meditating.
That means our mind is simply wandering from daydream to daydream and from story to story. Our mind is completely occupied and absorbed in its own little imaginary world. That is, until we are shaken from our state of distraction by a knock at the door or even a finger snap that awakens us from our daydream, and we come back to our senses, like waking up from a nap.

At that time, we recognise that we were distracted, and that now we are not, and that is good. That sense of frustration and sense of regret for having wasted twenty or forty minutes lost in thought is good. That regret, that frustration is the dawning of wisdom, because when we can recognise the state of distraction, in that moment of recognition, we catch a glimpse of the wisdom of non-distraction. And these glimpses offer us a reference point as our compass.

Trakpa Gyaltsen says that all we ever do is just anticipate and prepare for what is coming next. In the morning, we make arrangements for the afternoon. In the afternoon, we schedule events for the evening. In the evening, we organize details for the following morning. This pattern or routine goes around and round and round. But we are never finally arranged and scheduled and organized and prepared, because there is always the next detail to anticipate and prepare for.

This constant spinning comes about because we have a habit of grasping a thought, weaving a story, and having a reaction, which triggers or spreads into the next thought, and the next and the next. That is why we have to inculcate the wisdom view of undistracted non-grasping.

The brand and meaning of “wisdom” have been hurt by a social tendency to place wisdom up on a pedestal of holiness, making wisdom seem to be out of reach and abstract. Naturally, we prefer and aspire for wisdom over ignorance, so wisdom is given a place of honour. However, if wisdom is given a place of awe instead of a place of honour, that paints an inaccurate picture. Wisdom is neither out of reach, nor abstract; it is within our reach, and it is concrete.

When we are not grasping, when we are not dwelling in the past or the future, when we are just watching whatever thought arises in the present moment without grasping and reacting and spreading out, at such a moment, wisdom is within reach. In fact, some great masters like Jamgön Kongtrül have the boldness and courage to declare that such a glimpse of wisdom is not different in essence from wisdom mind. And also Milarepa’s songs often speak of this: when a thought ends, and before the next thought arises, in the gap between them, wisdom is found.
GLIMPSES OF WISDOM

Thus far we have been speaking mostly in terms of the broader philosophical overview of wisdom. Now let’s take a more practise-oriented direction. What is the practical value of Virupa’s tradition of introducing the view that mind is perception and perception is mind; and the view that mind is illusory like a mirage or rainbow; and the view that mind, which is perception, which is like an illusion, is beyond words?

The purpose or role of vipashyana is to develop the quintessence of wisdom, which is the view or state of non-duality. Earlier, we spoke of this state as the wealth of being natural, meaning the wealth of having a normal or natural state of mind. By natural or normal, we mean that it’s a state of mind which isn’t thought up and driven by any false dichotomies of dualism. This topic is not an easy one, but like everything else, it gets easier with practise.

Let us go back to our example of the mirror: you look at the mirror, and you see your face. And let’s say, for the sake of argument, that you see two objects, face and mirror, although of course there are no truly existing objects to be seen. But let’s just say that in this scenario, there are two relevant factors in play. One factor is the reflection of your face in the mirror, which is empty of inherent existence. Though it appears, your face in the mirror does not truly exist.

And the second factor is that, even though the reflection of your face in the mirror is an illusion, it also dependably appears whenever you look. The reflection in the mirror is always your face, and not the reflection of any other random object. That natural order never fails to function. These two factors present us with the seeming paradox that objects we perceive, such as our reflection, while empty of inherent existence, also appear and function in an orderly manner.

For us ordinary beings, it is so difficult to perceive the appearance and the emptiness together. We always get swept away by one aspect or the other, by the clarity aspect or by the non-truly existing aspect. If we think that an object we perceive truly exists, we have fallen into the extreme of eternalism, which is an extreme view because the object only appears, like a mirage. And, if we think that an object we perceive does not truly exist, we fall into the extreme of nihilism, which is an extreme view because it denies the clarity and utility of appearance.

The same extreme view is in effect when you see me and assume therefore that I exist. This configuration that you see and label as me is a composite of many transient elements that are rising, dwelling and falling like continuous waves of change. And yet you perceive me to be a fairly stable and relatively static phenomenon. You base your assumption that I exist on the evidence
that I have appeared to be existing during this seminar, but duration is just one criterion among many used to assert and prove my existence as a fact. Everything is like this.

For instance, this Japanese fan is a collection of parts that are by definition impermanent. And of course the collective formation of those parts into the object we call a fan is also impermanent. And not only is this object made of silk and wood and paint a temporary phenomenon, but also our human knowledge that labels this object “fan” is unstable and subject to decay. For instance, if we die today and are reborn as a silverfish, that silverfish will no longer recognise this as a fan, but possibly as a food source.

So, ultimately there is no such object called “fan” but, at the same time, relatively there is, because within relative phenomena, it does appear and function. But these two aspects, the relative clarity and appearance aspect, and the ultimately empty of true existence aspect of phenomena can cohabit in harmony.

In order to harmonise the empty and apparent aspects, we have to transcend the four extreme views that: one, phenomena are truly existing; two, phenomena are not truly existing; three, phenomena are both truly existing and not truly existing; and four, phenomena are neither truly existing nor not truly existing. However, this type of bifocal or synchronised vision of clarity and emptiness is a difficult balancing act. This is why near the end, Trakpa Gyaltsen says that the foregoing discourse has been an extensive explanation of the inexpressible.

What is inexpressible? Remember, all perceptions are mind, and mind is illusion, and illusion is inexpressible. What is mind then? Mind is beyond words, and therefore it is inexpressible. When the lamas say the ultimate truth is inexpressible, when they say that the Prajnaparamita is inexpressible, this isn’t a convenient excuse made up in order to hide the lama’s not knowing the answer. Lamas say that the ultimate truth is inexpressible because it is a state of mind or a realm that is pre-verbal. Therefore, no words exist to describe that state. We can only make a verbal guess, that’s all.

According to Longchenpa, everything, all of phenomena, even the Buddha’s blessing appears and is empty just like the reflected face in the mirror. Think of sentient beings as pools of water: some pools are clear and settled; some pools are unsettled and murky; some pools are under a lid or roof. When the full moon shines, as many as the millions and billions of pools as there are on this earth, there will be that many millions and billions of reflections of the very same moon. The moon doesn’t pick and choose what direction to shine but it just shines in all directions. This moon seems to be in each pool of water, but it is like a mirage that appears when the conditions are right: when the water is exposed to the sky, when the water is calm and clear, when the
sky is cloudless, when it is night-time, when the moon is shining in space, when all the conditions click, then a moon is reflected in each pool. This is how blessing works. This is how prayer works.

The problem with many religions is that their God is super-human or beyond human. We are only human, so how can we connect with a god who is so pure, when we are so impure? That means we need an intermediary to be a liaison between the perfect being and us imperfect beings. Then comes all this dogma about a semi-god, semi-human being to bridge the gap between the earthly and the divine, and then conflict follows.

Buddha tells us that we are our own saviour. Who else can save us? Buddha benefits sentient beings indiscriminately, just like the moon reflects indiscriminately in all the pools of water. When our pool is still and clear, and there is a perfect reflection on the water, this is due to our own merit appearing as a reflection of Buddha. And this is how prayer works also.

EVERYTHING IS LIKE AN OPTICAL ILLUSION

Since phenomena are momentarily gathered conditions, both material and mental, if we gather or dispel the appropriate conditions, phenomena appear or fall apart. For instance, the phenomenon of a flower is the result of many conditions, including our ability to recognise a flower as a flower by its appearance and attributes. Someone who has never seen a flower before will have no idea what this delicate object is.

Likewise, we recognise a house as a house by its appearance and attributes. When the parts of a house like walls, ceilings, floors, doors and windows are assembled in the correct manner, then the phenomenon of a house appears. You cannot deny that. You cannot and should not deny that. But, at the same time, this does not mean that a house truly exists. This learned ability to see beyond the surfaces of phenomena is so important to develop.

Everything is like an optical illusion that is put together in a clever way. But even to say that phenomena are put together is somewhat of an overstatement: phenomena are not even stitched together, you understand? Phenomena are just favourable conditions that happen to converge and a phenomenon manifests for the time being.

But this constellation of factors is not even glued or stitched or bound together like the pages of a book. It is much more haphazard than that: there is a confluence of various factors that combine to temporarily appear as a phenomenon of flower, as a phenomenon of house, as a phenomenon of human being, and that’s all.
As long as there is a gatherer, and acts of gathering, and conditions gathered, there will be continuous phenomena arising, dwelling and falling in endless waves. Some people wonder whether the stream of perception stops when we reach enlightenment. No, mind or perception does not stop. According to causes and conditions, when the circumstances are appropriate, appearances will still appear.

But they will appear within the non-dual view of non-grasping, or pure perception. Our greatest hindrance that keeps us from evolving the non-dualistic view is our old habitual pattern of treating transient phenomena as uncompounded and independent and singular. Because we define and designate a certain transitory set of variables as a human being, we perceive ourselves to be a solid and durable and existing human being.

We think we exist as a human being because we appear and function as a human being. But that appearance and function arise like a rainbow or a mirage arises, when transitory factors seem to synchronise temporarily, from our point of view: when conditions change, the mirage or rainbow vanishes; when conditions change, this human life will dissolve. After death, the collection of appearance and habit and human ability that we grasp to in life slowly, slowly dissolves.

Now suppose causes and conditions converge for us to be reborn in the form of, for instance, a pigeon in the next life. Slowly, slowly, slowly the transitory set of variables associated with pigeonhood waxes, as the transitory set of variables associated with your personhood wanes.

For instance, as human beings we like ice cream, because this transitory set of variables known as a human being has a tendency to like ice cream. But after we die, our liking of ice cream will blur and fade out as our pigeon consciousness comes into focus. Then, even if we are a famished pigeon, we will strut right past ice cream on the sidewalk, unaware that ice cream is delicious, because as a winged creature, we will find maggots and crickets delicious.

So in answer to the question whether the flow of perceptions through our mind will stop when we reach enlightenment, the answer is no, it doesn’t stop. Dependently arising phenomena will continue to appear. But phenomena will appear within the context of non-dual clarity and emptiness, beyond the four extreme views that phenomena exist, do not exist, both, and neither.

The discipline of hearing is such an important practise. For example, through the practice of hearing about this merging of clarity and emptiness again and again, we gradually get used to the idea that while phenomena appear, they
are empty. And through practising the discipline of contemplation, we become sure that we understand what we have heard thoroughly.

And then we meditate with the understanding that wisdom mind is the wealth of being natural; by natural, we mean the unelaborated or unembellished state of mind that is the norm before mental elaborations and embellishments arise.

Meditation is the quickest, easiest, most user-friendly way to gain understanding of and access to this state of naturalness. This state is natural in that it is free from having anything to do or say. Thus, we could say that meditation is the practise of freedom from anything to say or to do.
If you are attached to this life, you are not a person of Dharma.
If you are attached to cyclic existence, you do not have renunciation.
If you are attached to your own purpose, you do not have bodhichitta, the thought of enlightenment.
If grasping fixation arises, you do not have the view.

TALK TEN

Not only at this time but at all times, let us again and again arouse the right motivation for hearing this dharma properly. Whatever we do must be motivated by the wish to enlighten all sentient beings. That has to be our number one priority. And then, the merit we gather by engaging in virtuous deeds is dedicated to benefit all sentient beings, of course.

And in the midst of our virtuous activity, whether it be hearing, contemplating and meditating on dharma, or circumambulating the stupa, or offering lamps and incense, it’s essential that we do so with a good understanding that all of our so-called virtuous action is an illusion; and, that all of our non-virtuous action is also an illusion.

We have to understand very well that, likewise, motivation is illusion, my self is illusion, path is illusion, and enlightenment is also an illusion. As dharma practitioners, our aim is to attain enlightenment. And the state of enlightenment is basically the state of freedom from a state of deludedness and confusion.

Because the terminology of enlightenment can seem at times so esoteric and abstract, we tend to forget that enlightenment is simple, not complex. Also, there is a common prejudice which takes for granted that enlightenment only comes after many, many years of practise. Of course, I don’t dispute that, but at the same time, it’s also very important to understand that, in the simplest terms, enlightenment is basically the state of awakeness.

The fully awakened state may seem to some of us like a far-fetched idea, especially in the beginning. But the path of gradual awakening is quite down to earth and progressive, and the awakened state is as close to us as our own eyelashes are close to us.

To awaken from samsaric confusion is so advantageous. It awakens happiness that dispels all the pain and anxiety we suffer from. We’re often in the habit that when we speak of samsaric confusion and about dualistic mind, we speak as if the terms confusion and dualism did not actually apply to our own everyday experience, which is in fact confused and dualistic.
We tend to forget that from the time we got out of bed this morning until the
time we go to bed this evening, whatever we will have experienced today,
including all the faces, breakfast, our friends and family, the traffic, messages
in our inbox, phone calls we made and the conversations we had, all are the
stuff of illusion. Tonight, all of our experiences will be seen in hindsight to
have amounted to nothing more than an incessant stream of confusion and
that’s all.

We shouldn’t regard dualism as just some vague abstract idea. Dualism is the
figurative junk food that our minds are ingesting on a daily basis. And this
steady diet of dualism has made our confusion so fat and so large and so real,
so to speak. Out of our confusion we evolve a skin of chronic attachment, and
from this chronic clinging to self, we evolve a second skin of insecurity that is
always present.

Of course, self has good reason to be insecure since, as Chandrakirti points
out, the self is a baseless thing. After all, “self” is just a label that we give to a
transitory collection of the five unstable aggregates or skandhas that compose
a self: form, feeling, perception, karmic formation and consciousness. That’s
all self is, a never-ending process of mutating and evolving aspects of this
fragile and volatile self. And it is on this shaky basis that we confer the
honorific title of “I”. So, naturally, self is defensive and insecure, because so-
called self is only a constantly changing and re-arranging set of mental
factors.

We always try to escape from this worried and nervous state of mind by
diverting our attention and amusing ourselves with endless, mind-numbing
distractions. This constant nervousness and worry and insecurity are so
unbearably intense that we resort to sedatives and painkillers of mindless
entertainment.

We take many many pills of distraction to keep our insecurities out of sight
and out of mind. These pills to combat ego’s fears each fall into one of four
categories of mindfulness, except that in this case each pill imparts a contrary
form of unmindfulness, or form of mindlessness, beginning with the pill of
our physical form.

THE FOUR FOUNDATIONS OF MINDFULNESS

Our first typical response in order to escape from ego’s insecurity falls into
the category of mindfulness of form. The existence of this self seems to be
supported by the fact that we have the form of a human body. We flaunt and
groom and dress up our bodies, and our hygiene and fashion seem to re-
affirm our sense of a truly existing self.
Our second typical response in order to escape from insecurity falls into the category of mindfulness of feeling. We distract our insecurity by indulging in feelings about miscellaneous people and phenomena and social issues and so on. The moment insecurity strikes, we immediately pick up a magazine or the phone or the remote. Our emotional reactions offer a sense of feedback that seems to re-affirm our sense of a truly existing self who angers and laughs. This is a more subtle level of distraction than distraction through form or body.

Our third typical response in order to escape insecurity falls into the category of mindfulness of mind or consciousness. We might try to distract our insecurity by indulging in higher education and learning methods to free our mind from stress. And these mental exercises to learn and calm down and so on seem to re-affirm our sense of a truly existing self who studies and trains.

And, our fourth typical response in order to escape from ego’s insecurities falls into the category of mindfulness of dharma or phenomena. We distract our insecurity by taking refuge and performing ngondro and empowerments and sadhanas and we flaunt our practise credentials like framed diplomas and awards. Our exertion and engagement with the dharma seem to re-affirm our sense of a truly existing self who is following the path of dharma.

This is the most subtle level of distraction. If you practise this way, that means you are attached to this life, and that means you are not practising the dharma: you are practising distraction and escapism.

This is a quick and incomplete sketch of one facet of the four foundations of mindfulness. To turn these four styles of distraction into the four foundations, the moment insecurity strikes in our meditation, first we refrain from getting distracted. We don’t escape into fashion and hairstyles and make-up and perfume, and we don’t escape into feeling, mind, or phenomena. When insecurity strikes, we practise by sitting and doing nothing else except just watching. As Shantideva urges, we just sit there like a log.

For so many lifetimes, the moment insecurity has struck, we have had the habit of responding by taking refuge in distraction and unmindfulness. For better or for worse, we automatically react that way. But in shamatha meditation, we do the opposite: the moment when insecurity strikes, we do not react; we just watch. What does this do?

It actually sends a message to our mind that our habit of reacting to and masking our insecurity with escapism is so much unnecessary effort. It tells us that we can just sit and watch and not get swept up in distracting emotions. And it lets us see that this practise of just watching has the effect not of masking but actually melting away the insecurity of the moment.
Let’s say that our emotions are like a self-charging battery, meaning a battery that is re-charged each time we push its button. Whether we push gently or harshly doesn’t matter; either way, any contact at all with the button re-charges our emotional battery.

If our wish is to abandon samsaric insecurity, then we have to abandon our habit of pushing the button of our emotions. If we refrain from pushing our emotional button, that battery will have to use up its energy reserves and eventually run out of power.

But our habit is to touch emotions when they arise: we touch them in the sense that we probe and edit and react to feelings such as anger, jealousy, and pride and so on when they arise. And this contact constantly restores power to the battery of our emotional insecurity.

As Buddhists we might try to correct our anger, jealousy and pride by thinking that we should abstain from negative emotions. This is, of course, a gentle way of touching, but nevertheless it does touch our emotional button, and that touch prolongs the life of our samsaric battery.

Again, when insecurity strikes, we do not react; we let it be and we just watch. When we just let be and just watch and do not touch, our insecurity very soon runs out of energy. This means that we don’t have to make a great effort to mask our insecurity. We don’t have to keep our mind distracted away from our insecurity. We escape from painful emotion by simply leaving it alone. By not getting entangled, the emotion of the moment soon melts away all by itself.

This observation sends a very strong message to ego’s insecurity. It forces ego to face the truth that our efforts to escape insecurity actually have a paradoxical effect. Our efforts to escape are actually the trap that keeps us in a constant state of emotional insecurity. And it demonstrates that our insecurity is not a force of nature like a volcano or a glacier: when we let go of ego by not touching our emotional battery, we let go of insecurity. This is the truth that we have to face.

ENLIGHTENMENT IS TOTALLY POSSIBLE

Mindfulness meditation brings us face-to-face with reality. Many people tell me that they find meditation very, very boring, which is a deterrent to their practise. You know, when you are beginning to get bored, that means your meditation is working. Because your meditation is not lost in entertaining distractions and samsaric emotions, you are bored, which is a good sign. We have to make friends with this boredom. This boredom is our good friend. It
is a much better friend than the chaos of insecurity that erupts whenever we try to escape from this boredom.

It’s so important for us to get used to this idea that insecurity and confusion are not innate features of human life; they are a function of ego’s conflicts; and ego or self is like a dream from which it is possible to awaken. We can do so with ease, and when we awaken, the samsara of confused insecurity recedes to the vanishing point. Take this point to heart.

Train yourself not to think of enlightenment in terms of haloes and omniscience and miracles. Train your understanding of the meaning of enlightenment to be the simple act of waking up. Waking up to the truth spares you from needless suffering in the same way that a child is spared from burning her hand on the stove by a timely warning. And we could even say that this waking up is a small example of enlightenment, to the extent that we wake up to a greater awareness.

The enlightened view is simply a matter of viewing apparent phenomena from the perspective or view of non-attachment. All we need to do is switch our point of view as though we’re entering a new dimension, and this is very possible. We know that our view is always subject to change, so changing our view is not new. This is fortunate, since enlightenment means a fundamental shift in our perception and values.

Enlightenment is totally possible. It is as close as the air we breathe. But our habitual dualistic view that divides self from phenomena, and divides emptiness from clarity, and divides samsara from nirvana, is deeply established. Our main meditative task is to dis-establish that habit of impure perception and quit our habitual thought process of grasping, in favour of the non-dual pure perception of the enlightened view.

The path of dharma presents many challenges. One challenge is that Buddha’s view and meditation and teachings on emptiness are so hard to understand. Buddha’s view is so difficult because our samsaric view is a strong and stubborn habit. Also, we have a resistance to understanding and appreciating the logic of dependent arising, which adds to the difficulty. Even those who glimpse the truth of the logic of emptiness often soon forget what they have glimpsed, because their usual habit of defiled perception always comes flooding back.

A second reason that Buddha’s view is so hard to understand is that for some, the ultimate teachings, such as on the nature of the mind, are too simple; very, very simple; too simple to understand. Their very simpleness makes it hard to understand, and that difficulty is even more difficult than the difficulty of finding the teachings to be too hard.
So, Buddhism has two obstacles to understanding: one is that the dharma is too difficult; and the other is that the dharma is too simple. At least those who find the dharma is too difficult have some recourse. One can investigate and explore the Madhyamika, and ask khenpos questions, and contemplate deeply; they can learn to understand. But for those who find the dharma is too difficult because it is too simple, logic does not teach one to understand the dharma, no matter how many books one reads. So what can we do?

The first kind of difficulty in understanding the dharma, because it’s too hard, can be overcome by exertion and dedication. The second kind of difficulty in understanding the dharma, because it’s too simple, can only be overcome through an abundance of merit. Reading books is not going to help much. Asking many questions is not going to help much. Receiving many teachings is not going to help much. Only through the merit of a virtuous motivation and beneficial wish will understanding arise.

For instance, hearing and contemplation can, with the right motivation, generate merit, of course. But that educational approach only can go so far. To awaken from confusion, you need to hear, contemplate, and meditate on the dharma, and also you need to gather the greater merit which turns whatever situation arises into a stepping-stone on the path to enlightenment.

WHATEVER SITUATION ARISES IS A STEPPING-STONE

In the sutras, there’s a story about an old illiterate monk who was the target of some younger monks’ ridicule. In order to humiliate him in public, they instituted a new rule that all the monks would have to take turns giving the regular sermon to the sponsors. But this old monk didn’t know anything, and one day it was his turn to teach. The story goes that the distressed monk was talking to himself up at the front of the hall, saying over and over again wringing his hands, “I don’t know anything about the dharma, and this not knowing is suffering.” Now, hearing the old monk’s words turned out to be an epiphany for one old lady who instantly knew that it was true that not knowing is the cause that really does create suffering as a result. She heard his speech as the truth, because she had the merit to understand even the anxious words of the worried monk as a beneficial teaching. In this way, merit can expand and increase our understanding of dharma.

To a certain extent, we can say that one’s merit is simply a reflection of cause, condition and effect; but at the same time, merit also goes beyond cause, condition and effect. For example, once a yogi was making tea and a hot ember landed on his hand. And thanks to his store of merit, the pain at that moment sparked in him an experience of awakening from the illusion of duality. And that marked a major turning point in his life.
Once on a pilgrimage, Nyoshul Lungtok and his attendant were confronted by bandits. But even though they surrendered all their worldly goods, one bandit started to beat up Nyoshul Lungtok for no reason. This enraged his Khampa attendant who started to fight the bandit and was winning the fight. The lama was very displeased by his attendant’s outburst of violence, and he jumped on the disciple’s back saying “You have to stop!” But the disciple in a blind rage kept fighting, even mistaking his lama for the bandit in the heat of the moment. Needless to say, the bandits were quite bewildered by this turn of events.

After that, for three days the disciple’s anger never cooled down. But thanks to his merit, his extreme anger became the catalyst for a breakthrough experience. The extreme emotion of anger somehow short-circuited most of his usual samsaric confusion, and his life underwent a major change. What used to be such a big deal was no longer such a big deal. What used to be so precious no longer was so precious. This again I think was largely due to his great store of merit.

Merit is an essential element to make the leap from purely intellectual to more instinctual understanding of the dharma. Such merit can be accomplished by practising shamatha vipashyana, and especially by taking refuge in the Triple Gem of Buddha, dharma and sangha, and by arousing the bodhichitta wish to liberate all beings; and, of course, by practising the four partings from attachment. And devotion is, of course, the most efficient and most powerful way of accumulating merit.

If we learn to gradually accept and integrate these activities into our lives, even if only in brief sessions but repeatedly every day, we will really be freed from all manner of confusion and obsession. There will be a noticeable change in our conduct and outlook. Be patient and appreciate the signs of your modest and steady progress on the path.

I can speak from experience. I haven’t practised that much but I have practised some, and even in my limited experience which is far from enlightened, many of my minor quirks and tics quiet down after a month or two of practise, which feels like progress one can take pride in. But my practise is erratic and inconstant. In between periods of steady practise, my quirky nervous habits return. But when I practise regularly, many of my small obsessions loosen up.

For instance, I don’t have to lock and unlock the washroom door two or three times to check and double or triple check that the door is actually locked. So my paranoia is greatly reduced as long as I follow a daily practise routine, and I am more relaxed in general. I’m proud to say that now sometimes I don’t even have to lock the door at all.
All of which is to say that, if we lay the groundwork of the right causes and conditions, we are bound to see progress, and those positive effects encourage us to trust the path and to proceed; and, all of this is inextricably bound to the influence of merit.

Trakpa Gyaltsen’s closing words tell us that ultimate truth is a state of reality that words cannot express; and that, in order to attain the view of ultimate and inexpressible reality, one’s mind must first be speechless and undistracted.

And finally, Trakpa Gyaltsen simply dedicates the merit of propagating the dharma through his commentary on Sachen Kunga Nyingpo’s text,

*By this merit of expounding the Lojong Shenpa Shidrel, or the Mind-training of Parting from the Four Attachments, may all sentient beings attain enlightenment.*

**THE IMPORTANCE OF AN OPEN MIND**

To summarise, Sachen Kunga Nyingpo’s notation of Manjushri’s concise lesson, the text of *Lojong Shenpa Shidrel* begins with this admonition to those who wish to follow the Mahayana path: if you have attachment to this life, you are not a dharma practitioner. Within this first benchmark, Trakpa Gyaltsen prescribes hearing, contemplating and meditating in general, with a particular focus on precious human birth and impermanence.

Within the second benchmark, which admonishes that if you have attachment to samsaric existence, you have no renunciation mind, the faults of samsara in general are addressed, with a particular focus on cause and effect.

Within the third benchmark, which admonishes that if you have attachment to selfishness, you are not a bodhisattva, love and compassion are emphasised in general, with a particular focus on the importance of generating bodhichitta in two ways: first, by thinking that others and oneself are equal; and second, by exchanging others and oneself.

Within the fourth and last benchmark, which admonishes that if you have grasping, you do not have the view, the ultimate truth is covered in general, with a particular focus on the path of relative truth.

And that concludes the commentary written by Jetsün Rinpoche Trakpa Gyaltsen on Sachen Kunga Nyingpo and Manjushri’s *Lojong Shenpa Shidrel*, the Mind-training of Parting from the Four Attachments. I hope that I haven’t skipped anything.
I would like to re-iterate: Mahayana is very important. When I go to places like Taiwan, I meet two kinds of people. I meet people who have followed the Mahayana path and training, and were later drawn to practise Vajrayana. And I meet people who have entered straight into Vajrayana with no foundation in Mahayana. The difference between these two kinds of people is as plain as the difference between a firefly and the sun, I must say.

Those who skip the Mahayana path and go straight to the Vajrayana path are obvious from a distance by the gleam of their oily hair. They have at least four malas around their neck, and they love to talk about power and magnetizing wealth. Their view often seems to be founded on a rather superstitious cast of mind. Whereas those who have first practised Mahayana seriously have a very mature and refined approach to practising the Vajrayana.

Even within the Tibetan tradition, the practise of Mahayana Buddhism sometimes is overshadowed by the mystical allure of Tantra. And so often, Tantric Buddhism is overshadowed by the performing of rituals and the chanting of mantras. For some, Mahayana doesn’t sound as sexy and attractive as so-called dzogchen or mahamudra, which is unfortunate.

I encourage you to pursue your interest in the Mahayana path, and explore all of Buddha’s teaching. And I hope you will find that buddhadharma is like finding the missing link that makes sense of and solves many of life’s seeming dilemmas.

I’m said to be the reincarnation of a teacher who was venerated as a great Rime master, so it would be remiss of me not to say at least a few words in support of the non-sectarian movement. Frankly, I have little hope that the view of nonsectarianism will ever rise to prominence, especially among the native Tibetan Buddhist lineages.

Having said that, I think non-native Tibetan Buddhists might be more open to considering that grand attitude, free of grandiose school spirit and team loyalty. That would be so beneficial, but as I said, I’m not optimistic. You can see grey haired lamas who look so much like Kashyapa, and yet they are chauvinistic about their tradition, and if not with overt acts of protest, then covertly through passive resistance, they impede the spread of non-sectarian harmony.

To follow Buddha’s path, it is critical that we have an open mind. Sakya Pandita says that even if we are certain we will die tomorrow, we must still be open to new learning today. And he was referring to learning and knowledge in general; and needless to say, that dictum is all the more true with respect to learning about the dharma. We need to always be open.
So this is my obligatory pitch but also heartfelt pep talk on behalf of the non-sectarian movement and view. I am not bashing the traditional cultures of Tibet, or of Taiwan, by the way. Culture is very important as the medium that hosts civilized society.

Like language, cultural norms also provide a platform for the dharma. Our access to dharma depends on our fluency in a language. And that language is like the voice of the culture. So to complete the syllogism, we could say that therefore the dharma does depend indirectly to that degree on the culture.

But no criticism of culture as a social structure is intended. I do wish, however, to distinguish between culture and dharma as two different frames of reference. In the final analysis, if you want to practise the dharma, you have to seek the dharma, as distinct from the culture. Use culture as the source of practical information about the dharma, but don’t mistake cultural information about dharma for a thorough understanding and experience of dharma. We have to see for ourselves how the dharma is.