Releasing Life:

An Ancient Buddhist practice in the Modern World

Shenphen Zangpo
(Stephen Powell)

Copy Conditions

Printed for free distribution by
The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation
11F., 55 Hang Chow South Road Sec 1, Taipei, Taiwan, R.O.C.
Tel: 886-2-23951198 , Fax: 886-2-23913415
Email: overseas@budaedu.org
Website:http://www.budaedu.org

Table Of Contents:

List of Illustrations:

Front Cover: The young prince Siddhartha releasing a rescued swan.

1.Milarepa building structures as a means to purify negative karma.

2. The full moon reflected in the clear lake serves as a symbol of emptiness.

3. Jack, the black labrador, saving a boy from drowning.

4. A butterfly resting on a broken cup represents non-dualistic thought.

5. A Buddhist monk releasing fish into a river.

Foreword

This foreword has been offered by the eminent master Karma Chagme Rinpoche VII, supreme head of the Neydo lineage.

Rebirth as an animal, fish, insect or bird is the karmic consequence of engaging in non-virtuous deeds over many lifetimes. This book offers advice on methods for saving creatures from immediate danger, while at the same time creating the karmic conditions for them to experience a higher rebirth and, finally, total release from the cycle of samsara.

I pray over and over that all creatures rescued in this way will gain release from their immediate sufferings and finally attain liberation.

Old Man Karma Chagme,
Taipei, Taiwan.
1 May 2004

Preface

My first experience of a releasing-life ceremony was in Taiwan. A group of us that included several other monks and a number of Taiwanese Buddhists and their families purchased some locally caught fish at a wharf-side market, loaded them into the hold of a boat and headed out towards the open sea. The fish were offered consecrated pills that had been dissolved in water and auspicious aspirations were made on their behalf; finally, the fish were returned to the sea and the merit was dedicated to the well-being of all sentient beings.

It was very gratifying to watch the fish slip over the side of the boat and quickly swim away. That night before going to sleep I recalled the day's events, and imagined the fish that would otherwise have been chopped into pieces on the kitchen table or fried in hot oil now swimming peacefully in the cool water under the moonlight. This beautiful image inspired me to lead many more expeditions to purchase and release fish, and also to research the practice in greater depth.

This short book is the result of my studies. I hope that it will not only encourage people to engage in releasing life, but also to do so in a way that is both sensitive to the animals' needs and ecologically sound.

Shenphen Zangpo (Stephen Powell),
Taipei, Summer 2004.

Acknowledgements

For their guidance and advice, I remain deeply indebted to Karma Chagme Rinpoche, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, Karma Khenchen Rinpoche, Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche and Khenpo Tobgyal Phuntsog. Furthermore, I would like to extend my gratitude to Chatral Rinpoche for granting me permission to include his teaching on releasing life (see supplement).

In addition, I sincerely acknowledge the great kindness of Ven. Hui-min, Dr Huang Chin-wan and Louie Powell, without whose continued support and assistance this book could never have come to fruition.

To Frances McDonald, whose excellent skill as editor transformed a few basic ideas into a readable text, and to Lai Jen-loong, whose artwork brought the stories to life, I am extremely grateful.

Special thanks also to all the following friends who helped by editing, finding information and offering support – Daniel Altschuler, Marcus Bingenheimer, Chang Pei-yen, Chen Jr-hui, Jonathon Cloud, Chanel Grubner, Alan Horowitz, Hsiang Hui-ling, Cynthia Williams, Yuan Ju-tsen and friends at Siddhartha's Intent (Taipei).

Finally, a big thank you to all the people of Taiwan for the great warmth and friendship they have shown me. I have felt very welcome on this island.

May the merit accrued from this work bring you, together with all sentient beings, peace, good health, happiness and the blessings of the Dharma.

1

The Causes

Karma

> All felicity and adversity and all joys and sorrows of birth and death and so forth are dominated by our karma.
> - Karma Chagme, *Naked Awareness*[1]

The Sanskrit word *karma* literally means 'action', though in English it is often used to denote the fruit of an action.

For sentient beings, karma is the primary force of development. Thoughts, words and deeds based on intention[2] produce an energy that leaves karmic seeds, or traces, in the mind stream.[3] These traces essentially define the course of future events as they ripen under the influence of external factors.

How do these traces affect the future? Consider a building. The third floor does not appear independently;

---

[1] Karma Chagme, 2000: 57.

[2] Skt. *chetana*; Tib. *sems-pa.* These terms imply a conscious effort to accomplish a task.

[3] Buddhism divides the stream of consciousness into eight levels. It is the eighth, the *alaya,* where the residual forces of intentional thought, word or deed are stored.

rather, it depends on the first and second floors for its position. In turn, these levels depend on each brick or stone for their stability. If several bricks are defective or placed insecurely, a problem will arise at a higher level. In other words, we can say that the energy from these bricks is transmitted through the whole structure. The traces imprinted on the mind stream influence the nature of the whole stream in a similar way. In the future, the consequences of the acts that left the traces will be experienced.

With regard to the nature of the traces, the Buddha observed that mental, verbal and physical acts motivated by selfless generosity and goodwill produce pleasant and favourable results when the conditions are right. These are the solid bricks. In contrast, those governed by a mind distorted by greed, hatred, attachment, jealousy, pride or delusion are the bricks that lay the ground for future hardships.[4]

These karmic traces or seeds are similar to the latent potential for sound to resonate from vocal chords or for ice to form in water. They cannot be discerned, but when stirred by external factors, sound and ice are produced. In the same way, when karmic seeds meet conducive circumstances, a situation arises according to the nature of the seed. In an earthquake, for example, a house constructed with defective bricks might collapse. *The Treasury of Precious Qualities*[5] states:

---

[4] The result is also influenced by the strength of the imprint.

[5] Tib. *yon tan rinpoche che'I mdzod.* A famous treatise composed by Jigme Lingpa (see f.n. 37).

Soaring high in the sky
The eagle's shadow is lost from sight,
But like action and its result
The two are intrinsically connected,
And when conditions are ripe,
It will be clearly seen.[6]

The concept that past acts determine future circumstances can be difficult to comprehend. So, let us look at another example. As a youth, you exercised regularly and had a healthy diet. Now you are a middle-aged executive who likes to eat junk food and put his feet up in front of the TV. Even though this lifestyle is unhealthy, you will still reap the benefits of your previous good habits, though they will diminish in time. Equally, the rate at which they diminish will depend on the input of other actions. A diet consisting purely of junk food and exercise limited to switching TV channels will exacerbate a decline in health far more than a mixed diet and moderate exercise. In the same way that exercise primarily affects the continuum of the body, actions influence the continuum of the mind.

The results of one's acts, however, bear fruit at different periods. They can materialize within the same lifetime that they are committed, within the next lifetime, or at some time far in the future. We might see those that cheat and commit atrocities living in wealth

---

[6] Sodachi Khenpo, 1997: 9.

and opulence, while the good and kind are often poor and sick. This kind of situation arises because those that are currently engaged in unwholesome acts but who live in style are reaping the benefits of past positive actions, while those that are kind and generous but who experience ill health or poverty are suffering the effects of former negative actions. In Buddhism, it is often said that to know our past lives we need only look in a mirror, while to know the future we need only observe our present attitude and conduct. The *Sutra of One Hundred Actions* [7] describes the connection between cause and result in the following way:

> The joys and sorrows of beings
> All come from their actions, said the Buddha.
> The diversity of actions creates the diversity of beings.
> And impels their diverse wanderings.
> Vast indeed is the net of actions![8]

It is said that for every cause, there are a number of effects, and for every effect, there are a number of causes. Moreover, an outwardly similar act can produce different consequences, depending on various factors. For example, the result of a generous act depends on the intention, the level of assistance offered, the beneficiary, and whether the benefactor regrets or rejoices in the action later. Assistance offered to

---

[7] Skt. *Karmashataka Sutra.*

[8] Patrul Rinpoche, 1996: 118.

impress or to gain reward, for example, is like planting a tainted seed. The fruit will be adversely affected. In addition, the value of wholesome action is increased when it is directed towards beings to whom we are indebted, such as the Buddha, the guru or a parent. The law of karma is like a river that twists and turns, absorbing both filth and fresh rain as it cascades down a mountain.

Actually, it is impossible for the ordinary mind to fully grasp the intricacies of the law of karma; it is similar to a blind man trying to imagine a colour he has never seen – it can only be understood through direct experience. Consequently, the Buddha deemed speculation regarding such metaphysical matters a waste of time.

A common misunderstanding, however, is to confuse karma with predestined fate. The difference is that with predestined fate, there is no free will. While Buddhism does not deny that our circumstances are generally beyond our control, it emphasizes that the way in which we handle them is not.

The following example illustrates this distinction. Some people are in a small boat on the ocean, and a strong wind is blowing, threatening to capsize the vessel. These circumstances arose because of the past actions of those on board, and are presently unalterable. Nevertheless, the people have a choice in how they respond to the situation and to the others, and what they do will determine their future. A selfish response plants the seeds for future suffering, while calm and selfless action lays a foundation for future happiness. In order

to make wise choices, it is very important to understand this point.

The Buddha rejected the idea of a soul, or *atman.* Yet, we have discussed karmic seeds ripening in future lives. What is it that transmits from one body to the next after death? It is the karmic traces, the residual forces themselves. When a snooker ball hits another, the first one stops and the second continues. They are not the same ball, but there is transference of energy, and the way the first ball was hit determines how the second moves. This is similar to the process of death and rebirth. The Zen monk Ryokan[9] also uses the example of a ball to explain life and rebirth in a playful poem:

> Once we start to bounce a ball,
> We will only be led on to
> Counting: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven,
> eight, nine, ten,
> Only to start again – from at the beginning![10]

The cycle of birth and rebirth is known as samsara, and, as we have seen, is created by beneficial as well as non-beneficial acts of body, speech and mind. However, if even beneficial action leads to further samsaric existence, why did the Buddha admonish his monks,

---

[9] (1758-1831). A Japanese monk in the Soto Zen lineage (Ch. Ts'ao-tung) He was famous for his poetry and carefree lifestyle.

[10] Ryokan, 1999: 57.

saying: 'Do not be afraid of deeds of merit'?[11] In addition, why did he teach practices specifically aimed at creating merit?

According to the Mahayana,[12] perfection of the two accumulations (merit and wisdom) is a prerequisite to attaining full enlightenment. Alone, merit does not lead to liberation, but only to higher states within samsara.[13] However, by dedicating the meritorious act to the liberation of all sentient beings, the character of the seed is transformed. If one plants an apple seed, an apple tree will grow. Likewise, seeds dedicated to liberation will lead to liberation. Prior to performing any positive act, one should thus affirm one's motivation: 'May all benefits from this act help sentient

---

[11] Skt. *punya.* AN IV IX (59a).

[12] The Great Vehicle. This tradition emphasizes compassion and merit, combined with realization of wisdom, as a means to attain enlightenment. Mahayana is the predominant school in Bhutan, China, Korea, Japan, Mongolia, Singapore, Taiwan, Tibet and Vietnam.

[13] Buddhism recognizes six distinct realms of existence: the hell, hungry ghost, animal, human, demi-god and god realms. These are understood to be created by the mind's propensities, and mistakenly taken to be real. Consequently, none of these states are permanent, and beings transmigrate through them depending on their karma. While all sentient beings have the potential to attain enlightenment, only the human form provides the necessary conditions to do so. Beings in the other realms are either beset by too much suffering or ignorance to engage in Buddhist practice or they are overly absorbed in bliss, and consequently do not consider seeking a deeper meaning to life.

beings attain complete enlightenment.' In addition, while engaged in the activity, one should reflect that the giver, recipient and object given are empty of inherent existence.[14] This protects the merit.[15] Finally, the activity should be 'sealed' by dedicating the merit towards the enlightenment of all beings. In the same way that a drop of water is preserved by adding it to the ocean, dedicating one's merit to the 'great ocean' of beings sustains its power until the fruit of complete Buddhahood is attained. *The Middle Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*[16] explains this in the following way (paraphrased):

> O Sabhuti![17] When one develops the excellent mind of enlightenment,[18] even the ten virtuous deeds and so forth will become liberative virtues.[19]

Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche[20] concurs on this point:

---

[14] This is explained in detail at the end of this chapter.

[15] There are four ways that positive karma can be destroyed: through failing to dedicate the merit in favour of others' enlightenment, anger, regretting having performed the beneficial deed and boasting of one's positive action.

[16] Skt. *Prajnaparamita Sutra.*

[17] One of the Buddha's ten major disciples.

[18] Dedication of one's efforts towards the liberation of all beings from the cycle of karmic suffering.

[19] Longchen Rabjam, 1996: 225.

[20] (1926-1999). A Dzogchen master and teacher of many contemporary masters known in the West.

> Relative practices are very, very important for those who, like ourselves, are still involved in living in the relative world. We cannot deny the operation of karma and how our conditioning continues to bind us.[21]

The results of negative past actions create obstacles to the attainment of enlightenment. For example, a person may find that he is unable to find a qualified teacher, or that his environment is not conducive to practice. Obstacles appear in many forms, but they all have one thing in common: they can be purified.

Consider a polluted river. Adding fresh water will dilute the level of pollution and bring the quality of the water nearer to its original state. In reality, however, the original body of water is neither sullied by the filth nor sweetened by the fresh water (the molecules are not penetrated by either). Yet, the fresh water is able to clear the murkiness, and thus enable the practitioner to draw closer to reality. Here, the 'original flow' is synonymous with our original, or Buddha nature, which permeates all sentient beings in the same way that oil permeates a sesame seed, while the pollution and fresh water represent negative and positive karma.[22] Thus,

---

[21] Nyoshul Khenpo, 1995: 64.

[22] In the Vajrayana (Tibetan Buddhism) branch of Mahayana, the allegory of the sun obscured by clouds is often used to describe the relationship between our original nature and karmic obscurations. The clouds do not in any way interfere with or change the sun, and once they dissipate the rays of

we can see that any action that benefits others is of tremendous value; how much truer this is when it is driven by a great aspiration to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings.

The great Tibetan yogi Jetsun Milarepa[23] was responsible for the deaths of many people in his youth. Later, he regretted the action and turned his mind to the Buddha Dharma. His teacher, Marpa,[24] realized that the results of Milarepa's previous actions would create insurmountable obstacles to his practice. Consequently, Milarepa's first few years as Marpa's student were not spent in meditative absorption in a cave, but in constructing houses for his teacher. Once one building had been completed, Marpa would find fault with it, and instruct him to demolish the structure and rebuild it in a different place. Milarepa actually completed four houses before finally Marpa felt that his karmic stream had been sufficiently purified to receive meditation instruction.

---

light, which have always been there, can be seen. In this way, we can understand that the mind before and after enlightenment is the same. What changes is our perception.

[23] (1040-1123). One of Tibet's great yogis and poets, and a leading figure in the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism.

[24] (1012-1097). Often referred to as Marpa the Translator as he was instrumental in translating many Tantric texts into Tibetan. He studied primarily under the great yogi Naropa (1016-1100).

The Indian monarch King Ashoka[25] had likewise caused the deaths of many beings. Later, he undertook to build many monasteries, stupas,[26] and hospitals throughout his kingdom as a means to cleanse himself of these actions. In order to make these purification practices effective, however, they must flow from a mind moved by repentance. If there is no deep sense of regret for one's negative actions, then the 'purifying' deeds will be tainted by negative emotions; consequently, their effect will be greatly reduced.

Samsara is the product of karmic seeds ripened under the influence of contributing factors. Therefore, as a compounded phenomenon, it is ultimately non-existent. This explanation may sound complicated, but actually it just means that everything we perceive is composed of elements and is therefore neither permanent nor self-sustaining. For example, take a bicycle. On a relative, day-to-day level, it exists. We can sit on it and cycle away. However, under analysis, we can find no one thing that actually constitutes a bicycle.

Take out one spoke. Is this spoke the bicycle? Take out another spoke. Ask the same question. Piece by

---

[25] (270-230 BCE). The first monarch to rule over a united India and a historically influential patron of Buddhism. He is primarily remembered for having the moral aspirations of Buddhism carved into pillars and stone (known as the rock and pillar edicts) throughout his kingdom, abolishing war, and establishing clinics for the welfare of both men and animals.

[26] A domed monument containing Buddhist relics.

piece dismantle the entire bicycle, including the parts of the frame that are welded together. At some point, we will realize that the bicycle no longer exists – but where did it go? At what point did it cease to be a bicycle? We will discover that on an absolute level, there is not one thing we can call a bicycle. It is compounded, and therefore, as the Buddha realized, does not ultimately exist.

All phenomena are the same. This book did not spontaneously arise, but is the result of a combination of factors. The paper is made from wood and water. The wood came from a tree that had absorbed water, sunlight, and nutrition from the soil. Thus, when we look deeply into the book, we can see that it exists only relatively. It is merely a temporary combination of elements, and there is not one thing that we can actually call a book. This is what Buddhists call 'emptiness' (Skt. *shunyata*).[27]

The samsaric world created by karma is therefore no more than the result of our projections based on ignorance and conditioning. Like a dream, it does not ultimately exist. In the same way that a person who is dreaming believes his experiences are real, we also are

---

[27] Nagarjuna (second century CE – A great Indian Buddhist scholar and logician) said: 'That which originates dependently we call emptiness. This apprehension is the understanding of the Middle Way. Since there is nothing whatsoever originating independently, nothing whatsoever exists that is not empty. So emptiness and interdependent origination mean the same thing, and that is the Middle Way.' Traleg Kyabon Rinpoche, 2002: 75.

convinced of the ultimate reality of what we perceive. In a dream, we may find ourselves in a different land and a member of an unknown family. Yet, we do not for one moment think to investigate the situation. In fact, even if someone entered our dream and told us we were dreaming, we would just see them as part of the mistaken reality and carry on our lives as before. Because of this difficulty, the Buddha taught the expedient path of the 'six perfections',[28] which through the accumulation of merit and wisdom create the causes and conditions for sentient beings to awake to reality.

In conclusion: any act of body, speech or mind committed with intention creates a karmic force that produces a corresponding result in the future. In our daily life, we cannot avoid intention; consequently the Buddha established practices that channel these energies towards liberation rather than continued samsaric rebirth. A Buddhist saying states:

> Used well, this body is a ship to liberation,
> Otherwise, it is an anchor in samsara.
> This body is the agent of all good and evil.[29]

Among these practices and attitudes, bodhichitta[30] and its root, compassion, are perhaps the most sublime

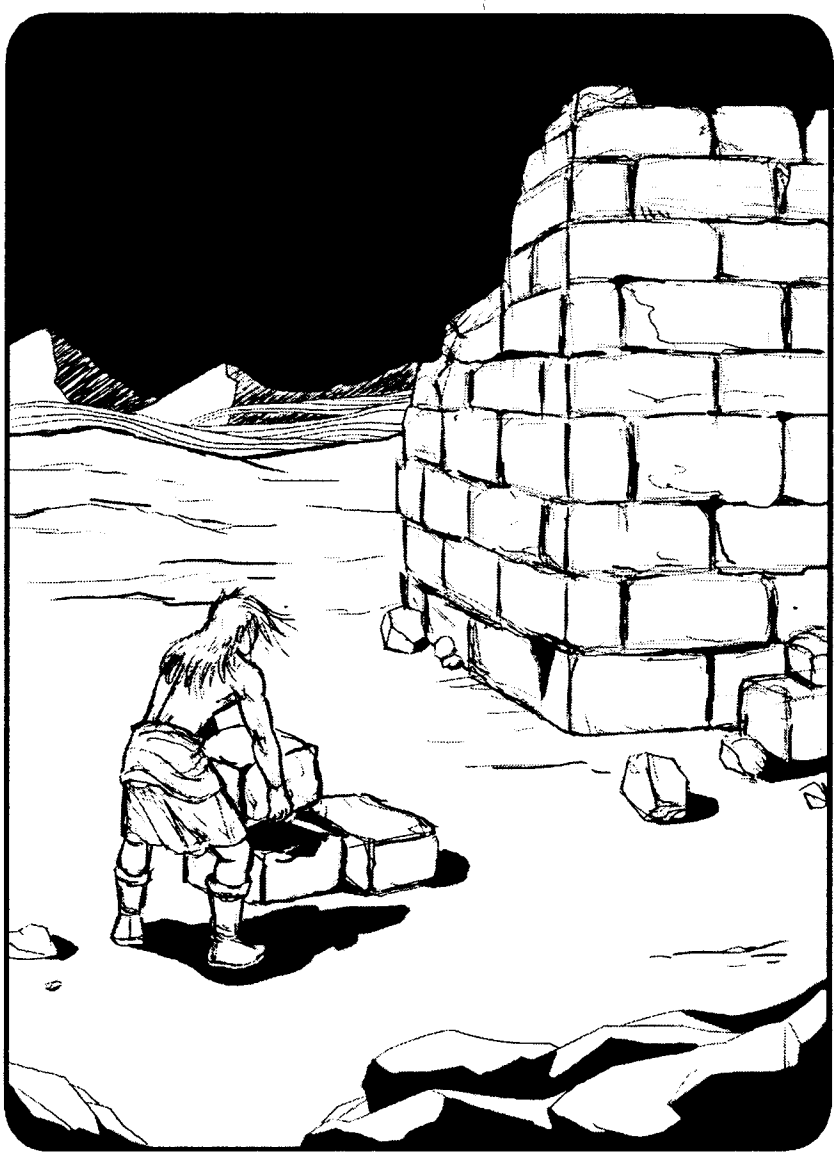
---

[28] For detailed information regarding these practices, see appendix 3, 'The Six Perfections'.

[29] Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, 1994: 15.

[30] Lit. The mind of enlightenment. This is explained in detail in the second part of the next chapter.

relative teachings that the Buddha offered the world. Open and spacious, the mind of bodhichitta transforms even the most mundane deed into a spiritual endeavour.



2

The Motivation

Compassion

> Compassion is the root of the Buddhist path[31]
> - Acharya Nagarjuna, *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom*[32]

Why is compassion considered the lifeblood of Buddhist practice? The answer to this question lies in the goal of practice, and in how compassion is intrinsically connected to attaining this goal.

After Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment 2,500 years ago under the Bodhi tree in India, he gave a teaching called 'the Four Noble Truths':

> (The first truth states that) samsaric existence is suffering.
> (The second truth states that) there is a cause of suffering.
> (The third truth states that) there is a way out of suffering.
> (The fourth truth teaches) the path to the cessation of suffering.

---

[31] Sodachi Khenpo, 1997: 14.
[32] Skt. *Mahaprajnaparamita Sastra.*

The Buddha said that this suffering arises as the result of ignorance of the way things are, which is the first link in a cycle of a twelve-link chain[33] that creates the illusion of samsara to which we feel bound.

In the context of the Buddha's teaching, suffering may be viewed from three aspects: the suffering of suffering, the suffering of change and the suffering of compounded things. The first kind of suffering is associated with sensations. Having a headache, feeling too hot or worrying are all examples of this category of suffering.

The nature of the universe is change; yet we cling to an idea of permanence. So, when confronted with the realities of sickness, loss, old age and death, we struggle and suffer. Consider our acquaintances: can we think of even one who has never been ill or experienced adverse circumstances? Even once famous and powerful kings are now only characters in history. The unrealistic hope that our present good situation will never change, and the fear that it will, taint our view of the world and create a misguided relationship with others as well as our environment. This is an example of suffering associated with change.

Finally, there is the suffering of compounded things. This is the most subtle kind of suffering because it may not be experienced directly as something painful or

---

[33] Skt. *nidana.* For detailed information regarding these twelve links, see appendix 1, 'The Twelve Links of Dependent-Arising.

threatening, but is intrinsic to life itself, like the lustre fading in the object we have strived so hard to acquire or the new job not quite meeting our expectations. The nature of existence, formed as it is from karma, is somehow imbued with a sense of imperfection.

In Buddhism, our basic ignorance is illustrated by the example of the man who mistakes a piece of rope for a snake. Seeing what he believes to be a snake, he takes appropriate action to defend himself. However, being based upon a mistaken view, his response is inappropriate. Only when he realizes the true situation does he relax and his suffering come to an end.

From a Buddhist perspective, all our thoughts, words and deeds are misguided because our view of phenomena and ourselves is incorrect. Consider a stack of coins. Each coin in the stack is reliant on the coins below for its position. They are separate entities, but have a dependent relationship that creates the illusion of a solid stack. The mind stream is the same. It is actually a succession of mental occurrences. Yet, its continuity creates the false impression of an independent and permanent 'I', or ego.

This mistaken view creates a schism. The ego supposes the world to be external, and reinforces this falsity either through anger and fear, or through desire and acquisitiveness. We create a fortress, and our possessions each become 'another brick in the wall'. With this kind of view, true and meaningful relationships are impossible. In addition, we begin to identify ourselves with our status and possessions. The fortress becomes us.

Yet, wealth and status and even friends and family are impermanent and therefore unstable. Our fortress is built on sand, and when we rely on something that is insecure, we ourselves naturally feel insecure. Take these erroneous views and irrational fears and multiply them on a national level. War and exploitation are inevitable.

As we have stated, the root of this problem is ignorance, and its creation, the ego. The Buddha realized this, and taught ways to counter the ego and transform ignorance into wisdom as a means to free us from 'the fortress', thereby focusing on its source.

Ego, by its very nature, is tight and restrictive. It is preoccupied with its own narrow world, and sees itself as an independent and permanent entity. Compassion is the total antithesis of this state. Consequently, the Buddha taught that compassion should be generated as a means to soften and lessen ego's power. Compassionate action is like warm balm being massaged into a frozen fist. It gradually melts away the hardness and frigidity, which allows the fist to open to the world. To explain it another way, action that is based on self-preservation, such as that motivated by emotions like greed or jealousy, reinforces the notion of a permanent self that is separate from other beings. Pure and selfless action, on the other hand, requires a certain degree of surrender of the self. Consequently, when we commit ourselves to the welfare of others, we are in fact chipping away at ego's 'fortress'. We are ending our self-imposed isolation and beginning to connect with our environment and fellow beings in an

open and caring way. Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche has taught that the difference between the deluded and enlightened mind is mainly the difference between narrowness and openness.

First and foremost, true compassion is free-flowing and all-encompassing. It is not tainted with a desire for reward, nor is it a partisan to the sports-team mentality where one expresses outrage at the opponent while reserving support for one's own team.

Compassion and wisdom[34] are inseparable. They are like the two wings of a bird that will lead us to enlightenment. Without this union, compassion can be misguided. We have all met people who need to help and force themselves into another's territory. The 'beneficiary' is thus merely a crutch for the inadequacies of the 'helper'. Likewise, we have all seen pictures of cities vandalized by social activists. Such action comes from lack of wisdom, a lack of understanding that the world is interdependent and that the supposed 'I' and 'external it' are in reality not two different entities. Compassion enshrined in wisdom should shine forth like moonlight, naturally and impartially. Shabkar[35] composed the following verse in praise of compassion:

---

[34] For detailed information regarding the practices of compassion and wisdom, see appendix 3, 'The Six Perfections'.

[35] (1781-1851). A Tibetan yogi in the Nyingma tradition, whose spontaneous teachings have been a great source of inspiration and instruction for successive generations of Vajrayana students.

If a man has compassion, he is Buddha;
Without compassion, he is Lord of death.
With compassion, the root of Dharma is planted,
Without compassion, the root of Dharma is rotten.
One with compassion is kind even when angry,
One without compassion kills even as he smiles.
For one with compassion, even enemies turn into friends.
Without compassion, even friends turn into enemies.
With compassion, one has all Dharmas,
Without compassion, one has no Dharma at all.
With compassion, one is a true Buddhist,
Without compassion, one is worse than profane.
Even meditating on voidness, one needs compassion as its essence.
A Dharma practitioner must have a compassionate nature.
Great compassion is like a wish-fulfilling gem.
Great compassion fulfils the hopes of self and others.
Therefore, all of you, renunciants and householders,
Cultivate compassion and you will achieve

Buddhahood.[36]

Wisdom refers to the understanding, intellectually at least, of the interdependent relationship of all phenomena that we discussed in the chapter on karma. In the same way that paper is composed of various elements, so we realize that the object of our animosity, the bad guy, is not absolutely bad. He is a complex being with all kinds of emotions and possibilities, and is very much a product of his environment, education and karmic traits.

Hostility, fear, greed and the desire to impose our philosophy are like dark glasses. Everything that is seen through them is the same colour: black. We need to demonize our supposed enemy before we attack. I am right. He is wrong. This over-simplistic 'good guy–bad guy' dichotomy, which was the staple of Hollywood westerns, certainly wouldn't stand up to investigation in a Buddhist court of reason!

There is a simple but clever story that illustrates the destructive potential of failing to realize the interdependent nature of all things: Once, the organs of a man's body had a mistaken view, believing themselves to be independent entities. Because of this misunderstanding, they began to argue. The heart felt that she was the most important organ as she controlled the blood. The liver disagreed, stating that as he kept the body pure, he was its greatest asset. Each organ held that its role was the most vital. Finally, in anger,

---

[36] Shabkar, 1994: 501

they ceased to cooperate. The heart refused to pump the blood and the kidneys stopped processing the fluid. This caused the body, composed of the organs, to die. The body can be a metaphor for members of society and nations that, due to ignorance, fail to cooperate. When industrialists pollute our planet and war rages between nations, the result is always the same. Everyone, including the perpetrator, loses out.

Zen Master Dogen [37] describes the connection between wisdom gained through Dharma practice and the realization that all things are inseparably linked:

> To learn the Buddhist Way is to learn about oneself.
> To learn about oneself is to forget oneself,
> To forget oneself is to perceive oneself as all things.[38]

There are numerous ways of awakening compassion, but the crux of all these methods is the same. We must deeply understand that all sentient beings, like

---

[37] (1200-1253). A Japanese monk who introduced the teachings of the Soto Zen tradition into Japan from China. In his principal work, the *Shobogenzo,* he reconfirms his commitment to the distinctive feature of Soto Zen, the practice of 'just sitting' (J. *shikan-taza*), and also introduces the principle of 'practice and enlightenment are one'.

[38] Dogen Zenji, 1975: 1.

ourselves, wish to be happy and free from suffering. In the *Dhammapada*[39] it is stated:

> All beings tremble at violence.
> Life is dear to all.
> Putting oneself in the place of another
> One should neither kill nor cause others to kill.[40]

Initially, it is difficult to be kind to beings that have been cruel to us. However, persistent practice will break even habitual patterns that have been formed over many lifetimes. We also discover that as our compassion flows, we become more cheerful and open. This will encourage us to practise more diligently.

A common misunderstanding exists that the Buddhist teaching on compassion encourages submission and over-compliance. This is incorrect. As stated earlier, a Buddhist cultivates compassion in union with wisdom. In certain situations, a passive attitude may be neither the wisest nor most compassionate response, although in many cases it can be.

With insight into the mechanics of interdependence and an attitude grounded in benevolence, revenge or moral outrage can never be accommodated. A mother

---

[39] One of the most influential set of teachings in the Theravada tradition. It was committed to written script in the first century BCE.

[40] Dh. 10, 130.

may punish her wayward son, but she never stops loving him. Her punishment aims to correct his behaviour and is for his benefit. Never is it inflicted out of malice.

Likewise, a Buddhist may respond actively, but the action is always underpinned with compassion and a strong motivation to benefit others. This, however, should not be taken as a license to impose one's religious or political views on others under the erroneous belief that it is beneficial for them. This is again to put on the dark glasses of ignorance and view everything in absolute terms: our side is totally right and everyone else is totally wrong. Hitler and Pol Pot were both guilty of this. They viewed the world in stark extremes of pure and impure, and in order to purge the world of the impure, millions were murdered.

In contrast, the Buddha advised his followers to show respect to adherents of other beliefs and customs. He never advocated converting others, nor imposed his views; neither did he claim that his teaching had a monopoly on truth. Instead, he exhorted others to accept and honour truth wherever it is found. Words and phrases like religious persecution, heretic, heathen, fanatic and zealot have no place the Buddhist lexicon.

As we become more in touch with our hearts and feelings of benevolence grow, we will feel restricted by our inability to truly benefit others. A person who lives where sickness pervades may have tremendous courage and compassion, but without medical knowledge, he cannot be very effective. Consequently, he may decide to leave and train to become a doctor. The motivation

to do so, however, is not for personal benefit, but purely in order to gain a skill that can increase his ability to assist others.

In Buddhism, when we reach the same conclusion, we make a vow to realize enlightenment with the motivation of becoming more effective in helping sentient beings. This mind is called the mind of bodhichitta.[41]

---

[41] This is the standard Mahayana view of bodhichitta. However, the teachings also talk of adopting the attitude of a shepherd (Patrul Rinpoche, 1996: 218), where one ushers other beings towards enlightenment without any thoughts for one's own liberation. In this way, one's practice is safeguarded against the possibility of contamination by selfish thoughts, and this is considered the most courageous attitude to adopt. However, if one's motivation remains pure, the attitude described in the text above is a very effective driving force for one's practice.
(See: www.khandro.net/doctrine_bodhicitta.htm)

Bodhichitta

> For as long as space endures,
> And for as long as sentient beings remain,
> Until then may I too abide
> To dispel the misery of the world.[42]

This quote from *The Way of the Bodhisattva*[43] expresses the deep sentiments of one who has opened his heart to bodhichitta and set out on the Bodhisattva[44] path. It is an attitude characterized by fearless persistence that has grown from a profound empathy with the suffering of all sentient beings and a heartfelt desire to alleviate that suffering.

Bodhichitta has two aspects: relative and ultimate. Relative bodhichitta forms the foundation of Mahayana practice and is the fire that generates all merit. The practice of relative Bodhichitta is further divided into two inseparable parts: intention and application. Before we depart on a journey to a distant city, we must have the desire to go there. The practice of relative bodhichitta is the same. Only when pure intention is firmly rooted in our heart and mind can it deepen and produce fruit. There are three practices that are especially effective for accomplishing this:

---

[42] Shantideva, 1987: 188.

[43] Skt. *Bodhisattvacharyavatara.* Composed by Acharya Shantideva in the 8th century.

[44] One who has taken the vow to liberate all beings from suffering and guide them to enlightenment.

1: Regarding others as equal to oneself.
2: Mentally exchanging oneself and others (Tib. *tonglen*).
3: Considering others to be more important than oneself.[45]

These practices should be performed wholeheartedly and thoroughly. If they are done perfunctorily, it will be like trying to reach the city without having deeply established the desire to go there. The chances of arriving are slim.

With the sincere wish to alleviate the suffering of our fellow beings rooted in our hearts, the obvious and natural progression is to channel it through practical application. The desire to reach the city is established.

As with any course of action, we need certain structures. In the practice of relative bodhichitta, these are provided by the 'six perfections'.[46] In addition, any serious practitioner would be advised to take the refuge[47] and Bodhisattva vows[48] from a qualified

---

[45] For detailed information regarding these practices, see appendix 2, 'Training in Bodhichitta'.

[46] For detailed information regarding these practices, see appendix 3,'The Six Perfections'.

[47] This is accomplished by making a formal commitment to accept the protection of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha (the Three Jewels) as a means to facilitate one's enlightenment.

[48] These vows are taken as a means of formally committing oneself to the attainment of enlightenment with the view of rescuing all beings from suffering.

master. Taking these vows infuses one's practice with vigour and momentum, and is a statement of one's commitment to the welfare of all sentient beings. The city has been located, the supplies are gathered, and the journey begins.

During the early stages of practice, our hearts are opening. However, there is still a strong sense of an 'I', the dispenser of compassion, and of sentient beings as the beneficiaries. Slowly, as our meditation practice matures, mere intellectual understanding of shunyata becomes more internalized. A feeling arises that the giver, the objects given and their recipient are somehow illusory. Finally, even this vague notion of a subject – object dichotomy dissolves, and the emptiness of an independent self and phenomena is fully revealed.

At this stage, there is no reference point. This is the realization of ultimate bodhichitta. The (illusory) destination has been reached. Chandrakirti[49] describes this process of realizing emptiness in the following way: At first, we continuously transmigrate through the various levels of samsara like buckets in a well, crashing into the shaft walls as we endlessly rise and fall within this cycle.

As our practice deepens, however, our perceptions change. Chandrakirti poetically depicts this as seeing

---

[49] (Approx. 600 CE). His most important work is the *Introduction to the Middle Way (*Skt. *Madhyamakavatara),* in which he defends the view that all phenomena are merely the temporary creations of circumstances.

the moon reflected in the ripples of water. It is there, yet the ripples disturb its shape. We question its reality.

Finally, he offers the picture of a full moon reflected in a calm lake as an allegory of the realization of ultimate bodhichitta, the perfection of wisdom. The moon is visible. It is clear and bright. Yet, we are fully aware that like a rainbow, it has no substance. It can neither be touched nor grasped. It is empty.

Merit derived from practising the first five perfections – generosity, discipline, forbearance/patience, diligence/vigour and concentration/meditation – is like petrol. It gives a vehicle the means to progress, but cannot determine its destination. The final perfection, wisdom, is like the driver. Stated a different way, outside the context of bodhichitta, the seeds planted by undertaking any of the first five perfections will mature within samsara. When united with wisdom, on the other hand, the result is liberation. This is the culmination of the dual paths of compassion/merit and wisdom.

This can be explained in another way: Imagine that your two hands do not recognize that they are part of the same body. They are jealous of each other and covet each other's possessions. Later, they are introduced to the Buddha Dharma. They are told that they are brothers, and should be kind to each other. A sense of duality still exists, but animosity has been replaced by love. Finally, they realize that they are actually the same body. Dualistic thinking dissolves, and with it the identity of a separate giver and receiver.

All action is now spontaneous and free of reference points.

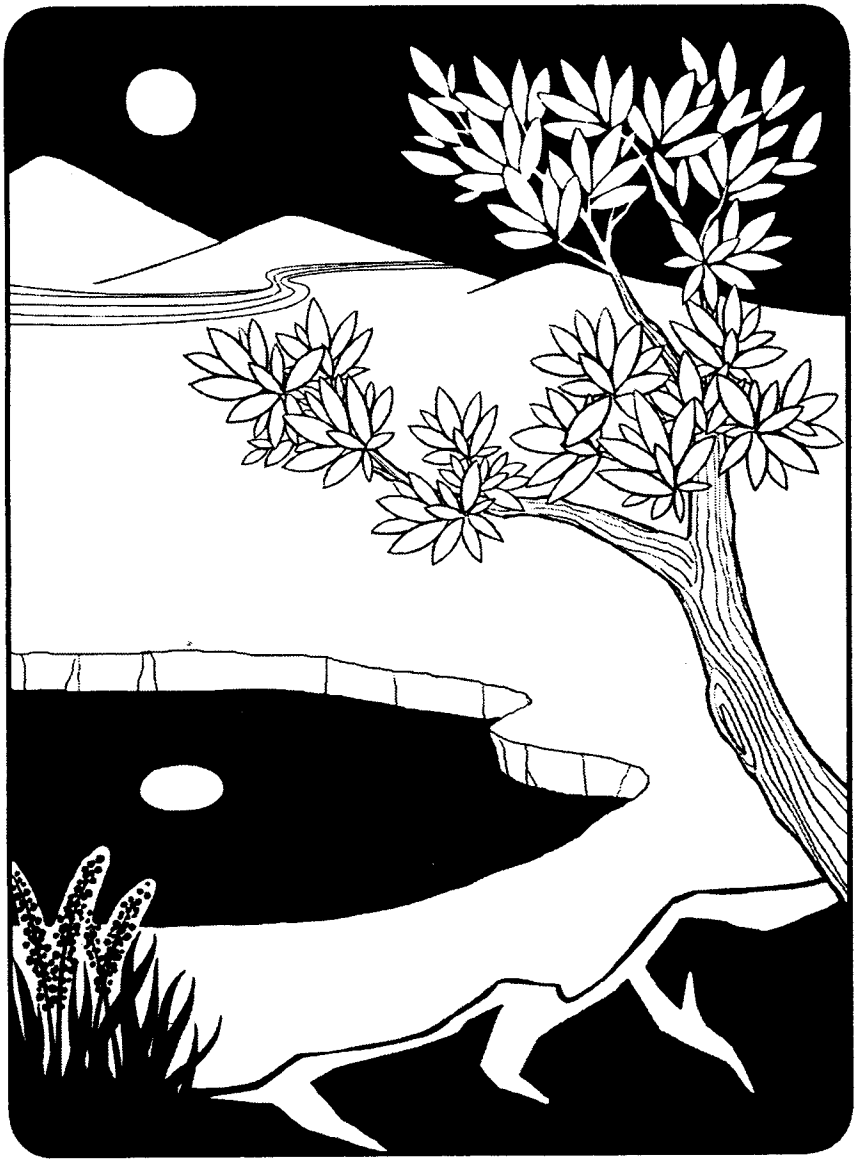
To continue this allegory, consider if only one hand realizes its connection to the body – for example, the right hand. Even though the left hand may be jealous or troublesome, the right hand cannot see the left as an enemy. He may discipline him or protect himself. However, because they are part of the same body, he can never retaliate out of malice. This is the same for someone who has realized emptiness, and is an attitude that we, as Dharma practitioners, should emulate.

One of the greatest means to channel the Bodhisattva spirit is through the activity of saving life. The highly accomplished master of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, Jigme Lingpa,[50] placed such great value on this activity that he maintained that

---

[50] (1729-1798). Jigme Lingpa was one of the greatest exponents of the Dzogchen lineage. After realizing the essence of three visionary teachings that he received from Longchen Rabjam, he transmitted them to his disciples. Later, these teachings gained great importance throughout Tibet, where they became known as the *Longchen Nyingthig* cycle of teachings.

saving the lives of animals destined for slaughter was one of his greatest achievements. Once, he even bought a whole mountain just to save the bees from being killed for their honey.



3

The Release

Releasing Life

Among all negative karma,
That for killing is the heaviest.
Among all positive karma,
That for releasing life the highest.[51]
Acharya Nagarjuna – *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom.*

Releasing life is a direct translation of the Chinese term *fang sheng,* and specifically refers to the practice of saving beings facing imminent death. Although the Buddha did not directly teach the practice, it is a natural expression of the Buddhist tenets of benevolence and protection of all forms of life. Indeed, the first of the ten negative actions to be avoided by a Buddhist is intentionally taking the life of any being, human or otherwise. Furthermore, the *Samannaphala Sutta*[52] exalts a monk as 'one who dwells with his rod laid down, his knife laid down; scrupulous, merciful and compassionate for the welfare of all beings'.

---

[51] Sodachi Khenpo, 1997: 26.
[52] D. (lesser section on virtue).

The Buddha not only taught his followers to protect life, but also acted as an example. One famous anecdote describes an incident when, as the young prince Siddhartha, he saved the life of a swan:

> When Prince Siddhartha was nine years old, his slightly younger cousin, Devadatta, shot a swan with an arrow. The bird fell to the ground at the young prince's feet. He gently removed the arrow from the swan's wing and carried the limp body into the palace. Soon afterward, his cousin stormed in and demanded return of the bird. He claimed that as he had shot it, the swan rightfully belonged to him. Prince Siddhartha stood his ground, and the matter was raised at a state hearing. Prince Siddhartha won the case and received custody of the bird. He tenderly cared for it, and soon the swan was able to fly away.

In addition to strongly opposing the idea that animals exist merely to serve and feed man, Buddhism also recognizes that every sentient being has the capacity to feel pain. Furthermore, as sentient beings are reborn according to their karmic propensities, we have all transmigrated through the various animal realms. As the Buddha stated (Over the repetition of rebirths since beginningless time), 'it is not easy to find a being who has not at one time been our mother, father, brother or sister'. So, when we save the life of another being, we

are not just saving a fish or a rabbit, but the life of one of our mothers in the past.

The *jataka* tales[53] confirm the flow of karmic traces through the various realms. They tell of animals exhibiting a great variety of personalities and traits, and in many instances continue their stories into a future human rebirth. Through the tales, we identify with the courage and loyalty as well as the fears and suffering of the animal world. We break down the narrow interpretation that society is comprised only of humans, and recognize it as encompassing all life forms. Whether an ant or a human, all possess Buddha nature and have the potential to attain Buddhahood.

Rather than cite examples of animal endeavour and bravery from the *jataka* tales, it may be pertinent to relate a story from my own childhood:

> Next to the promenade in Swansea[54] is a monument to commemorate Jack. In school, we learned about his feats. He was a local hero. He was our inspiration, and a being whose courage we were encouraged to emulate as adults. However, there was a difference between Jack and other city heroes. Jack was canine – a black labrador retriever.
>
> Although Jack grew up in the docklands, he was timid of water as a pup. Gradually, he become accustomed to his environment and

---

[53] Stories of the previous lives of the Buddha Shakyamuni.
[54] A city in the U.K.

> could often be seen swimming in the murky dock waters. His first documented act of bravery was in June 1931. A young boy was in difficulty in the water. Jack dived in and dragged the child onto the wharf. A few weeks later, Jack made his second rescue. News of the brave dog spread around the country, and he became a national celebrity. Jack's acts of bravery continued unabated, and by the time of his death, he was credited with having saved no less than twenty-seven lives. Few humans could boast such an achievement.

As we can see from the above story, animals can display qualities superior to many humans. Yet, because they lack the mental capacity, they are unable to attain enlightenment directly. Only a human rebirth provides this opportunity. As a result, Buddhism does consider animals to be lower in status than humans. However, inferior ability or lack of wisdom are not reasons to enslave or kill beings, or to treat them cruelly. If this were the case, then children or people with learning difficulties would also be candidates for ill treatment. On the contrary, the Buddha Dharma teaches that beings of lesser ability or with afflictions deserve kindness, not cruelty.

The *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta* states that the duty of a king is to provide protection not only for his subjects, but also for the beasts of the forest and birds of the air. In the true spirit of this sutra, the great Indian monarch Ashoka prohibited animal sacrifice, and in addition,

planted trees, dug wells, and provided medical care 'for the benefit of both man and beast'.[55] Furthermore, he repeatedly implored his subjects to treat animals with respect and kindness. The Indian king Harshavardhana[56] and several of the Sri Lankan kings followed his example and abolished the slaughter of animals. These examples provide historical testimony to the high esteem in which Buddhism holds all living creatures.

The Buddha himself vehemently denounced animal sacrifice. Not only does such action cause great and unnecessary suffering for animals, but it plants seeds in the mind stream of the perpetrator that will lead to future hardships.

The *Sutta Nipata*[57] records a meeting between the Buddha and several Brahmins, in which the Brahmins inquired whether sacrificial practice accorded with the ancient teachings. The Buddha replied that it did not. He stated that like our parents and relatives, cattle are our great friends. They provide us with nutrition, beauty, joy and strength. The Brahmins were moved by the Buddha's words and refrained from further sacrifice. The *Samyutta Nikaya*[58] tells a similar tale. King Prasenajit of Kosala intended to sacrifice 500 oxen, 500 male calves and 400 sheep in a ceremony. Following the Buddha's advice, the animals were released. Similar

---

[55] Rock Edict I; Pillar Edict VII.
[56] r. 606-647
[57] Sn. 58ff.
[58] S. I.74.

remonstrations against animal sacrifice appear throughout Buddhist literature.

During the early Chinese dynasties, gestures of respect for animals were often personal acts. Emperor Wu of the Liang[59] is said to have offered his ancestors noodles instead of the traditional meat dish in deference to the Buddhist ideal of preserving life. Also, in order to create the conditions for peace and harmony after the An Lushan rebellion, the Tang dynasty emperor Suzong [60] established ponds for releasing life at eighty-one locations throughout his empire.

It was during the more social-minded Ming dynasty, [61] however, that releasing life became an established custom, especially among the literati. The monk Zhu hong[62] was credited with popularizing the practice, and societies were established with the aim of regularly releasing life. Tracts of land were bought where animals could be freed, and ponds constructed as sanctuaries for fish. The custom became an integral part of the lives of the pious, and colourful tales of the near-miraculous effects of releasing life began to emerge. One story, which is well known even today among Buddhists in Taiwan and Hong Kong, is called '*The Sami*[63] *Who Rescued the Ants*':

---

[59] r. 502-549.
[60] r. 756-762.
[61] 1368-1644.
[62] 1535-1615.
[63] A Chinese term for a Buddhist monk who has not taken full vows.

The abbot at the monastery was very wise, and could see into the future. One day, he saw that a young monk in his charge had only seven days to live. He called the little monk over and said: 'Hey, little *sami*, you haven't seen your parents in a long time. I think you should go home and visit them. Come back eight days from now.' When the little *sami* left, the teacher felt sad. He was a kind-hearted little monk and everyone was fond of him, but the teacher thought it would be best if he died among his family.

Eight days later, however, the little monk returned. The teacher was overjoyed, but puzzled, and asked the little monk to tell him everything that had happened while he was away. The monk told him about the food he had eaten and about helping his father. Eventually, he also related the story of his journey home. On the road near his house, he had encountered a nest of ants. Water was pouring into the nest, and the ants were trying to escape. The little monk at first built a small dam to divert the water, but this only worked temporarily. Finally, he placed long leaves in the water so the ants could climb out. In this way, he saved many hundreds of lives.

Now the master knew why he had not died. The little monk's kind act had earned him much merit, and as a result, his life had been

extended. He lived to good old age, and became a wise and compassionate monk.

The above anecdotes provide a historical reference for releasing life, and we can see that looking after and protecting other beings is an integral part of the Buddha Dharma. In fact, there is no better way to create merit and generate compassion than to save the lives of others.

In the previous chapters, we mentioned the practice of the 'six perfections', the first of which is generosity. One form of generosity is to offer freedom from fear.[64] The action of the Buddha towards the swan and the edicts of the kings mentioned above all accord with this practice. To expand on this, the great Dzogchen master Jigme Phuntsog Rinpoche[65] revealed a teaching he received in a clear vision. It states that saving and releasing life fulfils not only the first perfection, but accomplishes all six. He explains this in the following way:

Generosity: When we release life we do so unreservedly, and among the many expressions of generosity, to give without reservation is

---

[64] Skt. *Abhaya-dana.*

[65] (1933-2004) In addition to being an esteemed master of Dzogchen, Rinpoche was also a recognized revealer of hidden Dharma teachings (Tib. *terma*) in the lineage of Lerab Lingpa.

supreme. In this way, it fulfils the perfection of generosity.

Discipline: To refrain from unwholesome action means to maintain discipline. When we release life, our minds are totally free of harmful intention. In this way, it fulfils the perfection of discipline.

Forbearance/Patience: To peacefully endure hardships meets the requirements of this perfection. When we release life, we wholeheartedly offer ourselves to this gesture. We calmly accept our own adversity and strive to bring peace and happiness to the life that we are releasing. In this way, it fulfils the perfection of forbearance.

Diligence/Vigour: When our lives are dedicated to the welfare of others, we will persevere in finding ways to benefit them. And, what could be of greater benefit to sentient beings than to save their lives? In this way, it fulfils the perfection of diligence.

Concentration/Meditation: The essence of contemplation is concentration. When we release life, we do so with a one-pointed mind. In this way, it fulfils the perfection of contemplation.

Wisdom: The basis of wisdom is the ability to make sound judgement. And, what could be of more sound judgement than to cease killing and

> release life? In this way, it fulfils the perfection of wisdom.[66]

Some people deride the saving of life in order to generate good karma and counter the ego, maintaining that helping others should be a pure act untainted by selfish concerns. This is of course true; however, we should remember that we plant positive seeds and overcome the ego not for personal advantage – rather, we do so in order to gain enlightenment for the benefit of others. Like the example of the altruistic doctor mentioned in the chapter on compassion, we are gaining credits to place us in a position to better help others. By adopting the right motivation and dedication, our worldly lives can be transformed into a spiritual path.

Another vital aspect of releasing life in a Buddhist context is to establish a link between the saved being and the Buddha Dharma. As we discussed in the chapter on compassion, the Buddha's first teaching after attaining enlightenment was that samsaric existence in whatever form is suffering. So, while lengthening the life of another being is a worthy and compassionate act, how much more so when it connects that being to the path which leads to a cessation of rebirths in the realms of suffering. On this subject, Jigme Phuntsog Rinpoche has taught the following:

---

[66] Sodachi Khenpo, 1997: 2-3.

> In terms of merit, no worldly act can compare with releasing life. Even if only one being is released, this remains true. Furthermore, because at the time of releasing lives, the Buddha's name and heart mantras are chanted, the beings are blessed. In the future, they will reach a level of attainment from which they cannot regress.[67]

Finally, a question that is often raised is whether avoiding eating meat[68] or offering money to charity are preferable to purchasing animals or fish to release. Of course, these are commendable gestures that totally accord with the altruistic spirit of the Dharma, and should definitely be encouraged. However, in terms of creating good karma, nothing surpasses saving the life of a being facing imminent death. The following example may clarify this. You are living in a dangerous neighbourhood where murders and gunfights are common. Being a vegetarian is akin to not contributing to the killing. Releasing life, on the other hand, is similar to actually saving people from being shot. It is an active form of benevolence, and as such leaves a greater imprint in the mind stream.

It may be appropriate to conclude this chapter on saving the lives of sentient beings with a quote from H.H. the Dalai Lama:

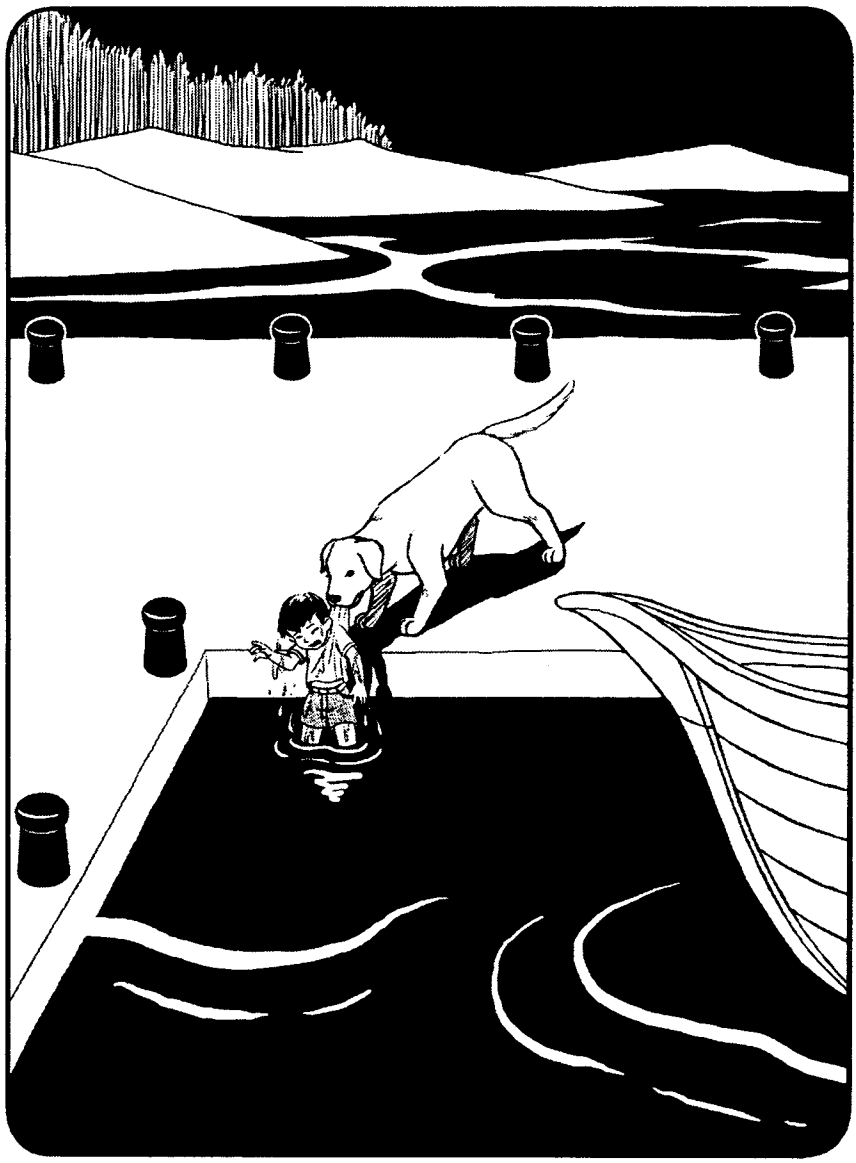
---

[67] Sodachi Khenpo, 1997: 25.

[68] Vegetarianism in Buddhism is discussed in the 'The Debate' chapter.

In our approach to life, be it pragmatic or otherwise, a basic fact that confronts us squarely and unmistakably is the desire for peace, security, and happiness. Different forms of life at different levels of existence make up the teeming denizens of this earth of ours. And, no matter whether they belong to the higher groups such as humans, all beings primarily seek peace, comfort, and security. Life is as dear to a mute creature as it is to man. Even the lowliest insect strives for protection against dangers that threaten its life. Just as each one of us wants happiness and fears pain, just as each one of us wants to live and not die, so do all other creatures.[69]

[69] Sarao, K.T.S., 2002: 18.



4

The Debate

Vegetarianism

> As the majestic Himalayas are the
> source of innumerable rivers
> That nourish the land and empty into the ocean,
> So, too, is the Buddha the source of innumerable paths
> That benefit all beings and lead them to enlightenment.

People possess a wide range of needs and propensities. In order to accommodate these, the Buddha devised 84,000 methods to lead us to the truth. Like clothing, if there was only one style, few people would find something suitable. Irrespective of the design, however, the articles must possess a common factor that defines them as clothing. The teachings of the Buddha are similar. Outwardly, they may take various forms, and in some cases even appear contradictory; nevertheless, the essence is the same. All the traditional schools, whether Theravadin, Mahayana or Vajrayana, are expedient paths of the Buddha. Practitioners of all these schools take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma[70] and Sangha[71] and

---

[70] The teachings of the Buddha.

the teachings conform to the four seals[72] that identify a path as Buddhist. Like a tree, the roots are the same, but the branches grow in many different ways as they adapt to their specific environment.

In addition, the Buddha was very flexible in accommodating local customs and beliefs. As long as they did not contradict the basic teachings or cause harm to others, they would not be rejected, but incorporated into the path. The great Thai master Ajahn Chah[73] instructed his students in this same spirit. Once, however, a new disciple criticized him for being inconsistent. The master responded by saying that teaching Buddhism was like instructing people to walk down a road. Some people veered to the left, so he would shout: 'Go right. Go right!' Others, on the other hand, would veer to the right, so the opposite instruction would be given. To our uninitiated eyes, the teachings are contradictory, but in reality, they are tailor-made for a specific person at a specific time.

As practitioners on a path of wisdom, we should avoid the narrow-mindedness of sectarian disputes, and appreciate the teachings of all the major schools as

---

[71] The assembly of those who practise and teach the Dharma.

[72] For detailed information regarding these seals, see appendix 4, 'The Four Seals of Buddhism'.

[73] (1919-1992). Ajahn Chah's direct and modern way of presenting the Dharma attracted many overseas students; consequently, the roots of several well-known Theravadin Dharma centres in the West are found at his forest monastery in northern Thailand.

skilful means of the Buddha. Indeed, we should be grateful that we have such a wide choice – here, I am referring to the recognized teachings of the major schools, not to individual teachers and their interpretations, which indeed need scrutiny. If we do have a tendency to believe that only our chosen path is authentic and all the others are false or inferior, we should question whether our practice is really leading us towards the open and spacious mind of enlightenment or whether we are burying ourselves deeper in the narrow and dualistic world of samsara.

Vegetarianism is a subject that often stirs these kinds of sectarian debates. Rather than seeing it emotionally, we might investigate the arguments from various angles. Furthermore, we should avoid claiming that the validity of a text recognized by one school automatically invalidates the authenticity of a doctrinally different one, but see each as one of the Buddha's 84,000 expedient paths.

In this chapter, I shall briefly discuss the views on vegetarianism according to the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana schools.

The source of instruction for the Theravada tradition is the *Pali Canon*, which is divided into three distinct volumes.[74] Within these volumes, there are no rules stating that meat cannot be eaten, though there are

---

[74] The *Vinaya Pitaka, Suttanta Pitaka* and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka,* which deal, respectively, with the rules for the monastic community, the discourses taught by the Buddha and the Buddhist system of philosophy and psychology.

restrictions regarding the conditions under which it can be received.

As stated above, the Buddha was a master of expedient means; therefore, in order to understand these restrictions, they need to be examined in the context of the environment in which they were introduced. At the time of the Buddha, there were no great Buddhist monastic institutions, and the monks were mendicants. Householders provided them with sustenance, and monks, on their part, gave the householders an opportunity to gain merit and form a karmic link with the Dharma. Furthermore, they would receive whatever food they were given with gratitude, without showing either pleasure or displeasure. Basically, the monks shared the food that a household had prepared for its own consumption. Whether this food consisted of vegetables, meat or fish, or was of high or inferior quality, was not a consideration; all offerings were accepted with equanimity. To refuse an offering would not only have been impolite, but more importantly, it would have deprived a household of an opportunity to gain merit.

Thus, when the Buddha was accused of causing the death of animals by allowing his monks to eat meat, he refuted the accusation, stating that the monks ate only the flesh of animals not killed especially for their consumption. This was not merely an ideal, but a prohibition guaranteed by the Buddha's three conditions under which his monks could not eat meat: namely, when an animal had been seen, heard or suspected to have been killed specifically to feed them. Should a

monk believe that the meat being offered contravened any of these conditions, he should refuse it.[75]

Some people argue that these conditions are mere hair-splitting, and that it is hypocritical for monks as well as lay people to take a vow that explicitly forbids killing[76] while continuing to eat meat. However, as stated above, the monks shared what the lay people ate. They did not choose to eat meat, and nowhere does the Buddha encourage meat-eating. They just received a portion of what had already been prepared to be eaten by the household.

In addition, the Buddha was very pragmatic in his doctrine. Due to a lack of vegetation or because of ingrained cultural habits, the Buddha was aware that in certain regions or at certain times it might be impossible to live on a purely vegetarian diet. Therefore, to stipulate that meat could not be eaten under any circumstances may not only have caused great hardship, but perhaps even death. Imagine how Inuits who live in a barren and frozen land, for example, could survive on a purely vegetarian diet! In addition, as stated above, a restriction of this nature would have prevented meat-eating households from making offerings to the Sangha, and thereby have deprived them of an opportunity to gain merit and make a karmic connection with the Dharma.

---

[75] A full account of the dialogue where the Buddha discusses these conditions can be found in the *Jivaka Sutta*.

[76] The complete wording of this vow is 'I undertake the training rule not to kill any living creature'.

As we have discussed earlier, Buddhism identifies mind as the engine, and words and deeds as the carriages that follow behind. While manipulating the carriages can affect the direction a vehicle takes, focusing on the engine is obviously the more effective means. The conditions pertaining to meat-eating established by the Buddha follow this logic. According to Buddhist psychology, a mind that wishes to deliberately deprive another being of its life must have a degree of hate and delusion as its root,[77] and as hate and delusion are two of the hallmarks of the ego, taking life reinforces it.[78] However, the intention behind eating meat is to eat, not to kill. One may think that by eating meat one is killing by proxy; however, from a psychological and karmic point of view, there is a great difference.

When I walk down a garden path, for example, I may kill numerous insects, but the intention is to leave the property, not to kill insects. Likewise, a person who eats meat does so to feed himself, not because he wants

---

[77] In order for the full force of karma to be activated, an act of killing must consist of the following five components: There is a living being. The perpetrator perceives it as such. There is thought of killing. There is an assault. The being actually dies as a result of the assault.

[78] For an in depth discussion of Buddhist psychology v. killing, see the paper entitled, *Can killing a living being ever be an act of compassion? The analysis of the act of killing in the Abhidhamma and Pali commentaries,* Rupert Gethin, (Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies - International Conference - Taipei, 2002).

to cause the death of animals. Similarly, eating the flesh of a bird found dead in the road, and purposely hunting and killing a bird, are very different acts, producing an entirely different result. Even strict vegetarians take life indirectly. The planting of vegetables and fruit requires huge areas of land to be cleared and ploughed, which results in the indirect killing of many small creatures. However, the motivation for eating the vegetables and fruit is to sustain one's life, not to cause more land to be cleared and ploughed, and thereby kill more creatures. In fact, there is probably nothing we use on a daily basis that has not caused the loss of life of some creature in its preparation.

While only monastics are officially bound by the three conditions regarding meat, the rules provided a guideline for the lay community. Thus, in countries where the Theravada form of Buddhism is prevalent,[79] meat-eating is not only accepted, but is in total accord with the teachings of the Buddha.

The Mahayana school, however, take a very different stand on meat-eating, and among the scriptures it follows, there are specific and clear prohibitions on the consumption of meat. For example, the *Lankavatara Sutra*[80] states:

---

[79] Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

[80] An important text in the Mahayana, especially the Zen tradition. It is said to be the scripture that Bodhidharma presented to his successor, Hui-K'o, as containing the essence of the Buddha's teachings.

> For fear of causing terror to living beings, let the Bodhisattva who is disciplining himself to attain compassion refrain from eating meat

The sutra continues with a stronger injunction:

> Meat-eating is forbidden by me everywhere and all time for those who are abiding in compassion.[81]

All monastic followers of the Mahayana receive the Bodhisattva vows of the *Brahma-Net Sutra.*[82] The third precept of the forty-eight secondary precepts is an injunction against eating meat:

> A disciple of the Buddha must not deliberately eat meat. He should not eat the flesh of any sentient being. The meat-eater forfeits the seed of Great Compassion, severs the seed of Buddha Nature and causes (animals and transcendental) beings to avoid him. Those who do so are guilty of countless offences. Therefore, Bodhisattvas should not eat the flesh of any sentient beings whatsoever. If instead,

---

[81] Lan. chapter VIII, 213 & 231.

[82] Skt. *Brahmajāla Sutra.* This is a sutra of great importance in the Mahayana and contains a list of the Bodhisattva precepts.

> he deliberately eats meat, he commits a secondary offence.[83]

To gain some understanding of the reason for the total prohibition against meat consumption in the Mahayana, let us examine the specific doctrines of this school and consider the circumstances in which it evolved. Firstly, the Mahayana path is based on compassion. This is not merely a passive ideal, but one that is actively pursued by its followers. The basic Theravadin tenet of non-harming has been expanded and infused with vigour and purpose. Passive abstention has been replaced by dynamic preservation.

In addition, you will remember that the conditions for receiving meat in the Theravada were that it should not come from an animal that has been seen, heard or suspected to have been killed specifically to offer to a monk. In the Theravada tradition, this worked because the monks lived by collecting alms. However, because the Mahayana Sangha developed later, it was larger, and the monks generally lived in monasteries. Therefore, offerings were brought to the monasteries rather than collected on alms rounds. In this case, meat offerings would not have come from the dining-room table; rather, the animal would inevitably have been killed especially for the monks' consumption. Even under Theravada restrictions, this would be unacceptable.

---

[83] The *Brahma-net Sutra* lists ten major and forty-eight secondary precepts. BNS. p. 18.

Like in Theravadin countries, monastics in predominantly Mahayana countries set the standard for the lay community. Therefore, in those countries, especially in areas populated by people of Chinese and Vietnamese descent, vegetarian fare became the accepted norm for the laity. This continues even today. In a modern city like Taipei, for example, it is not uncommon for a Buddhist who is unable to follow a strict vegetarian diet to compromise by forgoing meat at one meal of the day, usually breakfast, or by being a vegetarian on special Dharma occasions only. The ultimate goal of the good Mahayana Buddhist, however, is to adhere to a pure vegetarian diet at all times. This not only accords with the Mahayana understanding of practice, but is clearly stipulated in the particular scriptures and vows of this tradition.

Finally, we examine the Vajrayana view of meat-eating. By philosophy, the Vajrayana is classified as Mahayana. Compassion and bodhichitta are its guiding forces and the goal, to reach Buddhahood, is identical. To realize this goal, however, the Vajrayana utilizes special methods that are unique to this tradition.

Through visualizing the ordinary as sacred – for example, buildings are seen as palaces, sounds perceived as mantra – the Vajrayana student is trained to cultivate pure vision at all times. This is not a fabrication, but accords with what is actually the nature of reality – namely, that everything is intrinsically pure; it is our ordinary view, which divides phenomena into good and bad, that is the fabrication. Take, for example, a broken cup. To a man with a preconceived idea of a

cup, it is an inferior and less than perfect item. On the other hand, for a person who has no impression of a cup and does not know its function, a whole and a broken cup are equally perfect. Likewise, a butterfly is as happy to rest on one as on the other. The idea of imperfection thus arises as the result of clinging to a fixed concept, rather than seeing phenomena directly as they are. Imperfection is therefore merely a product of the mind. The division between samsara and nirvana is the same.[84] When the mind is impure, phenomena appear as samsara. When it is pure, they are nirvana. The special methods of the Vajrayana are thus intended to bring about a transformation of impure perception into pure view.

At the time of the rise of the Vajrayana school, there was a tendency in the religions of the day, including Buddhism, to be overly attached to discriminatory concepts. Certain objects were viewed as inherently bad. On a relative level, actions and phenomena can definitely be identified as beneficial or non-beneficial, but this classification must be examined in the light of a deeper understanding. Rather than exploring the true nature of self and phenomena, practitioners clung to a relative and dualistic view of the world. In order to correct this and possibly to shock practitioners into seeing reality, the Vajrayana introduced foods that were

---

[84] Another name for Vajrayana is Tantra (Tib. *gyü*), which means 'continuity'. This refers to the fact that the inner nature of a being is the same in samsara and nirvana.

nominally considered impure, such as meat and wine, into their practice.

The image of the Vajrayana is coloured by tales of the carefree lives of those who have attained the fruits of the Tantric path. Liberated from the narrow interpretation of the phenomenal world imposed by projections of the mind, these realized beings often led unconventional lives that expressed their freedom. In addition, the power of their realization enabled them to establish a connection with the consciousness of the animals whose flesh they consumed, and through this, they were able to transfer the beings to a Buddha pureland.[85]The enduring image of the mahasiddhas[86] Tilopa[87] and Saraha,[88] for example, is of crazy yogis who ate meat, drank wine, and often shocked the establishment by their eccentric behaviour. Also, when the fully ordained monk Gampopa[89] met Milarepa, he

---

[85] A place or world spontaneously manifested by a Buddha or great Bodhisattva as a sphere of their activity. There beings can steadily progress towards enlightenment without the possibility of falling into a lower realm. The pureland of Amita Buddha is the most well known.

[86] Tantric yogis renowned for their spiritual prowess and ability to teach beings of all calibres and inclinations.

[87] (988-1069) Teacher of Naropa and first human to expound the teachings of Mahamudra.

[88] (17th Century) Lived as an arrow maker and was famous for his three cycles of songs – those for the king, queen and ordinary people.

[89] (1079-1153) Originally trained in the Kadam tradition. Later, he studied under Milarepa and became his principle

was offered a glass of wine as a symbolic initiation into Vajrayana. In fact, the Vajrayana is replete with stories of meat-eating and wine-guzzling practitioners. These masters serve as a great inspiration, but their outer lifestyle is not to be imitated by those who have not reached their inner level of attainment. The path is not characterized by following one's whims and acting unconventionally, but requires complete non-discrimination in every aspect of life. If one chooses to eat meat, then one should also be prepared to eat 'foul' and 'disgusting' food. The Tantric path offers an effective way to challenge our ingrained concepts, and requires courage in order to meet every situation directly and with equanimity. It is not a vehicle designed to pander to worldly bias.

The highly respected Nyingma master Patrul Rinpoche,[90] in particular, took to task those monks who used the example of meat-eating yogis and the ritual use of flesh as an excuse to please their palate. In his work *The Words of My Perfect Teacher,*[91] the following admonishments were uncompromisingly metered out:

---

disciple. His is the author of *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation,* which represents a fusion of the Kadam and Kagyu teachings.

[90] (1808-1887) One of Tibet's greatest and most loved teachers. He eschewed high monastic positions, in favour of living as a homeless wanderer.

[91] Tib: *Kunzang Lama'i Shelung.*

> In Buddhism, once we have taken refuge in the Dharma we have to give up harming others. To have an animal killed everywhere we go, and to enjoy its flesh and blood, is surely against the precepts of taking refuge, is it not? More particularly, in the Bodhisattva tradition of the Great Vehicle (Mahayana), we are supposed to be the refuge and protector of all infinite beings. The beings with unfortunate karma that we are supposed to be protecting are instead being killed without the slightest compassion, and their boiled flesh and blood are being presented to us and we – their protectors, the Bodhisattvas – then gobble it up gleefully, smacking our lips. What could be worse than that?[92]

Rinpoche continues by imploring those who eat meat to think of the suffering that is being caused:

> Think of an individual animal – a sheep, for example – that is being slaughtered. First, as it is dragged from the flock, it is struck with paralysing fear. A blood-blister comes up where it had been grabbed. It is thrown on its back; its feet are tied together with a leather thong and its muzzle bound till it suffocates.[93] If in the throes of its agony, the animal is slow

---

[92] Patrul Rinpoche, 1996: 207

[93] In Tibet, it is common to slaughter animals by suffocation.

> in dying, the butcher, the man of evil actions, just gets irritated. 'Here's one who doesn't want to die!' says he, and hits it...[94]

Rinpoche did not oppose the use of meat in Vajrayana rituals and practice, nor was he against the unorthodox ways of enlightened masters, but he wanted ordinary monks and lay practitioners to use meat in a responsible way that accords with the manner and spirit prescribed in the texts. Being a Vajrayana student is not a pretext for a lack of compassion or an excuse to reinforce habitual patterns.

Another reason for the prevalence of meat-eating among Vajrayana students is that the Bodhisattva vows of this tradition,[95] unlike those of the Mahayana, do not contain injunctions against the eating of meat – though practitioners do adhere to the restrictions on meat consumption adopted in the Theravada tradition. Although Vajrayana is philosophically a part of the Mahayana, its adherence to this less stringent indictment is no doubt primarily a concession to the unique view and skilful means adopted by the school. Some people may wonder how a practice steeped in compassion could justify using meat as a means of accomplishment. We should remember, however, that the reason for gaining enlightenment in both the Mahayana and Vajrayana is not for oneself, but to be

---

[94] Patrul Rinpoche, 1996: 203.

[95] Two Bodhisattva lineages were transmitted into Tibet – one from Nagarjuna and the other from Asanga.

more effective in benefiting beings on a profound level. To achieve this aim, the Vajrayana offers swift and precise methods – among which the adoption of a pure or sacred vision of phenomena as well as the self is key. The meat consumed, though, should at least conform to the restrictions of the Theravada. The killing of sentient beings for whatever purpose is never accommodated in any Buddhist tradition.

Later, the rule of tolerance towards meat consumption found fertile ground in the special needs of the people in the regions where the Vajrayana spread and took root. The climate and soil of the high Tibetan plateau, the land of the snows, and the Himalayan mountain passes are not conducive to the cultivation of edible vegetation, and the primary diet of the inhabitants of these areas is basic: roasted barley flour, cheese, yoghurt, butter tea and meat. Elimination of the latter from this already spare diet would likely mean the total elimination of the human population in that region.

In conclusion, we can see that each tradition has its own reasons for accepting or rejecting the consumption of meat. It is not that one school is lax or another too obsessive. All the reasons have a sound scriptural basis, and suit the specific practice and the environmental or cultural requirements of the adherents. Furthermore, one cannot generalize that Mahayanists are vegetarian while Theravada and Vajrayana students are not. Within the Mahayana, for example, it is rare to find vegetarians among any school in Japan, while in Sri Lanka, it is not uncommon to find strict vegetarians

among both the monks and laity. The Vajrayana, too, has its notable exceptions. The dying words of the Great Rime[96] Master Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé[97] were, '...I pray that I will be reborn where I don't have to eat meat.'[98] In contemporary times, the great Dzogchen master Chatral Rinpoche[99] is a strong advocate of vegetarianism.

So, where do students of the Dharma who live outside traditional Buddhist societies stand? Rather than stating categorically that one should or should not be vegetarian, we might instead look at the motivation for our decision. Every Buddhist needs to cultivate compassion and wisdom. This is the root of Buddhist practice. Lacking these, it is doubtful that even outwardly kind deeds will be beneficial.

If the development of compassion leads to a feeling of empathy with other beings, it is natural to wish to protect them from harm. Becoming a vegetarian is one way to channel such an aspiration. Furthermore, the development of wisdom leads us to become aware of the consequences of our actions. Purchasing meat in the supermarket may not be the direct cause of the

---

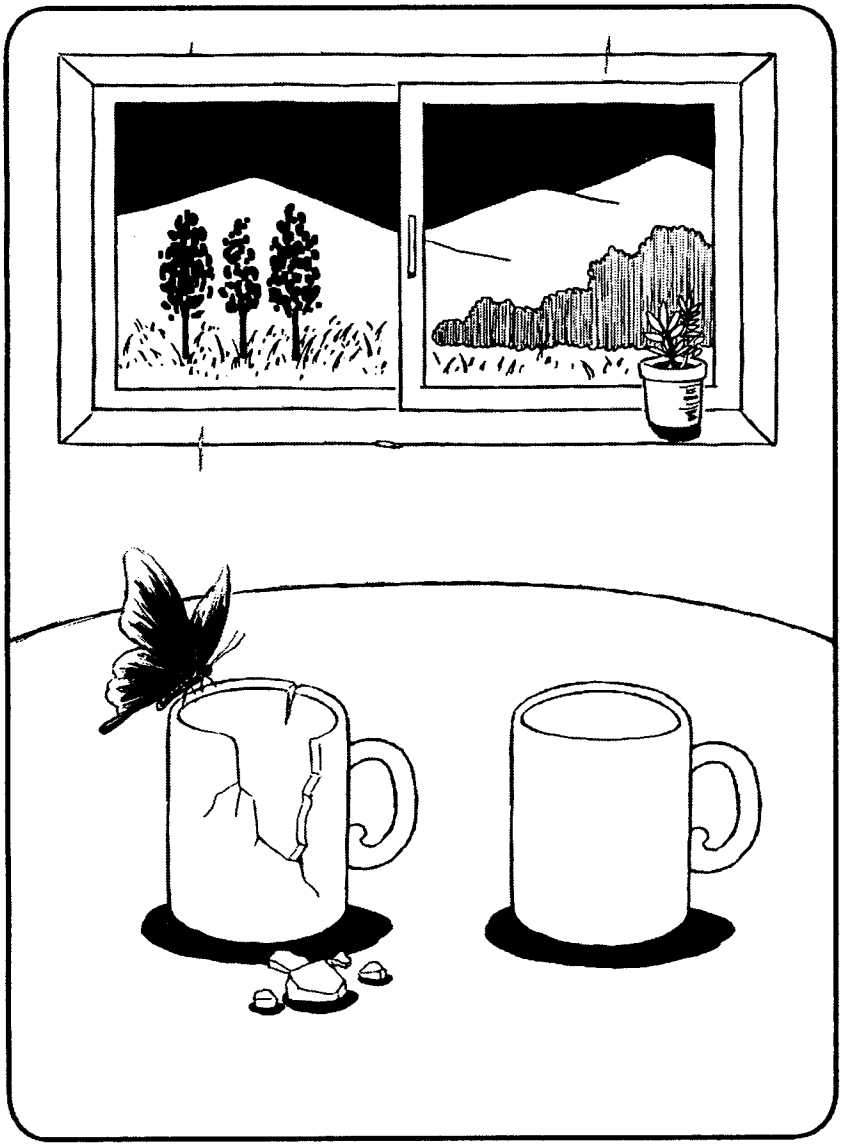
[96] Lit. 'without bias'. A non-sectarian movement that began in Tibet in the 19th century.

[97] (1813-1899) Also known as Jamgön Kongtrul the Great. Extremely talented in his youth, he went on to be a prolific writer leaving an immense heritage of five treasures of commentaries and personal writings.

[98] Jamgon Kongtrul, 2003: 378.

[99] (1913-) See supplement 'The Benefits of Saving the Lives of Other Beings: A Teaching by Chatral Rinpoche'.

slaughter of the animal whose flesh we are eating, but certainly we will not be blind to the connection. It is obvious that if meat is bought, it will be replaced. We are not the killers, but we are perpetuating an industry of slaughter. If a country has a high meat consumption, many lives are being taken on a daily basis, and we are definitely not exempt from the common karma. These points might be considered. However, our decision to become vegetarian should not cause us to be hostile to those who eat meat. Whether one eats meat or not is a personal choice, but as long as it is made as an expression of compassion and understood in the light of emptiness, then it accords with the sentiments of the Buddha's teachings, especially those of the Mahayana school. Being a vegetarian is not an option for everyone. Nevertheless, those who eat meat should not do so callously, blind to the animal's suffering. Instead, with a compassionate heart, one should pray to establish a positive connection with the animal whose flesh is to be consumed, and vow to repay its kindness for giving one the strength to practise. In the Vajrayana tradition, it is customary to chant the mantra *Om Ahbirakay Tsara Hung* seven times and then blow over the meat. This is said to overcome the fault of meat-eating and ensure an auspicious rebirth for the animal.



5

THE METHOD

When, Why, What & How

> The most beneficial of all composite roots of virtue is the protection and ransoming of the lives of sentient beings. A variety of that is saving the lives of livestock, which frees those animals from present danger to their lives. Through the blessings of their being offered to the Three Jewels[100] and of hearing names and *dharanis*[101] they will be ultimately freed from inferior births. Through the power of that, and as the result concordant with the cause, the practitioners themselves will undoubtedly receive benefits, such as increased lifespan. If this is done in a ritual context, it is more powerful.
> Jamgön Kongtul - *The Essence of Benefit and Joy*[102]

WHEN & WHY

As a spontaneous act: The opportunity to save life can present itself at any moment. It can be as simple as returning a fish washed up on the shore to the sea or

---

[100] The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.
[101] Mantras.
[102] Jamgön Kongtrul, 2000: 3.

jumping into a river to save a drowning person. To respond to these situations requires compassion, which the Dalai Lama has defined as a mental attitude based on the wish for others to be free of suffering and which is associated with a sense of commitment, responsibility and respect towards others.[103] With this attitude, it would be very difficult to ignore the plight of a fish wriggling on the shore, let alone a fellow human struggling for his life. In short, the cultivation of compassion increases our awareness of others' suffering and, in so doing, prepares us to respond in a spontaneous and beneficial way.

As a practice: Karma is one of the major forces that define our circumstances, and therefore the ripening of negative karma can have catastrophic effects on our lives. These effects can be felt on an individual level, such as experiencing ill health, poverty or misfortune, or collectively, as in the case of a region devastated by drought or famine. While no one will deny that worldly knowledge is vital in confronting these problems, it is also essential to recognize the influence of karma and to act to transform the nature of its flow. Take someone who is continually sick, for example. Although a direct remedy is required – it is not sufficient to merely sit at home and chant mantras – and that a doctor should be consulted, the underlying karmic causes for the continued adversity also need to be acknowledged. Negative karma must be purified, and positive seeds planted. Of the numerous practices for purifying karma,

---

[103] Dalai Lama, 1998: 91.

one of the most powerful is the Vajrayana practice of *Vajrasattva*,[104] while saving lives is considered the most effective way to plant positive seeds and dilute the consequences of past negative actions.

In traditional Buddhist societies, it is common to hold regular life-releasing ceremonies. This can be done at any time, though in terms of merit, they are most effective when conducted on auspicious days such as the Buddha Shakyamuni's birthday[105] or on the days that commemorate the four great events in his life.[106]

---

[104] A peaceful deity associated with the practice of purification. Deity practice is based on the understanding that we are intrinsically pure, but due to our obscurations and flawed perception, we fail to realize it. The deities are manifestations of this pure nature, so when we visualize ourselves as a deity, we establish ourselves in our original nature and, at the same time, deconstruct our dualistic thought patterns. This practice accords with the Tantric view that the nature of mind in samsara and nirvana are the same, the difference being in our perception of reality.

[105] The date varies according to the tradition. In the Vajrayana school, it is commemorated on the seventh day of the fourth month. * In the Theravada tradition, the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and parinirvana are all celebrated on the fifteenth day of the third month. * *Dates are according to the lunar calendar.

[106] 1. *Chortrul Duchen* (fifteenth day of the first month*): The first fifteen days of the year celebrate the fifteen days on which the Buddha produced a miracle in order to increase merit and give rise to devotion in future disciples. 2. *Saga Dawa Duchen* (fifteenth day of the fourth month*): The Buddha's enlightenment and *parinirvana* (according to the

In addition to religious occasions, it is also beneficial to release life at times of sickness or death, and when praying for one's spiritual teacher to remain in the world. A celebration to commemorate a birth or marriage is also an excellent time to plant the positive seeds of releasing life. At the very least, we should not sow seeds of misfortune by slaughtering animals or destroying natural resources at these times. On this point, the *Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva*[107] *Sutra* states (including some minor editing changes):

> The dwellers of Jambudvipa[108] should not kill or commit any other act of evil such as offering living sacrifices to spirits or gods on behalf of the departed one.
>
> The deed of offering blood-sacrifice will not give even the smallest benefit to the deceased, but will actually increase their suffering.
>
> Their future woe will be more severe as a result of this bloodshed. Even if the deceased have done some good deeds during their life that would help them to attain a heavenly or

---

Vajrayana tradition). 3.*Chokhor Duchen* (fourth day of the sixth month*): The Buddha's first teaching, called the First Turning of the Dharma Wheel. 4.*Lha Bab Duchen* (twenty-second day of the ninth month*) The Buddha's descent from Indra's heaven where he had taught for three months. *Dates according to the lunar calendar.

[107] One of the eight Dhyani Bodhisattvas, the guardian of the earth.

[108] The southern continent, i.e., the world in which we live.

> human rebirth, the evil acts performed on their behalf by relatives will act against their welfare and delay their progress towards liberation.
>
> If the dying being have no good deeds to their credit, and according to their personal karma, they merit a low rebirth, why should their families be so ill advised as to kill on their behalf?
>
> Just as a person who has suffered hunger for three days and travelled from afar carrying a heavy load of more than one hundred *katis*, and then some neighbour suddenly adds to the load. The total weight will be unbearable.[109]

In order to understand saving life in the larger context of benefiting society and the environment, it is perhaps pertinent to review the subject of emptiness and interdependence discussed in earlier chapters: for example, a flower does not suddenly appear, but arises as the result of a combination of factors. It grows from a seed, which, in order to sprout, requires soil, moisture, warmth and light. While the development of a plant has its own natural cycle, it is also dependent on the environment. This kind of interdependence is not only true for a flower, but for all phenomena. All things in the universe are interconnected. It is like a net that has a polished jewel at every juncture, with the characteristics of each jewel depending on the other jewels as they infinitely reflect each other.

---

[109] KB. Chapter 7.

The Buddha taught that the universe is governed by five natural laws or cycles. [110] Although each cycle functions independently, the phenomena they govern, as we have discussed, are interdependent. The repercussions of, say, environmental damage therefore not only affect vegetation, but also the physical and psychological health of sentient beings. The reverse is also true. For example, a society that is governed by ignorance, greed and attachment is marked by hostile and selfish acts. On a subtle level, these ripen as a common karmic result, such as epidemics and disasters. At a gross level, these negative traits manifest in karmically more obvious ways, like an increase in polluting industries and deforestation, which over an extended period adversely affects the climate and

---

[110] The Buddha stated that phenomena follow five natural laws: 1.*utu niyama,* 2.*biju niyama,* 3.*citta niyama,* 4.*karma niyama* and 5.*dharma niyama.* These refer respectively to laws that govern the inorganic, such as ice melting in heat, flowers opening in the day and closing at night; the biological, such as the characteristics of fruit and vegetables, for example, the fact that apple seeds will produce an apple tree; the psychological, such as the process of consciousness, the ability to perceive objects and telepathy; cause and effect, such as the fact that an action will produce a result based on the intention behind it; and natural phenomena, such as the interdependence of all things, gravity, tidal flow and impermanence of phenomena. The term *niyama* means 'certainty' of 'fixed way', and each *niyama* functions within its own cycle, except the last *niyama, dharma niyama,* which also works within the other cycles.

natural cycle of events, such as rain falling in season. In response, science will target pollution as the cause of the problem, while Buddhism will focus on ignorance and its offshoots, greed and attachment, with pollution being identified merely as a symptom. In the *Anguttara Nikaya Sutta*, [111] the Buddha explains that unwholesome passion, excessive greed and distorted values cause an increase in violence. In due course, this situation leads to a disruption in seasonal rains, resulting in crop failure and widespread famine.[112]

---

[111] AN. I, 160.

[112] These kind of collective results are often misunderstood as punishment. Buddhism, however, does not recognize any being or deity as having the jurisdiction to pass moral judgment. These results are purely the automatic effects of karma. As was discussed in earlier chapters, actions that strengthen the sense of 'I' inevitably create negative consequences, while those that counter and weaken the sense of ego, produce positive results. There is no being who decides that 'unwholesome passion' and so forth are bad and that the perpetrator must be punished, but if we think about it in terms of Buddhist logic, we will understand how it works. A person consumed with lust or wanton greed is definitely not concerned with the welfare of others. His motives are self-serving, and the other person is merely regarded as an object to fulfil his desires. There is no sense of caring or love, just personal gratification. A relationship built on such foundations will inevitably be very traumatic. If this attitude of selfishness is extended to society as a whole, the consequences will be dire. As in the example of climate change in the above text, the connection between the result and root cause may not be immediately apparent, but when

These are the collective results of sentient beings' past negative acts ripening at the same time.

In the same way that a river is defined by the quality of its tributaries, so it is with the stream of phenomena. When negative action predominates among beings, phenomena will be adversely affected. Saving life is an effective way to pump positive and beneficial karma into the stream. Consequently, extensive release of life is strongly recommended when clouds of war loom, when famines and droughts prevail, or following any other type of disaster.

WHAT & HOW – relative and ultimate goals.

The relative goals of releasing life are to protect sentient beings and prolong their lives, and there are numerous ways to do this. Purchasing and releasing animals that are destined for butchery or sacrifice, or paying for a life-saving operation or medicine, are the most common. These acts directly save lives, and are therefore the most beneficial and meritorious.

When we release creatures into the wild, first and foremost we must assure their safety and well-being, as well as the protection of the environment. With fish, for example, we not only need to identify whether they are a salt or fresh-water species, but also whether the salt-water variety are a coastal or a deep-water type, and whether the fresh-water ones are lake or river

---

considered from the point of view of karma and interdependence, the relationship becomes more obvious.

dwellers. Finally, we must ensure that the fish or any other creatures that we release are an indigenous species. Releasing non-native wildlife can wreak havoc with the local ecology, and doing so is illegal in many countries. In short, for a successful release, we need a liberal dose of common sense, as well as some prior research.

In the case of wild animals or birds, a professional release is recommended. This can be done by contacting a local animal care centre or wildlife sanctuary, making a donation and requesting that they undertake the release on our behalf. Most creatures do not adapt well to a new environment, and a professional release not only prevents unnecessary suffering and death, but also ecological damage.[113] Certainly, in countries with abundant wildlife reserves, such as India or Nepal, professional releases should be conducted. When considering which creatures to release, it is important to remember that all beings equally possess Buddha-nature, and have the potential to achieve a higher rebirth and ultimately attain Buddhahood. Therefore, they do not have to be large and magnificent; even the humble worm bought from a fishing supplies shop is a worthy and often convenient candidate for release.

---

[113] In some countries, it is the custom for wild animals, generally birds, to be captured specially to sell to Buddhist practitioners for release. These creatures were originally in no danger of being killed. This is an example of a practice losing its original value and becoming distorted, and the custom should not be encouraged.

Domestic animals do not adapt to living in the wild, and when released, require food and care as well as sanctuaries in which to safely roam. In Taiwan, for example, charity groups have purchased tracts of land in the countryside to house homeless dogs saved from being put down at city pounds. Herbivorous animals require less attention in terms of feeding, but still need a large grazing area and shelter from the elements. Taking care of domestic animals requires investment. Land, buildings, food and provisions for health care are prerequisites to embarking on this kind of release.[114] As funding a project of this nature is often beyond the means of individuals, a group effort is perhaps the best way to proceed. During the Ming dynasty in China, for example, releasing-life societies were founded in order to purchase land and establish sanctuaries and lakes for released animals. In Tibet, monastic communities sometimes provide havens for released yaks.

While one of the relative goals of releasing life is to extend the life of sentient beings, the released beings are still entangled in the mental delusion and suffering of samsara, even though prolonging their lives is a praiseworthy and virtuous act. An extended life is, therefore, not the source of permanent happiness. The higher, more exalted aim is to create conditions that result in liberation from samsara, which, as stated in the

---

[114] Animal sanctuaries may also need to be registered with local government authorities. Enquiries should be made before proceeding.

opening verse, is more effectively accomplished when the release is conducted as a ritual.

The goals, then, are threefold: 1. to protect and extend the life of sentient beings; 2. to plant seeds for the beings to gain higher rebirth and ultimately break through the bonds of samsara; 3. to provide merit for the practitioners, so that they gain enlightenment with a view to being of greater assistance to sentient beings. The first goal has already been discussed, and we shall look now at the second and third.

Ceremonies accompanying the release of life vary, but the aim is always to create a karmic link that results in the beings gaining a higher rebirth and ultimate liberation from samsara. The methods for doing this are given in greater detail at the end of this chapter. Basically, the practitioner first purifies his or her motivation by reflecting on his or her relationship with the beings to be released and, in addition, offers them consecrated substances (such as blessed pills[115]). Then at the time of the release, mantras are chanted and aspirations made for their well-being and future liberation.

For animals that will be freed professionally, the offering of consecrated pills and the chanting of the mantras can be done beforehand. One need not be present at the release, but one should make aspirations at the time of the event. As wild creatures are not accustomed to being among humans or held in captivity, in order to avoid traumatizing them, they should be

---

[115] Skt. *Amrita*. Tib. *Mendup*.

handled in the most gentle and peaceful manner possible.

The value of creating a connection that will result in a higher rebirth is illustrated the following story related by Ribur Rinpoche[116] (paraphrased):

> Once, a householder named Pelgye made the request to be ordained. Before consenting, however, the Buddha Shakyamuni looked into the man's past to see whether he possessed sufficient merit to follow the path of a monk. The Buddha saw that he did, and revealed the cause of this merit: Once, in a past life, when the householder had been born as a pig, a dog chased him around a stupa. Even though the pig ran around the stupa to save his life, not out of faith, still the merit for this act was sufficient not only to result in a human rebirth, but also to establish a connection with a path leading to liberation.

Prior to releasing animals, it may not be possible for them to circumambulate a stupa or other sacred objects, but by chanting mantras, offering blessed pills and making auspicious prayers, we plant seeds for an auspicious rebirth and liberation from samsara.

Finally, we discuss releasing life from the perspective of the practitioner. The goal of the practitioner is to attain enlightenment in order to help

---

[116] (1923-) A Gelupa Rinpoche from Kham, East Tibet.

sentient beings on a profound level, and as we discussed in earlier chapters, to accomplish this we need both merit and wisdom. Wisdom is generated through meditation and the realization of emptiness, while merit is accumulated through benevolent acts, among which saving life is supreme. The methods for directing the results of one's good deeds towards liberation are described in the chapter on karma. Here, they are combined with those for releasing creatures:

In order that our motivation flows from deep compassion, we first reflect that, due to our countless rebirths, there are no beings that have not at some time been our mother. Therefore, the beings to be released are not viewed as unrelated animals, but as our close kin.[117] Next, we should arouse the mind of bodhichitta by chanting and reflecting on the meaning of the following words:

> May all benefits from this act help sentient beings attain complete enlightenment.

If available, consecrated substances such as blessed pills dissolved in water are offered to the animals to drink, or in the case of fish, poured into their water tank. During the release itself, aspirations are made for the creatures' safety in this life, and for their future rebirth as a human or in a pureland and for their ultimate release from samsara. In addition, we continuously

---

[117] See the chapter on 'Releasing Life,' for instruction on how to contemplate released animals as one's own mother.

chant the mantra of great compassion, *Om Mani Padme Hum,*[118] in a voice loud enough for the released beings to hear. Releasing beings in this way plants the seeds for higher rebirth and liberation.

While our aspirations are based on the relative truth of karma and compounded phenomena, we should also remind ourselves of the higher truth of emptiness by reflecting that the benefactor, act and beneficiary are all empty of inherent existence. Finally, we should seal the activity by dedicating the merit towards the enlightenment of all sentient beings. Reflecting on the emptiness of self and other in this way imbues the merit with an indestructible, sky-like quality, while sincerely dedicating the merit increases its value and ensures that its power is sustained until we attain liberation. The following dedication of merit can be chanted as a means to direct the mind:

> I totally dedicate all merit in the same way as the Buddhas of the past, Buddhas of the future and the Buddhas of the present.

---

[118] In traditional Buddhist countries, it is also common to establish a link between the Buddha Dharma and the released beings by thrice chanting *Namo Buddha Ya. Namo Dharma Ya. Namo Sangha Ya.* Furthermore, in countries where the Mahayana tradition predominates, it is also a custom to continuously chant the name *Amitabha* in order to forge a link with the Buddha Amita and the Sukhavati pureland, which was created by his merit.

> May it be a cause for the enlightenment of all beings.[119]

While in terms of merit or relative benefit to sentient beings no act surpasses the direct saving of life, we should not underestimate the value of indirect contributions to their welfare. Making donations to hospitals, clinics, animal care centres and to charities that work in famine, drought and disaster relief, as well as campaigning for the abolition of the death penalty and blood sports, and contributing to HIV and cancer education programmes are examples of things that can be done to save life indirectly. In order to transform these deeds from mundane acts of charity into spiritual endeavours that have far-reaching benefits, they should also be performed in the context of the practices explained above.

---

[119] If we wish to dedicate the merit to someone in particular and for a specific reason, then the final line of the verse can be adapted. For example, we could say, 'May it be a general cause for all beings to be blessed by good health, and in particular for *person A* to recover from sickness'. When dedicating in this way, it is very important to include all other beings. Merit can also be dedicated to one's own attainment of enlightenment, being reborn in a specific place under certain circumstances or in favour of re-establishing the relationship with one's spiritual master in the next life. The motivation for making these aspirations, however, is to place one self in a stronger position to help beings on a profound level, not for personal benefit. Likewise, all sentient beings should be included in these prayers.

Appendix 1

The Twelve Links of Dependent Arising

As discussed in the early chapters of the book, nothing exists inherently but arises in dependence on certain conditions. In the *Rice Seedling Sutra*[120], the Buddha places this truth within the context of the cycle of life.

In the sutra, the Buddha states: 'Due the existence of this, that arises'. This statement affirms the Buddhist view that life is neither god-given nor fatalistic, but the result of particular causes and conditions. The Buddha elaborates on his earlier statement later in the sutra, when he says: 'Due to the production of this, that is produced'.[121] Because phenomena are compounded and impermanent, they are able to produce new phenomena. If, for example, a seed was permanent, it could never evolve into a flower.

Although the twelve links of dependent arising are presented in a specific order, they form a cycle and arise as a result of multiple causes. For example, although ignorance is placed first in the causal chain, it is also a result. Without birth, a later link in the chain, there would be no being in whom ignorance could manifest.

---

[120] Skt. Shalistamba Sutra.

[121] Dalai Lama, 1992: 7.

As stated above, the 'first' link is **ignorance**,[122] which in traditional drawings is symbolized by an old, blind person hobbling along with a cane. In the context of the Buddha's teachings, ignorance refers to not knowing the truth of how things actually exist.

Because our view of self and phenomena is incorrect, we respond to the outside world in an inappropriate way. This is called afflicted **action**, and is drawn as a potter moulding clay. In the same way that a potter takes clay and creates a new form that is dependent on his design, a person ignorant of the truth creates causes corresponding to his motivation and subsequent action. Additionally, the potter's wheel stands for the whole cycle of life, which continues to turn as long as we create new forms.

The third link in the chain is **consciousness**, symbolized by a monkey inside a house. Because consciousness is the product of ignorance and afflicted action, the mind is agitated, and consequently the monkey is shown leaping from window to window.

Name and form is the fourth link, and is depicted as people being carried in a boat. The boat represents form, while the people denote mind.

An empty house with six openings depicts the fifth link in the chain of dependent arising. This represents the **six senses**.[123]

The next link is **contact**. This is traditionally drawn as two people kissing, which signifies a meeting of

---

[122] Skt. *avidya,* which literally translates as lack of light.

[123] eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind.

sense organ, sense object and sense consciousness. Without all three arising together, there would be no sensation. For example, an eye that was independent of eye consciousness would be unable to perceive the outer world.

Contact is the basis for **feelings**, which is the seventh link. Feelings can be distinguished as pleasant, neutral, unpleasant or mixed, and the drawing that is associated with this link is that of a person with one eye pierced by an arrow. This is symbolic on two levels. Firstly, even though the eye is small, intense feelings are aroused through its perceptions. Secondly, feelings inevitably lead to pain. This is obvious when the feeling is unpleasant, but in fact even pleasant feelings result in suffering. This is because they generate an unquenchable thirst for more, which leaves us feeling unsatisfied and disappointed.

As stated above, pleasant feelings give rise to **attachment**, and this link is shown as someone drinking liquor. Even though the negative effects of excessive drinking far outweigh any short-term pleasure, it is difficult to give up the habit. When this becomes obsessive, it causes unrestrained **craving**, which is the ninth link in the chain, symbolized by a monkey crazily devouring fruit from a tree.

Action that flows from a mind crippled by desire and attachment leaves deep karmic traces in the mind, which are the seeds of a new **existence**. This is the tenth link, represented by a heavily pregnant woman, while **birth** forms the eleventh link. Here, the ripening

of karmic propensities is symbolized by a woman holding a newborn child.

The twelfth and final scene is of an old man's corpse lying on a rock. This denotes the process of **aging and dying**, which in fact begins at the very moment of birth.

These twelve illustrations are traditionally drawn in the shape of a wheel, with the first link on top. As a symbol of the driving force behind the links, the three 'poisons' – a cock, representing desire; a snake, symbolizing hatred; and a pig, embodying ignorance – are drawn at the centre.

Appendix 2

Training in Bodhichitta

What makes an action good or bad?
Not how it looks, nor whether it is big or small,
But the good or evil motivation behind it.[124]

The above verse underlines the pre-eminent role of motivation, which forms the first link in a chain of events. If we wish to go north but our initial steps are towards the south, we will not arrive at our intended destination. In the same way, if our motivation is tainted, any subsequent action will also be impure and its goal unobtainable. The following contemplations aim to ensure that we engage in the practices of the 'six perfections' with pure and altruistic motivation, and in this way accomplish our training in them.

Considering others equal to oneself:

The reason that we are unable to break free of the shackles of samsaric existence is purely due to our fixation on the illusion of an inherently existing 'I'. In order to counter this delusion, contemplate in the following way:

---

[124] Patrul Rinpoche, 1996: 8.

All beings want to avoid suffering and be happy. A worm that is pulled from the ground and placed in the hot sun will immediately try to return to the cool and safety of the soil. In this respect, its basic desires are no different from our own. However, despite the fact that beings wish to be happy, through ignorance we create the very conditions for the opposite to occur. Even the toughest criminals commit atrocities with the goal of increasing their comfort and well-being. Yet, their acts are the very root of their suffering, and in successive lifetimes they will suffer in the sea of samsara until finally the cycle of negative action and result is broken.

As Dharma practitioners, we should contemplate that through our infinite rebirths, there is not one being who has not been our mother. Therefore, we should not see others as unrelated, but as our own close kin. In addition, we should realize that like us, these mother-beings seek happiness and fear suffering. We should meditate and reflect on this repeatedly until prejudices, bias and feelings of distance from other beings dissolve, and both enemies and friends are considered equal and afforded the same level of love and care.

Exchanging oneself and others:

Look at or visualize a person who is suffering. Then, on an inhalation, imagine taking on all that person's pain and adversity. Likewise, as you exhale, imagine offering him or her all your joy and everything from

which you derive pleasure. In the beginning, this practice is accomplished more easily when a single individual is visualized. Later, as we become more adept, the scope of our visualization is extended to include all sentient beings.

Furthermore, whenever we undergo a painful experience, we should consider that many beings are suffering in a similar way. We give rise to a mind of compassion and make a sincere wish that their pain manifest within us, leaving them happy and free from distress. Likewise, when we are happy and healthy, we should visualize sharing our good fortune with others. Like a bright autumn moon that unconditionally illuminates the world, we should endeavour to bring joy and peace to all beings.

This practice of exchanging oneself and others is one of the most effective methods for positively transforming the mind. Even a single moment of feeling that one has actually taken on the suffering of others and exchanged it for one's own happiness purifies many aeons' accumulation of negative karma. In addition, it creates an immense store of merit and wisdom, and prevents rebirth in a lower realm.

Considering others more important than oneself:

From the depths of our hearts, we pray that the sufferings of others ripen within us, and that in return, all beings receive our joy and conditions for happiness. We should repeatedly make these aspirations until they

reverberate to the very core of our being and the waves of compassion naturally radiate from our hearts like the sun's rays at dawn, bringing warmth, light and sustenance to all. In the past, even secular kings willingly offered their lives and possessions to protect their subjects. How much more should we, as Dharma practitioners, be prepared to help others regardless of the cost to ourselves.

Like the legendary philosopher's stone that transformed base metals into gold, these contemplations have the power to turn our minds into dynamic forces that are capable of fully and fearlessly applying themselves to the Bodhisattva practices of the 'six perfections'. Therefore, they should be undertaken resolutely and thoroughly.

Appendix 3

The Six Perfections

An accumulation of merit and wisdom is a prerequisite to attaining enlightenment, the framework for which is provided by the practice of the 'six perfections'. The first five perfections – generosity, discipline, forbearance/patience, diligence/vigour and concentration/meditation – are associated with the attainment of merit, while practices related to the sixth – wisdom – develop insight into the lack of inherent existence of self and other. It is this last practice that causes the other practices to be 'perfected'. Without realization that the giver, gift and beneficiary are without inherent existence, the practices of generosity and so forth are deprived of their transcendental qualities, and the merit accrued by engaging in them merely matures and decays within samsara.

In order that the benefits of these practices ripen as causes for enlightenment, they should be undertaken under the auspices of the three merit-transforming practices explained on pages 15 & 16 and 86 to 88.

Generosity

The practice of generosity or giving provides us with a means to surrender the self, and is enhanced when done

in a spirit of spontaneity, joy and openness. In the same way that a radiant full moon naturally bestows light and beauty on the world without discrimination or expectation of reward, acts of generosity should not be forced, but allowed to skilfully flow forth as an expression of an open and generous heart and a mind untainted by thoughts of personal gain or feelings of superiority.

While the motivation for practising any kind of generosity is the same, a distinction is made in the forms of giving.

Offering material goods: This kind of offering relates to the relief of physical pain and discomfort, and consists of making gifts to the poor and needy of food, drink, clothes, medicine and money. Offering alms to members of the Sangha and assisting those who are entering a retreat are especially beneficial forms of giving.

Offering protection: Here we endeavour to protect others from fear or harm. When we encounter beings in danger, we courageously and spontaneously act to save and protect them. Offering sanctuary to someone who is suffering abuse, showing someone living in torment a way to overcome fear, or saving animals from being treated cruelly or which are under threat of slaughter are all examples of offering protection.

Offering Dharma: Facilitating a link between beings and the Dharma, offering Dharma teachings and instructions when requested to do so, and making Dharma material available to those who express interest are all examples of offering Dharma.

Discipline

While the English word 'discipline' has a connotation of severity, in the context of Dharma it implies a sense of cooling or calming. Unharnessed, the mind is like a raging fire fanned by emotions. Some days we are happy, while the next we are in a black hole or feeling agitated and annoyed. We are pulled this way and that by our impulses, and our lives lack the peace and stability required to sustain our happiness and well-being. Taking vows and maintaining discipline lend support to our efforts to take charge of our lives. They are like discovering the brake and steering wheel in a car that is out of control.

The vows we take and the attitude we adopt in relation to the practice of discipline are marked by three characteristics: the first relates to restraint. We understand the harmful effects of killing and cheating, for example, and vow not to yield to such impulses.

Next, we recognize that mere restraint is insufficient to bring true benefit to others. It is like a ground that has been purged of poison but lacks the richness to produce wholesome and beneficial crops. Therefore, we embark on transforming the mind into a fertile ground suitable for cultivating positive actions.

Finally, in order to provide a framework for our altruistic intention, we might take the Bodhisattva vows. This is like a river that nourishes the land. In order to do so effectively, it requires both a pure source of water and sturdy banks to contain the flow. Bodhisattvas on

the path of accumulation are the same. Even if our motivation is pure, if our action lacks a specific channel along which to flow there is a strong possibility that our efforts will be dissipated or misguided. These vows comprise the third characteristic of the practice of discipline.

Forbearance/Patience

The mind cannot express two conflicting emotions at the same time. Joy and anger, for example, cannot coexist. Therefore, by cultivating patience, our suffering diminishes as habitual tendencies such as hatred, frustration and annoyance dissolve.

Negative emotions arise when we cannot successfully handle a situation. Even if we encounter someone who appears troublesome, generally we do not feel angry or annoyed when we can deal with him or her skilfully. Anger and frustration boil up when we feel cornered and are unable to make a dignified exit. We are stuck and have lost face, so we try to blast our way through. These kinds of situations, however, provide the perfect stage for us to practise forbearance.

Instead of following our usual lines, we can just let the emotion rise and settle without reacting; we neither suppress nor indulge it, but simply experience it as a sensation in a non-judgemental way. Later, we can shine wisdom onto the situation by asking ourselves why we felt embarrassed or angry. Likewise, we can reflect on why we are intimidated by people whose opinions do not accord with our own. In the former

case, our unhappy predicament has inevitably arisen as a result of some unresolved personal issue, such as a fear of being a laughing stock or a need to always be correct. In the latter case, we will discover that we are too idealistic. Expecting never to encounter people who oppose us is like living in London and being surprised by rain.

Our negative emotions are not caused by the external situation, but are produced by our own mind. This is the focus of our training in patience.

The practice of patience has three aspects: the first relates to those who seem to wish us ill. Besides examining the reasons for our unskilful responses as described above, we should also examine the motives behind the acts of hostility. All beings wish to be happy. The person who has just stolen our bag did so because they felt that it would bring some advantage to their lives. The colleague who made an unkind remark did so believing it would assuage his jealousy.

As Dharma practitioners, we recognize that such actions are based on 'ignorance'; they not only lack the fundamentals to produce the happiness the perpetrator desires, but actually increase their suffering. Therefore, rather than losing our temper or seeking revenge, we cultivate patience based on understanding and compassion. To develop patience under these circumstances brings peace of mind and allows us to accumulate abundant merit.

The second aspect of the practice is to show forbearance on the path. We are in samsara, the nature of which is suffering. Consequently, when we

encounter difficulties, rather than kick and scream and wonder why these problems have befallen us, we can say to ourselves: 'Hey, this is samsara. The nature of unenlightened existence is suffering.' Sometimes the sun shines; at other times a storm brews. While our responses to these conditions differ according to their specific demands – for example, we might stay indoors during a storm but go for a hike on a sunny day – our mind remains peaceful in both situations. This is because we recognize that during the course of our lives we will inevitably encounter both pleasant and difficult conditions.

In addition, it is the challenging situations rather than the pleasant ones that offer us the best opportunities to practise, and we should therefore appreciate any problems that arise. Responding to difficulties with a mind grounded in forbearance and wisdom in this way not only allows the karmic residue of past negative actions to be burnt up, but also plants positive seeds for the future. In addition, we should reflect on the lives of great masters like Milarepa and Naropa. Despite the immense hardships they underwent in order to practise the Dharma, they did not flinch in their resolve, and through perseverance finally attained the fruits of their endeavours.

The third aspect concerns cultivating patience in order to discover the truth. The Buddha said we should investigate the teachings of the Dharma in the same way a goldsmith examines gold. While weight and colour validate gold, the hallmark of authentic teachings is whether they accord with reason and are

beneficial to all beings. According to the Buddha, only when the teachings meet these requirements can they be accepted.

However, because we are unfamiliar with many of the ideas that the Buddha presented, we may be unable to immediately grasp their deeper meaning. In such cases, we should be careful not to criticize or reject the teachings. Instead, we should reflect on previous ideas and concepts that we once denounced as incorrect but later came to accept. In this way we will realize that our opinions are not permanent but merely formed in relation to reference points, such as education and cultural bias.

It takes courage and flexibility to accept radical new ideas. Therefore, when we encounter a Buddhist doctrine that we cannot yet understand, we should cultivate patience and contemplate its meaning in an open and spacious way. Later, as our practice and wisdom mature, we will gradually understand that the teaching conveys a message that is both reasonable and beneficial to all beings.

Diligence/Vigour

Nothing is achieved without effort – even preparing a meal requires a certain amount of exertion. Attaining the fruits of the path is no different. When Gampopa was leaving his teacher Milarepa, he requested a final teaching. In response, Milarepa lifted his robe to reveal

the calluses on his rear, which were formed by years of sitting in meditation. The message was that without exertion and diligence in practice, enlightenment is unattainable.

It is a mistake, however, to think of exertion as necessarily being unpleasant. When we go for a hike in the woods or a swim in a lake, for example, it takes effort, yet we are not unhappy to exert ourselves in these activities. We know that the consequences will be pleasant and beneficial. Exerting ourselves in Dharma practice should be done in the same way.

There are three categories in the practice of diligence: the first is called 'armour-like diligence'. We reflect deeply on the value of human life and consider that we not only possess the faculties and freedom to practise the Buddha Dharma, but have also met with an authentic teacher to guide us on the path. What a rare opportunity we have to break through the shackles of samsara, and what a great tragedy it would be if it were wasted! With this thought deeply rooted in our mind, we vow to face all difficulties and hardships in order to practise and attain the fruits of the sacred Dharma.

The esteemed master Longchenpa said: 'Our activities are like children's games. They go on as long as we continue; they stop as soon as we stop them.'[125] Our lives are short, and rather than spending our days concerned with 'children's games', we should diligently engage in practice of the Dharma.

---

[125] Patrul Rinpoche, 1996: 246.

Once there was a man who, at a young age, was shipwrecked alone on a bleak desert island. Life was very difficult for him, and he was unhappy. Then one day some boxes of books were washed up on the shore, and the pictures they contained stirred distant memories of the lush lands, the great and beautiful cities, and the tall and handsome people he had seen as a child. He vowed to build a boat and set out to find these places. Yet, each day he merely busied himself in eating and sleeping. Slowly, his quest to understand the world died, and he no longer thought about why he was on the island or about the fantastic places beyond the seas. He just stayed there fretting about life and occupying himself with mundane matters. Then, one day when he was old and sick, he thought again about these places. He wondered about the purpose of his life and regretted that he had been so lazy in his younger days. Now it was too late. Some years later, the crew of a passing ship found his skeleton...

Most people would agree that this man wasted his life – but can we say we are any different? Busying ourselves every day working, shopping and eating, we probably rarely think about the deeper meaning of life. We might have heard of the Buddha's teachings, and they evoke joy and hope, but we are too lazy to practise. One day it will also be too late...The second aspect of the practice of diligence, then, is called 'diligence in action'. This practice begins when we vow not to waste our lives with trivia, but to passionately and enthusiastically strive to discover the truth.

When we wash our clothes, we aim to clean them thoroughly. It is useless to merely rinse them and, even though they still remain stained, be satisfied that they have been washed. The purpose of our efforts is the removal of dirt, not the washing. It is the same with practice. We are often content to say we have sat in meditation for thirty minutes or have completed a certain number of prostrations, irrespective of whether we slept through the meditation or our thoughts were elsewhere during the prostrations. How often have we rushed through a text, and then the moment we finished, slammed the book shut and dashed off to meet a friend for coffee? The aim of Dharma practice is to purify the mind and give rise to enlightenment, not to merely satisfy a *samaya*[126] requirement or to boast to friends how many prostrations we have done that morning. The final aspect of diligence, insatiable diligence, aims to correct this tendency. Each day, we should not only vow to deepen our practice, but also extend the length of time devoted to it.

Concentration/Meditation

The qualities of meditation are often compared to the light cast by a butter lamp. The first aspect, shamatha,[127] is like the stillness of the flame, while

---

[126] Vows or commitments taken with respect to Tantric practices.

[127] In English, this kind of meditation is often called 'tranquillity meditation'.

vipashyana,[128] the second aspect, is like its glow. In order for a lamp to be useful, it needs a flame that is both bright and still. Practice is the same. A mind that is dull or unstable is incapable of penetrating the nature of phenomena and of mind itself, an understanding which gives rise to wisdom.

While the skills and insights gained through the practices of shamatha and vipashyana are equally essential to realization of the truth, we begin with the cultivation of stillness through the practice of shamatha. Only when the mind has attained a certain degree of stability should we undertake the next step, vipashyana.

Experienced practioners can sit in the middle of a major highway without being disturbed. However, most of us need to practise in a quiet place. While the practice of shamatha should become an integral part of our lives like eating or sleeping, because we often undertake these kinds of activities in a mindless and uninspired way, it is helpful to create a simple but elegant environment for our practice. These preparations need not be elaborate – it is not necessary to have Tibetan *thangkas*[129] or gongs from Japan. All that is required is a space that is uncluttered, airy and clean, and which is not too damp or subject to extremes of temperature. If there is a Buddha statue, it should be placed in a high position, and in order to create

---

[128] In English, this kind of meditation is often called 'insight meditation'.

[129] Paintings of Buddhas or deities often used in the visualization practices associated with Vajrayana Buddhism.

conducive conditions for our practice, we might regularly place offerings before it of incense, candles, clean water and fresh flowers. Before beginning to meditate, many people also find it helpful to centre the mind by making three slow and respectful prostrations towards the statue. There are no strict rules regarding these rituals. We all have different ways of expressing our respect and calming our mind, so we should not be afraid to be creative in bringing the rituals to life. However, we should not lose the plot, and the methods we employ need to remain simple and beneficial.

For the practice of shamatha, we then assume meditation posture and try to maintain one-pointed focus. In the beginning, it is preferable to sit for short[130] but frequent periods. Later, after the mind has gained some stability, the time can be extended. 'Quality, not quantity' is the guiding motto.

There are three stages in the cultivation of concentration. During the early stages we become fascinated by the experiences that arise through meditation, and deliberately seek them. Later, we overcome the attachment to these experiences, but cling to the antidote. Finally, we relinquish the antidote and remain in concept-free concentration.

---

[130] One or two minutes is sufficient

Wisdom

Insight into the emptiness of self and other that arises from the cultivation of wisdom is the spark that transforms the other perfections into transcendental activities. It infuses them with a sky-like indestructible quality, without which their fruits would ripen and decay on a mundane level. Likewise, the practice of wisdom is insufficient in itself to attain enlightenment. As was stated in earlier chapters, wisdom and compassion must be fully integrated, like the two wings of a bird.

There are three aspects relating to the practice of wisdom. Initially, we hear teachings on emptiness given by a spiritual teacher and try to grasp their meaning. Later, we contemplate and ponder their significance, and ask questions to clarify points we have not fully understood. A mere intellectual understanding of emptiness, however, is insufficient to transform our mind. We need to internalize our understanding through direct insight, and this we accomplish through the practice of vipashyana.

Assuming meditation posture, we might contemplate such questions as: 'Who or what is this thing called I?' 'Where is it located?' 'What colour and shape is it?' 'What is the nature of a flower?' Finally, we sit silently, resting in the realization of the empty but luminous nature of mind.

Appendix 4

The Four Seals of Buddhism

While compassion and wisdom are often referred to as the pillars of Buddhist practice, they are not unique to Buddhism. What distinguishes Buddhism from other religions and philosophies are the following tenets, which are known as 'the Four Seals of Buddhism': *all compounded phenomena are impermanent; all emotions are painful; all phenomena are empty of inherent existence;* and *nirvana is peace.*

All compounded phenomena are impermanent:

Everything that has a beginning also has a period of abiding, followed by an end. For certain phenomena this is obvious. Everyone knows that a flower will not last more than a season, and that our bodies and those of our friends and relatives will age and decay. Through scientific research, we also know that even seemingly eternal entities like universes have a beginning, a period of existence and finally, a stage of dissolution. It is important to know this because if we do not acknowledge the transience of phenomena, we will suffer. We will cling to things we enjoy, and feel pain when they disintegrate or are taken from us. Some people find this observation pessimistic, but it is not

necessarily so. If the universe was not characterized by change, we would be permanently trapped in a particular situation. Sickness could never be cured. Wars would not end. Even the new house we hope to buy would not materialize. The Buddha did not invent change and impermanence. They are the facts of life. The Buddha merely observed that all compounded phenomena are inherently subject to change, and taught this truth to the world so that we would not suffer when confronted with loss.

All emotions are painful:

When people hear this teaching, they generally think of negative emotions: colleagues who are prone to fits of anger or who are easily brought to tears come to mind. However, the Buddha did not specify *negative* emotions as the source of pain; rather, he identified *all* emotions as being painful. How can this be so? How could kindness or love, for example, be associated with pain? It is because we view things with a dualistic mind, clinging to them as if they truly existed.

When there is a sense of 'I' and 'other', even kind acts are inevitably imbued with a certain degree of selfishness. We may offer someone a kind word or a helping hand without the thought of gross reward, but we inevitably hope for some form of payback, even if it is only a sense of personal gratification or the establishment of a friendship. This kind of expectation is what causes the emotion to be painful. How often have we heard someone express his or her deep love for

another person? Yet, when that person does not reciprocate but instead starts a relationship with someone else, how quickly that love turns to jealousy and anger. What happened to the love? If we love someone, then surely we should be pleased that they have found happiness. The problem is that the so-called love was tainted. It was based on dualistic mind, which by its nature sees the external world as something either to gain advantage or to fear.

Furthermore, in a dream we may run this way and that in order to avoid trouble and seek enjoyment, but in reality nothing happens. The fear and joy we experience are an illusion. Likewise, because phenomena do not inherently exist, they cannot be the source of true happiness. While we are still embroiled in ignorance, our attempts to find true and meaningful happiness are futile. That is why cultivating wisdom and countering ignorance, rather than teaching ways to be a successful businessman or a great disco dancer characterize the path of the Buddha. It is not that the Buddha was against making money or enjoying oneself; rather, it was that he recognized that these activities are not the source of ultimate happiness. If they were, he would have embraced them and encouraged us to engage in them. However, they are like a mirage of an oasis. They may bring temporary joy and hope, but finally they lead to disappointment.

All phenomena are empty of inherent existence:

Nothing exists independently. Take a sheet of paper, for example. If we traced it back in time, we would first discover that it was made from wood, water and heat. Continuing our journey back, we would find that the wood came from a tree that had absorbed nutrition from the soil, oxygen from the air and heat from the sun. The sheet of paper is therefore not an inherently existing object but the result of a temporary combination of many factors. This is true not only of paper, but also of a pen, a car or in fact any phenomenon that has identifiable characteristics.

In order to avoid becoming attached to the illusion of an independent self and phenomena, it is vital that practitioners understand this point. However, we should be careful not to fall into the other extreme – nihilism. The *mahasiddha* Saraha said on this point: 'To consider the world as real is a brutish attitude. To consider it as empty is even more savage'.[131]

Lacking an understanding of emptiness, we react to the world in a misguided way. We cling to things we enjoy and reject those we fear, and it is just these kinds of discriminatory reactions that create karma and perpetuate the illusion of samsara. However, as Saraha pointed out, taking the opposite view that nothing exists is an even graver error. People who are attached to this

---

[131] Kalu Rinpoche, 1997: 44.

view deny the existence of karma and feel they can do whatever they please. This is a fast track to suffering.

Insight into emptiness frees us from the two extreme views of believing that things either inherently exist or that they do not exist at all. With this view, we realize that all things occur in mutual dependence, and that as part of this system, we have a responsible role to play.

Nirvana is peace:

How does one achieve peace? It is not a place where we are spared irritations like traffic jams or where our favourite brand of coffee is available for free. It is the natural state of mind that exists when the extreme views that we have discussed in the previous seals have been discarded. These views are like thick, black clouds that obscure the sun's rays. However, once they dissolve, the luminosity of the sunlight is revealed. It is not, therefore, a contradiction to say that nirvana is realization of the true state of self and phenomena. Recall the man we discussed in the second chapter, 'The Motivation', who was afraid when he thought he saw a snake in front of him, but relaxed once he realized it was only a piece of rope. His peace of mind was not achieved by gaining something that did not previously exist, but as a result of the removal of a mistaken view. Attainment of nirvana is the same.

Supplement

The Benefits of Saving the Lives of Other Beings:

A Teaching by Kyabje Chatral Rinpoche.

Glory to the Buddha Amitayus[132] and numerous Bodhisattvas!

The unimaginable benefits of such noble deeds are described in the different sutras and tantras taught by Lord Buddha. The practice of such acts has been recommended by all the *siddhas*,[133] both Indian and Tibetan Buddhist *pandits*[134] in various scriptures. Compassion, being one of the main tenets of the Mahayana, also forms the foundation of the Hinayana[135] sect, which sets great store by abstaining from harming any living being. The Tantrayana, on the other hand, has one additional facet; it lays great emphasis on maintaining a moral relationship, samaya, between saviour and saved.

Behind all these teachings, there is one single fact of cardinal importance: that on this earth, a human being

---

[132] The Buddha of Eternal Life.

[133] Someone who has attained the fruit of Tantric practice.

[134] An abbreviation of the word 'pandita' - a Buddhist scholar.

[135] Often used interchangeably with the term Theravada to describe the school of Buddhism prevalent in South East Asia.

can commit no greater sin than taking the life of another living being. By implication, there is no greater source of accumulating merit than saving life.

To obtain real peace and happiness in this world, one has simply to follow the path of *ahimsa*[136], which naturally is common to all the religions of the world. If we do not like to experience any pain or suffering of any kind, how can we expect any other creature, whether big or small, to feel otherwise?

There is no better prayer or means of worship we can offer to the Lord Buddha than by being thoughtful, kind and compassionate, and abstaining from taking the life of any other fellow human being, animal, bird, fish or insect. Trying to save any life from imminent danger or to mitigate their pain and suffering is one step further in the active practice of loving other living beings.

The next logical step is to say prayers for those who die owing to another person's thoughtless cruelty. Following this path automatically puts an end to any conflicts and obstacles within ourselves. Furthermore, it generates spontaneous happiness and bestows absolute inner peace. If your deeds flow from a genuine pure heart and are imbued with selflessness, they will enable you to attain enlightenment in the future.

Consciously abstaining from hunting and killing living beings not only inspires others to do the same, but is the moral duty of the kind-hearted and pious. In its most basic form, human kindness requires us not to

---

[136] Skt. lit. Non-harming.

harm creatures. Therefore, we should neither cast stones or nets, nor shoot migratory birds while they rest for brief moments in the course of their long journey from one continent to another. On the contrary, we should provide them with all possible assistance to safely reach their destination.

A renowned Buddhist scholar from Bengal, Pandit Atisha Dipankara, said that giving compassionate love to the helpless and the poor is as important as meditating on emptiness. This virtue of compassion is the principal foundation stone of Mahayana Buddhism.[137]

[137] Chatral, *Light of Lotus*: 31. (contains minor editing changes).

Bibliography

Chatral: *Light of Lotus – issue 2* (Dudjom Buddhist Association International Limited, Hong Kong).) *
Dalai Lama & Howard C. Cutler: *The Art of Happiness*, (Coronet Books, London, 1998).
Dalai Lama: *The Meaning of Life from a Buddhist Prospective,* tr. Jeffrey Hopkins (Wisdom Publication, Somerville, MA, 1992)
Dilgo Khyentse: *Enlightened Courage*, tr. Padmakara Translation Group (Shechen Publications, Kathmandu, 1994).
Dogen Zenji: *Shobogenzo – The Eye Treasury of the True Law*, tr. Kosen Nishiyama, John Stevens (Daihokkaikaku Publishing House, Sendai, 1975).
Jamgön Kongtrul: *The Essence of Benefit and Joy: a method for saving lives* (Siddhi Publications, Vancouver, 2000)
Jamgön Kongtrul: *The Autobiography of Jamgön Kongtrul,* tr. Richard Barron (Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, N.Y., 2003).
Kalu Rinpoche: *Luminous Mind*, tr. Maria Montenegro (Wisdom Books, Somerville, MA, 1997).
Karma Chagme: *Naked Awareness*, tr. B. Alan Wallace, with commentary by Gyatrul Rinpoche (Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, New York, 2000)
Longchen Rabjam: *The Practice of Dzogchen*, tr. Tulku Thodhup (Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, New York, 1996).

Nyoshul Khenpo: *Natural Great Perfection*, tr. Lama Surya Das (Snow Lion Publications, Ithaca, New York, 1995).
Patrul Rinpoche: *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, tr. Padmakara Translation Group (Harper Collins Publishers, San Francisco & New Delhi, 1996).
Ryokan: *The Zen Fool Ryokan*, tr. Misao Kodama & Hikosaku Yanagishima (Charles E. Tuttle Publishing, Vermont & Tokyo, 1999).
Shabkar: *The Life of Shabkar,* tr. Matthieu Ricard (State University of New York, 1994).
Shantideva: *The Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, tr. Stephen Batchelor (Library of Tibetan Works & Archives, Dharamsala 1987).
Sodachi Khenpo: *Fang-sheng gong-de gan-lu miao-yu* (College of Five Sciences, Sz-Chuan, 1997).
Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche: *The Essence of Buddhism* (Shambhala Publications, Inc, Boston, 2001).

Sutras

AN: *Anguttara Nikaya Sutta.*
Graduated Sayings of the Buddha, tr. E.M. Hare (Pali Text Society, London, 1978)
BNS: *Brahma Net Sutra* (Sutra Translation Committee of the United States and Canada, New York, 1998).
D. *The Digha Nikāya – Samannaphala Sutra* (Leaves from the Buddha's Grove, webpage, ed. 2000).
Dh: *Dhammapada*, tr. Acharya Buddharakkhita (*Buddhist Publication Society*, Kandy, 1985)

KB: *Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra,* tr. Pitt Chin Hui. (True Buddha School Net, 2001)
Lan: *Lankavatara Sutra*, tr. Suzuki, D.T. (reprint: S.M.C. Inc., Taipei, 1977).
S: *The Samyutta Nikaya*, references – Sarao, K.T.S., 2002: p. 12 & 23.
Sn: *The Sutta-Nipata*, the references in English are from the book of Kindred Saying, tr. C.A.F. Rhys Davids and S:S. Thera, vol. 1; C.A.F. Rhys Davids & F.L. Woodward vol. II; F.L Woodward vols. III, IV, V, London: PTS, 1950-1956 (reprints) – Sarao, K.T.S., 2002: p. 11 & 24.

Resource Material

Chogyam Trungpa: *Training the Mind and Cultivating Loving-Kindness*, (Shambhala Publications, Inc. Boston, 1993).
Dzongsar Jyamyang Khyentse: *Buddhism in a Nutshell: The Four Seals of Dharma*, (Gentle Voice Newsletter of Siddhartha's Intent, N.S.W., Australia, March 2002). *
Web: www.siddharthasintent.org/pubs.html *
Gower Bird Hospital: www.gowerbirdhospital.org.uk/
Handlin Smith, Joanna F.: *Liberating Animals in Ming-Ching China: Buddhist Inspiration and Elite Imagination*, (The Journal of Asian Studies 58, no. 1, February 1999). *
Harris, Elizabeth J.: *Detachment and Compassion in Early Buddhism*, (Buddhist Publication Society, Bodhi Leaves BL 141, Kandy, 1997). *

Hopkins, Jeffrey: *Cultivating Compassion*, (Broadway Books, New York, 2001).
Nyanaponika Thera (ed): *Karma and its Fruit* (Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 1975).
Sarao, K.T.S.: *Buddhism and Animal Rights* (Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies, Taipei, 2002). *

Articles *

Index

With bad advisors forever left behind,
From paths of evil he departs for eternity,
Soon to see the Buddha of Limitless Light
And perfect Samantabhadra's Supreme Vows.

The supreme and endless blessings
of Samantabhadra's deeds,
I now universally transfer.
May every living being, drowning and adrift,
Soon return to the Pure Land of Limitless Light!

~ The Vows of Samantabhadra~

I vow that when my life approaches its end,
All obstructions will be swept away;
I will see Amitabha Buddha,
And be born in His Western Pure Land of
Ultimate Bliss and Peace.

When reborn in the Western Pure Land,
I will perfect and completely fulfill
Without exception these Great Vows,
To delight and benefit all beings.

~ The Vows of Samantabhadra
Avatamsaka Sutra~

DEDICATION OF MERIT

May the merit and virtue
accrued from this work
adorn Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land,
repay the four great kindnesses above,
and relieve the suffering of
those on the three paths below.

May those who see or hear of these efforts
generate Bodhi-mind,
spend their lives devoted to the Buddha Dharma,
and finally be reborn together in
the Land of Ultimate Bliss.
Homage to Amita Buddha!

NAMO AMITABHA
南無阿彌陀佛

財團法人佛陀教育基金會 印贈
臺北市杭州南路一段五十五號十一樓
Printed and donated for free distribution by
The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation
11F., 55 Hang Chow South Road Sec 1, Taipei, Taiwan, R.O.C.
Tel: 886-2-23951198 , Fax: 886-2-23913415
Email: overseas@budaedu.org
Website:http://www.budaedu.org
This book is strictly for free distribution, it is not for sale.
Printed in Taiwan
5,000 copies; July 2012
EN175-10608