

Garchen Mila Buddhist Center – Weekly Reading and Contemplation

Weeks 1 & 2

Opening thoughts:

The realities of birth, old age, sickness, and death—known in Buddhism as the “four signs”—are fundamental aspects of human existence. It was the direct encounter with these forms of suffering that inspired Prince Siddhartha Gautama to seek a path beyond the cycle of samsara (the cycle of birth and death), ultimately leading to his enlightenment. Facing the suffering inherent in birth, old age, sickness, and death is both a first step and an ongoing contemplation on the Buddhist path. This honest confrontation with life’s impermanence and suffering can awaken a sense of urgency and inspire a genuine spiritual quest. As articulated in the teachings of Khenchen Konchok Gyatshen Rinpoche and other masters, this process is not about pessimism, but about developing wisdom and compassion through direct experience and reflection. By mindfully engaging with these realities, practitioners begin to loosen their attachment to transient pleasures and fears, opening the way to deeper understanding, compassion, and ultimately, liberation.



Teaching:

*Birth, old age, sickness, and death are like fish struggling on hot sand.
Their fierce torment and suffering are intolerable.
Apart from Dharma, nothing will help.
This is my heart’s advice.¹*

This Precious human life is wonderful. There are many opportunities for us, but best of all it allows us to practice and study Dharma. But life is also very difficult. No one wants the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, and death, but whether we are educated or uneducated, rich or poor, ordinary or powerful, everyone has to experience them.

Birth is the beginning of our life. We are born in great suffering but don’t remember it because the suffering was so intense. It was so agonizing that it also obstructs our memory of our previous life. Then, every year thereafter we age. When we are in our teens or twenties, we don’t pay much attention to how things will be in the future. But when we become forty or fifty, we have more responsibility but less ability, and wish we were in our twenties again.

There was once a great lama in his sixties. He had many disciples and gave very precious teachings. Some of his disciples asked him repeatedly to tell them about his life. “How did you start your Dharma practice?” and so forth. He always answered, “I don’t have anything special to say. I am just old now.” They pressed him repeatedly, so he answered “Until I reached my twenties, I didn’t think of any Dharma practice. Life just passed while I played here and there. During the next twenty years, I thought I should make some effort to study and practice Dharma. But without actually starting, I just passed my time being busy with this life. Now I am sixty years

old. Look how I've wasted my life. I still haven't done any Dharma practice. That is my story. I very much regret how I wasted my time." Reflect on these words and remember that we are aging moment by moment.

A man once made friends with the Lord of Death. He asked, "Will you please warn me some years before I die so I can prepare for death?" Heedless of the passing time, the man grew old with grey hair and a bent body. One day the Lord of Death appeared and said, "Tomorrow you will die." The man was very upset because he had no time to prepare for the journey of death. "You are very cruel," he said. "I asked you to warn me." The Lord of Death replied, "But I did warn you. Just look at your body, hair, and face." "You are right," the man admitted. "I was mindless and too attached to this life's affairs."

In old age it is difficult to see, to digest our food, to stand up or sit down. Our hair turns gray, our faces become wrinkled, and we lose our teeth. Every human being in the world suffers when they get old. We become limited physically and mentally. It seems that here in the West we suffer even more. When we grow old here, there is nothing much to do. We retire from the world. If we have a nice family, our children try to take care of us, but they also have to work to take care of their own lives. Then they send us to a nursing home if we have enough money. No one listens to what we say and we feel so lonely. So much suffering; we feel life is not worth living. What can we do?

When I was in Tibet in 1998 and 1999, I noticed the old people circumambulating the temples, stupas, and monasteries, and constantly chanting mantras with great devotion. Even though they have seen terrible calamity in their lives, still many of them reflect on the preciousness of Dharma. They don't feel lonely or feel that life has no meaning. I think this is really wonderful. Even if nobody looks after them, each morning they do what they can, maybe making their way to a temple with a walking stick. If in one day they can recite a thousand mantras or so, they feel so joyful. This is how to bring meaning to our lives. We need something like that here, too, instead of allowing the elderly to feel lonely, neglected, useless, and depressed.

Aging is a sickness that cannot be cured by any medicine. Many people try to fight it and stay young by taking pills and undergoing cosmetic surgery. But they age anyway. In addition, aging attracts other sicknesses, and we easily succumb to them. So life ends as it began –with suffering.

As we age, friends or family may help us cook or clean. When we are sick, we can also get some help from doctors and medicines. But nothing helps at the time of death. Even if all our best friends surround us, we leave alone and take nothing with us. Like a hair drawn through butter, we leave everything behind.

Hook a fish that is swimming nicely in the water and suddenly throw it on the hot sand. What does that fish feel? It struggles helplessly as if it were in a hell realm. Once I saw a restaurant on television where a fish was pulled from a tank. The chef cut open the fish's stomach, cleaned out the organs, and threw it in the hot oil—all while the fish was still alive. After the fish sizzled in the oil for few seconds, it jumped from the pan. Imagine that kind of suffering!

This is the kind of helpless suffering we experience in birth, old age, sickness, and death. In *The Song That Clarifies Recollection*, Lord Jigten Sumgön² says:

When you see the suffering of birth and death,
the happiness of the assemblies of gods and men is unreliable.
The joy and suffering of the wheel of samsara—
think! Can you put your trust in them?

These teachings introduce us to the reality of samsara. Each one of us has to go through these things. To face these experiences positively, we have to have Dharma teachings. Without Dharma, we will find it impossible to face them positively. With the Dharma, it doesn't matter if we get old or sick or whether we die; we will always have confidence. Pay precise attention to the nature of suffering and deepen your Dharma practice. Knowing about suffering helps prepare us for it. When we talk about these things, it can seem very depressing because we are so deeply entrenched in the culture of denial. We try to hide suffering behind a screen. If we could avoid suffering, then there would be no need to make ourselves miserable learning about it. But we have to face it, so we should prepare our-selves. Then when we experience suffering, we will really appreciate these teachings about transforming our thoughts and looking at the positive side.

This story gives us an example of how to conquer the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, and death:

In central India, there was once a king named Dawa sangpo, whose son, the prince, was called Daway Ö, Light of the Moon. When the son grew up, the father said, "Now it is your time to rule the kingdom." The son replied, "I don't want to be king and rule the country." The father objected, saying, "But it is a prince's duty to be enthroned as the king and then subjugate all the enemies of the country." His son said, "I cannot do this task. We already have a powerful foe who is very difficult to confront, and I am more afraid of that enemy than all the other enemies of our country. First, we have to get that one under control."

The king-father asked, "What kind of enemy are you talking about?" The prince replied, "The general of that enemy's army is self-grasping, and its soldiers are birth, aging, sickness, and death. That mighty force is armed with the five poisons. Because we haven't defeated that enemy yet, it will be more difficult to subdue in the future." Then King Dawa Sangpo asked, "Where is this enemy?" His son answered, "All the appearances of the king are the fixations and self-grasping of the great afflictions, the ministers of the five poisons. You are surrounded by the armies of birth, aging, sickness, and death. They wear the armor of the ten nonvirtues and wield the weapons of conceptual thought."

The father asked, "How can we defeat such an enemy?" And the son replied, "We have to ask the Buddha." So they went together to Shravasti, where the Buddha was staying, and requested him to teach them the methods for defeating these enemies. Buddha said, "If you, King, want to defeat these enemies, give up attachment to the bonds of wealth and practice generosity. Wear the armor of patience and ride the horse of perseverance. Build a palace on the field of devotion, and within

its hall of meditative concentration, bear the weapon of discriminating wisdom. Fight this enemy with the ten virtues³.”

Both father and son practiced rigorously, as the Buddha instructed. After some time, their mental obscurations were fully purified, which freed them from the sufferings of birth, aging, sickness, and death. Even though they aged, got sick and died, they did not experience any suffering related to these events. Because of their achievement of such great realization, gods proclaimed this verse from the sky:

The commander of samsara’s impermanence
waged a Dharma-war on the forces of birth, aging, sickness, and death.
Fully equipped and well prepared, he won a complete victory.
What a wonderful war this was!

In the same way, if we want release from the four great rivers of suffering, we must practice Dharma sincerely and diligently from our heart while we have the opportunity and ability.

There is no support for us either at the beginning or end of life unless we have realization. Of course we will age. But if we practice Dharma, especially bodhicitta and Mahamudra, these sufferings will be illusory. Milarepa said, “If you have not realized birth, old age, sickness, and death to be illusion, then the suffering they bring is intolerable.” As long as aging, sickness, and death are real to us, all the pain that we experience in life will be real. When we actually face these conditions, Dharma will surely help. There is not as much suffering for Dharma practitioners as there is for those who don’t have these practices. Therefore, we must practice the precious Dharma now, before we encounter these sufferings.

Take a moment to visualize a fish struggling on the hot sand at a beach. Helplessly, it dies there without any support. There are many people in the world; some are rich, famous, or educated, and some are not. But all face the suffering of aging, sickness, and death.

Develop great compassion and pray that you can accept these sufferings. Make a commitment to achieve buddhahood and help all sentient beings.

Excerpt from *Complete Guide to the Buddhist Path*,
by Khenchen Konchok Gyatshen Rinpoche (2009, pp. 117–121)

Reflection:

Week 1: There are so many ways we avoid thinking about the suffering woven into our lives. We fill our days with distractions and busyness, but when those distractions fade or the busyness quiets down, we find ourselves face-to-face with life's fundamental realities. This week, you are invited to take a little time each day—even just five or ten minutes—to reflect on old age, sickness, and death in your own life. You may find that this contemplation stirs up anxiety, or perhaps it brings a sense of relief. However you respond, try to approach the process without judgment. There is no right or wrong way to feel. Simply begin to make friends with your own reactions to the inevitability of old age, sickness, and death.

Week 2: This week's reflection is a deeper exploration into the universal nature of suffering. Building on your personal contemplation of birth, old age, sickness, and death, you are now encouraged to widen your awareness to include the shared experience of all sentient beings. All sentient beings—including every single human and animal—desire happiness and wish to be free from suffering. Yet all are inevitably subject to the four signs: birth, old age, sickness, and death. This week, you are again invited to take a little time each day—to contemplate this vast and interconnected suffering. A range of emotions may arise: sadness, empathy, feeling overwhelmed, or numbness. The practice here is to remain present with these emotions, observing them without judgment or resistance. If strong emotions arise, acknowledge them gently and return your focus to the contemplation itself. Remember, the aim is not to judge or fixate on suffering in this moment, but to see it clearly and honestly as a shared condition of life

Notes:

1. The root text for *A Complete Guide to the Buddhist Path* by Khenchen Konchok Gyatshen Rinpoche is *The Jewel Treasury of Advice, One Hundred Teachings from the Heart* by Drigung Bhande Dharmaradza (1704-1754)
2. Lord Jigten Sumgön (1143–1217) was the founder of the Drikung Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism and a direct disciple of Phagmodrupa. Renowned for his profound realization and teachings, he played a pivotal role in spreading the Kagyu tradition throughout Tibet.
3. The ten virtues include three virtues of body: protecting life, practicing generosity, and renouncing sexual misconduct. There are four virtues of speech: speaking truthfully, speaking harmoniously and speaking gently and speaking meaningfully. There are three virtues of mind: practicing contentment/generosity, cultivating loving-kindness, holding correct view of cause, effect and interdependence.

Garchen Mila Buddhist Center – Weekly Reading and Contemplation

Week 3: The Four Noble Truths

Opening thoughts:

The realities of birth, old age, sickness, and death—known in Buddhism as the “four signs”—are fundamental aspects of human existence. It was the direct encounter with these forms of suffering that inspired Prince Siddhartha Gautama to seek a path beyond the cycle of samsara (the cycle of birth and death), ultimately leading to his enlightenment. After attaining enlightenment the Buddha began to teach and his first teaching is known as the Four Noble Truths. In this passage His Holiness the Dalai Lama offers a short explanation of the Four Noble Truths and the three categories of suffering.



Teaching:

The Four Truths of the Aryas

The topics of the first discourse the Buddha gave after attaining awakening, the four truths of the aryas, well known as the “four noble truths,” form the foundation and structure of the Buddhist path. He taught these at the beginning for a specific purpose. Each sentient being has the innate wish for stable peace, happiness, and freedom from suffering. The longing for these motivates us to engage in many activities in an attempt to gain them. However, until now everything we have done has not brought about stable peace and joy because we live in cyclic existence (samsara) — the state of having a body and mind under the influence of mental afflictions and karma. Within cyclic existence we encounter only dukkha - unsatisfactory conditions and suffering.¹ Without choice, we take a body that gets old, sick, and dies and have a mind that becomes anxious, fearful, and angry. The I - the person that is merely designated in dependence upon the body and mind - revolves in cyclic existence. Our five aggregates of body and mind are unsatisfactory by nature and constitute the first truth of the aryas, the truth of dukkha. The causes of the five aggregates are mental afflictions - skewed attitudes and disturbing emotions, the chief of which is ignorance - and polluted actions.² These constitute the second truth, the true origins of dukkha.

The final true cessation — the third truth — is liberation and nirvana, the state of peace, joy, and fulfillment that we seek. Here ignorance, afflictions, and polluted actions and the unsatisfactory experiences they cause have been extinguished from the root so that they can no longer arise. True cessations are attained by depending on a method that eradicates ignorance. This is true paths, the fourth truth, which consist primarily of the wisdom realizing the ultimate nature - the emptiness of inherent existence of all persons and phenomena — and the virtuous consciousnesses supported by that wisdom. These paths require time and diligent effort to develop; we cannot hire someone else to accomplish them for us, like employing a mechanic to fix our car. How to cultivate these paths and actualize nirvana is the subject of this series.

The process of attaining nirvana begins with understanding the first truth, the nature of dukkha and the various types of unsatisfactory circumstances and suffering that afflict sentient beings in cyclic existence. When some people hear this, they fear that reflecting on their suffering may only make it worse, and therefore believe that no benefit would come from learning the Buddha's teachings. This would be true if it were impossible to free ourselves from the causes of dukkha. However, since the root cause of dukkha, ignorance — a mental factor that misapprehends reality and grasps phenomena as inherently existent - is erroneous, it can be eliminated by the wisdom that sees things as they really are — as empty of inherent existence. By gradually eradicating ignorance and other afflictions, we can bring greater satisfaction and freedom into our lives. After all its causes have been accumulated, we attain the final true cessation of dukkha and its causes, nirvana.

While nirvana may sound like a far-off goal, we can easily see steps going in that direction: the more we cease anger, the greater harmony we experience, and the more our greed diminishes, the greater contentment we have. As we gradually reduce ignorance and afflictions through the application of wisdom, tranquility and fulfillment correspondingly increase, culminating in nirvana.

Hence recognizing and reflecting on our suffering has a special, beneficial purpose: it activates us to discover its root and subsidiary causes and to eradicate them by practicing the path to peace that leads to the true freedom of nirvana.

The Buddha spoke of three types of dukkha. The first is the dukkha of pain. This is the physical and mental suffering that all beings see as undesirable. All world religions agree that destructive actions, such as killing, stealing, and lying, bring physical and/or mental pain. To counter this pain and the actions that cause it, all religions teach some form of ethical conduct. Scientists also seek to remedy physical and mental pain; they do this by developing the means to change its external causes that are in our environment or due to the malfunction of our body, our brain and nervous system, or our genes.

The second type of dukkha is the dukkha of change, which refers to worldly happiness. Why did the Buddha call what is conventionally considered happiness - such as pleasant sensations - dukkha? Worldly happiness is unsatisfactory because the activities, people, and things that initially give us pleasure do not continue to do so. Although eating, being with friends, receiving praise, and hearing good music may initially relieve pain or boredom and bring pleasure, if we continue to do them, they will eventually bring discomfort or fatigue.

Most people do not recognize worldly happiness as being unsatisfactory by nature, although many religions do. Some Hindus see the unsatisfactory nature of worldly pleasures and seek deep states of single-pointed concentration that are far more enjoyable. Some Christians abandon worldly pleasures in favor of a state of rapture or grace.

The third type of dukkha - the pervasive dukkha of conditioning — is the fact that we have a body and mind that are not under our control. Without choice, we take a body that is born, falls ill, ages, and dies. Between birth and death, we encounter problems even though we try to avoid

them. We cannot obtain everything we want even though we try hard to get it, and even when our desires are fulfilled, that happiness is not stable: we become disillusioned or separated from what we crave.

The description of the third type of dukkha - the pervasive dukkha of conditioning - is unique to Buddhadharma. Neither other religions nor science identify our taking a body and mind under the control of ignorance, afflictions, and polluted karma as problematic. They don't look for the causes of the pervasive dukkha of conditioning, let alone work to eliminate them. Instead, they try to make the situation better by focusing their efforts on eliminating the dukkha of pain. Having identified the pervasive dukkha of conditioning as the basic unsatisfactory condition we sentient beings suffer from, the Buddha sought out its root cause. He identified it as the ignorance grasping inherent existence and saw that this ignorance can be eliminated completely only by cultivating its opposite, the wisdom perceiving the emptiness of inherent existence. Here the Buddha's teachings on selflessness (*anatman*) become important. He explained that when we search for what ignorance apprehends — the inherent or independent existence of persons and phenomena — we cannot find it. The wisdom that realizes this — the true path — has the ability to gradually eradicate all ignorance from the mind, resulting in nirvana, the final true cessation. Here we see that the Buddha's explanation of the origin of dukkha, the ultimate nature of reality, the wisdom realizing it, and the attainment of nirvana are also unique.

In this way, the Dharma - true cessations and true paths — is a unique refuge. The Buddha who taught this Dharma is a unique teacher, and the Sangha — those followers who have realized directly the lack of inherent existence — are unique companions on the path. These three objects of refuge as described in Buddhism are unequaled and are not found elsewhere.

The situations described in the four truths were not created by the Buddha. He simply described things as they are. If dukkha, its origin and cessation, and the path did not exist, there would be no need to practice Dharma. Of course it is up to each of us to test the veracity of the four truths for ourselves. By observing our own experience, we will come to know that dukkha and its origins exist. Although we may not directly know true cessations and true paths at this time, they, too, also exist. Through understanding that dukkha and its origins can be eliminated, we understand that true cessation can be attained. This brings conviction that true paths are the means to bring about peace in our minds.

Reflection:

- 1 The first two of the four truths of the aryas describe our present experience: we are subject to three main types of unsatisfactory circumstances: pain, change, and pervasive conditioning. These are rooted in ignorance of the ultimate nature of reality.
- 2 The last two of the four truths describe possibilities: a state of freedom from ignorance and dukkha exists, and a path to that state also exists.
- 3 It is up to us to learn and reflect on these to gain conviction in them and to cultivate wisdom in order to free ourselves.

Excerpt from *Approaching the Buddhist Path*,
by His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron (2009, pp. 61- 65)

Notes:

1. Dukkha (P. dukkha) is often translated as “suffering,” but this translation is misleading. Its meaning is more nuanced and refers to all unsatisfactory states and experiences, many of which are not explicitly painful. While the Buddha says that life under the influence of afflictions and polluted karma is unsatisfactory, he does not say that life is suffering.
2. The Sanskrit term āsrava is translated as “polluted,” “contaminated,” or “tainted,” meaning under the influence of ignorance or its latencies.

Garchen Mila Buddhist Center – Weekly Reading and Contemplation

Week 4

Opening thoughts:

Nagarjuna, who lived in South India in approximately the first century C.E., is undoubtedly the most important and widely studied Mahayana Buddhist philosopher. He is the founder of the Madhyamika, or Middle Path, schools of Mahayana Buddhism. His vast corpus includes texts addressed to lay audiences, letters of advice to kings, and the set of penetrating metaphysical and epistemological treatises that represent the foundation of the philosophical school known as Madhyamika. Most important of these is his largest and best-known text, the Mulamadhyamikakarik – in English, Fundamental Stanzas on the Middle Way. This text in turn inspires a huge commentarial literature in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese. Divergences in interpretation of the Mulamadhyamikakarika often determine the splits between major philosophical schools. So, for instance, the distinction between two of the three major Mahayana philosophical schools, Svatantrika-Madhyamika and Prasangika-Madhyamika, reflect distinct readings of this text, itself taken as fundamental by scholars within each of these schools. In this teaching His Holiness the Dalai Lama offers a very brief introduction to Nāgārjuna's teaching on dependent arising.



Teaching:

Dependent Arising and Emptiness

In the [previous] explanations of the four truths, several topics repeatedly arose: ignorance, which grasps inherent existence; the emptiness of inherent existence, which is the ultimate nature of all persons and phenomena; the wisdom realizing emptiness that counteracts ignorance; and nirvāna, which is the state of peace attained from doing so. Another essential topic — dependent arising — ties all of these together.

The Madhyamaka tenet system as explained by the Indian sage Nāgārjuna speaks of three levels of dependent arising. The first, which is common to all Buddhist tenet systems, is *causal dependence* — the fact that products (conditioned things) depend on causes. A table depends on the wood, which is its substantial cause — what actually turns into the result — and the people who make it, who are the cooperative condition that helps to bring about the result. Similarly, our body, mind, and present rebirth depend on their respective causes and conditions. Such dependency rules out the possibility of things arising haphazardly without any cause. It also precludes things arising due to discordant causes — things that do not have the ability to cause them. Barley cannot grow from rice seeds, and happiness does not come from destructive actions.

In addition to chemical, biological, and physical causality, karma and its effects is another system of causal dependence. Karma is volitional actions done physically, verbally, or mentally. These causes bring their effects: the rebirths we take, our experiences in our lives, and the environment

in which we are born.

The second type of dependency is *dependent designation*, which has two branches: mutual dependence and mere designation by term and concept. *Mutual dependence* refers to things existing in relation to each other: long and short, parent and child, whole and parts, and agent, object, and action. Our body — which is a “whole” — depends on its parts — arms, legs, skin, and internal organs. The organs and limbs only become “parts” in dependence upon the body as a whole.

A hard, spherical object the size of a small apple becomes a baseball only because there is the game of baseball, a pitcher, a batter, and a bat. Apart from this context, this round object would neither be called a baseball nor function as a baseball. A parent is identified only in relation to a child, and someone becomes a child only in relation to a parent. Neither the parent nor the child exists independently of each other.

On a daily basis we use conventions and terms and engage in actions based on language. Doing this does not require there to be a direct, one-to-one objective referent for each term. Rather terms are defined relationally and derive meaning only in the context of mutually dependent relations.

The second type of dependent designation is *mere designation by term and concept*. In dependence on the collection of arms, legs, a torso, head, and so on, the mind conceives and designates “body.” In dependence on the collection of body and mind, the mind conceives and imputes “person.” In this way, all phenomena exist in dependence upon mind. Whatever identity an object has is contingent upon the interaction between a basis of designation and a mind that conceives and designates an object in dependence on that basis.

This interdependent nature is built into phenomena. If phenomena had an independent identity unrelated to others, we should be able to find the true referent of a term when we search for it. However, we do not find an independent essence in any phenomenon. This shows that all existent objects exist by being merely designated by term and concept. Being dependent, all phenomena are empty of independent existence. This is the subtlest meaning of dependent arising.

Dependent Arising and the Three Jewels

Indicating the importance of realizing dependent arising, the Buddha says in the Rice Seedling Sūtra (Śālistamba Sūtra):

Monastics, whoever sees dependent arising sees the Dharma.
Whoever sees the Dharma sees the Tathāgata [the Buddha].

How does seeing dependent arising lead to seeing the Dharma, which leads to seeing the Buddha? A process of progressive understanding is needed. When we realize causal dependence — that everything we perceive and experience arises as a result of its own causes and conditions — our perspective on the world and on our inner experiences shifts. Due to understanding that these exist only because their causes and conditions exist, our world, our experience, and even

ourselves no longer seem so fixed and solid. Being dependent, they have no essence of their own.

As our understanding of mutual dependence and mere designation by name and concept deepens, we will appreciate that a disparity exists between the way things appear and the way they exist. While things appear to be autonomous, objective, independent realities “out there,” they do not in fact exist in this way. If we focus repeatedly on branches, trunk, twigs, and leaves arranged in a certain manner and question, “What makes this collection of things a tree?” we will begin to understand that neither the individual parts nor the collection of those parts is a tree and that the tree exists by being merely designated in dependence on its parts. Dependent on the collection of parts of a tree (the basis of designation of a tree) and on the mind that conceives and designates “tree,” a tree exists. Because it is dependent on all these factors, the tree is empty of objective, independent, or inherent existence. It does not exist in isolation — from its own side or under its own power — because it depends on causes, conditions, parts, and the conceiving and designating mind.

While an inherently existent tree cannot be found under analysis, a tree still exists. How does it exist? It exists dependently. Thus, we see that emptiness and dependent arising are not contradictory and, in fact, are mutually complementary. Everything is empty of inherent existence, and simultaneously everything exists, but not in the independent fashion that it appears to. It exists in dependence on other factors.

Underlying strong emotions such as clinging attachment, anger, and jealousy is an assumption that we are inherently existent, independent persons, that exist in and of ourselves. Similarly, there appears to be an independent reality of objectively existent people and things in the world. By recognizing the disparity between appearance and reality, we come to understand that our perceptions and ideas of things are exaggerated. Investigating how our mind perceives and interprets the things we encounter, we develop insight into the functions of the mind and the different types and levels of consciousness operating within us. We also come to appreciate that although some of our emotional states seem so strong and their objects appear so vividly, they are in fact similar to illusions in that they do not exist in the way they appear to us.

Dependent arising is the foundation for all Dharma practices. The two levels of dependent arising — causal dependence and dependent designation — are the main factors through which spiritual practitioners accomplish their aspirations. By developing a deep understanding of the nature of reality in terms of causal dependence, we come to appreciate the workings of karma and its results: our actions bring results. Pain and suffering arise due to destructive actions, and happiness and desirable experiences are the results of constructive actions. Understanding this, we choose to live with good ethical conduct, which enables us to have a higher rebirth in the future.

Through deep contemplation of dependent designation, we come to realize emptiness, the ultimate mode of existence. This wisdom tackles the fundamental ignorance keeping us bound in cyclic existence, allowing us to fulfill our spiritual goals of liberation and full awakening. Dependent arising also underlies the four truths. Through such reflection and analysis, we understand that the self-grasping ignorance that misapprehends reality gives rise to our mental

afflictions (true origins), and that these, in turn, bring about the suffering we experience (true dukkha). Understanding dependent arising also enables us to realize the lack of independent existence of persons and phenomena — their emptiness. This wisdom realizing emptiness (true path) has the power to overcome all ignorance, wrong views, and afflictions because they lack a valid basis, while emptiness and dependent arising can be proven by reasoning as well as directly experienced. Through this, we will appreciate that a state exists in which all ignorance and afflictions have been removed. This is nirvāna, true cessations, the third truth. Thus the Dharma Jewel — true cessation and true paths — exists.

If such a state as nirvāna exists, individuals must be able to actualize it. This leads us to understand the existence of the ārya Sangha — those beings who perceive emptiness directly. It also demonstrates the existence of the buddhas — omniscient beings who have perfected this state of cessation. In this way, the understanding of dependent arising leads us to establish the existence of the Three Jewels of refuge: the Buddhas, Dharma, and Sangha. For this reason, the Buddha said that those who see dependent arising see the Dharma and those who see the Dharma see the Tathāgata.

I believe this statement of the Buddha could also mean that by seeing dependent arising on the level of conventional appearance, we see causal relationships and understand karma, compassion, bodhicitta, and the method aspect of the path. Through accomplishing the method aspect of the path, we come to “see” — that is, actualize — the form body (rūpakāya) of a buddha. By understanding dependent arising in relation to the ultimate mode of existence, we experience the meaning of emptiness — the suchness (tathatā) of all phenomena — and by that, we “see” (actualize) the truth body (dharmakāya) of a buddha, a buddha’s mind, specifically an awakened one’s wisdom of ultimate reality. In this way, both the body and mind of a buddha are actualized.

Reflection:

- 1 All persons and phenomena exist in dependence on other factors. There are three types of dependence: causal dependence (for impermanent things only), mutual dependence, and mere designation by terms and concept.
- 2 Dependent arising contradicts the possibility of independent or inherent existence. Understanding this can eradicate grasping inherent existence, the root of our dukkha in cyclic existence.
- 3 The wisdom that eradicates ignorance (the true paths) and the freedom from dukkha that comes about due to it (true cessations) are the Dharma Jewel.
- 4 People who have actualized the Dharma Jewel in their minds are the Sangha Jewel and the Buddha Jewel. Thus the Three Jewels of refuge exist.

*Excerpt from Approaching the Buddhist Path (The Library of Wisdom and Compassion Book 1) (p. 67)
by His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron (2009, pp. 65–71)*

Garchen Mila Buddhist Center – Weekly Reading and Contemplation

Week 5 - Mind and Emotions

Opening thoughts:

We are emotional beings. Our feelings of pleasure or pain provoke different emotions, and our emotions motivate us to act. Some of our emotions are afflictive and unrealistic; others are more realistic and beneficial. As a result, some of our actions bring more pain, while others bring happiness. Learning to differentiate destructive from constructive emotions so we can subdue the former and nourish the latter is a worthy endeavor on a personal as well as societal level. Buddhas have eliminated all afflictive emotions, but that does not mean that they are emotionally flat, apathetic, and unreceptive to human contact. In fact, it is the opposite: by going through the gradual process of overcoming destructive emotions such as greed and anger, buddhas have built up and expanded constructive emotions such as love and compassion. Due to this inner transformation, their work in the world is wiser and more effective. In this chapter, you'll be introduced to the Buddhist view of emotions, comparing and contrasting that view with Western paradigms. We'll also examine how specific emotions affect our daily life and how to work with difficult emotions and cultivate positive ones.



Teaching:

Buddhism, Science, and Emotions

Buddhists and scientists have some similar and some very different ideas about emotions. In general, scientists describe an emotion as having three components: a physiological component, an experiential component, and a behavioral component. The physiological component includes the chemical and electrical changes in the brain as well as galvanic skin response, heart rate, and other changes in the body. The experiential component is the subjective experience — the psychological mood or feeling aspect of an emotion. The behavioral aspect includes the words and actions of a person motivated by that emotion.

From the Buddhist perspective, emotions are mental states and subjective experiences. They may be accompanied by changes in the body's physiology, but the brain's activities are not the emotion itself. For example, if we could put some live brain cells in a petri dish in front of us, we would not say their chemical and electrical interactions were anger or affection, because anger and affection are internal mental experiences of a living being. This experience may be correlated with activity in a certain area of the brain, but that neurological activity is not the experience of anger. Similarly, an emotion may lead to an action, but that action is an effect of the emotion, not the emotion itself. Consequently, of the three components mentioned above, Buddhists speak of emotions only in terms of the second — what we experience, feel, and think.

Buddhism does not deny that the mind and body affect and influence each other. When our knee

hits the table, our mind experiences pain, and we may become irritated. When our mind is calm, our physical health improves. In *Commentary on Reliable Cognition*, Dharmakīrti says that when the body is healthy, attachment to sexual pleasure increases in the mind, whereas when the body is weak, anger arises more easily.

On a subtler level, certain emotions correlate with specific chemical and electrical changes in the brain. Does this correlation indicate a cause-and-effect relationship? Science has made fascinating discoveries correlating certain cognitive and emotional states with specific areas in the brain and particular neuron activity, but we must be careful not to attribute causality when there is merely correlation. Whereas some scientists believe that physiological events in the brain cause the emotions, Buddhists think that in general, the mental states precede the physiological changes. This is an important area open for research, and in recent years many scientists have begun to explore it. But regardless of whether the subtle changes in the brain cause, are caused by, or simply correlate with emotions, Buddhism emphasizes that emotions and feelings are mental states in living beings. Without mind, there is no experience: a corpse certainly doesn't have love or hatred, and a group of neurons or a cluster of genes does not feel pleasure or pain. Living beings do. Feelings, emotions, thoughts, views, attitudes, and so forth occur in the mind — they are mental states experienced by living beings.

These mental states motivate our physical and verbal actions. It is unreasonable and even dangerous to say, “My biological makeup makes me harm others.” Such an attitude leads us down the slippery slope of abdicating responsibility for our actions by attributing their causes to physical elements over which we have no control. In addition to creating a sense of powerlessness in us, it could be used to justify eliminating individuals with certain genetic or neurological makeups.

The vast majority of our physical and verbal actions are prompted by intentions in our minds, and these intentions are influenced by our feelings, emotions, and views. Although many of our intentions are very subtle and some seem more like primal urges than conceived plans, they are present nonetheless. The fact that our intentions and emotions are the forces behind what we say and do means that by changing them, we can transform our actions and our lives. We are not doomed to a life circumscribed by the limitations of our genes, neural pathways, and biological processes over which we have very little choice or control. While we still have to deal with the effects of genetic and physiological processes, we need not develop a defeatist attitude regarding them. We have human intelligence and the seeds of love, compassion, wisdom, and other magnificent qualities inside us. These can be consciously developed, and many great sages in a variety of cultures and spiritual traditions have done this.

Many years ago I challenged one of the scientists in our *Mind and Life* dialogues to research the effects of cultivating well-being and positive emotions on the brain. After investigating for some years, he reported that due to a combination of the brain's neuroplasticity and people's meditation practice, there were changes in the brain circuits of people who cultivated four selected qualities: resilience, positive outlook, attention, and generosity. Each of these has corresponding Buddhist practices to develop them. Resilience is the speed with which we recover from adversity; a positive outlook is seeing the basic goodness in others and letting that influence

all that we do; attention is the ability to focus on an object and enables us to complete what we begin; and generosity is an attitude of giving and sharing. All of these activate brain circuits that are correlated with a sense of well-being. The researchers' conclusion was that well-being can be learned, so they've been developing programs that teach meditation and mindfulness and using them in schools, hospitals, and so forth with great success.

Happiness and Unhappiness, Virtue and Nonvirtue

While both Buddhism and psychology seek to help people have more happiness and fulfillment and decrease their unhappiness and misery, they differ somewhat in what they consider positive and negative emotions. Some psychologists and scientists I have spoken with say that a negative emotion is one that feels bad and makes the person unhappy at the time it is manifest in the mind. A positive emotion makes the person feel happy at the time it is manifest.

In Buddhism, what differentiates positive and negative emotions is not our immediate feeling of happiness or discomfort but the happiness or suffering that is the long-term result of those emotions. That is because the long-term effects of our actions are considered more important than their short-term effects, which tend to be fleeting in comparison. If, in the long term, an emotion produces unpleasant experiences, it is considered negative; if it brings happiness in the long term, it is positive. Buddhism explains that virtuous (positive, constructive, wholesome) emotions lead to happiness in the long term, while nonvirtuous (negative, destructive, unwholesome) emotions lead to suffering.

The Buddha presented four scenarios in which present happiness/pain and virtue/nonvirtue are at play (MN 70.7):

Here, when someone feels a certain kind of pleasant feeling, nonvirtuous states increase in him and virtuous states diminish; but when someone feels another kind of pleasant feeling, nonvirtuous states diminish in him and virtuous states increase. Here, when someone feels a certain kind of painful feeling, nonvirtuous states increase in him and virtuous states diminish; but when someone feels another kind of painful feeling, nonvirtuous states diminish in him and virtuous states increase.

This thought-provoking citation is worthy of some illustrations. As it says, there are four possible permutations of feelings and ethical value. In the first, a pleasant feeling accompanies the increase of nonvirtue and the decrease of virtue. An example is feeling happy when we successfully deceive others about a vile action we have committed. Even though it may be accompanied by a pleasant feeling, our action is not virtuous, since it is the cause of future suffering.

In the second, there is a pleasant feeling when a nonvirtuous state decreases and a virtuous one increases. An example is taking delight in making a generous offering to a charity that helps refugees or the poor and hungry. This kind of happiness is win-win: we feel joyful now, and our action creates the cause for future happiness for self and others.

The third occurs when an unpleasant feeling accompanies an increase in nonvirtue and a decrease in virtue. An example is the pain of someone who angrily rejects being sentenced to prison after being convicted of embezzlement. Not taking responsibility for his nonvirtuous action, he angrily blames others, creating more nonvirtue. If he accepted responsibility for his action and regretted it, his virtue would increase, and his pain would lead him to change his ways.

In the fourth situation, we have a painful feeling, but our nonvirtue diminishes and our virtue increases. An example is taking a lower-paying job to avoid having to lie to clients or customers. In this case, creating virtue that will bring happiness in the future and peace of mind right now also brings some unhappiness of a loss in income. But it is undoubtedly worthwhile in the long term.

Making some examples of these from your own experience is useful. Such an exercise helps us to value our ethical integrity more than the fleeting happiness of getting what we want at the moment. Since our self-esteem and feelings of self-worth depend more on our ethical integrity than on sensual pleasure, it is worthwhile to take the time to remind ourselves of these values before an impulse arises, so that when the time comes we will make wise decisions.

Reflection:

- 1 When you act against your ethical values, how do you feel at the moment of doing the action? How do you feel later, when reflecting on your action?
- 2 When you give up an immediate pleasure due to your sense of personal integrity or for the sake of long-term happiness, how do you feel at the time? How do you feel later, when reflecting on your action?
- 3 How integral is ethical conduct to your happiness? Based on what you conclude here, make some determinations about how you want to live.

Excerpt from Approaching the Buddhist Path (The Library of Wisdom and Compassion Book 1) by His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron (2009, pp. 77-81)

Garchen Mila Buddhist Center – Weekly Reading and Contemplation

Week 6 & 7: The Three Poisons -Attachment, Anger

Opening thoughts:

The Three Poisons are a fundamental concept in virtually all major schools and branches of Buddhism, including the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions. They represent the root causes of all suffering and the primary obstacles to enlightenment. These three mental afflictions are greed (or attachment), hatred (or aversion), and ignorance (or delusion). These poisons fuel the cycle of samsara by generating negative karma through our thoughts, words, and actions. Attachment binds us to worldly pleasures and creates craving, aversion manifests as anger and rejection of unwanted experiences, while ignorance obscures our understanding of reality's true nature, including the impermanent and interdependent nature of all phenomena. Tibetan Buddhism teaches that recognizing and transforming these three poisons through wisdom, compassion, and skillful means is essential for breaking free from cyclic existence and achieving liberation. The antidotes to these poisons are generosity and non-attachment (countering greed), loving-kindness and patience (countering hatred), and wisdom and mindfulness (countering ignorance), with all practices ultimately aimed at dissolving the self-grasping that gives rise to these mental afflictions.



Teachings:

Attachment

Among the multiple meanings of the word attachment, one form of attachment is necessary for our physical and psychological well-being; another is one of what are called the *three poisons* — three afflictions that poison our own and others' well-being.

The first form of attachment is spoken of in psychology and refers to a feeling of closeness or connection among people. For example, psychologists speak of the attachment a baby has for his or her mother. Such attachment or bonding with the mother or mother figure is necessary for the psychological well-being of the child.

This feeling of closeness or attachment is present in families and enables them to function together as a unit for the benefit of each member. Healthy attachment in a harmonious family has a realistic understanding of the other family members' capabilities and fosters mutual respect. Similarly, attachment unifies the citizens of a country, facilitating their cooperation for the benefit of their society. This form of attachment produces good results.

Buddhists have a positive use of the term as well. Bodhisattvas are said to be “attached” to sentient beings because they feel a tremendous sense of closeness and responsibility for the welfare of each and every sentient being that spurs them to practice. Their love for sentient beings invigorates them to do whatever they can to alleviate suffering and bring happiness. They do this with greater energy and joy than we ordinary people work to benefit ourselves.

More commonly in Buddhism, however, attachment (*trsnā and rāga*) refers to one of the three poisons and one of the six root afflictions. This attachment is a mental factor that, based on exaggeration or projection of good qualities, clings onto its desired object. With attachment, we hunger after, crave, cling to, and become obsessed with an object, person, idea, place, and so forth. When we succeed in procuring the object of our attachment, we are happy; but when that desire is frustrated, we become angry, resentful, and jealous. These emotions, in turn, motivate destructive actions to procure or protect the cherished object. We can clearly see that the greed of a CEO for money or the craving of a sports or movie star for fame leads to harmful actions and suffering for himself and others.

When attachment is moderate, society in general considers it to be a positive emotion. There is a feeling of happiness or excitement at meeting someone wonderful, receiving a desired possession, or being praised by the people we value. However, from a Buddhist viewpoint, such attachment is based on exaggeration, and while it may be captivating at the beginning of a new relationship, it will hinder the relationship from being harmonious and mutually beneficial in the long term. This is because attachment leads to unrealistic expectations. Difficulties and disappointments naturally follow when we discover that the object of our attachment doesn't possess all the wonderful qualities we thought it did.

This attachment is sneaky. For example, when family members' affection becomes neediness and possessiveness and generates demands based on unrealistic expectations, it turns into unhealthy attachment. If someone's appreciation for his country makes him suspicious of foreigners on the basis of nationality or ethnicity alone, attachment has set in. This emotion can cause prejudice and discrimination, and the person may go so far as to deny others their human rights.

Once I met a Chilean scientist who spoke of scientists being attached to their field of study. He said that any exaggerated clinging onto one's field of study, political beliefs, or religion is harmful. This man was not a Buddhist, but he understood that it is the mental state of clinging, not the object clung to, that causes problems. In the case of a scientist, such attachment could lead to ignoring contrary evidence or even rigging the result of experiments or misreporting data collected from them. Similar disadvantages accrue to a person attached to their own religion or political views.

Some people ask whether it is possible to be attached to nirvāna or to the Buddha. Aspiring for nirvāna or to have the Buddha's qualities is not attachment. The mind is clear, and although it is attracted to its object, there is no exaggeration present because the Buddha and nirvāna possess magnificent qualities. Still, according to the Prāsangika viewpoint, as long as there is subtle self-grasping — in this case, grasping nirvāna or the Buddha to exist inherently — there is the potential for subtle attachment to arise. If someone then clings to nirvāna and desperately wants to attain it as if it were an external object, exaggeration is present in the mind. When this person studies and practices the Dharma, eventually the distorted aspect will be dispelled, and she will have a genuine aspiration for nirvāna that is free from attachment.

Anger

Most of us would agree that in general anger is a destructive emotion. Under its influence,

we speak in ways that break the trust in relationships with people we care deeply about. Overwhelmed by anger, we act in ways that are dangerous and destructive to our own and others' well-being. While we often believe that our anger is justified — “any sane person would be angry in this situation” — that doesn't alleviate the downside of anger. When we later calm down, we can see that our mind was exaggerating the negative qualities of a person or situation, or even projecting negative qualities that aren't there.

Some people argue that some forms of anger are constructive. For example, if a student is wasting her time and not actualizing her potential, her teacher may become angry. This anger stems from the teacher's wish that the student succeed and, from that perspective, could be considered a positive form of anger, some people say. Nevertheless, we need to examine each individual situation and check our motivation carefully. It is easy to justify abusive behavior by saying, “I'm doing it for your own good.”

Moral outrage at injustice in the world is another form of anger that some people say is beneficial because it leads to constructive change in society. But here, too, we need to examine if exaggeration is present. Years ago when I, Chodron, was at an anti-war protest, I saw another protester pick up a brick and throw it at the police. His action shocked me into realizing that his mental state had become like the mental state of those who were responsible for the war. There was bias for his own side and animosity toward the other. He was protective of those who agreed with him but sought to harm those who didn't. It is all too easy in a situation of conflict to forget that people on the “other side” are human beings who want happiness and freedom from suffering just as we do. Painting them as thoroughly evil and never to be trusted is definitely an exaggeration.

Anger is not the only emotion that can motivate us to tackle social injustice. Compassion can be a strong motivating factor as well. Because a compassionate mind is concerned with the well-being of all parties in a conflict, there is a greater chance of reaching an outcome that benefits everyone. We are able to think more clearly when we are free from anger. Ārya bodhisattvas who are liberated from cyclic existence have no anger whatsoever. If they see one person harming another, they have compassion for both people and intercede to avert the harm. Compassion does not mean being passive and ineffective. Rather, it impels us to act assertively when appropriate, but without anger or hatred.

It is difficult to experience the emotions associated with anger — hatred, resentment, vengeance, and so on — without some degree of hostility toward others. When we closely examine such emotions, we find that they are based on self-centeredness. As such, from a Buddhist perspective, emotions falling under the umbrella of anger are distorted and harmful mental states to be abandoned. Having said that, we must be careful not to confuse anger with assertiveness. A person can speak or act firmly and forcefully without being angry, just as an angry person can be passive and withdrawn.

Sūtrayāna — the path based on the sūtras — sees all instances of anger as based on distortion and hence damaging. Tantrayāna — the path based on the tantras — speaks of using anger in the path. In our discussions, His Holiness speculated that when a bodhisattva practicing tantra

speaks harshly to someone, the causal motivation — the initial thought to do the action — is compassion, but the immediate motivation at the time of the act is anger. One difference between this anger and ordinary anger is that ordinary anger wants to harm or punish the person, while anger that has been transformed into the path aims to stop the person's harmful actions. A bodhisattva has tremendous concern and compassion for the person and uses fierce actions to stop him from harming others and from creating destructive karma that will later ripen in his own suffering. In addition, the bodhisattva has deep wisdom that realizes the agent, the action, and the object all lack inherent existence.

In speaking of the possibility of using anger in the path, a guideline is warranted. Since we beginners lack the requisite compassion, wisdom, and skill to transform a destructive emotion into the path, it is better for us to apply the antidotes as taught in the Sūtrayāna path and to practice restraint.

*Excerpt from Approaching the Buddhist Path (The Library of Wisdom and Compassion Book 1)
by His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron (2009, pp. 46-48)*

Garchen Mila Buddhist Center – Weekly Reading and Contemplation

Week 8: The Three Poisons -Ignorance

Opening thoughts:

The Three Poisons are a fundamental concept in virtually all major schools and branches of Buddhism, including the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions. They represent the root causes of all suffering and the primary obstacles to enlightenment. These three mental afflictions are greed (or attachment), hatred (or aversion), and ignorance (or delusion). In this section we examine ignorance.



Teachings:

Ignorance

The ultimate nature of the mind is its emptiness of independent or inherent existence. Inherent existence is a false mode of existence that we superimpose on all phenomena; we believe that they have their own findable essence that makes them what they are, that they exist independently of all other factors such as their causes and parts. In fact, they are empty of all such fabricated ways of existing because they exist dependent on other factors. In the Eight-Thousand-Line Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra (Astaśāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra), the Buddha says:

The mind is devoid of mind, for the nature of mind is clear light.

“The mind is devoid of mind.” This leads us to investigate what the mind actually is, its ultimate mode of existence, how it really exists. “The mind” refers to the clear and cognizant conventional nature of mind. When we search that clear and cognizant nature, we cannot find something that is the mind. Within the clarity and cognizance, there is nothing we can pinpoint that is inherently the mind. If we were able to find a real mind, then the mind would inherently exist with its own independent essence. However, when we search to find the mind, we do not find the mind in the mind; we do not find an inherently existent mind. That is why it says here that the mind “is devoid of mind.” The final nature of the mind, its ultimate mode of existence, is its emptiness of inherent existence.

Since the mind is devoid of mind, we might think that the mind does not exist at all. But this is not the case. The words “the mind” indicates that the mind exists; it is the basis of our analysis. That the mind exists is shown by the fact that I can explain these statements due to the workings of my mind and you can understand them due to the workings of your mind. Saying that the mind does not abide in the mind means that an inherently existent mind is not the final mode of existence of the mind. It does not mean that the mind does not exist at all.

The mind exists, but it is empty of inherent existence. This is the meaning of “the nature of mind is clear light.” This ultimate nature of the mind is pure in that it is free from inherent existence. But the fact that the mind is empty of inherent existence alone does not mean the afflictions such as ignorance, anger, and attachment can be eliminated from it. These afflictions also lack inherent existence, but we cannot say they are pure by nature.

Ignorance is a mental factor that grasps phenomena as inherently existent, with their own independent essences. It is the source of all other disturbing emotions, such as anger, craving, jealousy, and conceit. The fact that the mind, as well as all other phenomena, do not inherently exist means that the ignorance that grasps the mind as inherently existent contradicts reality. If the mind did inherently exist, ignorance would be a correct mind that sees reality. In that case, it could not be eliminated. However, since ignorance perceives the opposite of reality, it can be eliminated by the wisdom that sees reality correctly, the wisdom that realizes the emptiness of inherent existence.

Because ignorance and other afflictions are erroneous mental factors that lack an inherently existent foundation, they are not embedded in the nature of the mind and can be eliminated forever. Just as clouds temporarily obscure the open sky although they are not the nature of the sky, ignorance and other afflictions temporarily obscure the pure nature of the mind. But unlike clouds, which once gone can reappear, ignorance and afflictions, once they have been eliminated from their root by wisdom, can no longer obscure the mind. Meanwhile, other mental factors, such as love, compassion, and fortitude, do not depend on ignorance to exist and therefore remain as part of our mindstream forever.

*Excerpt from Approaching the Buddhist Path (The Library of Wisdom and Compassion Book 1)
by His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and Thubten Chodron (2009, pp. 46-48)*

The Benefits of Understanding

You may still ponder, What is the benefit of understanding emptiness? By understanding emptiness, you maintain an appreciation for all that appears to exist, but without clinging to the illusions as if they were real and without the incessant disappointment of a child chasing a rainbow. Which is not to say rainbows don't exist. They are there but not there. They are empty but apparent. When you understand all things are like this, you begin to see the cosmic joke, your clinging becomes humorous. When you see others stuck in their clinging, you have greater understanding, because you've been there and empathy comes. Not only on an individual level, this will help develop empathy for Kremlin dwellers, and Kremlin dwellers might understand why White House dwellers fear them. Millions of Americans who are obsessed with the illusion of individual rights as a truly existing thing will understand millions of Chinese who are obsessed with the illusion of collective harmony and vice versa. You see through the illusions and are reminded that it is the self that created them in the first place. You may still get stirred up or emotional, sad, angry, or passionate, but you have the confidence of someone at the cinema who can leave the drama behind because there is a clear understanding that it is just a movie. Your hopes and fears are at least slightly diffused, like recognizing that the snake is just a tie.

When we have not realized emptiness, when we don't fully understand that all things are illusions, the world seems real, tangible, and solid. Our hopes and fears also become solid and thus uncontrollable. For example, if you have a solid belief in your family, you have a deep-seated expectation that your parents will take care of you. You don't feel that way about a stranger on the street; he has no such obligation. Understanding assembled phenomena and understanding emptiness allow for some room in the relationship. As you begin to see the various experiences, pressures, and circumstances that molded your parents, your expectations of them change, your disappointment lessens. When some of us become parents ourselves, even a little understanding of interdependence effectively softens our expectations of our children, which they may interpret as love. Without that undemanding, we might have good intentions to love and care for our children, but our expectations and demands can become unbearable.

Similarly, by understanding emptiness, you lose interest in all the trappings and beliefs that society builds up and tears down—political systems, science and technology, global economy, free society, the United Nations. You become like an adult who is not so interested in children's games. For so many years you have trusted these institutions and believed that they could succeed where past systems have failed. But the world has not yet become safer, more pleasant, securer.

This is not to say that you should drop out of society. Having an understanding of emptiness doesn't mean that you become blasé; to the contrary, you develop a feeling of responsibility, empathy, and compassion. If Jack is howling, making a scene, yelling at everyone to stop putting snakes in the house, and you know it is because of his delusion, you have sympathy for him. Others may not be so forgiving, so you can try turning on some lights, for Jack's sake. On a gross level, you will still fight for your individual rights, hold down a job, be politically active within the system; but when the situation changes, either for or against you, you are prepared. You don't blindly believe that everything you wish for and expect must materialize, and you're not caught up in the end result.

More often than not, many of us choose to stay in the dark. We aren't able to see the illusions that create our everyday life because we don't have the courage to break out of the network that we're plugged in to. We think that we are, or will soon be, comfortable enough if we continue on as we are going. It's as if we are entering a maze through which we already have a habitual route, and we don't want to explore other directions. We are not adventurous because we think we have so much to lose. We fear that if we see the world from the view of emptiness, we may be cast out from society, lose our respectability and along with it our friends, family, and job. The seductive allure of the illusory world doesn't help; it's packaged so well. We are bombarded with messages about soap that makes us smell like heaven, how miraculous the South Beach Diet is, how democracy is the only viable system of government, how vitamins will increase our stamina. We rarely hear more than one side of the truth, and on the rare occasions that we do, it's usually in fine print. Imagine a procession of American presidents going to Iraq, China, or North Korea and shrugging as they proclaim, *American-style democracy might or might not work in your country.*

Like a child at the cinema, we get caught up in the illusion. From this comes all of our vanity, ambition, and insecurity. We fall in love with the illusions we have created and develop excessive

pride in our appearance, our possessions, and our accomplishments. It's like wearing a mask and proudly thinking that the mask is really you.

Once there were five hundred monkeys, one of whom thought he was very clever. One night this monkey saw the reflection of the moon in the lake. He proudly informed all the other monkeys, "If we go to the lake and collect the moon, then we will be the heroes who saved the moon." At first the other monkeys didn't believe him. But when they saw with their own eyes that the moon had fallen into the lake, they decided to try to save it. They climbed a tree and held each other by the tail so they could reach the shimmering moon. Just as the last monkey was about to grab the moon, the branch broke and they all fell in the lake. They didn't know how to swim and they all struggled in the water as the image of the moon shattered in the ripples. Driven by the hunger for fame and originality, we are like these monkeys, thinking that we are so clever in discovering things and convincing our fellow humans to see what we see, think what we think, driven by ambition to be the savior, the clever one, the seer of all. We have all kinds of small ambitions, such as impressing a girl, or big ambitions, such as landing on Mars. And time after time we end up in the water with nothing to hold on to and not knowing how to swim.

*Excerpt from What Makes you Not a Buddhist
by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche (2009, pp. 72-80)*

