

Transforming Suffering & Happiness into **ENLIGHTENMENT**

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Root Text Composed by DODRUPCHEN JIGME TENPE NYIMA

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* The root text was translated by Adam Pearcey from Lotsawa House in 2006. The commentary was taught by Khenpo Sodargye in Chinese in June 2020 and the translation into English was completed by his students in December 2020.

We should know that the mind is a big subject that
deserves everyone's study. The mind is full of
mystery on both the phenomenal level and on the
ultimate level.

– Khenpo Sodargye



Om

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LECTURE ONE

If we never come to know the innermost secrets of the mind, no matter how hard we try to seek happiness and avoid suffering, we will find our efforts to be useless, leaving us to wander in samsara continuously and to experience endless suffering. On the other hand, if we seriously study how the mind works, understand its secrets and apply this knowledge to the training of our mind, then no matter what external circumstances occur, they can bring neither harm nor benefit to us and we will remain peaceful in the face of whatever situation we may find ourselves.

– Khenpo Sodargye

Understand the Secret of the Mind

1

The text is made up of three parts, the wholesome beginning, which includes the initial statement, the wholesome middle of the main text, and the wholesome ending which contains the concluding statement. Within the wholesome beginning appears the title of the text, the homage to Noble Avalokiteshvara and the statement of intent.

The Title of the Text

Root Text

Title:

Transforming Suffering and Happiness into Enlightenment

This title indicates the profound instruction contained within this famous text, which is directed toward the training or transforming of the mind. Suffering and happiness accompany us throughout our entire life. It is impossible for any person to avoid the experience of suffering over the course of one's lifetime, nor is it possible for any person not to experience happiness, regardless of how fleeting that experience might be. Thus, it can be said with certainty that the alternation of happiness and suffering is a fact of human life, although some lives contain more suffering, while others are endowed with more happiness.

Ordinary people pursue happiness with all of their hearts, while simultaneously trying at all costs to avoid suffering. To seek hap-

piness and to avoid suffering is considered by almost everyone to be perfectly natural. Dharma practitioners however, make the choice to transform both suffering and happiness into the path to enlightenment. Unafraid of suffering, they do not indulge in the endless quest for temporal happiness. Instead, they see both suffering and happiness as favorable conditions with which to further their spiritual practice.

● **Why Transform?**

Some people may wonder, while the desire to transform suffering into enlightenment is understandable, why would one wish to transform happiness into anything else? Isn't happiness what we are all longing for? Is it not something to rejoice in? Why then transform it? The fact is that both happiness and suffering need to be transformed into the path of enlightenment. But why, you may ask, is this so?

Most often, when suffering strikes, ordinary people generate a great deal of negative emotion. They become sad, depressed, anxious or filled with a sense of hopelessness. They feel rejected, fragile, vulnerable etc., and may even lose the ability to continue moving forward with their normal life. In times of happiness, however, they may become arrogant and complacent, and may even begin to look down on others. From this we can see that both suffering and happiness have the potential to engender a negative mindset in the minds of ordinary people. These negative mindsets can, and must be, eliminated through the training of the mind.

Happiness is not sustainable for those without great merit. As a Chinese saying states, "Great virtue promotes growth." Only with great merit or virtue can one enjoy the acquisition of great wealth and high reputation without the accumulation of bad karma. Many

believe that once they become rich, happiness will follow soon behind, but that is not necessarily the case. Even if one were to become exceedingly wealthy, unless one had attained considerable merit or virtue, one would only experience more and more negative emotions and suffering, until eventually, one would end up with nothing at all.

Therefore, from the worldly point of view, although there is a natural desire to embrace happiness and reject suffering, this is a shallow idea that is not grounded in reality. From a spiritual point of view, unless both suffering and happiness are transformed into the path to enlightenment, they cannot help but bring harm into one's life. For those experienced practitioners who have learned to use happiness as the path to enlightenment, when they are happy, they do not give rise to arrogance or contempt for others, nor do they create negative karma. Instead of looking down on, or feeling superior to others, they dedicate their happiness to other living beings, and thus their happiness becomes a cause to increase merit and virtue, as well as providing a favorable condition for enlightenment.

Though it may seem strange, for many practitioners, suffering is easier to cope with than happiness. For example, in times of turmoil, many will devotedly engage in Dharma practices, but later, when they have gained fame, wealth, or position, their Dharma practice is quickly abandoned. In the early years at Larung Gar, Dharma friends underwent all of the hardships associated with poor living conditions but were diligent in engaging in their Dharma practice. Being strong minded, they seldom encountered obstacles to their practice. However, once they began to receive the veneration of others, received more offerings and gained higher reputations, their practice and virtues faded away. This was likely due to their lack of merit, and this is the type of story one hears of often in life. This is why we need to transform happiness into the path to

enlightenment.

Certainly, it is also necessary for practitioners to transform suffering into the path to enlightenment. In samsara, almost everyone experiences more suffering than happiness. Whether you have recognized this distinction or not, living beings are fettered by three types of suffering. These can be classified as: suffering upon suffering, suffering caused by change and the all-pervasive suffering of conditioning. As we have said earlier, it is impossible for anyone to avoid the experience of suffering or obscuration. In fact, from the biographies of the great masters of the past, we can see that they suffered even more than ordinary people. If they hadn't transformed their suffering into enlightenment, it would have been impossible for them to become accomplished practitioners. Therefore, if we fail to use our suffering as the path to enlightenment, our Dharma practice cannot successfully serve its purpose.

● **Why Practice?**

What should we do in order to transform suffering and happiness into enlightenment? We need practice. Without perseverant practice, these instructions will only remain words and theory, and won't bring about change, just as acquiring wealth or fame does not bring about change from within. One may think that since they have renounced home and become ordained, having shaved their heads and abandoning their ornaments, that they should be able to rid themselves of suffering just as easily. But without proper Dharma practice, a life with a shaved head can be as equally miserable as any other kind of life. However, if we can absorb the great Mahayana teaching into our mind, we will be able to transform anything that we encounter in life into steps on the path to enlightenment. This is something that cannot be accomplished through any outward or external changes.

The Mahayana teaching is precious because it can change us from within and lead us to full enlightenment. External titles such as Khenpo, Khenmo, Geshe, Geshema, rituals such as taking the Refuge vow and the Bodhisattva vow, receiving empowerment, or such Buddhist objects as badges with a master's picture, prayer wheels and vajra bells, etc., can never transform our mind. Even if you are ornamented like Yamantaka and living in a charnel ground, without fully understanding the Dharma teachings and practicing them accordingly, you cannot be an authentic Dharma practitioner.

So, practicing the Dharma instruction is crucial. If you have practiced for a long period of time, you will be more ready to accept those sufferings which are otherwise so hard to bear. The instruction on transforming suffering and happiness into enlightenment given in this text is particularly necessary for people living in this day and age, because it has an uncommon power to resolve unsteadiness and confusion in our mind and to pacify our negative emotions.

I have no idea how many sessions we will need to finish this text. I'll just try my best to offer you fully elaborated guidance. With the chaos and uncertainty of the world today, we are frequently reminded of the real situation of samsara. Whether we perceive the changes that we experience in the external world as good or bad, we should take each as a unique opportunity to discover the secret of our minds and a path to gain inner realization. For ordinary beings, the moment they feel happy, they are thrilled and will try to hold onto it as if that happiness could be made to last forever. But for Dharma practitioners, both happiness and suffering should be taken as a spiritual path, and made use of as favorable conditions for enlightenment. If we can accomplish this with strong minds, we can be considered to be authentic Dharma practitioners.

The Author of the Text

The author, Dodrupchen Jikme Tenpe Nyima, was the eldest of Dudjom Lingpa's eight sons. He is known for the scholarly treatises he composed on many subjects, an example of which is his famous commentary on the *Guhyagarbha Tantra*, which in English is called, *The Key to the Precious Treasury*. He also authored the extensive explanations on Terma which I lectured on during visits to several western universities.

Tenpe Nyima was born in 1865, and passed away in 1926 at the age of 62. He was a remarkable and capable disciple of Ju Mipham Rinpoche and he was mentioned several times in Ju Mipham's biography. As frequently told by His Holiness Jigme Phunstok Rinpoche, Patrul Rinpoche once said that the propagation of the Nyingma teaching was promising because Tenpe Nyima had given the teaching on *The Way of the Bodhisattva* at the age of eight years old and that the flourishing of the Nyingma practice was also hopeful as Nyala Pema Duddul in Delong had attained the rainbow body in 1872.

As an extraordinarily accomplished master, Tenpe Nyima received high praise and exaltation from many other great masters and his biography is a fascinating record of his worldly achievements and transcendental qualities. His poems and songs, which have been compared to those of Ju Mipham and Longchenpa, are not easy to understand in terms of poetics and rhetoric. In spite of this, many modern scholars and practitioners from all corners of the earth study his teachings and commentaries on both Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, as well as his songs of enlightenment. His works in Tibetan comprise six or seven volumes.

I translated this text from Tibetan into Chinese from February 21st to March 5th, 2020. At that time, the coronavirus epidemic in China

was reportedly at its peak and there was a great deal of tension caused by this situation. I made the decision to isolate myself and focus all of my attention on this translation. On March 5th, when I finished, I remember that the death toll that day had reached over 3,000, and people were truly worried. For myself, I felt that I had made good use of that difficult time to practice transforming suffering into the path. Later, I returned to do some proofreading, and even now, as I am beginning to teach this material, I continue to make further refinements to my translation.

The Author's Homage

Root Text

Homage

*I pay homage to Noble Avalokiteshvara, recalling his qualities:
Forever joyful at the happiness of others,
And plunged into sorrow whenever they suffer,
You have fully realized Great Compassion, with all its qualities,
And abide, without a care for your own happiness or suffering!*

The author pays homage to Noble Avalokiteshvara, a bodhisattva who embodies great kindness and compassion to all living beings, and is most accomplished in the practice of tonglen, the exchange of self and others. If we want to transform suffering and happiness into enlightenment, practicing tonglen is a necessity. Therefore, praying to Avalokiteshvara in order to cultivate his spirit in our practice is of great benefit.

The author first exalts Avalokiteshvara's qualities and then pays homage to him. Avalokiteshvara always feels joyful at the happiness of others and is plunged into sorrow when others suffer. Constantly

abiding in the true nature of reality, Avalokiteshvara has realized great compassion with all its qualities and has eliminated his own suffering and happiness. In spite of this, when seeing the suffering of others, he becomes filled with sorrow and heartbreak. In this way, he differs from ordinary beings who cling strongly to their own happiness and suffering, but are apathetic towards the happiness and suffering of others. Master Jizang says in his commentary on the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, "Ordinary beings generate revulsion when seeing the happiness of others, while they are relieved from the suffering of others. Bodhisattvas, on the other hand, rejoice in living beings' happiness and grieve over their suffering." This is an extraordinary characteristic of all bodhisattvas.

For ordinary people, it is normal to try their best to pursue their own happiness and rid themselves of the slightest suffering. However, in regard to others, they do the opposite. The current coronavirus pandemic has caused tens of thousands of people to die. This is such an unfortunate disaster for all human beings, however, there are some who gloat over the effect that this tragedy is causing to other nations or countries, feeling that in this way, the suffering and defeat of their enemies is a kind of victory for them. As Mahayana practitioners, we should sincerely wish for all living beings, including our enemies and foes, to be freed from suffering. If we cannot benefit them directly, we should at least wish for their happiness.

Because Avalokiteshvara has attained the realization of the equality of self and others, and considers others to be even more important than himself, the author prostrates to Avalokiteshvara with veneration. This great bodhisattva is deserving of our exaltation and prostration because of his extraordinary qualities. If Avalokiteshvara were not different from ordinary beings, and like them, was joyful at the suffering of others and agitated at his own misfortunes, then he would be considered unremarkable and not worthy of

our respect. But this is certainly not the case. From this verse, we should recognize that the one we pay homage to, must be imbued with noble qualities; it is for this reason that we express our faith and devotion. By paying homage to this noble being, we can attain these same qualities. It would be wrong to do so for such other reasons as fame, status, wealth, or fear.

The author says, “I pay homage to Noble Avalokiteshvara, recalling his qualities.” Here “recalling” indicates that when we pay homage to this noble being, we should reflect on the following: Avalokiteshvara is a remarkable bodhisattva. May I one day acquire the same qualities and realization as Avalokiteshvara has, so that I may be able to benefit living beings by taking their suffering upon myself and giving them my happiness. Generally speaking, there are three types of homage to a deity: homage by the body, in which one prostrates one’s self in front of the deity; homage by speech, which is to recite the homage verse of the deity; and homage by mind, which is accomplished by recalling the deity’s noble qualities. We should follow the example of previous masters, by understanding how they paid homage and then imitating their actions. Through supplication and prostration to Avalokiteshvara with our most sincere devotion and veneration, gradually we will become imbued with all of his worldly and transcendental qualities.

The Author’s Intent in Composing the Text

Root Text
Statement of Intent
I am going to put down here a partial instruction on how to

use both happiness and suffering as the path to enlightenment. This is indispensable for leading a spiritual life a most needed tool of the Nobles Ones, and quite the most priceless teaching in the world.

There are two parts:

- 1) how to use suffering as the path,
- 2) how to use happiness as the path.

Each one is approached, first through relative truth, and then through absolute truth.

This is the statement of intent. The author tells us that he's going to share an indispensable instruction for leading a spiritual life. It is an instruction on how to use both happiness and suffering as the path to enlightenment, which is the most priceless teaching in the world, even though it comprises only a few pages of writing.

The instruction has two parts, how to use suffering as the path, and how to use happiness as the path, both of which are indispensable for all practitioners. There are some who claim to be Dharma practitioners, but when suffering befalls them, it is questionable whether they will be able to transform it into the path to enlightenment. The same goes to happiness. If one seriously studies and practices these instructions, one will be able to accomplish this transformation. Otherwise, even if one has been studying Buddhist philosophy for many years, it is still possible that one may become exhausted by their own cycle of happiness and suffering, rather than using it as the path to enlightenment.

I quite like a teaching in Ju Mipham Rinpoche's, *The Just King*, which says,

*The wise, with deep insight, improve
No matter what good or bad they experience.*

*The foolish, lacking self-reflection, gain nothing from witnessing
Hundreds of different forms of happiness and suffering.*

This is a very important teaching, and I hope you will contemplate its profound meaning and memorize it. Whether they enjoy happiness or experience suffering, the wise reflect deeply on these experiences, and because of the deep insight that they have gained, they are able to improve themselves. For instance, when they get sick or one of their beloved family members passes away, in fact, whatever kind of circumstances may happen to befall them, instead of becoming overwhelmed by sadness or any negative emotion, they are able to transform these circumstances into favorable conditions for their spiritual practice. Viewed in this way, their suffering brings progress. Likewise, when they are joyful, healthy, their lives filled with wealth and fame, they won't be deluded by any of these things. They are instead, able to see them as the path. So, their happiness and their suffering bring progress to their practice. However, for the foolish ones, because they lack self-reflection, there can be little benefit even if they have experienced hundreds of different forms of happiness and suffering.

So, you may observe for yourselves which group you belong to. When there is sorrow, do you find it helpful for your practice? How about when there is joy? Does it enhance your practice or just make you more lost? It is for this exact reason that we need to study this precious teaching, which teaches us how to transform suffering and happiness into enlightenment. For the wise and good practitioners, they will find it indispensable, and feel that it is a necessary tool and the most priceless teaching in the world. For the foolish, nothing that happens in their life will bring them any benefit. Instead, their experiences may actually cause them to lose their merit and virtue, and cause their practice to regress.

Each of the parts of the text are twofold; they can be approached

first through the lens of relative truth, and then through the lens of absolute truth. The author has chosen to place his emphasis on the aspect of relative truth, not offering much elaboration on the aspect of absolute truth other than to offer a few words such as “through the refutation of production from the four extremes the mind is emptiness, so let alone harmful circumstances or suffering, not even their names can be found”. This teaching on absolute truth is simple but profound, though can hardly be put into practice for most ordinary practitioners or those who haven’t learned the philosophy of Madhyamika. For most practitioners, approaching this instruction through the lens of relative truth is more helpful. It is for this reason that the author has chosen not to focus this teaching from the perspective of absolute truth.

I had originally hoped to give this teaching with live streaming available, so that a larger audience from all over the world could receive this priceless teaching. Unfortunately, given the current situation of the pandemic and many other issues, I can only teach it on site, with fewer listeners and everyone wearing a face mask. Although an audience of people wearing masks looks kind of weird, as the pandemic continues, everybody has to adapt to this new lifestyle and in fact, these days, many people would feel that it is even more strange not to wear a mask in public. Such is life in samsara!

The Secret of the Mind

Root Text

1) How to Use Suffering as the Path to Enlightenment

i. Through Relative Truth

Whenever we are harmed by sentient beings or anything else, if we make a habit out of perceiving only the suffering, then when even the smallest problem comes up, it will cause enormous anguish in our mind.

This is because the nature of any perception or idea, be it happiness or sorrow, is to grow stronger and stronger the more we become accustomed to it.

This significant and meaningful statement brings us into the whole-some middle section of the main text. My wish is that you will learn it by heart. By that I mean that you will memorize it word for word, contemplate it again and again, and eventually be able to apply it to your daily life. In this way, you will become a great practitioner.

● **Are You Harmed?**

Normally we feel upset because we have been harmed by other sentient beings, whether humans or animals. For instance, your friend deceives you, your foe harms you, others revile and accuse you or create various obstacles that you must overcome. Or it could be that the problem is caused by some kind of animal, whether a mouse which runs around on your rooftop, or little insects that fly all around and disturb you. These are all harms that are caused by sentient beings.

In my courtyard, there live many sparrows. Every morning, very early, before the dawn, they all start to chirp. If I'm not practicing well, I feel they are so annoying that I start to grumble, "Why do these birds keep chirping at all hours?" Or it might be a dog that is barking in the night disturbing my sleep. Sometimes people feel that they are harmed or harassed by ghosts, although they cannot directly see them. Since they have developed the idea that

there are ghosts or non-human beings who annoy them, this kind of situation is considered as a type of harm caused by sentient beings.

“Anything else” refers to insentient things, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, fires, floods or other natural disasters that would cause harm to you. Or small things encountered in daily life that would annoy you, such as poorly built stairs, lack of success in business, or it could be a collapsed courtyard wall, your earplugs not working well, your phone not unlocking and so on. All of these types of incidents may also disturb your peace of mind.

● **How Habitual Thinking Works?**

If you are of the mindset that all these harms by sentient beings or other things are annoying and that they make you feel terrible, afflicted, hopeless, or heartbroken, then eventually you will make a habit out of perceiving only the suffering and you will soon find that thoughts of suffering and negativity are the only thoughts that you have. Rarely, would any positive thoughts or positive words come to mind, and worst of all, you will not even be aware that you have programmed your mind to respond only with negativity. In that case, it can be said that you are mentally ill but that you have not noticed the situation yet and still believe that the way that you are thinking is perfectly normal.

Such mental illness is mental afflictions that can be classified into many categories. 2500 years ago, Buddhism elucidated various mental afflictions, naming them with a set of Buddhist terms, such as inverted view and wrong view. When psychologists have observed these behaviors through a long-term study, they are called mental disorders. Whether detected by psychologists pursuing their own research or described in teachings drawn from ancient

religious wisdom, these same mental states have been given different names by different people, each claiming to be the first to have identified them.

What are the consequences of such mental affliction? If one is accustomed to negative thinking, as the author says, “When even the smallest problem comes up, it will cause enormous anguish in our mind.” This is crucial for us to understand. According to Buddhist philosophy, all suffering originates in one’s own mind. However, most people believe that suffering comes from outside of themselves and so try to fix their problems through external things. Indeed, one will never find true happiness if one is searching outwardly. Not only will those who pursue happiness through material satisfaction and external environments, not attain happiness, but will in all likelihood, develop all types of suffering. On the other hand, if one learns how to adjust one’s mind, his or her happiness can be attained.

The key point here is that the smallest problem can eventually cause enormous anguish. The reason is that both happiness and suffering come from our clinging mind. Therefore, whichever state of mind we cling to most strongly, our experience of happiness or suffering, will also become stronger and stronger. If you always think in a positive way, you will be happy and relaxed. For example, you can say to yourself, “I am happy, everything is fine.” “I am happy when it’s raining, and I am also happy when it’s not raining.” “I am happy to see that person, but if I don’t see them, I am also happy.” “A delicious full meal makes me happy today, but if I am not so full, I am also happy because I can lose weight.” “Today if I come into the shrine hall and see my fellow Sangha members, I will feel happy, but if tomorrow I stay at home and meditate alone, I will also be happy.”

In the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, it states, “Sorrow grows stronger

when constantly feeling sorrow, just like sleep grows longer when being enjoyed.” If you always reinforce the mindset of feeling miserable, the perception of misery will grow stronger. It is the same with sleeping. There are some people who really enjoy sleep. The more they sleep, the more sleep they need. So, the more you reinforce the feeling of suffering, the feeling of suffering will grow stronger and stronger. As a consequence, even something that starts as a tiny problem can give rise to a feeling of enormous suffering.

● **Mental Illness in Modern Life**

In modern times, many people suffer from a variety of mental illnesses. In Western society, people are encouraged to go to see their psychologists whenever they feel that something is wrong. But for Chinese or Tibetans, it would be considered shameful to expose their mental problem to a psychologist. As Buddhists, it is helpful to learn about some of the most common mental illnesses found among modern people.

One common mental problem is called obsessive-compulsive disorder or OCD. It features a pattern of intrusive thoughts and fears that lead one to exhibit repetitive compulsive behaviors. These obsessions and compulsions interfere with daily activities and cause significant distress. For example, an OCD sufferer may not be able to shake the feeling that they have left the window or door open, causing them to get up repeatedly in the night, even to the point of losing sleep, to check whether the windows and doors are closed. Others will wash their hands over and over again, despite the damage that these repeated washings do to their skin, because they are obsessed with the thought that their hands are dirty. Still others will become agitated if their shoes have not been placed in a proper way, and will not calm down until the situation has

been remedied. There are even some Buddhists, who will obsess over the feeling that their robes are never clean enough, and will send them to the dry cleaners or will hand wash them over and over again to get rid of the hair and dust that they believe remains clinging to them.

Are there external factors and forces contributing to such a problem? Yes, but from the perspective of Buddhism, the external conditions are only a minor factor, while the disquiet of the untamed mind, along with the failure to train the mind through practice, are the major causes. The problem of the mind could be a karmic result of previous lives, or may be the result of one's living conditions or education during this lifetime. Psychologists think perfectionism is a type of anguish and is very toxic, so have been developing therapies to deal with such behavior. The root cause of all the mental problems are the thoughts that are fabricated in one's mind. The best way to heal such illnesses is to make an inner change by adjusting one's mind.

Other types of mental disorders are what is known as persecutory delusions, which are a set of delusional conditions in which the affected persons believe they are being persecuted, despite a lack of evidence to support this. An example of this might be that someone who listens to this teaching suspects that Khenpo hates him and that the teaching is meant as a way to criticize or cause harm to him. Or they may believe, without any proof, that nonhumans and spirits are trying to harm them. These are examples of persecutory delusion.

I give these teachings according to the traditional way of preaching the Dharma, with absolutely no intention to harm anyone. But there are some who might complain, "You humiliated me during today's teaching, why? Are you not happy with me?" This is particularly true when we study some of the traditional Kadampa

teachings, that are quite pointed and can easily affect the student personally. Nevertheless, the teachings are certainly never intended to deliberately insult someone. Others might believe that when others chant mantra, perform ritual, or practice wrathful deities, that their intention is to cause them harm. This irrational belief causes them to constantly remain on the defensive state and to avoid associating with others in an effort to avoid obstacles and pitfalls that could cause them to fail in their practice. Actually, this is just their own delusion. Once again, this is due to the lack of mind training. Instead of taming the mind so that it becomes soft and gentle, they keep a rigid and fragile mind that is dominated by a brittle ego. In *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, Shantideva says,

*Heat and cold, wind and rain,
Sickness, prison, beatings—
I'll not fret about such things.
To do so only aggravates my trouble.*

So, one should not be too fragile because a fragile mind only brings suffering and harm. This fragility is, itself, a type of mental illness and suffering.

I've read of another type of mental illness, which is the need to exercise control in the name of love. For example, a mother loves her child so dearly that she wants to take care of everything for the child; this is actually a form of manipulation. She may insist that her child behave in a certain way, in spite of the fact that the child has already become an adult. She may constantly check whether her child has eaten, washed his or her hands, or turned off the light before going to bed. This is simply not appropriate when the child is no longer one or two years old.

There are even people who treat me in this way. "Be careful, Khenpo, a car is coming." "Stop, it's a red light." Am I that silly? Even clever yaks and goats are able to mind their steps. However,

when people get used to doing all these things out of love, they obdurately believe it's solely for the good of the beloved, even though in reality it is nothing more than some sort of mental affliction. Parent and child, husband and wife, even a close friend, may often have many obscured thoughts and behaviors that they believe to be natural and normal, but which are caused by their strong clinging.

● **Why Modern People Commit Suicide**

Broadly speaking, Buddhism teaches that all sentient beings are deluded by their ignorance. However, in this day and age, people's delusions are more apparent. What is the reason behind this? These days, too many media programs promote the value that the more you cling to things, the more perfect and happier you will be. Unfortunately, this way of thinking leads people in the opposite direction. Thus, many people are confused and lose their inner happiness.

Happiness never gets a chance to take hold, if one's mind is forever restless. In the end, many people find themselves feeling fragile and lost, and many even lose their courage to continue with their lives. This is the reason that today's suicide rate remains so high. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), every year close to 800,000 people die by suicide. This means that one person dies every 40 seconds from suicide. Some Western leaders have stated that, "Compared to the toll of those who die by suicide, the pandemic is not the most disastrous." Well, from that point of view, what they are saying makes sense.

Look at the places where suicidal people often choose to kill themselves. They often choose such magnificent places as Mount Fuji, the Golden Gate Bridge, and so on. Some jump off of high

buildings, some jump into rushing rivers. The possible ways are countless, but why did they choose to end their lives in such tragedy? Because they felt they were hurt so badly, that they had no more energy to continue their life. Their mind was stuck in this way and they had no idea how to transform their suffering.

Recently I read a news story stating that having found a college student cheating on an exam, the teacher confiscated his test paper and mobile phone. Sadly, 20 minutes later, the student left the classroom and committed suicide. At first, many people suspected that the teacher had been persecuting him, but surveillance video showed that the teacher had done nothing at all to harm him. The reason that someone would choose to commit suicide over such an insignificant matter is because they don't have the strength of mind to face their suffering, nor do they possess the courage to transform it.

If Dharma practitioners neglect their mental problems instead of coping with them, it may happen that they will also choose suicide. We often see from media portraits and dramatizations, that when some people find themselves desperate and hopeless in their lives, they enter into Buddhism and become ordained. So, in reality, monastics such as these, are actually not genuine practitioners, but are monks or nuns in name only. This, of course, occurs only in rare cases. As a matter of fact, people who don't study the Dharma are likely even to be worse off when it comes to coping with their mental afflictions.

● Understand the Secret of the Mind

We should know that the mind is a big subject that deserves everyone's study. The mind is full of mystery on both the phenomenal level and on the ultimate level. Leaving aside its secrets on the

ultimate level, if we don't know how the mind works on the relative level, we are very likely to ignore our mental problems and feel that we are mentally healthy and that nothing is wrong. However, when a small incident occurs, such as someone says a few harsh words to you, or displays an offensive attitude or even looks at you strangely, these little things can become detrimental, or taken to an extreme, can even ruin the rest of your life. If you do not take good care of your mind, a tiny harm could become a wound that never heals, even causing you to end this precious life.

For this reason, the Buddhist teaching in this regard is particularly vital. Think about the fact, that about one hundred years ago, the author Tenpe Nyima, living in the remote region of the Tibetan plateau, without access to any scientific or psychological research literature, by simply relying on supreme Mahayana treatises such as *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, *The Precious Garland of the Middle Way*, *The Compendium of Training* and so on, was able to analyze the mind in great detail and render a vivid picture of people's mindset that holds true even in the modern era. If we can understand the statement above, then we can understand the mind's secret on its phenomenal level.

In *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, Shantideva says,

*All who fail to know and penetrate
This secret of the mind, the Dharma's peak,
Although they wish for joy and sorrow's end,
Will wander uselessly in misery.*

If we never come to know the innermost secrets of the mind, no matter how hard we try to seek happiness and avoid suffering, we will find our efforts to be useless, leaving us to wander in samsara continuously and to experience endless suffering. On the other hand, if we seriously study how the mind works, understand its secrets and apply this knowledge to the training of our mind,

then no matter what external circumstances occur, they can bring neither harm nor benefit to us and we will remain peaceful in the face of whatever situation we may find ourselves.

Whether it is obsessive-compulsive disorder or persecutory delusions, all mental disorders are created by people's fabricated thoughts, and have absolutely no intrinsic existence. Likewise, the attitude of others toward you can never bring you any substantial harm. For Dharma practitioners who understand this, they can easily cope with mental illnesses, because the best antidote to these problems is to recognize the inverted views and improper thoughts that distort the reality. Once you recognize them, the fact that you once took them seriously will seem ridiculous, and you will ask yourself "Why did I act in this way? Why did I have such a stupid thought? I should have a broad mind, it's no big deal to me." This is the way of positive thinking.

Psychologists interpret positive thinking as the ability to see the best side of everything. The sufferer of mental illness is lost in the habit of thinking in a negative manner and carries with them the feeling that everything is painful and hopeless. Their minds are filled with such thoughts as, "The environment is too bad. It's dirty and disorderly." "My drinking water is not clean." "This cup is harmful to my health." With so many negative thoughts, it seems as if the whole world is attacking and bullying them. Consequently, the world becomes for them a place that is filthy and dark. If, however, they can be trained to perceive people around them as pure and perfect, like buddhas and bodhisattvas, they will gradually cultivate a mode of positive thinking which will reduce the negativity in their mind. Certainly, this is a practice that needs to become habituated.

Due to a lack of the education and training of the mind, people allow their emotions to lead them to conduct improper behaviors

which result in the rapid growth of greed, hatred and ignorance. They may even come to believe that hatred or aggression is an exercise of heroism, which is, of course, a kind of inverted thinking. According to scientific research, if a new mother is filled with anger, her milk becomes like a kind of poison to her baby. Although they are alternatively described as the five, or the three poisons, Buddhism teaches that people suffer from the three fundamental mental afflictions, i.e., greed, hatred and ignorance. Excessive desire or anger is a negative emotion harmful to physical health. The same is true of ignorance. Because ordinary people don't understand true reality, they are driven by ignorance to develop various wrong views and improper thoughts, which in turn cause them to create negative karma and experience endless mental and physical suffering. In many ways, mental suffering may be the more severe of the two. All of these are related to negative karma that has been accumulated in past lives, the environment in which they were raised, the education that they received in this life, as well as the misleading and false information advocated in various media platforms.

Therefore, it is an absolute necessity for us to understand the most deeply hidden secret of our own mind. As we mentioned earlier, this secret has two levels, the phenomenal level and the ultimate level. What is the secret of the mind on the phenomenal level? It is that in this phenomenal world, suffering and happiness do exist, but that while we must accept the suffering that exists in real life, we needn't have additional suffering created by our own fabricated thoughts. For example, when you have been burned by something hot, you feel pain. This kind of suffering does exist in our real life and we must accept it without any rejection. But if you have not come into contact with something hot, and yet you strongly believe you have been burned and feel the pain of your believed injury, then this kind of suffering has been created by your deluded mind,

and the only way to rid yourself of this type of suffering is to work on your mind to eliminate your delusion.

● Making Changes in Our Habitual Thinking

In this regard, we need to understand the natural principle of our mind. As the author, Tenpe Nyima, says, “the nature of any perception or idea, be it happiness or sorrow, is to grow stronger and stronger the more we become accustomed to it.” So, the key idea is to change our habitual ways of thinking that have only led to an increase in our suffering. One method to do this, is to understand the cause and effect of the things that you encounter, rather than becoming confused or deluded by them. Moreover, do not cling to whatever happens in life and develop an attitude in which you allow nature to take its course. For example, if today you are allowed to come to the shrine hall to receive the teaching on site, you just joyfully come, but if tomorrow you are not allowed, again, that is also okay for you because you are joyful and open to any option.

Thogme Zangpo composed a song called *How to Transform Sickness and Other Circumstances*, in which he said,

*This illusory heap of a body, which, like others, I possess—
If it falls sick, so be it! In sickness I'll rejoice!
For it will exhaust my negative karma from the past.
And, after all, many forms of Dharma practice
Are for the sake of purifying the two obscurations.*

*If I am healthy, so be it! In freedom from sickness I'll rejoice!
When body and mind are well and at ease,
Virtuous practice can develop and gain strength.
And, after all, the way to give meaning to this human life
Is to devote body, speech and mind to virtue.*

*If I face poverty, so be it! In lack of riches I'll rejoice!
I will have nothing to protect and nothing to lose.
Whatever quarrels and conflicts there might be,
All arise out of desire for wealth and gain—that's certain!*

*If I find wealth, so be it! In prosperity I'll rejoice!
If I can increase the stock of my merits that will suffice.
Whatever benefit and happiness there might be, now and in the future,
All result from merits I have gained—that's certain!*

So, as Dharma practitioners, in sickness we'll rejoice; in freedom from sickness we'll rejoice; in lack of riches we'll rejoice; and in prosperity we'll also rejoice. If we can learn not to cling to things strongly, we can cultivate an attitude of letting it be, which will certainly rid ourselves of unnecessary suffering.

Another method is to be content and desire less, so you are happy with whatever you possess but do not desire what you do not possess. These days many people pay attention to oriented thinking. Let's say that you originally had a plan but it did not work out as you had thought and you are now faced with a different outcome. Although it turned out to be something that did not meet your original expectation, you should think, "This may be an even better outcome than I had originally planned, so instead of being disappointed, I'll just accept it."

For myself, every time I encountered certain difficulties, such as being sick, having a major operation, my parents passing away, my travel being forcefully canceled, my activities being rudely stopped, I was seldom stuck there. Instead of being overwhelmed by sadness or disappointment, I try to always find the positive side of an unexpected situation and make it meaningful. During the epidemic a few months ago, I spent all my time translating, so for me, it was a pretty happy and fruitful time.

So, when we find ourselves unable to move forward, we need to find and take a different path. When one path is blocked and brings you nothing but frustration and grief, rather than forcefully breaking through, you would do better to return and search for another path. Remember that happiness and sorrow both depend on our own mind. When our thoughts are happy, happiness is increased, but if we always think in a negative manner, that everybody is evil and trying to hurt us, then suffering will grow. My wish for everyone is to reflect on this teaching deeply, and seek to understand the natural principle of our mind.

LECTURE TWO

If we truly believe there's a real world outside, and we cling to it strongly and develop our happiness or suffering based on it, that suggests that we are deluded by the illusion created by our own mind. It is such a pity that people fail to realize the fundamental truth that the entire phenomenal world as perceived by them is nothing more than a projection of their own mind. Consequently, they remain ignorant of the fact that the main cause of their happiness or suffering is their own mind. Thus, because they believe that the outside world exists as the cause of their happiness or suffering, they hold it and other people to blame for their mental state.

– Khenpo Sodargye

Embrace Uncertainty and Randomness

2

The Secret of the Mind

In the last session, we talked about the secret of the mind and I explained that this is a crucial pith instruction on the principle of how the mind functions. Whenever we are harmed by sentient beings or anything else, if we make a habit of perceiving only the suffering, then even the smallest problem can cause enormous anguish. This is because the nature of any perception or idea, be it happiness or sorrow, is to grow stronger the more we become accustomed to it.

- **Form a Positive Habitual Thinking Pattern**

This simple but direct teaching tells us that most of our suffering is related to how we think about it. If we can internalize this teaching and apply it to adjusting our mind, we will gain a great power that will help us to face any situation that might arise in our life. Because of the way that it is pronounced in Chinese, many people in China call 2020, “Love you! Love you!” Unfortunately, rather than bringing with it more of a feeling of love, the new year has brought with it a series of devastating and dramatic disasters. At present, the pandemic is still spreading globally and in many places, there have been recent outbreaks of fires that are raging out of control, floods, earthquakes and so forth. The barrage of news of these misfortunes has contributed to many people feeling more and more worried and anxious. It is important to bear in mind that our suffering

only increases the more negatively we think of it, increasing the danger of getting caught in a cycle of feeling that “The world is a terribly painful place”, “Everything is so depressing”, or “I can’t bear it anymore”. These, and similar complaints do not help to relieve our suffering, but rather to enhance it, making us more fragile and feebler in our ability to cope with the increasingly negative environment. Without an understanding of the way the mind functions, even the smallest problem can bring us enormous suffering.

So, an understanding of the principles of how the mind functions is an absolute necessity if we want to avoid unnecessary suffering. When the mind becomes accustomed to a particular thought, then the power of that thought increases. If we cultivate pure perception in our mind, and make a habit of perceiving everything as a manifestation of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, and if we see others as respected teachers or as our beloved mothers and fathers, then we will be able to practice tolerance and compassion towards every person, even if that person causes us pain or brings us trouble. As Ju Mipham Rinpoche says, gradually, we can turn even a resentful enemy into a close friend.

Similarly, if we consistently cultivate an understanding of causality, and recognize that every virtuous action will give rise to a positive result and that every non-virtuous action will engender a negative result, then when we encounter major misfortunes in our life, we will be able to accept them calmly, because we have a clear understanding that it is a result of our previous karma and that nothing happens without a reason.

If we can make a habit of recollecting the blessings of the guru, as indicated in the Vajrayana teaching, and hold onto the belief that every appearance is a blessing of the vajra guru, then we can also handle any difficulty easily and joyfully. When we maintain

a positive attitude towards everything, the outcome is always positive. Unfortunately, however, the opposite is also true. This then, is the secret of the mind that enables us to remain undefeated by negative situations, as well as increasing our feelings of happiness in even the most difficult environment.

- **Using the Dharma Teaching as a Mirror of the Mind**

As I encounter many people in the course of my life, I have noticed that there is one particular type of person who gets nervous easier than most. When we talk to people such as this, we need to be very careful as even a single word might make them worried or uncomfortable. There is another kind of person who always seems to be open and optimistic. These people seldom get annoyed and seem to find it easy to get along with almost everybody. Even if something bad happens to them, they nevertheless remain joyful and optimistic. I have also noticed that there are some Dharma practitioners who never smile and whose faces appear as if they are constantly in pain or that they have a miserable life. Previously, we have studied the story of Langri Tangpa, who never smiled and had a permanently gloomy face except on the one occasion when he saw a mouse trying to move a piece of turquoise on his mandala plate. This great master is said to have set the standard for meditation on the suffering of samsara, but I'm afraid that those unsmiling practitioners that I just described are in another category and that their lack of joy is not related to their spiritual practice.

From time to time, we need to observe our mind closely and see what kind of thoughts comes up. When we have learned to be mindful of our thoughts, we need to examine whether they are, or are not, proper according to the Dharma teaching. People tidy up their appearance by looking in the mirror and we must,

similarly, use the Dharma teaching as a mirror with which we inspect our thoughts. Otherwise, it will be very difficult for us to detect or recognize our faults or the problems in our thinking, not to mention the difficulties in pacifying our mental afflictions. This is an important aspect of how the Dharma teachings can help us. As practitioners, we should be aware of the sufferings of others, but also of our own defects. Carefully observing the mind is necessary for our spiritual improvement, so that through the application of the Dharma teaching, we can detect and correct our improper thinking. If one were to consider themselves to be perfect, and carried with them the idea that all of their thinking, language and behavior made perfect sense, then this person will find it impossible to make any progress in their spiritual practice, because they would not have gained the ability to monitor their own mind.

- **Decidophobia: The Fear of Making Decisions**

As a Tibetan saying goes, “One can take notice of a tiny louse hiding on the face of another, but remain ignorant of a yak that is sitting on one’s own face.” This is another way of saying that ordinary beings often fail to realize their own faults. As we are now discussing mental problems in order to solve them, the first step is to be aware of them. As I mentioned in the last lecture, a number of mental illnesses have been recognized and well described by psychologists. In 1973, a philosopher named Walter Kaufmann from Princeton University, described a mental phenomenon, which he called decidophobia, as an irrational fear of making decisions. People with decidophobia experience intense anxiety when encountering a situation that requires them to make any decision at all. Their fear of making the wrong decision makes them so anxious that in extreme cases, a victim of decidophobia may experience full blown

panic attacks.

Tibetan people often say, “Those able to make choices are happy, but suffer a lot if they fail to choose the right one.” The psychological study shows that decidophobia can come about as the result of a number of environmental factors, such as past experiences and social learning. In most cases, those who suffer from decidophobia have experienced a trigger event earlier in their lives, such as being harshly scolded by their parents or others, for a decision made during childhood or adolescence. This so-called trigger event eventually led to anxiety about making any decision for fear of receiving taunts or accusations of wrongdoing from others.

This is a typical example of how the mind functions. There are many types of mental illness being studied by psychology, but most of them are related to people’s habitual patterns of thinking. With a lack of the knowledge of how to transform those habits, people can be driven to develop even more severe negative patterns that result in emotional distress.

I want to repeat a teaching from the *Mahaparirvana Sutra* that I quoted during the last lecture, “Sorrow grows stronger when constantly feeling sorrow, just like sleep grows longer when being enjoyed.” My hope is that you will memorize this crucial teaching and use it as a reminder as you reflect on your daily thoughts. If you are caught in a pattern of negative thinking, but you are not aware of it, your pain and suffering will only grow stronger and stronger.

● A Cure for Life

Happiness lies in one’s own mind. Money, health, good looks and social connections are minor conditions that can affect us, but they

are not the main cause of our happiness or suffering. Psychologists have reached certain conclusions on the way that the mind functions through extensive research and scientific investigation, but they are still looking for an efficient method to cure mental illness. Great Buddhist masters of the past were able to gain a direct realization of the secret of the mind on both the phenomenal and ultimate levels and their knowledge has, fortunately, been passed onto us so that we can gain incredible benefits from their precious teachings. Because of its subtle value, many people are deeply attracted to Tibetan Buddhism. How wonderful it will be if more and more people of different cultures are able to receive this priceless teaching. If they apply the principle of the mind to their life, then whatever they encounter, whether it is great success or irreparable loss, they can always maintain a peaceful attitude and face their lives calmly and unperturbedly, regardless of how tortuous their life journey may become. As a result of learning the secret of the mind, they will certainly find out and be able to enjoy the most important and meaningful aspect of their life.

This is especially true for young people, for once they understand how the mind works, they will be able to avoid many of life's detours and mistakes, and will not be deluded or defeated by the various external obstacles that life may throw in their path. Unfortunately, due to the karma created in their previous lives, the upbringing and education that they received in their present life, as well as the influence of the media on their beliefs and values, some may choose the wrong path and end up feeling confused when facing significant life problems. As a result, many have to undergo enormous pain and suffering.

Therefore, when we have learned this wonderful teaching on transforming the mind, it is crucial for us to first, put it into practice in our own life and solve our own problems, and second, share it with as many others as possible. It is like taking a medicine

to cure disease. When you find a medicine that has completely healed your disease, you gain a true appreciation of its value and are more than happy to share it with others who suffer from the same disease. Similarly, when you have benefited greatly from the precious teaching actualized through your study and practice, you are more than happy to share this amazing spiritual medicine, and your personal experience, with others. Additionally, through the process of sharing this precious teaching, your own practice and realization will be improved as well.

The Strength of Thinking Pattern

Root Text

So as the strength of this pattern gradually builds up, before long we'll find that just about everything we perceive becomes a cause for actually attracting unhappiness towards us, and happiness will never get a chance.

Starting with the principle mentioned above, we will talk about the strength of the negative thinking pattern. If someone is in the habit of constantly perceiving suffering, or thinking negatively about whatever they have encountered, then the power of their negative thinking pattern will grow stronger and stronger and at a certain point, everything that they encounter will become a cause for their unhappiness. This is the power of habituation which will never give a chance for happiness to arise. As a result, regardless of what circumstance, what message or what material possession they acquire, they will only experience suffering. All day long, they will experience only bad luck and loss, feeling that they are suffering and that they should be pitied, etc.

When we encounter people like this, nothing that we try will cheer them up. Offer them some dessert, they will turn it down, saying, "Oh, no, it is not healthy for me." Share some teachings with them, they will respond with, "You are only saying these things to criticize me." Introduce them to others so that they make friends, they will refuse and say, "No, I am sure that they will try to cheat me." Or kindly offer them something beneficial, they will turn it down because, "This will not make me happy." All in all, it seems that they will never get the chance to be happy because they believe that everything around them will cause them harm. This is the result of their habitual thinking. The mind functions exactly in this way. Whatever it is that the mind has become habituated to, gains power and grows stronger and stronger. If one always thinks he's unhappy, he really will be unhappy, and the same is true for someone who thinks that he is happy. Psychologists have reached the same conclusion in the course of their research. As I mentioned in the last session, research psychologists have found over and over again that a person's basic mode of thinking, whether positive or negative, can greatly affect one's experience in life.

If we become accustomed to a negative thinking pattern with the result that we feel that, "I'm suffering" or "I'm not happy", then everything that appears to us will become an actual cause for suffering. It makes no difference whether we are wealthy or not. In fact, many people imagine that if they were to become rich, their happiness would be in their hands. But the fact is that many rich people are also yearning for happiness, as their lives are filled with worry and anxiety. Some believe that they would be happier if they were promoted to a higher position, so they work hard to pursue a promotion, but a high position does not guarantee one's happiness and in fact, may even bring one more suffering. The same goes for relationships. Regardless of what we possess, if we fail to adjust our mind properly to pacify our negative emotions, we end up

only exaggerating our suffering.

Therefore, we can draw the conclusion that if we don't know how to tame our mind, the external world will never bring us happiness. We can agree that our feelings are conditioned by external objects, but the determining factor is our own mind. For example, hot pot is your favorite kind of food to eat, so a hot pot meal today makes you happy. But how would you feel if you were to have it three times a day, and continue to eat three meals a day of it tomorrow and the day after tomorrow? Obviously, eating hot pot cannot bring you endless happiness. Anything external works the same way. Nothing outside of ourselves can be the source of our everlasting happiness. But when we realize the nature of our mind, and realize the principle of the dependent arising of all phenomena, we will gain true happiness that transcends our feelings and emotions in a way that is unconditioned by anything outside of ourselves.

● Why Does Tibetan Buddhism Appeal to Modern People?

This is probably the reason that, in last century, Tibetan Buddhism has become so popular all around the world, and has become particularly attractive to so many people in the West. In the remote Tibetan region, without the help of any advanced scientific technology, the great Buddhist masters explained and actualized the most profound teaching on the mind. Generation after generation, masters of different lineages passed the knowledge of the mystery of the mind on to their followers and guided them to achieve enlightenment. Now, even in this modern age, these traditional teachings still remain fresh and vigorous. Since Tenpe Nyima's *Transforming Suffering and Happiness into Enlightenment* was translated into English and French several decades ago, many great

masters have given teachings on this text to Western audiences and their words have been of great benefit and inspiration.

Seen from an external perspective, people may think that science and technology have the ability to bring them happiness. One may well wonder why in developed countries, with modern conveniences, up to date facilities and abundant material wealth, people still feel unhappy and suffer from various mental illnesses. The primary reason is that they don't have a useful method to manage their stress and anxiety. In this regard, Tibetan Buddhism's mind training, utilizing such practices as inner stillness, insight meditation and the practice of exchanging oneself with others, such as in the cultivation of compassion and bodhicitta, can greatly help modern people to relieve their negative emotions and develop the positive potential of the mind. Numerous teachings in Tibetan Buddhism, because they can be of great benefit to one's mind and life, attract many modern people to engage in these practices.

There's another aspect of mind training that I would like to mention. In addition to the instructions on tolerance, love and compassion, Tibetan Buddhism offers the most direct and profound teaching on the specific nature of the mind. Throughout history, countless great Tibetan masters have actualized this teaching and achieved the transcendental wisdom of enlightenment. From their writings and biographies, we are offered a glimpse of their deep realization and inconceivable wisdom. Great works such as Shabkar's *Flight of the Garuda*, and Longchenpa's *Treasury of Dharmadhatu*, expound the luminous and empty nature of the mind and of the phenomenal world, and also provide direct instructions on how to discover this nature in oneself. Anyone who studies these teachings will undoubtedly be amazed by their wisdom, and if put into practice, they can certainly lead to gaining the experience of their realization.

- **Internalizing and Sharing the Dharma Teaching**

This wisdom of enlightenment is not confined to certain nationalities, regions or countries. Throughout history, Tibetan masters have experienced countless hardships in seeking the Dharma from India. Having first received the Dharma teaching from great Indian masters, where it had been directly taught by Buddha Shakyamuni and flourished by the Six Ornaments and the Two Supreme Ones, those noble ones inherited the great teaching, actualized it, and passed it onto their followers, generation after generation. In this modern age, the Buddha's teaching still deserves our study and practice, and should continue to be spread and shared among the people of every nation and every culture, because of the great benefit that it offers for everyone's mind and life.

The Buddha often used the analogy of medicine to describe his teaching. For every kind of medicine, whether it was developed in Tibet, China, India, Africa, or the West, as long as it can cure disease, there is no reason for a patient to refuse it. The same is true for living beings suffering from the illness of various mental afflictions. Those who are poisoned by desire, anger and ignorance, are in desperate need of spiritual medicine to cure their afflicted mind and to help them to achieve happiness. In this regard, the Buddha's teaching, as it has been intactly preserved in Tibetan Buddhism, can perfectly satisfy the needs of modern people, and bring them extraordinary benefits.

This preciousness of the Dharma teaching can only be fully appreciated through serious study and practice. Just reading through a few Mahayana or Vajrayana texts, will allow only the barest understanding of their deep meaning, and can offer only a glimpse of how to apply them to solve one's problems. In order to truly benefit from these teachings, one must first receive their transmission and explanation from a qualified Dharma teacher. After systematically

studying and reflecting on a teaching's meaning, one will be able to internalize it and apply it to their real life. According to the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, the tantric teachings are kept secret from ordinary people to protect them from exposure to teachings that they are not capable of understanding, as this may generate misunderstanding that will lead them to stray from the path of enlightenment.

Therefore, although the Dharma teachings are beneficial to us, such benefit can be gained only through systematic learning and practice. As we usually say, let the teachings merge into your heart. Only after we have fully comprehended their meaning and have developed a conviction in it, can we use the teachings as a wisdom guide in our life and realize the importance of sharing it with others.

All Appearances Arising as Enemies

Root Text

If we do not realize that it all depends on the way in which mind develops this habit, and instead we put the blame on external objects and situations alone, the flames of suffering, negative karma, aggression and so on will spread like wildfire, without end. This is what is called: "all appearances arising as enemies."

Ordinary people have no idea that their experience of suffering or happiness depends on their habitual thinking. Lacking this knowledge, people build their expectations of happiness on external objects, but neglect their habitual thinking which actually determines the resultant effect. By holding on to the belief that their state of mind is caused by external things, they continue

to blame external objects and situations for their happiness and unhappiness.

One place that we can see this type of situation is in the news. When there is a conflict between two countries, they often just carry on the dispute by blaming each other, believing that the only way to fix the problem is for their opponent to change. In personal relationships, when couples break up, very frequently both sides will complain about their partner, feeling it is the other person's faults that have ruined the relationship and left them in pain. Many people attribute their unhappiness to the size of their income, moaning that "I cannot afford a house, so that is why I am unhappy." Even worse, they feel that the entire external environment is hostile to them, treats them unfairly, restricts their development, and creates all kinds of obstacles for them. Consequently, they blame their leaders, their colleagues, their family and friends, society or the entire country, complaining that their teachers didn't provide them a proper education, or their doctors didn't take good care of their health. People like this will complain endlessly until eventually, all appearances will arise as their enemies and the flames of suffering and negative karma will spread like wildfire.

Truly, this is a priceless teaching for anyone who wishes for happiness. When we accuse the external environment of unjustness and believe it to be the cause of all of our suffering, this negative emotion joins together with the negative reactions of others to form a collective driving force that causes the flames of negative karma and suffering to spread far and wide. In our day-to-day interactions with others, it is not difficult for us to notice those with unsettled minds. No matter how impressively they may talk about themselves, they are unable to hide their offensive language and behaviors or the fact that their mind is in a state of constant affliction and thus, the flames of negative karma and suffering are spreading like wildfire all over the world.

The phrase “all appearances arising as enemies” is a part of a very famous teaching in Tibetan Buddhism. It means that for the poor practitioner that suffers from their mental afflictions, whatever he sees and whomever he associates with, are all seen as negative things that bring him harm. For example, he fears that his family members will hurt him, or that his Dharma brothers and sisters are hostile towards him and that even his close friends may be plotting against him. Not only do other human beings annoy and anger him, he is even upset by yaks, sheep, goats and dogs. Whatever he hears, including the sound of someone’s teaching or chanting, even the birds chirping in the trees, will disturb him and make him feel unsettled. Likewise, whatever he smells with his nose, tastes with his tongue, touches with his body or perceives with his consciousness, can make him unhappy and cause him to feel irritated.

● The Mind Projects the World

People commonly think unhappiness is caused by harm or irritation from the external world. Indeed, as *The Lankavatara Sutra* says,

*The mind manifests manifold phenomena
That are discriminated as various forms.
Failing to know what is perceived is of the mind,
There’s a deluded clinging to the external world.*

If we truly believe there’s a real world outside, and we cling to it strongly and develop our happiness or suffering based on it, that suggests that we are deluded by the illusion created by our own mind. It is such a pity that people fail to realize the fundamental truth that the entire phenomenal world as perceived by them is nothing more than a projection of their own mind. Consequently, they remain ignorant of the fact that the main cause

of their happiness or suffering is their own mind. Thus, because they believe that the outside world exists as the cause of their happiness or suffering, they hold it and other people to blame for their mental state.

In fact, external things can only be a trigger for you, but it is your mind that determines your reaction. If you have an open and tolerant mind, even unclean things or resentful enemies won't be able to harm you or make you feel uncomfortable. However, due to our habitual thinking and deluded clinging lifetime after lifetime, we remain controlled by external circumstances that keep us extremely tired in this human life. Sentient beings who are deluded in this way lack the mature wisdom that informs them of the truth, enables them to make the right discernment and keeps them from being deluded by external appearances.

Deluded clinging means that one blindly clings to something that does not truly exist but has an illusory appearance. There's a story about the Zen Master Wonhyo Daesa's early enlightenment. When he was young, he decided to travel to China from Silla (ancient Korea) to study Buddhism, particularly Xuanzang's teaching on the Chittamatra school. As night fell, Wonhyo, who had traveled a long way that day and was very tired and thirsty, found what he thought was a cave and decided to take shelter there. Groping his way into the cave, his hand touched what seemed to be a bowl full of water. Under the moonlight, the water in the bowl appeared clean and fresh, so he eagerly drank from it and felt as though he had never before tasted such sweet water. The next morning, upon waking, he found that he had slept in an ancient tomb littered with human skulls, and realized that the vessel from which he had drunk was in fact a human skull filled with brackish rainwater. Wonhyo was so disgusted that he vomited and began to run from the tomb. Suddenly, he stopped and thought to himself, "How can it be that the same environment that I found so comfortable and

beautiful last night, now appears to me as gruesome and the bowl that I had been so happy to drink from, now reveals itself to be a horrid skull cup filled with filthy water?" At that moment, he experienced the realization that "It is the mind that gives rise to all kinds of phenomena and it is the mind that extinguishes all kinds of phenomena." It was through this realization that Wonhyo attained early enlightenment.

While it is absolutely true that there is nothing inherently clean and nothing inherently dirty and that everything is a projection of the mind, it requires a spiritual realization to actualize such a state. Before we achieve such a realization, we cannot simply dismiss the distinction between what is unclean and what is clean but we do need to, at least in theory, understand this principle of the mind. The primary cause for happiness and unhappiness lies in our mind, and the external environment only serves as a minor condition that exerts its influence on us but is not the determinant factor on our happiness or our suffering. Many people, particularly young people, do not understand this principle and spend all of their efforts searching for happiness outside of themselves, only to end up frustrated and exhausted.

As I love to associate with people from all walks of life, I often think to myself how beneficial it would be for all people to learn and to understand some of the Buddhist teachings. For example, many younger people become emotionally shattered as a result of their relationships, others brawl and fight with others over disputes regarding money. Every time I come across people such as these, the thought naturally arises, how wonderful it would be if everyone could learn some of the Buddha's teachings on the mind.

- **Don't Pick on the Faults of Others**

Some Dharma practitioners are antisocial, unwilling or even afraid to mix with others. My hope is that they do not take appearances to be their enemies but rather, will learn to see them as friends. In this way, whatever arises can be transformed into a favorable condition for their practice. When someone can respond in this way, they can be considered to be a qualified practitioner. We often say to those that are troubled, "Why do you pay so much attention to other people's faults? Has everything and everyone become an enemy to you?" If one sees all appearances as enemies, then this person's life can seem to be both hopeless and terrible.

Some, who have taken refuge in Buddhist teachings for twenty years or more, and others, who have been ordained as monks or nuns for many years, still enjoy gossiping and enumerating the faults of others. Indeed, their mocking speech only reveals their own perceptions and inner state. Some in even higher positions, including some Dharma teachers, enjoy picking on others and their subordinates thinking that it will please their superiors, will also join in the mockery and ridicule, which in turn reinforces the negative perception that everything around them is ugly and dirty. We sometimes see people in power that will vilify and abuse others in coarse language that even the most vulgar people wouldn't use. This only expresses how vile their inner world is.

A good practitioner would never view external appearances as their enemy. Instead, they perceive all appearances as the pure buddha land filled with manifestations of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Wherever they live, whether it is in a luxury hotel or a rundown house in poor condition, they are equally happy. In the early years at Larung Gar, we lived in little huts made of mud and sod. Sometimes, a clump of dirt would drop from the roof while we were eating, but this did not disturb our happiness or the thrill that

we felt at studying and practicing the Dharma. I remember once traveling with His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and we had to spend the night at a poor motel in Barkam, on the trip back to Larung Gar. It was cold, the bedding and quilt were extremely unclean and smelled badly, and we could only cover our lower body because we were afraid that the dirty and smelly quilt would bring bad influence to the ritual stuff that we wore on the neck. However, since we were together with His Holiness, our hearts were full of joy and delight.

If our mind is defiled and foul, it is impossible to find true happiness. Many people think that external objects can bring happiness, so they fill their lives with the pursuit of luxury items. For example, one may buy a car that costs fifty thousand dollars, however, after driving it for only a short while, they are no longer satisfied with it and wish to buy one that costs over one hundred thousand dollars. This pursuit of external pleasure is driven by improper thoughts, and in the end only serves to exhaust both body and mind. When people fail to tame the mind and control desire, they become carried away by their attraction to external objects and their desire for these things multiplies. Similarly, many negative emotions are accelerated by improper thought and behavior.

If we return to the text, we find that it says that if we put the blame on external objects and situations alone, the flames of suffering, negative karma, aggression and so on, will spread like a never-ending wildfire. This is the situation that occurs when one perceives all appearances as enemies. For a practitioner, this situation betrays that his Dharma practice has not been successful.

Suffering Is Not Necessarily an Obstruction

Root Text

We should arrive at a very precise understanding that the whole reason why sentient beings in this degenerate age are plagued by so much suffering is because they have such feeble powers of discernment.

This is a key point on which we need to develop a very precise understanding. “Precise understanding” indicates that reading through a text and gaining an understanding of its literal meaning is not enough for us to engrave this view deeply into our mind. We should instead enter into its profound meaning in order to gain a deep conviction. In this degenerate age, sentient beings suffer severely. It matters not at all whether they are from the West or from the East, whether they are monastics or layman, male or female, aged or young. The root cause is that they are controlled and tormented by negative emotions that arise from delusion and improper thinking. Although they suffer greatly from delusions of their mind, unfortunately, their power to discern reality is too weak and too feeble to free themselves from their own mental imprisonment.

How many people understand and accept the view that suffering and happiness are nothing more than products of the mind? Unfortunately, very few. It is understandable that worldly people are unfamiliar with these teachings, but it is sad that many Buddhists, including monastics that have practiced and studied for many years, still lack conviction on this teaching. There are some who boast proudly that they, “. . . have taken refuge for more than 20 years.” But when associating with others, their jealousy, arrogance

and other mental afflictions arise with the ferocity of the Utsang ghost. This only shows that they haven't arrived at a precise understanding of this teaching, and thus are not accomplished in taming their mind.

Root Text

So, not to be hurt by the obstacles created by enemies, illness or harmful influences, does not mean to say that things like sickness can be driven away, and that they will never occur again. Rather, it simply means that they will not be able to obstruct us from practicing on the path.

We often pray not to be harmed by the mara of illness or other harmful influences. This does not mean that afflictions like sickness can be easily eradicated or that they can be rooted out quickly and completely. While experiencing life in samsara, we are bound to experience sickness and suffering. What is critical here is to prevent these things from becoming obstacles to our practicing on the path.

It is of vital importance that we bear this teaching in mind. As sentient beings, nobody is exempted from mental afflictions, or from birth, old age, sickness and death. As human beings born in the desire realm, we will inevitably experience sickness and death, and mental afflictions may always follow us. What we need to do is to make sure that they are unable to obstruct our spiritual practice. In order to do this, we have to recognize these mental afflictions and apply antidotes to them. Likewise, we cannot pacify all external misfortunes and subjugate all maras or foes. As *The Way of the Bodhisattva* says,

*The hostile multitudes are as vast as space—
What chance is there that all should be subdued?*

*Let but this angry mind be overthrown
And every foe is then and there destroyed.*

As the number of stubborn and obstinate beings are as endless as space, we cannot subdue them one by one. But if we can extinguish our anger, this is virtually the same as subjugating them all. This then, is the key to taming the afflicted mind. Even when we encounter certain obstacles, we can still turn them into a favorable condition for our practice.

Some people may wonder if a Dharma practitioner can completely avoid generating mental afflictions, or if they can avoid ever suffering from negative emotions. The answer is no. Afflictions will occur to practitioners too, but the difference is that they know that there is a cure for them. In *The Sutra of Miscellaneous Jewels*, it says that “In order to extinguish the hostile ones, one needs to extinguish mental afflictions.” Whether due to an external enemy or any other negative condition that seeks to afflict our mind, the best and most efficient way to prevent this is to tame our mind. How does one do this? By transforming our feelings, of either happiness or suffering, into the path to enlightenment. This is the best way to tame our mind.

Two Steps

Root Text

In order for this to happen, we need: first, to get rid of the attitude of being entirely unwilling to face any suffering ourselves and, second, to cultivate the attitude of actually being joyful when suffering arises.

Here is the method on how to transform negativities and actualizing these two steps is crucial. We need to hold the conviction that afflictions cannot be avoided and will definitely occur, but that they can be transformed into something that can assist us in our practice. But how can this transformation take place? The first step is to give up the attitude of being entirely unwilling to face any suffering ourselves. The second step is to cultivate the attitude of actually being joyful when suffering arises.

Some people think that since they practice the Dharma, they will never have to experience suffering. This is absolutely incorrect. When suffering strikes, the experienced Dharma practitioner will just accept it and let it arise on its own without feeding it negative emotion which would only serve to exaggerate it. For example, when suffering arises, we should not moan and complain that we're so irritated and annoyed. These types of negative emotion only increase our suffering. We should accept suffering and any unfavorable condition willingly, with the understanding that it is quite natural for it to occur. Because it is impossible to drive away all suffering or prevent it from ever occurring in our lives, it would be best when adverse circumstances do arise, to simply let them do so on their own without adding fuel to the fire.

How then should one act in order to prevent adverse conditions from obstructing our practice and causing us to wander from the path? By heeding the instruction on how to transform them into beneficial conditions for our practice, in the end, we can learn to be happy even when suffering arises. Many people are far from reaching this stage due to lack of actual practice. For those who regularly engage in Dharma practice, in the beginning they might be a bit worried when encountering suffering, but in the end, they will welcome suffering since they will have learned how to turn it into a favorable condition to enhance their practice.

- **Embrace Uncertainty and Randomness in Life**

The author has given a detailed explanation of each step in the following text, but I'd like to expand on this a bit more. Normally, when there is an imbalance or suffering in our life, our habitual thinking leads us to wish for life to always be peaceful and full of joy, free from sickness and other misfortunes. This is the common expectation that most people will have towards life. In terms of life goals, people normally hope to get married, have a good family life and a nice career. This is quite a normal way of thinking when things are going well. But when we are facing uncertainty, we need another way of thinking. Life is not normally as steady or free from uncertainty as we may have hoped for. When something unusual happens, or when life fails to meet our expectations, what can be learned about how best to deal with it? In Buddhism, we call this situation impermanence, and is an aspect of the true reality of samsara. Since impermanence and change are inevitable, we need to develop an attitude towards impermanence that allows us to embrace uncertainty and the random nature of external reality. That way, if one day, something unexpected happens, unlike most ordinary people, we will not be shocked and defeated.

It is quite common for people to feel comfortable when there is no unexpected change and life goes on in its normal way, but when unexpected changes occur, they are devastated. As I mentioned earlier, as Dharma practitioners, not only should we accept unexpected changes in our life, we should take advantage of them by transforming them into favorable conditions that will improve our practice. In 2014, the American author Nassim Nicholas Taleb published a book titled, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*. This book encourages people to cultivate a quality of antifragile, which he calls the secret of life. As Taleb explains in the book, the antifragile is beyond the resilient or the robust. The resilient has

learned to remain reasonably calm during times of uncertainty and suffering, while the antifragile have learned how to use times of adversity to actually improve themselves.

When some people are hit by adversity, they remain in their normal state of mind and way of life as if nothing untoward had taken place. Usually we would call this type of person a brave hero for their ability to sustain any amount of stress and anxiety. For example, if you are generally happy when you are in perfect health, and equally happy when you fall sick, your internal state of mind has not changed which indicates that you are a brave person. To be antifragile, however, means more than that. Not only are you able to robustly deal with your sickness, you are also able to gain benefits from this negative condition. The antifragile enables you to improve yourself even when facing suffering or any adverse circumstances.

In Taleb's book, he uses a cat and a washing machine to explain being antifragile. The cat is flexible and agile enough to be able to safely fall from high places. Not only will he remain unharmed, but he remains resilient enough to jump back up to his lofty perch. That's what life should be, and to some extent, all living beings are, to varying degrees, antifragile. On the other hand, a washing machine is strictly mechanical. When some part is broken, our only option is to replace the part to make it work again. A washing machine has a system of clear causality and lacks the ability of self-repair and self-improvement, while the cat's system is complex and is causally opaque, which makes it antifragile. For our lives to progress steadily along the path, we need to develop this potential to manage any level of stress and anxiety.

In the West, there is wide recognition of the fact that the antifragile is considered as a necessary personality to engage with uncertainty and disruption in a more positive way. There is research that shows

that in the first half of 2020, with the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, people were experiencing increased levels of stress and anxiety. Given this situation, to become antifragile would be the best way to manage stress and to maintain both physical and mental health. Unfortunately, how to become antifragile remains an open question, with many people still searching for the solution.

In Mahayana Buddhism, there are specific teachings on how to take advantage of stressful or unfavorable conditions and how to enrich oneself from suffering. During the virus outbreak that has caused this present pandemic, many Dharma practitioners have internalized much of what they have learned in Buddhism. As Shantideva says, “If I have no pain, I’ll never long for freedom.” Even in the current environment, not only are these practitioners undefeated, but they have also actualized a certain level of inner realization. So, they are not fragile at all, rather, they are able to improve themselves and deepen their understanding and realization of the Dharma teaching during a time of great difficulty. This sudden change across the world has vividly demonstrated the true reality of samsara, which, as taught in Buddhism, is impermanence, uncertainty and suffering. By making good use of the opportunity caused by this pandemic, they have internalized this teaching deeply into their hearts.

The Chinese writer, Lu Xun, published a novel called *The True Story of Ah Q*, in which he uses the term “Ah Q-ism” to characterize the Chinese penchant for rationalizing defeat as a kind of “spiritual victory” that relies on a type of spiritual apathy and ignorance. Certainly, the Buddhist approach to transforming suffering and happiness into enlightenment is quite different. Indeed, the Buddhist approach relies on coming to a deeper and clearer realization of the true reality of samsara. When one realizes the true nature of samsara through an unexpected change, one becomes endowed with the ability to transcend the suffering caused by that

change.

These days, many successful people are gauged by IQ, EQ and AQ. What is AQ? It is a measure of how well someone deals with the adversities that one encounters in life, or to put it more simply, how resilient a person is. In Buddhism, transforming suffering is not just to be resilient in the face of suffering, but more importantly, to take advantage of suffering to transform it into a benefit to one's life and practice. Usually, we think that as long as suffering is eliminated, everything will be fine, but we rarely have the thought that suffering can help us to create a more meaningful life. Without learning the Mahayana teaching, it is unlikely that we would discover the value of suffering, but as we have fortunately made a connection to this precious teaching by Tenpe Nyima, we should be able to uncover its significant benefit.

To summarize, when suffering occurs, your first reaction should not be to turn away from it. Since you understand that it is inevitable, just let it arise. Next, you can find joy in it by realizing that it is another opportunity for your improvement. If you can cultivate this mindset, it indicates that you have gained the ability to transform suffering.

LECTURE THREE

Be sure that you are pursuing the Buddhadharma genuinely and not with a careless attitude. Without a doubt, you will benefit from the teaching if you practice earnestly. Combined with fervent practice, I have no doubt that you will experience the potency of its effect, both for yourself and for others. You will also find that once you have gained a personal realization of a Dharma teaching, you can also share that teaching with others and have a powerful impact on them. There are many auspicious Mahayana pith instructions in Tibetan Buddhism, but it would leave an unreachable gap if the teachings remain as words alone rather than accepted and actually applied. So please take the teaching into your heart and let it completely dissolve into your mind through diligent practice.

– Khenpo Sodargye

Unlatch Yourself from the Prison of Suffering

3

An Incisive Teaching for Modern People

In recent months, the world has experienced dramatic changes on a scale that has rarely been seen in the course of human history. Much of these changes have been brought about by the global coronavirus pandemic which, in addition to being responsible for the loss of life of many of our family and friends, has also caused great financial instability due to job layoffs and the closing of many small family run businesses. The suffering that this has caused, has left many with a feeling of devastation and unbearable grief as they contemplate the chaos and uncertainty surrounding them.

Buddhism often describes samsara through the analogy of a house on fire. The year 2020 has brought many of us a refreshed understanding of samsaric suffering on an experiential level rather than mere conceptual understanding. These overwhelming adversities have caused many to make incorrect or irrational choices, as in moments like these our wisdom and mentality is greatly tested. As always, when we find ourselves beset by challenges, a strong mental state is crucial. Yet, such strength does not arise without preparation. When faced with severe levels of suffering, it is imperative to have a method that we can rely on to avoid falling into despair. For Dharma practitioners, as indicated by the title of this text, we should know that both suffering and happiness can and must be transformed into the path to enlightenment.

This technique is efficient and universally applicable. After a gap of nearly a century, the wisdom that Tenpe Nyima left behind remains dynamic and continues to be just as applicable today as when it was first taught. Over the centuries, many great masters have offered insightful analyses on the nature of suffering and the mechanism of mind transformation. Jetsun Milarepa, in his biography, introduced the practice of transforming suffering into positive use, and Ju Mipham Rinpoche offered the technique of transforming illness into enlightenment. Rongzom Chokyi Zangpo, as well as some Kagyu masters, also gave related instructions in their writings and teachings. Through very distinct approaches, they recognized and encouraged the transformation of adversities into beneficial means from a multitude of differing aspects.

Of all of these instructions, I find Tenpe Nyima's *Transforming Suffering and Happiness into Enlightenment* notably invigorating and salient for modern people, as he precisely and deeply revealed the underlying causes that contribute to the mentality of suffering in general but which is also relevant for the mindset of people being challenged by this most recent pandemic. By recognizing the true nature of suffering, people can learn to embrace and work through it. I believe that the instruction discussed here is indispensable, not only for students of Buddhism and other trained practitioners, but for the general public as well.

● Three Types of Reaction When Distressed

The types of suffering that humankind experiences are remarkably similar, regardless of ethnicity, culture or geographic location. However, due to cultural differences and upbringing, the way people respond to tragedy and personal adversity varies greatly. In our last session on how to cope with adversity, I mentioned the book, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*, which discusses the

ways to improve and thrive when exposed to shock and personal tragedy. Although the author intended the book for people that had been impacted by the global financial crisis, the interest it has received reflects the desire of many people to learn a method that they can count on to cope with hard times.

Speaking in general terms, people fall into one of three categories in the way that they react to distress or other stress filled situations. There are some who are brought to their knees; they have lost their courage and feel that there is no hope or chance of recovery from the loss or pain that they have endured. Yet, there are others who endure all the pressure and pain with their strength and optimism intact. They remain steady, with the confidence that things will get better soon and they hold onto the belief that it will not be long before they are able to get back to their normal lives. The third group, though smaller in number, not only remain strong throughout the challenge, but view these times of difficulty as opportunities to improve and empower themselves. Eventually, this route will lead them to uncover a more insightful and meaningful way of life. But again, these people are part of a very small minority.

Dharma practitioners might not be specialists in how to manage an economic crisis or in disease control, but our specialty lies within a genuine practice, specifically in how to train the mind to withstand and even benefit from times of great difficulty. While it is true that, in spite of their training, there are some practitioners that are beaten to the ground by chaos and difficulty, others are able to stand firm by engaging in constant self-reminder of their training and practice. Most importantly, there are a small number of advanced practitioners who are able to transform adversity into a path of personal and spiritual enhancement by applying their training to redefine life to a level of wholesomeness and vibrancy.

Seen from a different perspective, enemies or difficult situations

can be of immense benefit for us. Without the hostile forces that assail us, we would not have the chance to recognize our essence. There are countless cases presented by great masters that serve as examples of this. Without hardships, Milarepa would not have attained enlightenment in one lifetime. Similarly, the story of Gelongma Palmo tells of her using her suffering from leprosy, in conjunction with the compassion of Avalokiteshvara practice, to develop the great dedication and effort that led her to becoming one of the best known of the 84 mahasiddhas.

While from an external perspective, someone may be experiencing misfortune and destitute circumstances, it is also possible for their unimaginable suffering and dire circumstances to open a direct path to remarkable spiritual gains. It is my sincere hope that every one of you will benefit to some degree from Tenpe Nyima's *Transforming Suffering and Happiness into Enlightenment*. What are the ways in which we can benefit? The logical reasoning presented here should answer that question in a manner that is easy to comprehend. The language and concepts utilized here are not as sophisticated as *Valid Cognition (Pramana)*, which requires meticulous examination and logic, nor is it as profound as the Vajrayana teaching which directly addresses the concept of nonduality. With plain language, this teaching offers an easy-to-understand guide to the secret of our minds. After acquiring the deep meaning of this text, we should familiarize and internalize the teaching and its essence. Combined with sufficient effort given towards our practice, this concise instruction can really change our lives. It is very possible that in the future, due to our past karma, we ourselves may be exposed to immense suffering. But having grasped and practiced the pith instruction on how to transform it, we will be able to avoid any unwise habitual actions or reactions. Furthermore, we may take the opportunity presented by these challenges to enhance our Dharma practice and achieve a deeper realization of the nature of

samsara.

● **Dropping and Cultivating**

In the last lecture, we talked about the two steps of transforming suffering. These are: (1) dropping the attitude of being completely unwilling to suffer and (2) cultivating the attitude of being joyful when suffering arises. The concept of dropping the attitude of being completely unwilling to suffer is probably odd enough for most people, but we have to remain cognizant of the fact that wishing to be free from suffering does not prevent suffering from knocking on the door. Every being goes through experiences that are in accordance with their respective physical, verbal, and mental conduct of their past karma. Therefore, one cannot stop suffering from intruding into one's life, no matter how sincere a wish one might make to avoid it.

We often see people visiting a temple with the wish that they might have a smooth and lucky life. While it is certain that prayers can be very effective, the realization of their wishes also depends on karma and merit. The individual karmic effect can be as vicious as a torrential rain running through a gorge. When it's time for one's individual karma to manifest, placing \$10 in the temple donation box and wishing to get lifetimes of karmic debt waived is not realistic.

It is like a man who is finally convicted for having been a life-long thief who tries to buy his way out of his conviction by handing a bribe to the police. While the police are powerful to a certain degree, they cannot guarantee that he will be pardoned from his crimes. That being said, due to the intense negative karma that has been gathered in our countless past lives, it is unrealistic to expect that we will never experience a single instance of suffering.

Even if you have received lay precepts or have become ordained, you will still have to undergo the consequences of the ripening of the karmic effect. There's no way for anyone to escape from the governing law of karma.

Given that this is the case, is there a way to mitigate, or to reconstruct, a dire situation, so that we can put it to better use? As most of you have recently studied the Mahayana *Seven Points of Mind Training*, I would certainly recommend it as an excellent practice. But studying it once is not enough. It is an imperative key that we should review continually. I'd encourage you to review it at least once every year. Eventually, you will discover your mind has become filled with tenderness. In much the same way, *Transforming Suffering and Happiness into Enlightenment* is very handy in times of suffering.

Dropping the Attitude of Being Entirely Unwilling to Suffer

- Negative Emotions Are Useless

Root Text

Dropping the Attitude of Being Entirely Unwilling to Suffer

Think about all the depression, anxiety and irritation we put ourselves through by always seeing suffering as unfavorable, something to be avoided at all costs. Now, think about two things: how useless this is, and how much trouble it causes. Go on reflecting on this repeatedly, until you are absolutely convinced.

Naturally, we wish, “Don’t let me suffer, please. . . , I don’t want any trouble. . . ” We seek, to no avail, to repel suffering regardless of how vulnerable, disheartened, or saddened we feel for ourselves. Repeating the loop of thinking “I’m in pain” doesn’t help at all when the pain comes in waves. If you can prevent suffering from befalling you, do so by all means through your way of living or your spiritual practice. Do not mistake that the Mahayana teaching means that everyone is doomed to misfortune. In fact, although Buddhism points out the pervasiveness of suffering, it also offers ways to work through it.

Given that being entirely unwilling to suffer is futile, to continue to hold this attitude only serves to aggravate the level of suffering. For instance, while it is certainly good to remain healthy, but if one has already got sick, there’s no use to reject the fact. It is pointless to whine or complain, “I should not have fallen ill. Why am I so unfortunate?” Even worse, a sense of vulnerability combined with continual frustration and sadness will lead to deterioration.

Very often we see people freak out rather than accept that they have been diagnosed with a critical illness. Their hearts beat faster and they become lost in despair. Then, out of fear, they refuse to eat properly or to take their medicine as required, until eventually, their doctors can no longer carry on with their treatment. On the other hand, there are a very few positive individuals who can face this type of situation differently. “I’m sick? That’s alright, I will deal with everything that comes without expectation.”

Indeed, a calm mentality, that is derived from reflection on suffering and impermanence, can help a lot, or at least won’t intensify the illness. As is stated in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*,

*So, come what may, I’ll never harm
My cheerful happiness of mind.*

*Depression never brings me what I want;
My virtue will be warped and marred by it.*

With a depressed mind towards illness, one's virtue, health and happiness may also be diminished. From the medical perspective, the stress hormone cortisol can suppress the effectiveness of the immune system. For those whose minds are unprepared, when they receive the diagnosis of a terminal illness, various mental and physical problems often also arise.

Worse still, certain individuals will not only complain about their illness, but may also develop the idea that a similar illness should strike others. Such an idea is extremely ignorant and foolish. It is like a criminal questioning the police, "There are a lot more murderers out there besides me. If I have to go to jail, so should they!" In other words, "I've killed people, but I shouldn't be the only one that has to pay." When someone experiences an ailment that is the result of non-virtuous conduct of having inflicted harm on other beings, it would be absurd to claim that others should be equally punished without knowing anything about their previous karma or merit.

Even if we are engaged in Dharma practice, samsaric beings like us face the inevitability of death, sickness, and unhappiness. Despite the increasing popularity of information on how to live a happier and more positive life, most people are actually experiencing a greater feeling of discontent and deprivation. That being said, to dwell on negative emotions is not only futile, but will also undermine one's virtues and one's wellbeing, physical and mental. Therefore, an important aspect of our practice must be to uphold a stable and balanced state of mind.

We need to reflect on this conclusion over and over again, until we are absolutely convinced. Since no one can prevent suffering from arising, to be depressed in the face of suffering is not only

useless, but makes us more vulnerable to it. Repeated reflection on this point will progressively give rise to a type of certainty. This certainty does not arise as a result of superficial talk or outside influences, but is rather a firm belief that arises as a result of deep inner reflection. This is the only way to be absolutely convinced that frustration and thoughts of self-pity will only make things worse and that a peaceful mindset is the most appropriate for all situations.

● **Internalize the Teaching with Great Courage and Determination**

Root Text

Then say to yourself: “From now on, whatever I have to suffer, I will never become anxious or irritated.” Go over this again and again in your mind, and summon all your courage and determination.

This is a relatively short but important paragraph. It is important to go over this teaching again and again, and to repeatedly perform an analytical contemplation of the various kinds of suffering, the uselessness of anxiety or irritation when facing these types of suffering, as well as the courage and determination never to compromise in the face of adversity.

While some may confidently claim that they are always optimistic, they may easily fall into the abyss of pessimism when whatever their confidence is based on crashes. Hence, we should perform our analytical contemplation while we are still healthy, cheerful and in good spirits. Suffering can be triggered by relationships, physical illnesses, lack of freedom, becoming the victim of slander

or defamation, shortage of food and living necessities, mental afflictions, and more. Buddhism categorizes the suffering of ordinary beings into eight or ten categories. These can be condensed into three, or expanded into infinite subcategories. When confronted by any of them, can we maintain our determination not to become weak and defeated? To do so requires two things in our daily practice.

First, “go over this again and again”, means to reflect on this teaching fervently. If we only take it as something light to be read once before moving on to something else, it can hardly take any effect. For any type of knowledge, only after we have studied it over and over, can we gain a firm grasp of it and apply it optimally when it is needed. Similarly, we need to familiarize and internalize the teaching, day after day, year after year. Only in this way, can we make steady progress in transforming our mind.

Second, we must exert ourselves fiercely in our Dharmic practice; as the author says in the text, “summon all your courage and determination.” We must ask ourselves, “How shall I act if a severe problem hits me?” Here’s the moment to assert determination from the bottom of our hearts. Some people utter pretty words like, “I’ll be able to transform suffering into beneficial means”, or they absentmindedly perform practices like impermanence or Dzogchen. This shows that they do not have the forceful determination to really absorb the teaching into their hearts and engender change. On the other hand, there are individuals who exert themselves fiercely and have a firm intention to integrate the teaching and the practice into their mind. During our guru yoga meditation, I can see from your facial expressions that some of you pray sincerely with intense faith.

● We Can Make the Change

So, Tenpe Nyima emphasizes the two aspects, repeatedly contemplating the teaching and remaining strong and courageous. Without contemplation and practice, the teaching will always remain something external and can never enter into our heart and monitor our mind. Without strong courage and determination, we will not face our afflictions bravely, nor will we become aware of our defects.

It is mentioned in the *Wish-Fulfilling Treasury* that ordinary beings are as oblivious towards suffering as if it were nothing more than a speck of dust in the palm of their hand – hardly perceivable, while noble beings are as conscious of suffering as if they had a speck of dust in the eye – highly perceivable. Frequently, ordinary people are indifferent toward suffering and lack the courage to make a change, whereas sublime beings or good practitioners are more attentive to suffering, and are more strongly determined to rid themselves of it by undoing the root cause. In order for this to happen, they engage in fierce practice. Therefore, it is important that auspicious teachings not remain as words alone but are integrated into the mindstream through consistent practice. During this process, we must summon all of our courage and determination to change our vulnerable and narrow mindset into a broad and tolerant state.

A cousin visited me this morning. We used to herd yaks together when we were young. At that time, he was hot-tempered and was always getting into fights. His rage arose often and easily. He was not aware at all and just followed his strong emotions to do whatever he felt was right, even to the point where in severe cases, he hurt others with rocks or a knife. Now that he stays close with his guru, he has changed completely and become a non-aggressive man. He said to me, “I had severe fights with others more than 20

times in my life. But now as I've sworn not to fight any more, even if someone were to stab me with a knife, I wouldn't fight back."

Therefore, we can see that the Buddhadharma has the incredible power to transmute an individual and completely rid them of their habitual tendencies and temperament. When we receive an instruction, it is crucial for us to directly internalize it into our heart, so that it can generate the strong power to change our thinking and protect us from being driven away by our afflictive tendencies. When confronting difficulties, it is this strength that we can rely on to make us more determined and powerful. If due to our fragility, we lose control and give in to such negative emotions as pessimism, frustration, self-pity, and so forth, this can only lead to a greater deterioration of whatever situation we may find ourselves in.

● **Be Aware of Extremely Harmful Emotions**

Some Western economists advise that we should diversify our financial investments. They counsel not to put all of our assets into one project but rather to spread the risk between a number of them. That way, if one should happen to fail, we may still receive a return from another source. Likewise, our love for people shouldn't be obsessively fixated on one person, or on a small number of individuals. Otherwise, once the loved one to whom you are most attached is no longer with you, you would find the grief and torment too hard to endure. If one loves his mother wholeheartedly, he will be in grave pain when she passes away. Wealth and relationship are other examples of things which we may become attached to or rely upon for our happiness, if one has a strong clinging to any of these things, one may become completely defeated and undergo extreme anxiety if one or more of them were to disappear.

When a man or woman is experiencing unbearable grief or resentment, they lose their mindfulness and rationality. The decisions made at moments like these are almost always unwise and regrettable. A person who loses control of themselves in this way may even attack others with a knife. I have visited prisons where the offenders shared their stories of hurting or even killing those that were close to them in a moment of anger. If the right mindfulness is absent, anyone can commit such horrific actions.

As *The Way of the Bodhisattva* suggests,

*When the urge arises in the mind
To feelings of desire or wrathful hate,
Do not act! Be silent, do not speak!
And like a log of wood be sure to stay.*

When we are in a rage and our native intelligence drops to zero, it is best to take the time to find a place to sit still and remain silent until we are able to recover from our extreme emotions. You will have a much better sense of discernment once you have regained control.

There is a Chinese classic on righteous conduct titled *The Jade of Collected Aphorisms* (Chi.: Ge Yan Lian Bi), which advises, “Do not promise gifts to others when in ecstasy. Do not write to others when in a rage.” This piece of advice on not making important decisions when overflowing with joy is very helpful, for instance, when one is considering marriage. People these days seem to rush in and out of marriage in a flash. When one is in love, to marry right away seems like the best decision in life. Yet, when the excitement fades, one may become so annoyed or frustrated with their partner that they want a divorce. A similar instance would be impulsive posting on social media. A while ago, a particular celebrity was so upset about a private matter that she created a posting on Weibo.

Later, when she was less upset, she wanted to delete the post but it was too late and it became public gossip.

Therefore, we should not only be clearly aware of how detrimental a negative state of mind can be, but we should also recognize the significance and benefits of a healthy mentality. In order to achieve an all-encompassing mindset, we must practice the instruction repeatedly, fiercely and without any timidity. This type of practice will enable us to progressively overcome our frailty and improve the capability of our mind, and we will find ourselves more than competent in accomplishing things that ordinary people can't.

● Cultivate Noble Qualities

In Asvaghosa's *Book of Glory (Mahalankara)*, there's a story about a bhikkhu who surprised everyone with his reaction towards having been defamed and denigrated. The bhikkhu was an eloquent and respected teacher who received many offerings. Out of jealousy, one of his fellow bhikkhus began to criticize and denigrate him behind his back. When the first bhikkhu heard about this from his disciples, he invited the bhikkhu who had been critical of him to his home and made a gift to him of some fine garments. His disciples were so surprised by this that they asked the bhikkhu to explain why he had responded to such poor treatment with such kindness. His answer was, "My fellow bhikkhu's denigration has influenced many to stop making offerings to me, which has been very helpful for my practice. Now that my concern for the eight worldly preoccupations has been weakened, I'll become a better practitioner, so it only makes sense that I should make an offering to him for his kindness."

What the bhikkhu demonstrated is not the way that most ordinary people would respond. Normally, we are delighted when compli-

mented, even if we don't really deserve the compliments, yet, if someone makes a negative comment about us, we find it difficult to accept even if it is true.

Sakya Pandita says in his *Treasury of Good Advice*,

*Not to be pleased by praise,
Nor displeased by criticism,
And to properly maintain their good qualities:
These are characteristics of noble people.*

Surely, our minds are troubled with all sorts of afflictions, making it difficult for us, as ordinary beings, to cultivate such noble qualities in a short time. Everyone seems to have different “sore spots”, areas of mental affliction that can't be touched. People can be very sensitive about money, a particular individual, a relationship, fame or position. In situations such as this, only through committed Dharma practice can we expand our mind and make it gentle and tolerant. As explained in the *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*, if one's mind is veiled by afflictions, wisdom cannot come forth, and Maras seize the opportunity to disturb him further. When we lose control of our mental afflictions, various obstacles hinder our way forward.

In the *Sutra of the Heap of Jewels*, it explains that with a craved object there comes greediness, with a hated object there comes aggression, and with a neutral object there comes ignorance. The emergence of these three poisons can really mess up one's mentality and bring about endless suffering. Yet, the good news is that we are completely capable of mitigating, and even eradicating our weaknesses or sources of suffering. We can achieve this by exercising fierce effort in our Dharma practice. In this way, our mind can be transformed little by little. Given this one instruction, we need to familiarize it through repeated contemplation, as well as by fervent and fierce practice. Only through this procedure can our habitual pattern of

thinking be gradually transformed, which will result in our minds becoming more inclusive and spacious and better able to deal with any kind of situation.

Two Positive Thoughts to Accept Suffering

- Nothing to Be Unhappy About

Root Text

First, let's look at how useless it is. If we can do something to solve a problem, then there is no need to worry or be unhappy about it; if we can't, then it doesn't help to worry or be unhappy about it either.

The author further elaborates on this concept so that we may more deeply reflect upon it. First, we are asked to reflect upon how useless the attitude of seeing suffering as unfavorable is, and secondly, we are asked to recognize how much trouble it causes. Being drenched in sorrow doesn't eliminate the problem, so it is obvious that as far as solving the problem goes, it is useless to remain dispirited. If we can find a solution to the problem, then there is no reason to remain upset. If, on the other hand, there's no way to solve the problem, for example, once a glass is broken beyond repair, even then, feeling down is of no value. As *The Way of the Bodhisattva* reminds us,

*If there is a remedy when trouble strikes,
What reason is there for despondency?
And if there is no help for it,
What use is there in being sad?*

Should there be room for improvement, why bother to be sad? If nothing can be done, to become depressed also serves no purpose. In summary, to be frail and weak when confronted with suffering serves no purpose. As blunt as it sounds, we can analyze every difficult situation with our wisdom to conclude that grieving is of no help at all. A thought process like this is very helpful for people who are going through a breakup or other disheartening events. Reflecting on this particular stanza flowing from Shantideva's sharp wisdom is an excellent mind training for keen practitioners, as its logic and meticulous reasoning is extremely pivotal.

- **Suffering Can Be Changed by Your Perception**

Root Text

Then, enormous trouble involved. As long as we don't get anxious and irritated, then our strength of mind will enable us to bear even the hardest of sufferings easily; they'll feel as flimsy and insubstantial as cotton wool. But while we are dominated by anxiety, even the tiniest problem becomes extremely difficult to cope with, because we have the additional burden of mental discomfort and unhappiness.

It is also important to remind ourselves frequently of how enormous our troubles appear when we are caught up in anxiety and irritation. I think that we can all agree that it is not the problem that brings one down but rather, it is the emotions that we respond to it with that undermines our sense of well-being. As enormous as a problem might appear to be, we can get over the hurdle with bravery and resoluteness. Without anxiety and irritation, any issue can become like flimsy cotton wool, no longer a heavy burden but an insubstantial matter. As a common saying goes, "When one door closes, another door opens." If we have strength and courage,

we can always find a way out, maybe leading to a more meaningful state.

Many people's life experiences serve as examples of the benefit of changing your way of thinking. For myself, I'm not someone with a high realization of emptiness or tonglen, but I have decent confidence in my practice on impermanence and renunciation. Whenever I'm in a peculiar predicament, I can approach the situation from a manifold of perspectives.

Last year, I made plans to visit Russia, Dubai, Poland, the UK and more, towards the beginning of 2020. It could have been a wonderful trip that would have allowed me a chance to visit quite a few universities and to exchange ideas and thoughts with many people. Regretfully, at the last minute, the plan was not approved by the required government officials and I was left with no choice but to accept their decision. Soon after, the coronavirus swept across the globe, traumatically affecting country after country, and making it totally impossible to travel abroad. To be frank, at first, I was quite uncomfortable with this situation, but then, I decided that since I could not travel, that I would work on several translations instead. During this period of time, I took the liberty to translate some scriptures that had been previously translated into Chinese but were not yet available in Tibetan, such as *The Original Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra*, *The Buddha Speaks the Sutra on the Kindness of Parents and the Difficulties of Repaying It*, *the Sutra on the Meritorious Qualities of Monasticism*, *the Sutra on Praising the Noble Qualities of the Sangha*, and Vasubandhu's *Treatise on Rebirth in the Pure Land*. Some of these are very short but others are quite long. Looking back, I feel I have been able to utilize this time for meaningful purposes.

While it is certain that I would have enjoyed the trip that I had planned, it is also great that the plan fell through. Back in 2002,

I became quite ill, in addition to becoming very disturbed by the divisive talk that was taking place among Dharma circles. For these reasons, I went on a solitude retreat in Xiamen. On the first day that I arrived there, I started to work on a translation and spent nearly all of the next six months translating Ju Mipham Rinpoche's *Extensive Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni* from Tibetan into Chinese. I would spend the mornings reading and going to the hospital to get an IV, and in the afternoons, I would work on the translation. There were times that I believed my life was coming to an end and I worried that my translation of the *Extensive Biography of Buddha Shakyamuni* might have to be left incomplete. Fortunately, the grand project was finished in spite of my debilitating health, and in addition, I was able to complete a number of other books as well. After I finished these projects, my health recovered and I was able to meet His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche in Chengdu, after which we traveled together back to Larung Gar.

As I reflect on that experience, if I had not been sick, I probably would not have had the courage to make the decision to translate such a huge scripture, which totaled more than 500 pages in the Dege printed version. A difficult time somehow had turned into a great opportunity for me to finish what I had previously thought of as a nearly impossible task. 2016 was another difficult year for me. I underwent surgery, loss of my mother, and a major structural change took place here at Larung Gar. At the same time, I was teaching a number of scriptures and working on a number of translations. During that period, we studied *The Lotus Sutra*, *The Discourse on The Ten Meritorious Deeds*, *The Sutra of the Medicine Buddha*, as well as Gampopa's *A Precious Garland of the Supreme Path* and Jigme Lingpa's *Yeshe Lama*. Meanwhile, I was translating Longchenpa's *The Treasury of Dharmadhatu* and a few other texts. Unbelievably, all of the programs and translations were delivered and presented successfully.

- **Open Another Door**

These are among many personal experiences where my feeling of having hit rock-bottom turned out to be a great opportunity. As Ju Mipham Rinpoche said, seemingly unfavorable circumstances may become favorable and vice versa. Each of us, at certain point, may encounter unimaginable suffering which totally defeats us and makes us feel that our life has come to an end. In fact, when the path before us has become completely blocked, there is very possibly another way that leads to a vaster space. So, instead of being stuck by that which obstructs us, we should, at times like these, be ready to discover something new. Sometimes great significance can be found within a seemingly disadvantageous situation. When looking back, we may even find ourselves feeling fortunate, and even grateful, that things happened in a way that we had not expected because that setback offered us something with a more meaningful value. As the saying goes, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” To make lemonade from lemons, we need a strong mindset to overcome the bitterness. Believe it or not, when one is ready to expand their mind, even that which, at first, tasted most bitter, will no longer be thought of as unpleasant.

There’s a Chinese fable that illustrates the idea of a blessing in disguise. There was an old man who lived near the northern border of the country. One day, one of his horses ran away. So, his neighbors came over to comfort him. Yet, the old man wasn’t bothered at all and to their expressions of sympathy, he merely said, “It’s possible that this may turn out to be a blessing.” A few months later, his horse came back accompanied by another fine horse from the north. Everyone came to congratulate him, but this time the old man said, “Who knows? This may turn out to be a cause of misfortune.” One day, his son fell off the new horse and broke one of his legs. Once again, all the neighbors felt terribly

sorry for him. Again, the old man responded to their sympathy by saying, “You never know. This may turn out to be a blessing in disguise.” One year later, tribes from the north invaded the border regions but because the old man’s son was crippled, he was able to avoid joining in the fighting and so, while many others died, he survived.

Therefore, while something may, at first, appear to be good for us, it may bring a bad consequence. Conversely, something that seems to be so terrible that we can hardly accept it, may, in the long run, bring us great benefit. For Dharma practitioners, having fame or money may cause our mind to be easily corrupted by arrogance and greed, while having no money or offerings may help us to augment our renunciation. The same can be said for bad health, which may keep us from being able to practice the Dharma, but may also enhance our determination to abandon all worldly concerns. It all depends on our mindset.

Psychology describes fixed mindsets and growth mindsets. Someone with a fixed mindset believes that attributes and abilities are inherently fixed and unchanging, whereas, someone with a growth mindset happily pursues the self-improvement and views challenges as opportunities. As practitioners, we should examine our own mindset. Before training, we tend to hold a fixed mindset, thinking that we will always be healthy and happy. Unfortunately, that is not at all realistic. Thus, when unexpected changes occur, we are better prepared to face them with a growth mindset.

As amazing as is our mind’s ability to bear the most painful suffering, is its tendency to do the exact opposite. If one is overwhelmed by anxiety, even the tiniest problem can seem monstrous and impossible to cope with. One can be so unhappy that they are unable to carry on with even the most common of activities. People perceive and respond to suffering differently due to each individual’s

mind capacity. If one is heavily afflicted, even a small degree of pain can be magnified tremendously. As Shantideva says in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*,

*When they find a dying serpent,
Even crows behave like soaring eagles.
Therefore, if I'm weak and feeble-hearted,
Even little faults will strike me down and injure me.*

By observing our mind, empathy will arise for ourselves and for all sentient beings. Too many people are convinced that they are in grave pain, when, in fact, the problem is mild. Until the karmic effect is exhausted, sentient beings cannot get free of the struggle. Suffering itself is not a big deal, but people become overwhelmed due to improper thinking patterns. Thus, knowing the method to transform suffering into the path of enlightenment is critical.

● Seal the Doors of Senses

Root Text

Imagine, for example, trying to get rid of desire and attachment for someone we find attractive while continuing to dwell all the while on their attractive qualities. It would all be in vain. In just the same way, if we concentrate only on the pain brought by suffering, we'll never be able to develop endurance or the ability to bear it. So, as in the instructions called 'Sealing the Doors of the Senses', don't latch onto all kinds of mind-made concepts about your suffering. Learn instead to leave the mind undisturbed in its own natural state, bring the mind home, rest there, and let it find its own ground.

Here the author uses the example of desire to illustrate how to prevent ourselves from living with anxiety and irritation. If one

is continually thinking of a beautiful woman, and dwelling in his thoughts about her attractive appearance, it would be impossible to rid oneself of desire and attachment. In this case, one's mind is consumed by uncontrollable greed. Similarly, when we are undermined by pain, our attention is drawn to it and in moments like this, we are unlikely to develop endurance or the ability to bear or transform it. Furthermore, the level of pain multiplies as we continue to habitualize the thinking pattern.

Thus, we need the instruction of "Sealing the Doors of the Senses" to prevent our attention from being occupied by suffering. Typically, in order to protect oneself from being poisoned by desire, one exercises this instruction to safeguard his visual and mental faculties from attractive objects. As taught in the Vinaya and other texts for the guidance of practice, when seeing an attractive person, one practices seeing that person's body as impure and unclean, and as a source of suffering. By applying the vigilant mindfulness of impurity, there's no chance for desire to arise.

The same principle applies to suffering. Do not latch onto all kinds of mind-made concepts about your suffering. Do not fixate on the idea that "I'm in pain". Rather, let your mind rest naturally and find its own ground. Should our mind become disturbed, we will no longer be able to think or act rationally. That's why some people commit self-injury, suicide, and other unimaginable harms when faced with great pain. But if our mind remains in its natural state, even severe trouble can't harm us in the slightest.

When we take a closer look, we can recognize that covetousness and aggression arise from improper concepts and deluded thoughts, and further cause infinite forms of suffering. What state should our minds be in? On the phenomenal level, the mind should rest in its natural state of serenity and stability that is conducive for making proper decisions. I can't stress this enough. But when one's

mind is in chaos, all sorts of hostile forces can influence it onto a destructive path. If one often thinks of suicide, Maras or demonic energy would lure that person with the idea that by taking one's own life, all the pain in his or her life will end and a life full of suffering can be exchanged with a beautiful paradise. A restless mind can cause us to lose control of our mind, and to be easily bewitched by external forces. Therefore, as soon as we notice any bizarre thoughts entering our mind, instead of dwelling aimlessly in negativity, we need to pray to our guru and the Three Jewels.

Make Your Practice Efficient

To summarize the aforementioned sections, we must engage in the following two actions in order to transform suffering: 1) deeply and repeatedly contemplate the teaching to not reject suffering; 2) exert ourselves in fierce practice with strong courage. If we are able to accomplish this, we can expand our mind to an all-encompassing state which will enable us to transform suffering easily and skillfully. If we are unable to do so, it is not so meaningful to take the laity precepts or even the monastic ordination. Whether you've stayed close to a great master for several decades or lived in a monastery for years, without diligent practice, your mind will remain stubborn and rigid, and unable to cope with suffering. An example of this is Bhikkhu Sunaksatra who attended the Buddha for decades, yet rather than achieving any improvement, his wrong view towards the Buddha only intensified.

Gungtang Tenpe Dronme Rinpoche says in his *Water and Wood Shastras*,

*Merely listening without practicing
Won't transform one's mind.*

*You may soak a stone in water for a hundred years,
But its inner nature will remain dry.*

Indeed, to make a change within ourselves doesn't need to take a long time. The key is high efficacy with in-depth groundwork and strong dedication. This is what determines the power of our practice. If we lack power in our practice, a hundred million mantra recitations or years spent in a monastery won't make a dent to our rigid minds. How successful is our practice? This can be examined when we're confronted by suffering.

We must ask ourselves, do we really wish to change our mind-stream? If we truly hope to do so, we must remain confident that the guidance given in Tenpe Nyima's *Transforming Suffering and Happiness into Enlightenment* will make us much stronger and more resilient. I've heard about certain Western military colleges where the soldiers are trained to be deployed to the battlefield at any time and without any fear. In a similar way, if we have trained vigorously on a daily basis, we will also be fearless in the face of hardship. However, if all we do is to spend our days attending lectures without integrating the teaching with mind training, it will be in vain, no matter how many lectures we have heard. The efficacy of Dharma practice is low when the only merit gained comes from listening to the Dharma and nothing more.

So, I hope that each of you will build up the strength to transform suffering. We all have the potential to turn the most painful suffering into flimsy and insubstantial cotton wool, but this potential can only be unlocked by constant and fervent practice. The Buddha reminded his followers, "I have pointed out the path to enlightenment; it is up to you to walk the path." In regards to the practice of transforming suffering into beneficial means, I am fairly confident in my ability to apply it. I'd attribute this to my having gone through in-depth studies and assiduous practices

during my early days. If I hadn't done so, I couldn't offer you this teaching with any experiential insight, nor would you embrace the teaching.

So, be sure that you are pursuing the Buddhadharma genuinely and not with a careless attitude. Without a doubt, you will benefit from the teaching if you practice earnestly. If you practice genuinely and ardently, I have no doubt that you will experience the potency of its effect, both for yourself and for others. You will also find that once you have gained a personal realization of the Dharma teaching, you can also share that teaching with others and have a powerful impact on them. There are many superb Mahayana pith instructions in Tibetan Buddhism, but they would be useless if the instructions remain as words alone rather than accepted and actually applied. So please take the teaching into your heart and let it completely dissolve into your mind through diligent practice, and the result will amaze you beyond imagination.

LECTURE FOUR

Indeed, without hardship, very possibly we would never have the opportunity of awakening and until the day we died, we would still be unsure of the truth of samsara. Our illnesses serve to remind us of the preciousness and meaning of life. While we were sick, we might have felt frustrated and desperate, but after we have recovered and look back at the struggle during that period of time, we may find out that it has been a valuable experience that has led us to realize the most meaningful thing in our life. Thus, we appreciate the benefit brought to us by grave illnesses.

– Khenpo Sodargye

See Suffering as an Ally and Be Joyful

4

Be Confident in Your Practice and Exert Great Efforts

In the last lecture, we discussed the two steps of transforming suffering, those being: 1) to drop the attitude of being entirely unwilling to suffer and 2) to cultivate the attitude of being joyful when suffering arises. As simple as these two ideas sound when summarized into a brief sentence, they are not as easy to apply in our own lives. As ordinary people, although we can theoretically understand the principle and necessity of transforming suffering, it is difficult enough to embrace suffering, let alone to be joyful about it. That's why we must be persistent in our study, contemplation and practice of the Mahayana teachings. Through genuine cultivation, we can engender bodhicitta, compassion, the ability to transform suffering, and more.

Many people think of Dharma practice as sitting in silent meditation or going off alone to retreat from the world in a distant cave; but these activities do not tell the whole story. Actually, to constantly listen to and contemplate teachings and to familiarize ourselves with their meaning are all Dharma practices. In due time, experiences will naturally arise and realizations will take root and thrive in our mind, even if we do not notice an obvious change when we look within.

Spiritual progress requires strenuous effort. By reading the biographies of the great masters, we can see that their profound realizations and transcendental qualities were not accomplished

without sweat and perseverance. In fact, without exception, they endured extreme hardships throughout their pursuit and study of the Dharma. For ordinary practitioners, the transformation of suffering, though difficult, is not completely unattainable. Keep in mind that every living being possesses the most precious tathagatagarbha that is endowed with unlimited potential and abilities. On this basis, by continual contemplation and fierce practice, one will greatly increase the efficacy of the mind training.

Too often, we become entangled in problems that we have overmagnified in our mind. These cyclic thoughts of self-pity are useless. Negative thinking patterns affect our physical well-being to the point where we suffer from sleep deprivation and loss of appetite, and our mind can never rest in peace. Remember, it is not our problems that bring us down, rather it is our emotions that disrupt our peace of mind. A small issue could seem like the end of the world for people who are emotionally vulnerable. Such individuals only see the darkness in this world and feels hopeless in their ability to carry on with their normal life. As Buddhists, it would be particularly heartrending if we were not able to gain mastery over our minds.

When suffering befalls us, suppressing the pain purposely is an unworkable strategy. Suffering arises from the ripening of karma and afflictions. As soon as these take effect, it is very unlikely that they can be interrupted from maturation. When one has already been infected with a terrible flu and is suffering from severe symptoms, medications and other treatments only offer a small amount of relief. However, if one had taken the precaution of getting a flu shot, the risk of getting infected in the first place would have been quite low. The same principle applies to our mental well-being. Certain kinds of distress are unavoidable, and unfortunately, one must undergo the agony until the karmic effect has been exhausted. Still, if we've trained our minds regularly, the

negative impact would be far less.

We must establish an understanding of this teaching before applying it. Over the long run, not only can we come to embrace problems, but also to welcome them with delight. In the past, great masters would purposely expose themselves to desperate circumstances. Venerable Atisha kept a bad-tempered attendant to help him cultivate patience and compassion. Other masters purposely mingled with leprosy patients to develop empathy for those in pain. When practicing Chöd (a method of cutting through ego), some practitioners would deliberately hang around disturbing beings to provoke afflictions as a means of training their minds.

Of course, I'm not suggesting such extreme exposure for everyone. Rest assured though, our mind is capable of handling any situation when our realization deepens. Through persistent practice, we can reach a high-level spiritual state and gain enormous mental strength. We can take the first step by learning the working logic of our minds. Then, by the accumulation of practice, our tolerance for suffering will gradually increase from a feeling of unbearable pain to welcoming it with open arms. From being fearful to becoming fearless, one becomes more and more experienced with the transformation of negativities in everyday life. Although in pain, practitioners who have become skilled in this kind of transformation are rather happy, "Great! Here comes sickness! Excellent, someone has just insulted me." Certainly, not everyone can reach such a high state quickly, but when faced with difficulty, we should see it as an opportunity to reaffirm the teaching that every situation can be transformed into the path to enlightenment.

As stated in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*,

*But if depressed, I give up trying,
How can I gain freedom from my abject state?*

*If, however, I stand my ground with proud resolve,
It will be hard for even great faults to attack me.*

For individuals whose mentality has been strengthened through practice, even an enormous obstacle is no longer a hindrance. Quite the opposite, sensitive people with narrow minds have a tendency to inflict harm on themselves and others. Even when faced with a trivial issue, they have the feeling that they are being challenged with an invincible obstruction. Therefore, a genuine practice is the only way to incorporate profound teachings into one's life. By following this path, the progress made by the gradually accumulated improvements becomes our Dharma practice. If one were an emanation of buddhas or bodhisattvas, no extra preparation would be needed. Because, merely meeting a slight hint at an opportune time would be enough to awake quickly one's store of wisdom and compassion. However, in the case of the majority of ordinary people, great efforts in their practice will need to be exerted to ensure a fruitful result.

Cultivating the Attitude of Being Joyful When Suffering Arises

Root Text

Cultivating the Attitude of Being Joyful when Suffering Arises

Seeing suffering as an ally to help us on the path, we must learn to develop a sense of joy when it arises. Yet whenever suffering strikes, unless we have some kind of spiritual practice to bring to it, one which matches the capacity of our mind, no matter how many times we might say to ourselves: "Well, as long as I've got roughly the right method, I'll be able to use suffering

and obtain such and such a benefit”, it’s highly unlikely that we’ll succeed. We’ll be as far from our goal, the saying goes, as the earth is from the sky.

● See Suffering as an Ally and Be Joyful

Regardless of whether it is illness, the loss of wealth, a divorce, unemployment or something similar, regard suffering as the best ally to help us on the path, and thus develop a sense of joy when it arises. Shantideva says in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*,

*When sorrows fall upon the wise,
Their minds should be serene and undisturbed.*

In the face of any negative situation, the mind of a wise man remains undisturbed. Furthermore, the clarity of his mind will become even more pristine. When conditions are favorable, he does not become arrogant; when conditions are unfavorable, he learns more ways to practice and makes adversity an ally on the path. Conversely, as Ju Mipham Rinpoche said in *The Just King*, which we quoted in the first lecture, the mind of the fool remains obscured whether experiencing happiness or suffering. Such a person finds nothing to reflect on regardless of their experience and remains muddle-headed all day along, making no progress and reaping no benefit.

A wise man should take delight in approaching suffering as a favorable means on the path of enlightenment. If one is easily overwhelmed by the fluctuations of suffering and happiness, there will never be the “right time” to embark on the practice. This is because, when you are happy, you are distracted by external things that bring you pleasure and when you are anxious and suffering, you don’t have the energy to focus on your practice. As a result,

reacting to either happiness or suffering does not create a favorable condition to engage in Dharma practice. In that case, you may well ask, “When is the best time to practice?”

Some people always have an excuse to put Dharma practice on hold, “The rain makes me gloomy. . . I don’t feel well. . . It’s too hot today. . . I’ve been busy lately. . . I’ve been upset recently. . .” If, due to various reasons, you always end up feeling that your practice can be put off to tomorrow, you may never find the perfect opportunity to practice, in which case your practice is likely doomed to failure. On the contrary, good practitioners will diligently engage in practice in both favorable and unfavorable circumstances and do not allow their time to go to waste, even if they are being tormented by a serious illness.

● **Practicing Rather Than Talking**

When we are dealing with a difficult situation, it is only when we have been regularly practicing a Dharma instruction that matches the capacity of our mind, that we can transform negative circumstances into beneficial means. Otherwise, transforming suffering into the path to enlightenment remains nothing more than an abstract idea without any actual power to make a real change. Actually, any teaching that remains nothing more than words without a pragmatic application will not bring about any genuine change. As Dharma practitioners, all effort is futile if it does not integrate our mind with virtuous practice.

Take the practice of Bodhicitta as an example. If you keep repeating “I will liberate all sentient beings as endless and as vast as the sky,” all day along without vigorous perseverance in the practice of compassion and tonglen, then when an angry man stands before you, you may simply run away and completely forget the vows that

you have made. “All sentient beings” will remain nothing more than an abstract concept in your mind and your behavior betrays that you have not spent enough time reflecting on the teaching of Bodhicitta, not to mention time spent in actual practice.

The process is like curing an illness. If a man takes a specific medication regularly, then when illness strikes, he has already developed the defense system to recover quickly. However, if one does nothing more than repeating, “I should take the best medicine when I am sick, I know potent medicines from China, Tibet, India and other places,” nothing will help, as all medicine won’t have any benefit without one actually taking it.

Similarly, if we don’t put the teaching into practice to train our mind, it’s highly unlikely that we’ll succeed at embracing suffering joyfully, regardless of how many times we say to ourselves, “As long as I’ve got an idea of the right method of how to use suffering, I’ll be able to obtain this or that benefit”. Thinking in this way, the transformation of suffering into the path to enlightenment will remain nothing more than a concept for us, and will never bring us closer to our goal and this auspicious teaching will remain as unreachable as the sky is from the earth.

As I mentioned before, without genuine practice, even years spent in a monastery will have been in vain. We often hear about certain teachers who have spent decades in retreat in a cave far away from the rest of the world. Sometimes when I listen to stories like this, I cannot help but wonder if they have genuinely applied the practice into their minds. The same message is true for all of you. If you simply see Larung Gar as a place to escape to, your study will be hollow if it isn’t mingled with the mindstream. Without internalization, you may respond no differently than ordinary people when confronted by adversity.

It is crucial to adopt one suitable practice and to make it a personal

training that resonates with your individual strength and capability. It is indispensable for each of you to master your chosen practice through exertion and constant repetition. Otherwise, we will never attain our goal of facing suffering joyfully. If we fail to internalize the Dharma teaching within our mindstream due to lack of practice, who else can we blame but ourselves?

● **Choose a Practice That Matches the Capacity of Your Mind**

If we decide to engage in earnest practice, it is certain that we will find a type of practice that most closely matches the capacity of our mind. For instance, when dealing with suffering, some people find the contemplation on renunciation very helpful, while others find it most useful to recollect the transcendental qualities of the Three Jewels. Still other practitioners will make a full prostration to destroy arrogance, while there are some individuals who find confession and purification most effective. For still others, the cultivation of compassion through tonglen practice is very powerful, while some find conviction in the words of the guru is the most empowering.

Personally, I feel the contemplation of impermanence is particularly useful. Every time that something unexpected happens, my first thought is that the Buddha was absolutely right when he taught that everything is impermanent. For instance, when I suffer from a severe illness or when something that I have planned falls through, I often reflect that the principle of impermanence is truly infallible. So, for me, the best practice to transform suffering is the practice of impermanence.

Even though I was born into a Buddhist family, I did not receive any formal education in Buddhism as a young boy. Every day, until

I was a teenager, my life mainly consisted of herding yaks up on the mountain. Maybe it is due to the habitual imprints from my previous lives, even while still quite young, I had a strong and innate feeling of impermanence. As a herd boy, when I came across the skeleton of a dead yak, as I often did, I used to think to myself, “How impermanent life is. These yaks were once so attached to their body and now there is nothing left but these bones.” This feeling intensified when I visited the charnel grounds and saw the bones of human beings lying there. Also, as I grew older and began to hear stories of the changes in the interpersonal relationships of those around me, the sense of life’s uncertainty increased.

During the period marked by the Cultural Revolution in modern China, I experienced the many dramatic changes associated with that era’s chaotic history. In those days, I often heard that this person was to be persecuted or that person was to be publicly shamed and so forth. I also learned that many of them had once been extremely glamorous, wealthy or highly venerated. Seeing what had become of them only reinforced the sense of impermanence in my mind.

Nonetheless, such an intuition isn’t pessimistic. Some people think that to contemplate impermanence would make everything meaningless, and would take away the reason why anyone would work hard for anything. I’d disagree. For experienced practitioners who are skilled at meditating on impermanence, renunciation or *bodhicitta*, when confronted with problems, rather than immediately feeling hopeless, they are even more likely to work through the problems with seriousness.

A while ago in my home village, a house fire took the lives of three children. Their parents, on returning home, fainted upon hearing of the tragedy. A couple of their relatives are nuns here at Larung Gar. These nuns went back to the village of their relatives to see if they could be of any help. Although saddened by the loss of those

three young children, they remained composed and performed the funeral ceremony to purify the karmic obscuration of the deceased and to guide their rebirth to the pure land. They also offered condolences to the family and spoke to them on impermanence and the karmic effect. Everybody felt that the way that these nuns dealt with adversity was remarkable. Because their education in the Dharma and their daily practices, the nuns were able to remain calm and help the family to deal with its feelings of pain and loss.

Of course, words of wisdom might not take effect immediately for those who are in great pain. However, we have seen that people who have spent time in contemplation of the teachings are more resilient when faced with difficult situations than ordinary people. If we take the precaution of first seeking to understand the nature of suffering and the truth of phenomena, or if we frequently listen to and reflect on these teachings, we will be more empowered when coping with such adversity whenever it should arise. Both analytical reflection and personal realization on the teaching can provide us with the strength to face difficulties. Then, like a well-trained soldier, one will be able to swing the sword of wisdom effortlessly when confronted by the foes of afflictions. The practitioner can exercise his or her skills in contemplation by focusing on impermanence, renunciation, or bodhicitta in a way that benefits from the years of training. In this way, one is prepared to defeat the enemy of negative emotion.

To reiterate, I'm emphasizing the importance of selecting one suitable practice as your primary focus to develop the strength of transforming suffering into enlightenment. Otherwise, when suffering strikes, you will be easily carried away by it, and your ability to cultivate a sense of joy in the face of suffering will be as far away as if you had tried to reach the sky from the earth. When faced with difficult situations, if you are able to remain

happy, you will be seen as a good practitioner; if you react by becoming upset, you will be seen no differently from an ordinary person. That is typical of those who only enjoy talking about the highest Dharma teaching without having truly engaged with the practice. For example, one “happy practitioner” may talk about the high realization of Dzogchen, natural clear light, nonduality of luminosity and emptiness, and so on, impressing everybody with his clear and logical manner of speaking. Yet, he immediately turns into a “sad ordinary man” when a challenge emerges. That is the time when one’s practice is put to test.

Seven Approaches for Transforming Suffering Joyfully

Root Text

Therefore, use suffering as the basis for the following practices:

a. Using Suffering to Train in Renunciation

Sometimes, then, use your suffering to train your mind in renunciation.

Say to yourself: “As long as I wander, powerless and without any freedom, in samsara, this kind of suffering is not something unjust or unwarranted. It’s simply the very nature of samsara.” At times, develop a deep sense of revulsion by thinking: “If it’s already so hard for me to bear even the little suffering and pain of the happy realms, then what about the suffering of the lower realms? Samsara is indeed an ocean of suffering, fathomless and without any end!” Then turn your mind towards liberation, and enlightenment.

The following seven practices are approachable for one who wishes to transform suffering into the path to enlightenment. The first is to use suffering to cultivate the mind of renunciation. When suffering strikes, remind yourself of the very nature of samsara. As long as one is bound in samsara, they must face the various types of suffering and none of them is unjust or unwarranted. Therefore, it is unnecessary to become caught up in cyclic complaining, “Why should this happen to me? I’m such a kind person!” Instead, draw your attention to the awareness of the nature of samsara. It is as it is.

● **Human Beings’ Suffering Is Insignificant**

As human beings in one of the happier realms, in addition to the many benefits we are granted, we must also experience many kinds of mental and physical suffering. When encountering suffering, some experienced practitioners are able to immediately arouse a strong renunciation towards samsara. They will reflect upon their suffering as follows:

Compared to the suffering in the lower realms, what human beings experience is small and temporary. From the physical discomfort of a headache, to having to undergo a major surgery, or to experience the mental suffering of being denigrated, misunderstood or insulted, none of these are comparable to the suffering of the hell realms. In the human realm, I am only troubled by such petty problems as physical pain, a bad meal, an unhappy mood, being the subject of gossip, fighting with others, and so forth. But imagine if I took rebirth in either the hot or cold hells, I would be in grave nonstop agony and there would be no Sunday breaks. If I should take rebirth in the hungry ghost realm, I’d be constantly torn by hunger and cold. If I should take rebirth in the animal realm, I’d be intimidated by other predators and end up fearing for my life.

If I can't even bear the little bit of suffering and pain of the happier human realm, how could I possibly endure the tortures found in the lower realms?

If we can think in this way, we will gain much more inner strength and won't become depressed when encountering suffering. Take the Covid-19 pandemic as an example. It has imposed on us all sorts of additional difficulties. If we can apply a little bit of renunciation or put ourselves in another's shoes, the intensity of our suffering will immediately begin to mitigate: "There are many who didn't get a chance to see their loved ones before their passing. How sad for them! So many people have to undergo loneliness, fear and pain, however, even these pitiable feelings are insignificant compared to the suffering of the lower realms." By contemplating the suffering of hell beings, hungry ghosts, and animals, the exaggerated idea that we are among the most unfortunate and pitiable will be mitigated, while the aspiration to achieve liberation from samsara will be enhanced. Therefore, this practice is crucial for practitioners to cope with the various sufferings that may fall upon them.

● **Rely on Suffering to Turn Our Mind Towards Liberation**

In Milarepa's biography, we find that when Milarepa returned home after finishing his studies, his mother had passed away and his sister was nowhere to be found. The abandoned house and the barren fields presented a pitiful sight. Anyone would be saddened to find that after returning home, everything that they had left behind was gone. While ordinary men are drenched in sorrow, Milarepa made up his mind, "This is how samsara is and the way that sentient beings suffer. I must put all my efforts into solitary Dharma practice." Because of this clear intention, he attained

liberation in one lifetime and is regarded as one of the greatest models of fierce exertion for practitioners.

Therefore, suffering can inspire genuine renunciation. There's an important teaching in *The Treasury of Pith Instructions*, quoted by Patrul Rinpoche in his *Words of My Perfect Teacher*:

*Assailed by afflictions, we discover the Dharma
And find the way to liberation. Thank you, evil forces!
When sorrows invade the mind, we discover the Dharma
And find lasting happiness. Thank you, sorrows!*

In this teaching Longchenpa points out a pithy twist in the thinking process. Should adversity and suffering eventually lead you to the Dharma path, they become a blessing of immense grace for you. Among the audience, some of you had experienced harm or oppression from others that provoked renunciation within you. A bad breakup, bullying, insults, or deception, could incite a great renunciation that leads you to pursue the Dharma and ultimate liberation. Although you have undergone a very difficult time, wherein both your body and mind were badly hurt, eventually you were able to realize the true reality of samsara and set the right goal of your life. Therefore, it can be said that those who have threatened or imposed harm on you are of great benefit to you.

Indeed, without hardship, very possibly we would never have the opportunity of awakening and, until the day we died, we would still be unsure of the truth of samsara. Our illnesses serve to remind us of the preciousness and meaning of life. While we were sick, we might have felt frustrated and desperate, but after we have recovered and look back at the struggle during that period of time, we may find out that it has been a valuable experience that has led us to realize the most meaningful thing in our life. Thus, we appreciate the benefit that even grave illness brings to us.

● Innumerable Suffering in Samsara

With practice, we have become aware that suffering is inevitable and is a major aspect of the nature of samsara. In the *Parinirvana Sutra*, it states,

*In the three realms of samsara,
Nothing pleasurable can be found,
But only the suffering of birth and aging,
And the defects of sickness and death.*

In samsara, there are infinite types of suffering that are derived from birth, aging, sickness and death. The *Yogacarabhumi Shastra* delineates 110 types of suffering including the three primary sufferings: the suffering of suffering, the suffering of change, and the all-pervasive suffering of conditioning. It also describes the seven types of suffering as the sufferings of birth, old age, sickness, death, meeting what is unpleasant, parting from what is pleasant and not finding what is being sought. In addition, it mentions the sufferings of extreme cold, extreme heat, starvation, thirst, lack of freedom, suffering caused by the decline of oneself and others, suffering due to the decline of wealth, health, precepts, right view, and more. There are also infinite forms of suffering that pervade the desire realm as well as the form and the formless realms. Without a strong mentality and an open mind that accepts suffering, we will find it nearly impossible to survive in this vast ocean of suffering.

In the *Sutra of the Bodhisattva's Primary Conduct*, it says, "By taking the karmic body in the three realms, all are subject to suffering." As long as we were born in this world, we cannot separate ourselves from suffering. Unless one transcends the three realms and attains Arthatship, Pratyekabuddhahood or Buddhahood, in which case, all suffering and its roots are fully uprooted, every sentient being in the three realms will continue to experience suffering. Even if one

were to take rebirth as a Chakravartin, an Indra, or a Brahma, one would still have to withstand sufferings. There are no exceptions to this.

Often, we are envious of rich, beautiful, and powerful people who seem to possess all of life's luxuries and privileges. Because of this, we might assume that their lives are stress-free. Yet, if we were to have the chance to look into their minds, we might well find that they are living a harder life than those of us who are not rich, beautiful or powerful. As we observe people pursuing their mundane pleasures, we see right through their beautiful disguises and find the *samsaric* suffering within.

- **Using Suffering to Train in Renunciation**

We must realize that most of the numerous types of physical and mental suffering in human life are actually caused by the mind. As we've mentioned in the previous lectures, external factors are not a major cause of suffering, it is our mind that discerns what is suffering. Therefore, it is essential that we recognize the nature of suffering, the source of suffering, and the effect of suffering. That way, we will have the ability to confront pain, even as we experience it. This is exceptionally vital.

If our mind is weak without recognizing that, "I should develop the capacity to endure all of this pain", we will surely struggle to stay afloat in the ocean of *samsara*. On the contrary, by embracing the fact that suffering is all-pervasive, our level of anxiety will lessen. Let's approach it by using another example: With the foreknowledge of how tough prison life is, we will find it easier to cope with it if we are ever put behind bars. On the other hand, if we are expecting a heavenly reception when we arrive, we will find the reality to be truly unbearable. Having experienced suffering

and identified its nature, we engender a heartfelt yearning for renunciation, as well as the wish for ultimate liberation. Thence, we will commit ourselves to the path of enlightenment with an earnest renunciation.

Therefore, when suffering arises, we would do better to think, “This is a perfect opportunity for me to break free from my delusion and recognize the true nature of samsara. I should use this experience to develop a sincere aspiration to free myself and all others from samsara.” Or we can think as follows: “It is natural that suffering should arise in my life, as samsaric beings cannot escape from suffering. So, for me to experience such suffering is quite fair.” With this type of contemplation, suffering will be not as unbearable as we had originally imagined.

Once, an atheist politician said to me, “Khenpo, I’ve been reading some philosophy lately and I have a strong feeling that birth, aging, illness, and death are the fairest things in this world.” I replied, “Yes, very well. But I’d suggest you look into Buddhism which offers more detail on this.” Whenever birth, aging, illness, or death strikes, renunciation of samsara and faith in the Buddhist doctrines is inspired. An unprecedented devotion to Dharma practice will arise inside one’s mind directly or indirectly. Here we conclude the first practice on how to approach suffering.

Root Text

b. Using Suffering to Train in Taking Refuge

Say to yourself: “Life after life, again and again, we are continuously plagued by these kinds of fears, and the only protection that can never fail us is the precious guide, the Buddha, the precious path, the Dharma, and the precious companions on the way, the Sangha: the Three Jewels. So it is on them that I must

rely, entirely. Whatever happens, I will never renounce them.” Let this become a firm conviction, and train in the practice of taking refuge.

One should never forsake the Three Jewels, even in the face of fear and pain, as they are the only protection that can never fail us. If one has not yet developed a solid understanding of the qualities of the Three Jewels, then I’d encourage you to study *The Sutra of the Recollection of the Noble Three Jewels*. Regarding taking refuge in the Three Jewels, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok delivered *My Heart Advice and the Secret Pith Instructions* in Nova Scotia, Canada. It was an exceptional talk which volunteers translated into more than 15 languages. As a result, many people from many different countries around the world, have been inspired, intrigued, and have had their hearts touched deeply by his words.

● The Only Protection in Samsara

The Three Jewels are our sole reliance and safeguard in samsara, and can dispel all kinds of suffering. We samsaric beings undergo various fears and problems. If we genuinely contemplate the qualities of the Three Jewels to generate conviction, we will find the power of the Three Jewels inconceivable. As mentioned in the *Mahavaipulya Mahasamghata Sutra*: with an immense faith in the Three Jewels, an infinite amount of suffering can be dispelled. By relying on the Three Jewels, all suffering in the human realm can be driven away.

The *Sutra of the Lady Who Has Purified all Defilements* says,

*No other place of reliance
Could safeguard sentient beings,*

*But the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.
The Three Jewels are the only protector.*

When we are experiencing great suffering and fear, it is no use to entrust our faith to such other sentient beings, as worldly gods and deities, who are also shackled by karma and afflictions. How could they guide us towards liberation when they are even not able to liberate themselves? Only the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha offer the transcendent qualities and abilities that can lead us out of samsara. In the *Manjushri's Inquiry Sutra*, it says,

*By taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha,
And the Four Noble Truths,
Which are the most supreme refuge of peace,
One is liberated from all sufferings.*

By taking refuge in the Three Jewels and the Four Noble Truths, we can certainly find the rightful place of refuge where all the sufferings are pacified and peace is obtained. I'm sure many of you would agree with this on an experiential level. Even if we leave aside, for the moment, being set free from samsara, even the most mundane secular concerns and anxieties can be resolved through the blessings of the Three Jewels. Before you took refuge, you were unhappy, irritable and often heartbroken and life was filled with many troubles that seemed to be too difficult to overcome. But now that you have found a supreme place of refuge, through faith and devotion, you've gained the strength to cope with all difficulties and afflictions. Having conviction in the refuge, one can work through all situations with courage and positivity.

● Using Suffering to Train in Taking Refuge

Therefore, suffering can be used as an opportunity to train in taking refuge. When in pain, we can immerse ourselves in recollecting

the qualities of the Three Jewels, and through this practice, our suffering will dissipate. For example, if you are having a rough day, recite the refuge verse,

*I take refuge in the Guru,
I take refuge in the Buddha,
I take refuge in the Dharma,
I take refuge in the Sangha.*

This is an extremely powerful way to pacify whatever suffering we are confronted with. Personally, it helps me a lot whenever I encounter problems. Since it is no use to cry about them, I just settle my mind and pray sincerely and devotionally to my guru and the Three Jewels. Amazingly, certain miracles happen. So, in times like this, reaffirm your conviction to the Three Jewels and aspire from the bottom of your heart never to forsake the Three Jewels. Instead of feeling desperate, take the chance to exert yourselves in practicing the refuge.

As we are aware, many people turn to Buddhism when they realize that nothing secular can provide any substantial reliance. Often, family and friends may worry that one might be becoming too “superstitious” by devoting oneself to religious practice. They might seek to discourage him, or even at first, keep themselves at a distance from that person. Yet, after he has taken refuge in Buddhism and committed himself to work on his mind and conduct, a positive effect takes place in many aspects of his life, such as in his career, interpersonal relationships, and other aspects of his life. When others see these changes, they will flock to him.

In my case though, I didn’t assume the monastic life because of personal suffering. Many journalists have asked me, “You were 23 when you became a monk. Were you in such great distress that you made this decision without thinking it through?” I clarify for them that I wasn’t under any distress and that I already had faith in the

Three Jewels. But when I took on monasticism, it is nevertheless true that my college teachers, schoolmates, and relatives rejected me, thinking that I was out of my mind. Later, however, as my study and practice progressed, the attitude of many people who saw an unexpected improvement in me, changed.

That being said, when our view is right and our conduct is in accord with that view, humans and non-human beings will venerate us with their support. However, if our views and conduct are improper, then all humans and non-human beings will turn away from us. Thus, taking refuge in the Three Jewels is the wisest decision one can ever make.

LECTURE FIVE

However, if we become familiar with the practices of transforming suffering and do our best to apply them when suffering arises, gradually we will be able to face it and even transform it. In my life, I have encountered many unpleasant and tough things. Although at that time they were quite unbearable, I did try to use them as the path. Thus, rather than acting as obstacles, they resulted in something meaningful. So, when you encounter any type of suffering, first and foremost, do not be afraid. Then, try to contemplate and practice the instruction taught here and you will find that you will be able to accept it courageously.

– Khenpo Sodargye

Choose a Practice and Familiarize with It

5

Suffering and Antidote

Now we continue with the study of *Transforming Suffering and Happiness into Enlightenment*. Given the many changes and uncertainties caused by current situation of the world, as well as the many people who are suffering and miserable, this year more than ever, it is quite timely and helpful for us to learn such an applicable pith instruction.

- **You Are Not Alone in Experiencing Suffering**

It would certainly be better if we were to have no suffering and no need of this instruction. However, the simple truth is that suffering is unavoidable for everyone. During the Spring Festival, an interview was conducted in which people were asked the question, “Do you feel happy?” Although many people replied “Yes”, I question whether there might have been quite a few who did not speak truthfully, as they may have felt ashamed to admit that they were suffering. While it would be great for all people to enjoy constant happiness, the fact is that everyone in this life experiences suffering from time to time. If there were to be a survey with the question, “Do you feel that you are suffering?”, and if people were to be open and frank, I believe that there would be many who would answer “Yes.”

Our life is accompanied by myriad kinds and causes of suffering. Sometimes, multiple types of misery befall us at the same time.

This, in Buddhism, is called the suffering of suffering and is a type of blatant suffering that weighs one down with a feeling of heaviness. Particularly during this time of pandemic, many people might have a deeper feeling for the suffering of suffering. Since the pandemic has impacted the global economy, many people's job and income has been negatively affected, and thus they are exposed to sudden and unexpected financial pressures, and may even be unable to make regular payments on their car loans, home mortgages, and so on. Additionally, many people's long-term plans have been interrupted by the pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, it is not unusual for problems to follow one after another, including on the international scale where the spread of the coronavirus has led to economic upheaval, political tension and a host of other problems. On an individual level, many are experiencing broken relationships, the loss of their jobs, anxiety and fear caused by having been diagnosed with the infection, and many other ways in which the quality of life has been undermined.

● Embrace Suffering Gracefully

When misfortune strikes, we must learn how to deal with it. While it is admirable to bite the bullet and endure difficulties with bravery and toughness, this is just a passive acceptance of suffering and does not result in the same outcome as is taught in this text. As taught by Tenpe Nyima, we'd better to accept suffering positively with a sense of joy and to consider it as an opportunity for spiritual progress. This may sound unrealistic, as our habitual reaction towards suffering would typically be frustration, fear and rejection, and to hope that whatever is causing us pain will end as quickly as possible. Whenever we experience such miseries as falling ill, being slandered by others or being threatened because of our debts, our first thought would normally be to want them to be gone as

soon as possible. On the other hand, an experienced practitioner would be exhilarated to have the chance to practice transforming suffering into enlightenment.

Although it is not easy for most people to achieve such a state, as long as one keeps practicing, in time they will be able to learn to face misfortunes with a positive attitude. For this reason, it is necessary to become familiar with the mind training methods contained in this instruction, as it enables one to bravely face any tribulation in life and to become fearless in the face of it, and even to be able to embrace it gracefully. Everyone experiences suffering, but few are able to detach themselves from its harm and disturbance. If we can train our minds to reach a state where we remain unwavering or unbothered by suffering, then we can certainly succeed in whatever else we may choose to do.

Therefore, as I mentioned earlier, this teaching is quite relevant and applicable. It is not like the philosophy of Madhyamika, which to many people seems disconnected from real life, even though it reveals the ultimate reality that enables people to break free from all extremes and attachment. It is, however, applicable only after one has gained a thorough understanding of its logic. On the other hand, everyone feels that the teaching on transforming suffering into enlightenment is relatable, as we all experience suffering and seek to be freed from its pain.

Practice Is the Basis for Transforming Suffering

In the last session, we talked about cultivating the attitude of being joyful when suffering arises. In order for this to happen, everyone needs to choose a type of practice that most matches the capacity

of their mind and to follow it as their primary form of practice over the long term. In this regard, Tenpe Nyima lists seven types of practice, of which we have already discussed the first two. These are: using suffering to train in renunciation and the taking of refuge. If you train your mind well in renunciation, then when suffering arises, it will bring no harm to you but will instead turn your mind towards liberation and enlightenment. If you follow the practice of supplicating to the Three Jewels, the blessing of the Three Jewels will remove your misery. Even if the effect is not immediate, by relying on the Three Jewels as your place of refuge, you will feel settled in your mind.

Before we move on to the next practice, it is necessary to stress again the importance of actual practice. As mentioned previously, we should be able to use suffering as an ally on the path, and thus to develop a sense of joy when it arises. Yet, whenever suffering strikes, unless we have some kind of spiritual training, no matter how many times we might tell ourselves to embrace suffering with a joyful attitude, it is unlikely to work. This is because once suffering befalls them, people are likely to feel shattered and may even lose the hope that their life will ever again be free of pain, in which case, it would be hard to cheer them up with comforting words or with the abstract idea of transforming suffering. This is especially true when one has accumulated such severe negative karma that it has led to overwhelming suffering.

Karma plays an important role in determining our experience of suffering and happiness. If one has accumulated only a small amount of negative karma, one will suffer less in life and when suffering does occur it won't be as severe or beyond what one can manage and endure. Conversely, if one has accumulated heavy negative karma in one's previous lives and it ripens in this life, one will have to bear severe mental suffering or physical pain with no way to cope with it. This is why some people suffer little or no

illness in the course of their life and may even die in peace with contentment, whereas others, including even some great masters and excellent practitioners, have had to experience severe and unbearable illnesses.

When negative karma ripens, especially in the form of severe illness, it is rather difficult for one to treat it as an opportunity for practice and develop a sense of joy. I, myself, have had such an experience. While I can manage most mental discomfort and distress, when I suffer from some type of agonizing physical illness, it really is not easy to tolerate it peacefully, not to mention developing a sense of joy towards it, especially when the agony is persistent.

However, if we become familiar with the practices of transforming suffering and do our best to apply them when suffering arises, gradually we will be able to face it and even transform it. In my life, I have encountered many unpleasant and tough things. Although at that time they were quite unbearable, I did try to use them as the path. Thus, rather than acting as obstacles, they turned into something meaningful. So, when you encounter any type of suffering, first and foremost, do not be afraid. Then, try to contemplate and practice the instruction taught here and you will find that you will be able to accept it courageously.

Seven Approaches for Transforming Suffering Joyfully

Root Text

c. Using Suffering to Overcome Arrogance

As I explained before, [as long as we are in samsara] we are never independent or truly free or in control of our lives. On

the contrary, we are always dependent on and at the mercy of suffering. So we must eliminate “the enemy that destroys anything that is wholesome and good”, which is arrogance and pride; and we must do away with the evil attitude of belittling others and considering them as inferior.

When we encounter suffering, in addition to using it to cultivate renunciation and faith in the Three Jewels, we can also use it to overcome arrogance. Some people might feel that, “I don’t think that I am arrogant, so why do I need to overcome it?” Actually, as is said in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, “Of all negative emotions, pride and jealousy are the most difficult to recognize. Therefore, examine your mind minutely.” It happens that arrogance sneakily hides under our disguise of humility and sincerity, and it is due to this negative emotion that we may have accumulated a lot of negative karma. You might not realize it now, but in due course when your intelligence matures and you become rich in life’s experiences, you will recognize how arrogance has led you to many kinds of misconduct.

We can overcome our arrogance by realizing the fact that living beings in samsara are so pathetic that we all have to involuntarily experience the various kinds of worldly suffering and are unable to rid ourselves of them. If we deeply contemplate the defects of samsara, we will become good practitioners. With an understanding of the suffering of samsara and the truth of impermanence, even if we enjoy the kind of prosperity and success that most people admire, we will not become arrogant since we know that these are impermanent and are always accompanied by suffering. Also, we will not be envious of another’s wealth, high status, beauty or anything else. I’ve met with a lot of people with abundant wealth or high status and although they are blessed with prosperity, due to a lack of spiritual training, they are still at the mercy of the sufferings of samsara. All of the enjoyment brought by prosperity

and success, which is so admired by most people in the world, is not as desirable as we may think because it is, for the most part, either a kind of suffering in itself or can become the cause of suffering.

By reflecting on the above fact, we should be able to realize that we must eliminate arrogance and the evil attitude of belittling others, because these are enemies that destroy everything that is wholesome and good. Arrogance undermines the root of virtue, as it obstructs us from engaging in the practice of virtue and may also lead us to disturb others' engagement in virtuous practice. Arrogance also inhibits our kindness as it causes us to belittle others and consider them as inferior, which is another type of evil attitude that leads to severe karmic retribution. Therefore, a deep understanding of the suffering of samsara or any other profound philosophy in Buddhism, enables us to discard these two types of negative attitude.

A lot of people have a feeling of superiority about themselves because they have wealth, power, fame, or other qualities that by worldly standards surpass others. This feeling causes them to belittle or jeer at others by making snide remarks or behave in other ways that creates suffering in others. This is not good, and the result of such an attitude and behaviour will be terrifying and unbearable. The story of Bhikkhu Nīthi in the sutra, reveals the exact and terrible consequences of being arrogant. Nīthi was born in the time of the Buddha, into a family of Shudra, the fourth and lowest of the traditional varnas, or social classes of India, and worked as a dung-sweeper. Later, he was converted by the Buddha and became a great Arhat. When people wondered why Nīthi had been born into such a low caste and had to work as a dung-sweeper, the Buddha explained that as a result of having been contemptuous of his subordinate and commanding him to clean up his chamber pot during a previous life, he had been reborn

as a lowly dung-sweeper for 500 lifetimes.

- **Everything Is Impermanent, So Why Be Arrogant?**

Moreover, it is unwise to be arrogant because everything in this world is impermanent. In the sutra, *Mindfulness of the True Dharma*, it says,

*Appearance, caste, wealth and possessions,
As well as all kinds of prosperity and enjoyments
All of these are impermanent,
In which the wise should not trust.*

People become arrogant because they are attractive, wealthy, born into a noble family or own gorgeous things for their enjoyment or entertainment. Even a child may be proud and feel superior for possessing a beautiful piece of candy wrapping paper or a candy that his little friends may not have. Adults may show off because they possess a sumptuous villa, a luxury car, a PhD degree, or anything else that makes them feel unique and superior. However, the wise one never cares too much about those external things, as they are aware that these are impermanent phenomena, which are as unreliable as water bubbles that will burst and disappear. This year, due to the pandemic, many people gained a better understanding of impermanence, as they have witnessed or experienced the loss of family members, possessions, jobs, status and so on. While this kind of impermanence brings suffering, in some ways it has value, as it destroys one's arrogance.

Last year, I encountered some obstacles to my Dharma activities as many of them were forcibly terminated. In the beginning, I was upset, but then I thought to myself that it was not a bad thing because it forced me to become humbler. Without obstacles or suffering, we might never be aware of such defects in our

mindstream as arrogance. So, rather than remaining upset, I took the opportunity to sincerely wish those who had been jealous of me to be happier and more satisfied. I do believe it is a good thing to have some difficulties in life, otherwise, we might never reflect on our faults and give rise to the mind of renunciation that leads us to liberation. Even worse, due to our blind arrogance, we may continue to accumulate even more negative karma.

As an example, when a person is healthy and strong, they may care very little for anyone else. But once they become seriously ill, they might become a humble and devout Buddhist. There are some people who at one time were in a position of power, but after having lost their powerful positions, they no longer give themselves airs when talking with others. People tend to be arrogant when they are materially abundant, even though material possessions are impermanent and tainted by destructive emotions. But when they lose these, they are likely to become modest and compliant. So, from this aspect, misfortune is beneficial to us.

Root Text

d. Using Suffering to Purify Harmful Actions

Remind yourself and realize: “All this suffering which I’m going through, and suffering which is greater still—all the boundless suffering that there is—come from nothing but harmful, negative actions.”

Reflect, carefully and thoroughly, how:

1. karma is certain—cause and effect is infallible;
2. karma multiplies enormously;
3. you will never face the effects of something you have not done;
4. whatever you have done will never go to waste.

Then say to yourself: “So, if I really don’t want to suffer any more, then I must give up the cause of suffering, which is negativity.” With the help of “The Four Powers”, make an effort to acknowledge and purify all the negative actions you have accumulated in the past, and then firmly resolve to avoid doing them in the future.

When encountering obstacles, some dharma friends will comfort themselves by saying, “It’s okay. This purifies my negative karma from previous lifetimes. Although it is really afflicting and unbearable, it is good for me.” This really is quite to the point as it is important to build a deep conviction of the law of cause and effect. Realize that whatever suffering we experience is due to our past misconduct. If you often suffer from illness, realize that it is probably because you deprived others of their lives in one or more of your previous lives. If you are always hard up and your money is quickly exhausted, do not complain about others or feel jealous of those who are wealthy. Be assured that it is because you have stripped others of their possessions in previous lifetimes.

When you experience suffering, reflect carefully and thoroughly on these four points: 1) The karmic law of cause and effect is infallible; good will be rewarded with good, and evil with evil. 2) Karma exists in the mindstream of every living being and its effect multiplies enormously with the passing of time, just as money kept in the bank accrues interest. 3) One will never face the effects of something that one has never done. 4) Whatever one has done will never go to waste.

As we often quote from the *Sutra of a Hundred Actions*,

*Even after a hundred kalpas
The actions of beings are never lost.
When the conditions come together
Their fruit will fully ripen.*

Therefore, if you don't want to experience suffering, you must rid yourself of its cause. What is the cause of suffering? It is negative karma or action, such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and others. How to get rid of it? By relying on the four powers of confession, to purify all the negative karma that you have accumulated in the past and firmly resolve to never commit these same thoughts or deeds again. Otherwise, if you do not purify your negative karma, it will definitely ripen into suffering.

The Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom says,

Karma has enormous power

That does not run after those who have not created it.

However, before it is time to ripen into effects,

It neither vanishes nor shrinks.

The influence of karma is overwhelming, but it never befalls those who have not created it in the first place; only the one who did so will experience its fruit. When the proper conditions come together, the fruit will ripen in the being of those who first planted its seed. It will never ripen in the being of others or anywhere else in the material world. Before it ripens, this fruit never disappears, vanishes or gets exhausted, not even after hundreds of thousands of eons.

● Suffering Is a Commutation

It is reassuring that many practitioners have conviction in the karmic law. They know it is terrible to perform unwholesome actions, as the accumulated negative karma will bear painful fruit that will never lose its efficacy, even if one has attained the fruition of arhat or bodhisattva. From historical records, we can see that even some great masters have experienced the retribution of their past negative karma. Master Xuanzang experienced illness during

the last days of his life because of his negative karma from previous lives. He understood that as a result of his contribution to Buddhism, his negative karma, which otherwise would have ripened into even more severe sufferings, had been largely purified. Therefore, whenever we experience suffering, understand that it serves to purify the negative actions that we have accumulated in the past. *The Diamond Sutra* says, “If it be that good men and good women who receive and retain this discourse are downtrodden, their evil destiny is the inevitable retributive result of sins committed in their past mortal lives. By virtue of their present misfortunes, the reacting effects of their past will be thereby worked out and they will be in a position to attain the consummation of incomparable enlightenment.”

That is why some Buddhists who had previously enjoyed good health, begin to experience physical illness or discomfort after engaging in such virtuous practices as the practice of confession. Due to the power of their spiritual practice, their negative karma ripens prematurely but in a less severe way during this lifetime, so that they won’t have to undergo the unbearable suffering that they would otherwise experience in later lives. So, in this way, suffering is good as it purifies our negativities. Whenever we encounter suffering, we should try to remind ourselves that without suffering, we may never realize and confess our faults. As an example, some people realize the preciousness of all lives as a result of suffering from a serious illness and this realization has led them to resolve to abstain from eating meat and seafood, and begin to engage in freeing captured animals.

Now due to the pandemic, many people have begun to reflect on the harm that human beings have brought to other animals and to nature. They realize that the over-slaughtering and over-hunting of animals by modern people probably has in part led to this pandemic, and they feel sorry about that. Seen from this point

of view, the pandemic is not so bad, as it has made many people examine their behavior and purify their negativities. Thus, if we reflect thoroughly and rightly, we will see the meaning of the pandemic rather than becoming overcome by pessimism.

Root Text

e. Using Suffering to Find Joy in Positive Action

Say to yourself: “If I really want to find happiness, which is the opposite of suffering, then I have got to make an effort to practice its cause, which is positive action.” Think about this in detail, and from every angle, and dwell on the implications. Then in every way possible, do whatever you can to make your positive, beneficial actions increase.

Suffering sometimes leads people to positive action. I’ve personally witnessed cases where people who had not previously believed in the Three Jewels, who suddenly turned to seeking help from the sangha and began to engage in virtuous actions such as freeing animals. This came about after they had encountered suffering or obstacles in their lives. During the pandemic, Dharma practitioners have seen that many previous non-religious family members or friends suddenly come to them to ask for Buddhist ritual items that may bless them and protect them from the coronavirus. Even if, previously, they had strong objections to the practice and belief of Buddhism, during this time of great suffering and psychological unrest, they have started to believe in and rely on the power of Buddhism. This is the good side of suffering, as it can lead one to the light of belief.

So, when encountering suffering, it is important to arouse the mind to take joy in positive action. We must constantly remind ourselves of the fact that the direct cause of happiness is the practice of virtue,

while the direct cause of suffering is the practice of non-virtue. If we really want to find happiness and get rid of suffering in this and all future lives, we have got to make an effort to practice its cause. As long as we engage in virtuous practice, even though we are experiencing suffering, gradually the suffering will depart, virtue will be increased and happiness gained.

Finding joy in positive action also means strengthening our belief in virtue when we are in the midst of suffering. Most practitioners, when life is going right, are happy and outwardly seem to be devoted to Buddhism and virtuous practice. However, once unbearable suffering strikes, they are quick to abandon both their belief and their practice. In order to prevent this situation from occurring, whenever we encounter a negative situation, we need to remind ourselves with great specificity of the benefits of virtue and resolve never to lose faith in virtuous practice.

● Do Not Lose Your Faith in Times of Difficulty

Venerable Master Mengcan was imprisoned for 33 years in the latter part of his life, experiencing pain that one can hardly imagine. Each time that he was forced to undergo one of these pain-filled experiences, he would inspire himself with a stanza from the *Avatamsaka Sutra* which reads,

*Even if a blazing wheel
Were spinning on top of my head,
I will not transgress my bodhicitta
For the sake of departing from suffering.*

I really like this stanza. It is quite important to evoke such an unshakeable determination so that we will never renounce the practice of virtue regardless of whatever adversity we may face or whatever cost we must bear. In the face of difficulties or obstacles,

there are cases where some monastics have given up their monastic vows and returned to the life of an ordinary person; there are also cases where practitioners have regressed in their beliefs and given up their spiritual practices. This is because they had not studied the Dharma deeply enough nor had they engaged well enough in practice. Thus, they failed to build a sufficiently firm sense of belief and determination. If they had built a firmer belief, they would not have been so easily shaken by whatever might have befallen them.

Trials and tribulations test whether a practitioner's faith is firm and unmovable. Once one has developed an unmovable faith, they will never give up their spiritual practice regardless of how painful the suffering they are asked to bear may be. Furthermore, they will use their suffering to find joy in virtuous practice. There is a saying that goes, "Be light and handy when in the saddle while remaining weighty and steady in crucial times." It is in crucial times during which one is confronted with disaster or suffering, that one's true character is revealed. Bad practitioners can hardly pass the test of even the tiniest of obstacles, whereas good practitioners, when challenged by difficulty, become even more inspired in their belief and practice, just as the refinery process serves to make gold purer.

When Master Mengcan was released from the prison, people asked him if he had thought of committing suicide while in prison. He said, "The thought did occur to me, but because in my dream, I had a vision that I would come out of prison and spread the Dharma, I felt that because of the chance to teach the Dharma for the remainder of my life, with this in mind, I was able to remain patient with life in prison." So, although he experienced great suffering while in prison, as he later recalled his experience there, it was going through that suffering that led to his rapid progress on the spiritual path.

Some practitioners may also experience such severe suffering on the spiritual path that the negative thought of suicide might arise in their mind as well. When this happens, realize that it is nothing more than a transient, temporary and conceptual thought and do not follow it. Pray to the Three Jewels and try to take control of your emotions, and through this, your spiritual practice will go smoothly and you may even be able to promote the Dharma and to benefit other beings in the future.

While we try to increase our virtue, it is important to know that the indispensable way to do so is to generate virtuous intention. In *Treatise on Response and Retribution*, it states that if we keep kindness in our mind, the benevolent god will accompany us, whereas if we hold onto evil in our mind, then that harmful god will follow us. I have no doubt about this. We can see that if one is kind, things usually go as one wishes, while if one is mean to oneself or others, holds onto grudges or expresses aversion towards those around him or her, then one will always have trouble. This is a natural law, taught by the wise teachers of the past. Therefore, we should hold a conviction in this law and apply it in our life.

Root Text

f. Using Suffering to Train in Compassion

Say to yourself: “Just like me, others too are tormented by similar suffering, or even much worse...” Train yourself by thinking: “If only they could be free from all this suffering! How wonderful it would be!” This will also help you to understand how to practice loving kindness, where the focus of the practice is those who have no happiness.

Another good side of suffering is that it helps us to train in compassion. When we are tormented by suffering, we should think,

“There are many living beings who are also suffering like me, or even worse.” Then we should train ourselves in cultivating the wish, “May they be free from suffering and attain happiness.” The practice of compassion is the basis for the generation of bodhicitta and those who have trained in bodhicitta are quite familiar with it.

Living beings are pitiable and are afflicted with all kinds of suffering. Usually, we would not realize that, but when we experience suffering ourselves, we can more easily understand the pain of others. For example, when we suffer from poverty, we will generate empathy towards those who experience destitution; when we are tormented by illness, we can better understand those who are afflicted by sickness. There was a time when I suffered from foot pain and had difficulty in walking. From then on, I was able to show strong compassion towards those who have disabilities in their legs. Once at an airport while I was walking to the luggage claim area, I saw someone moving with difficulty as a result of some kind of problem with his legs; he was struggling with his carry-on luggage. Since there was quite a distance to the luggage claim area, I just came up to him and helped him carry his suitcase. So, suffering can trigger the compassion to help others to dispel similar sufferings.

In the same way that we can use suffering to practice compassion, we can also use it to practice loving kindness towards those who have no happiness. All ordinary beings are haunted by suffering; this is why our compassion and loving kindness can be triggered by the experience of having suffered ourselves. We know how painful it is to experience suffering, so we naturally dislike it. In spite of this, we remain ignorant of the suffering of others. We know that there are those who are left distraught by war and others that live in desperation due to famine, but because they are far from us, we tend to be indifferent. As it is said in an old Tibetan saying, “To

burn a moxa stick on cloth is far different than to burn it on skin.” This is quite true. We suffer when misfortune falls on us or on our close and beloved ones, but feel indifferent when it falls on those who are not related to us. This suggests that we lack training in compassion and loving kindness.

Examples can be found in our responses to the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Some people experience a near breakdown when a member of their family gets infected, but would have almost no reaction if the same thing were to occur to a stranger. There are also cases where people became quite concerned and worried when the pandemic spread in their own country, but when the pandemic spread to in other countries, especially when those countries did not have a good relationship with their own, they took pleasure in their misfortune. This is far from the Mahayana spirit of compassion. A good Mahayana practitioner feels the same pain and may even lament with tears, when seeing the suffering of other beings, no matter who they are. However, most people, who have never trained in compassion, care only about the pain that affects either themselves or their loved ones, and are not bothered too much by the suffering of others. This is where suffering manifests its value of inspiring our compassion and loving kindness toward all living beings.

Root Text

g. Using Suffering to Cherish Others More Than Yourself

Train yourself to think: “The very reason why I am not free from suffering such as this is that from time immemorial I have cared only about myself. Now, from this moment onwards, I will only cherish others, as this is the source of all happiness and good.”

The very reason that we suffer is because, driven by ego, we

are constantly cherishing ourselves and ignoring the suffering of others. From beginningless time, we love only that which relates to ourselves—our body, our family, and anything else that we identify as ours, while at the same time, we reject and abandon others. This is the exact source of all of our suffering. Now that we have entered the Mahayana path with the helpful guidance of our spiritual teachers, we should realize that others are equal to us and that our selfishness is our biggest enemy: one that causes us to experience suffering. Thus, from now on, we should try not to inflict harm on other beings, and moreover, we must abandon the attachment to self and wholeheartedly commit ourselves to the benefit of all sentient beings.

Although it is not an easy task, to forget oneself and work perseveringly on the cause of benefiting others is the utter responsibility of Mahayana practitioners who have taken the bodhisattva vow. Since we have vowed to generate bodhichitta, it is our choice and aspiration to, in whatever way possible, benefit all sentient beings who wander miserably in the suffering sea of samsara. We must do this regardless of how small the benefit we might bring. Therefore, we should practice cherishing others more than ourselves, and try to do what we can to bring actual benefit to sentient beings.

However, before we engage in this practice, we need to first practice equalizing ourselves and others and then practice exchanging others and ourselves. Without such a step-by-step training, it is hard for most people to cultivate the sincere altruism that leads them to cherish others more than themselves. Mostly, when ordinary people claim to love others, such love is based on attachment and self-grasping, which actually brings harm to both oneself and others. Such love is distorted and contaminated by deluded thought and can seldom bring any real benefit to others. Only the love from bodhisattvas can be called true love, as it is a great love that is completely selfless.

Do Not Be Caught Unprepared by Suffering

The above are the seven practices that are needed for cultivating the attitude of being joyful when suffering arises. Without those practices, it would be hard for one to give rise to joy when suffering really befalls them. So, everyone should choose one or two practices that they are most familiar with and try to apply them. It is not realistic that one could become truly familiar with all seven practices, as it would require a lot of time and effort. So, choose certain practices that you feel are most suitable for yourself and constantly train yourself in them whenever you encounter suffering. For example, when you are sick, or confronted with big obstacles, you may think, “May I take other beings’ suffering upon myself so that they will experience less suffering.” In this way, your suffering will become meaningful.

- **Prepare Beforehand**

Root Text

It is extremely difficult to use suffering as the path when it has already struck, and is staring us in the face. That is why it is crucial to become familiar in advance with the specific practices to be used when misfortune and difficulties befall us. It is also particularly helpful, and will really count, if we use the practice we know best, and of which we have a clear, personal experience.

Without having become familiar with a specific practice in advance, it is extremely hard to use suffering as the path to enlightenment when suffering actually strikes. Say, after listening to this teaching,

you suddenly got the bad news of the death of one of your parents, you would very likely fail to give rise to a positive attitude rather than breaking down as the instruction has taught. But if you are already well-prepared with one of the above practices, then when it happens, you will find it far easier to make your suffering meaningful. For instance, you can deepen your realization of the impermanence and defects of samsara, and strengthen your determination to acquire liberation for yourself and for all living beings.

Therefore, it is crucial to become familiar in advance with the specific practices to be used when misfortune and difficulty befall us. It is necessary for soldiers to train every day before they go into battle because with enough training, even if soldiers have never before fought in a war, they will be able to manage well, if called upon to respond to an attack. The same applies in our practice. The more we familiarize ourselves with the specific practices, whether that is renunciation, impermanence, or cherishing others more than oneself, by applying it whenever a negative situation occurs, the better prepared we will be in a time of severe suffering. If we have been well-prepared, when suffering befalls us, our mind will be open enough to embrace it.

Enough training is the exact reason that some practitioners are able to face any adversity, never retrogressing, but constantly making progress on their spiritual path. Indeed, training is indispensable not only in spiritual practice, but in whatever we do, if we want to be successful. This is true whether we are striving to gain more knowledge or to gain comfort and familiarity with a particular technique. With enough mind training, we will be able to transform suffering into the path to enlightenment, while without it, we will fail even if we have been bestowed with all kinds of happiness. During this process, it is crucial that we master a couple of specific practices that we know best and that are most suitable for us. This

is particularly true for those who are still young and have the freedom to practice as they need to, seize on every opportunity to engage in the Dharma practice or else, when impermanence hits, they will be left helpless.

This year of 2020 seems to be a year of catastrophe for human beings, beginning with the pandemic and followed by the global food crisis, economic recession, as well as many natural disasters and man-made conflicts. At such a time, the importance of spiritual training is explicitly revealed, especially for those who have been slothful in their own practice or who blindly feel complacent about themselves. In times of emergency, those who are most well-prepared and have made regular deposits to their bank accounts will be able to make it through hard times, whereas those who have no savings will be left helpless. Likewise, now in this year of catastrophe, people who have avidly engaged in spiritual practice and have accumulated enough “spiritual deposits” will be able to make it through much more easily, whereas those that lack actual training, even if they have listened to a lot of Dharma teachings, will fall short.

We must therefore prepare ourselves for future uncertainties and sufferings by engaging in spiritual practice while we are still young and capable, as it will be too late to practice when we have become old and suffer from vision loss, deafness, poor memory and many of the other problems that make us feeble in learning and practicing the Dharma. An old saying goes, “Do not put off your spiritual practice until old, since quite a lot of people die while still young.” This is an important point. We need to familiarize ourselves with Dharma practices while we are young, healthy and energetic.

We must constantly remind ourselves that suffering is definite and inevitable and that we have to prepare ourselves beforehand, just as when going on a journey to a high plateau, one will prepare

some medicine for dealing with altitude sickness. No one can be exempted from suffering, and no matter who one is, whether one has status and wealth or not, one is bound to face the unavoidable suffering of birth, old age, sickness and death. When suffering strikes, there is no use in crying and wishing for it to disappear. Because the preparation of certain methods to transform suffering is far more precious and useful than anything else, it is always necessary to reflect on how to deal with suffering and prepare ourselves beforehand.

As for myself, I feel I do well in the face of suffering, and, for this reason I am able to share this teaching with you based on my own personal experience. Whenever I encounter difficulties in my daily life or in my spiritual practice, I see it as a good thing. At such times, I think, "Okay, since I cannot evade it, I will joyfully accept it and try to transform it." This doesn't mean to fight with it recklessly in a head-to-head manner, which likely won't work. My way is to learn about it and adjust myself as necessary, so as to seek a way to turn it into something meaningful.

● **Never Trust the Phenomenal World**

Just as with suffering, everyone is subject to impermanence. If you fail to realize this and remain unprepared for it, you are bound to suffer over and over again. So, try not to be too attached to anything or to anyone because when impermanence manifests, you will break down. As I mentioned the other day, it is unwise to put all your money and possessions into a single investment, because if it fails, you will be left penniless. Similarly, whatever you do, do not become fully attached to the thing and always prepare for the likelihood of losing it. We must constantly bear in mind that nothing in samsara is unchanging nor will it last forever. Some people might think that to hold to this attitude of impermanence is

too negative, and that we should try to see the beauty of life. In fact, to prepare ourselves for the reality of impermanence isn't being negative at all, but will actually serve to make us more positive and adaptable when suffering really does strike. Those who have never cultivated the attitude of impermanence may just freak out and want to escape from suffering, which is far more pessimistic than learning to embrace and transcend it.

These practices of transforming suffering into the path to enlightenment are very necessary as they help us to become well prepared so that not only will we not be defeated by suffering, but we will be able to transform suffering into a favourable condition for our spiritual path. In the biography of the Buddha, it states that if there were no Devadatta, who continually disturbed and sought to do him harm, the Buddha would not have completed the six paramitas. Specifically, it was Devadatta's disturbances that created the opportunity for the Buddha to accomplish all of the paramitas. This is a perfect example that should serve to inspire all followers who seek enlightenment.

When we practice transforming suffering into enlightenment, we should take as our main focus a practice that we know well and of which we have a clear and personal experience. I personally prefer the practice of impermanence and renunciation. Whenever I experience such suffering as a deteriorating health condition or defamation, if I contemplate the truth of impermanence, my suffering becomes weakened. Although suffering is an excruciating and devastating feeling, if you practice by contemplating impermanence, whatever it is that brought you to a place of suffering will be seen as no big deal.

Say if you were suddenly diagnosed with terminal cancer and were told that you only had three months left to live. What would you do? Would you be able to accept it peacefully, and think contently,

“Okay, sounds good, there is still enough time to do a one-hundred-day retreat.”? A good practitioner should be able to maintain such a positive attitude in the face of anything that might befall them. If you can do this, then whenever difficulties you may experience, you will be able to face them with more happiness.

But never focus strictly on the pursuit of happiness, as the nature of samsara is suffering. If we do not realize this point and believe that we can achieve a happy and wonderful life in this world, we are bound to be disappointed. For this reason, it is important to prepare ourselves before things go wrong by realizing the nature of samsara and training in the mind of renunciation.

Nowadays, due to media driven propaganda, many young people, especially college students, indulge in the fantasy of living a life of luxury and looking forward to a wonderful future that they may never be able to achieve. As they grow older and make their way into society, they very likely will be faced with the harsh reality of finding that there is a huge gap between their expectations and reality. Given such mixed messages, how can these students find the proper way to adjust their attitude and their mind? I believe that it would be best for them if they familiarize themselves with the true reality of this phenomenal world and thus have a mindset that prepares them to accept whatever changes life brings.

- **Always Put the Teaching into Practice**

This instruction on transforming suffering and happiness into enlightenment, which may seem simple, as it requires no enigmatic and abstruse philosophy, is quite applicable for both ordinary people and spiritual practitioners. If one contemplates it thoroughly and constantly, one will have the courage to embrace whatever kind of suffering life throws at us, whether that is caused by our own

severe illness or by the departure of a beloved companion or relative. With a commitment to one's choice of practice, practitioners will become more unwavering on the path to enlightenment. Otherwise, without such practice, one may not even withstand the common sufferings that most people will experience periodically, not to mention pursuing the path to becoming a good practitioner.

All in all, try to assimilate this instruction into your mind and apply it in your life. It is concise in words, but sublime and practical in its content. If you practice it well, it might be more beneficial to you than the profound teachings of Dzogchen, Madhyamika or anything else. Whatever Dharma teaching we receive, we should put immediately into practice, otherwise it brings no practical value other than the mere merit of listening. If we practice well, even just one stanza from the teaching will guide us through any kind of hardship, in the same way that a particular stanza from the *Avatamsaka Sutra* supported Master Mengcan through his time in prison. It should by now be abundantly clear that this teaching is beneficial to us. However, without practice, regardless of how many teachings we have received, we won't gain much benefit from them. So, I sincerely wish for all sentient beings that they will deeply contemplate this teaching and be able to transform their own suffering into enlightenment.

LECTURE SIX

Our experience of suffering follows in the same way. When we undergo sorrow and happiness, partings and reunions, all of these ups and downs in life cause us to “taste” different psychological flavours, sour, sweet, bitter, spicy or salty, and even some that are truly unpleasant and very nearly unbearable. But if we combine these experiences with spiritual practice, just like cardamom and pepper being mixed with sugar, we will gain a special flavour to our life’s experience. At the beginning, we may feel uncomfortable with this new taste, but we will gradually become accustomed to it and eventually we will gain a strong sense of joy towards it and come to love it because it is so beneficial to our mind and body.

– Khenpo Sodargye

Suffering Is a Gift

6

We will continue with our teaching on *Transforming Suffering and Happiness into Enlightenment*. The following text contains two parts: 1) how to use suffering as the path and 2) how to use happiness as the path. Each of these is approached first through the perspective of relative truth, and then through the perspective of ultimate truth. We will begin by discussing how to use suffering as the path to enlightenment on the relative level.

Practice to Transform

Why do we need to transform suffering? As we can tell from the people around us, almost no one likes or expects suffering. It would be extremely unusual for someone to think, “I wish to experience suffering.” When suffering does strike, most people’s reaction is shock and fear. However, suffering in samsara is much like the surging of ocean waves, in that it comes one after another without cessation. A shared aspiration of people of all times is to avoid suffering and be happy forever. But throughout all of human history, whether in the East or in the West, whether we are talking about one hundred years ago or one thousand years ago, no one has ever fulfilled this wish except for extraordinary bodhisattvas and accomplished practitioners. This is what makes transformation so necessary.

- **Do Not Feel Crazy with the New Mode of Thinking**

To many, this practice is likely to be completely new. Some who have been following Buddhism for years, may have heard about the tantric teachings to cut through suffering and happiness, these being based on the practice that when suffering or happiness arises, to look directly into its nature will cause it to disappear naturally and give rise to the wisdom of the union of bliss and emptiness. However, this Mahayana teaching on transforming suffering into enlightenment is not frequently taught and can be a very fresh teaching to many Buddhists. It instructs us not to reject suffering, but rather, when it strikes, to accept it joyfully: “Wow, suffering has arrived, I am so excited! What a blessing! I am so fortunate!”

When someone says, “I didn’t sleep well last night.” Naturally you may show your concern by saying, “Is everything all right?” But next time, you can start with “That’s great! I’m happy for you.”

“I am in a bad mood recently.”

“That’s wonderful!”

“I have been in good health recently.”

“Too bad. That means that you have less opportunity to practice.”

“I’m in poor health recently.”

“Great! May the Three Jewels bless you so that you never recover!”

This kind of dialogue seems weird or crazy, and is hard for us to practice because it is opposite of our conventional thinking. But because it is meaningful, and indeed a better way to practice, good practitioners will engage in such practice accordingly.

If we follow the conventional mindset of constantly seeking happiness, our mindset will be tantamount to that of children chasing rainbows: The faster that they race towards it, the faster and further it recedes from them. In a similar way, the more fearful we are of suffering, the more it will get hold of us when it does arrive. On

the other hand, if we face it without fear and welcome it by saying, “Come on then, let’s see what you can do”, then suffering seems to become timid and afraid to approach us and at the same time, other negative spirits and evil forces will also not dare to take advantage of the occasion to harm us. Therefore, by accepting and dealing with suffering in this way, our life will be much benefited. Even if, at this moment, this teaching doesn’t bring us any immediate benefit, to take the time to understand it won’t cause us any harm.

● **Deepen Specific Practices and Make Them Powerful**

During this practice, we need to try different methods to transform suffering. If a certain method doesn’t suit us, we need to find a different one that we can truly relate to. In such a way we can take this teaching as a crucial pith instruction for our practice, like adopting the practice of a particular major deity. I recently met some students who go abroad to study. After they had read the English translation of Tenpe Nyima’s text, they found it so marvellously helpful as a way to cope with their afflictions that they decided to take it with them, so that they have access to it all of the time.

The way they rely on this text is somehow similar to the reliance on one’s major deity, and I do agree with them. For most of you, after you receive the oral transmission and teaching of this text, it is better to take it as your daily practice and read it every now and then. If you not only understand its content literally but also integrate the teaching into your being and truly master it, then it will be of great benefit to you in your life, and even the kind of suffering that would likely be unbearable for others will not be a big deal to you. This makes this teaching a real pith instruction for us practitioners.

A pith instruction is one that cannot be easily obtained by ordinary people. Likewise, what can be obtained by everyone may not necessarily be a pith instruction. When confronted by suffering, it would be a shame if a Dharma practitioner were to be as fragile as an ordinary person who has no way to cope with it. After having spent such a long time learning and receiving so many precious instructions and profound teachings, if we were to fail to absorb them into our mind and put them into practice, then we would certainly not have the power and courage to cut through our mental afflictions and difficulties. Then what would make us different from other people? We may have planted virtuous seeds in our mind by hearing the Dharma teaching, but it would be a pity if we were not to cause it to ripen into great strength within us. So, the necessity of practicing the instruction earnestly should be obvious to every one of us.

Develop a Sense of Joy for the Transformation

In the previous session, we explained the seven approaches to transform suffering, and emphasized that it is crucial to become familiar with a few specific practices before misfortune and difficulties befall us. If we use the practices we know best, and of which we have a clear, personal experience, we can truly rely upon them when suffering strikes. To be able to skilfully apply one or two chosen practices is immensely important for us. If you are not even familiar with this teaching's words and content, it will be absolutely impossible to use it when misfortune befalls. By contrast, if you have familiarized yourself with certain practices, it will be easy for you to use them when difficulties arise. For example, if a person has a strong relatability to bodhicitta and practices it frequently in

their daily life, then when difficulty occurs, he can immediately call upon the bodhicitta practice to transform his negativity, or if someone is experienced in practicing renunciation, then this practice can be called upon to easily solve his life problems. So, to reiterate, it is necessary to be well prepared with a couple of practices that you know best for transforming suffering.

- **A Sense of Real Joy Is Required**

Root Text

With this, suffering and difficulties can become a help for our spiritual practice – but that alone is not enough. We need to gain a sense of real joy and enthusiasm, inspired by a thorough appreciation for our achievement, and then to reinforce this, and make it stable and continuous.

When suffering occurs, let's say for example that you are very ill or someone close to you has died, do not allow it to defeat you or cause your practice to retrogress. Transform it into a support rather than a barrier for your practice. However, it does not just end there. It is not enough to just transform suffering and difficulties into something helpful. Instead, we need to go further and gain a sense of great joy and to make it stable and continuous.

This is challenging. After we are able to transform suffering into the path, we should further gain a thorough appreciation for our successful transformation, which in turn will bring us a strong sense of joy and enthusiasm. For example, if you are seriously ill, this shouldn't become a barrier for your practice, but instead, should make you feel joyful since you have transformed it. This sense of joy from your achievement is not slight but very intense. It's like the inexpressible happiness you feel when you are going

to have a vacation, enjoy delicious food, or be highly paid for something that you are proud of. This sense of joy does not only occur for a brief moment, but is instead stable and continuous.

It is impossible for us to reach this state if we never practice. We can easily understand the literal meaning of the teaching, but when suffering strikes, we may not even have the ability or courage to transform it onto the path, not to mention to take joy in it. “Ah! Why is this happening to me?” It could even cause you to break down and be rendered speechless. This is how ordinary people usually react to suffering. However, for experienced Mahayana practitioners who are skilled in the practice of transformation, when suffering befalls them, they react with happiness. In the biography of Thogme Zangpo, a great Tibetan master, it is recorded that for a certain period of time, he lost his advanced state of dreaming practice, in which he was able to roam freely in his dreams into the pure realms and to receive Dharma teachings from numerous buddhas. He later fell ill and this experience caused him to regain his earlier state of realization. Because of the benefit that he gained from his illness, he felt so joyful that he became even more diligent in his practice.

● **Suffering Is a Gift**

Generally speaking, it is rare for authentic Mahayana practitioners to encounter great difficulties. When difficulty does occur to them, they seize upon this precious opportunity to reinforce their practice. So, for the wise, every obstacle in their life is a great help towards their spiritual accomplishment. They fully appreciate any difficulty that they may encounter and have a strong and stable sense of joy towards them. During the Cultural Revolution in China, many great Tibetan masters were imprisoned and treated badly. They often reminded each other: “This is the time for us to transform

suffering into enlightenment. Make good use of it!" Some of the great masters from Qing Hai said that the public shaming that they received was a more supreme form of practice than the practice of discerning samsara and enlightenment, which is a unique Dzogchen preliminary practice that aims to enhance one's realization. During that time period, many intelligent and highly educated people were rudely denounced and slandered in public by the use of some very absurd reasoning and nonsensical logic. Many people were wrongly accused and treated badly, but for accomplished practitioners, this rude treatment was seen to bring benefits that were even more supreme than the practice of Dzogchen.

Without perseverant practice and training however, one cannot gain a sense of joy towards suffering. It is only through long-term training that one will be able to develop a joyful attitude and to make it strong, fierce, stable and continuous. So, in times of difficulty, when we are being subjected to negative circumstances, we need to remind ourselves that the most supreme time for practicing has come and thus we should cherish it wholeheartedly.

● **Habituate the Thought of Feeling Joyful**

Root Text

So, with each of the practices outlined above, say to yourself: "This suffering has been of tremendous assistance; it will help me to achieve the many wonderful kinds of happiness and bliss which are experienced in the higher realms and in liberation from samsara and which are extremely difficult to find. From now on too, I know that whatever suffering lies in store for me will have the same effect. So however tough, however difficult the suffering may be, it will always bring me the greatest joy

and happiness, bitter and yet sweet, like those Indian cakes made of sugar mixed with cardamom and pepper.” Follow this line of thought over and over, and very thoroughly, and get used to the happy state of mind that it brings.

How can we develop the sense of joy towards suffering? With each of the practices of transforming suffering, we can think in this way: Suffering may be unbearable to many others, but to me, more suffering means more opportunities to gain rebirth in the higher realms and to achieve liberation. Also, it is a tremendous assistance to me in attaining the fruition of shravakayana and Mahayana, including the ultimate enlightenment of Buddhahood. Furthermore, it is of the greatest and best help for me to achieve all kinds of happiness and bliss which are otherwise extremely difficult to obtain. Therefore, whatever suffering lies in store, I will resolve myself to the practice of transformation and take great delight in doing so.

On the surface, suffering is cruel, brutal, tough, unpleasant and awful. Nobody wants to get ill or to see their loved ones dying. But indeed, suffering is meaningful because it always has the potential to deepen our practice, which in turn brings us the greatest joy and happiness. Thus, we should welcome suffering, love it deeply and cultivate a joyful spirit towards it.

The author uses an analogy in his description of the role of suffering. Cardamom, in the Tibetan region, is a spice and a type of herb too. It tastes quite spicy and for many is quite unpleasant. Pepper is also a spice with a salty and spicy flavour which can burn the tongue. For those who are not used to their strong taste, it is really difficult to enjoy them. But if these two are mixed together with sugar and made into a cake, people love it as it tastes quite delicious and is also very beneficial to our body. In herbal medicine, cardamom and pepper can be used to get rid of excess water, detoxify toxic

substances and treat an upset stomach. We often add sugar or salt to medicinal soups to make the herbs that heal us taste better.

The same is true for coffee. A strong cup of black coffee can have a very bitter taste, but if you add sugar and milk to it, you will find the taste tantalizing. For those who do not drink coffee, they won't understand why people like it because it tastes weird, as it is neither spicy, salty, nor sweet. But for those who are in the habit of drinking coffee, they really like it and can even become addicted to it. The simple truth is that being able to enjoy any of these flavors is directly related to the habituation of our mind.

Our experience of suffering follows in the same way. When we undergo sorrow and happiness, partings and reunions, all of these ups and downs in life cause us to "taste" different psychological flavors, sour, sweet, bitter, spicy or salty, and even some that are truly unpleasant and very nearly unbearable. But if we combine these experiences with spiritual practice, just like cardamom and pepper being mixed with sugar, we will gain a special flavor to our life's experience. At the beginning, we may feel uncomfortable with this new taste, but we will gradually become accustomed to it and eventually we will gain a strong sense of joy towards it and come to love it because it is so beneficial to our mind and body. So, this analogy of sugar being mixed with cardamom and pepper helps to inspire us to enlarge our understanding of the role of suffering and Dharma practice.

In the *Precious Garland*, Nagarjuna also uses this analogy as a teaching to his friend, who is a Shatavahana king.

He says,

*Monarchs whose nature is generosity,
Are liked if they are strong,*

*Like a sweet that is hardened on the outside
With cardamom and pepper.*

This means that although this sweet, with its cardamom and pepper exterior, looks to be spicy and bitter, it is enjoyed by many people. Likewise, if an awe-inspiring monarch conducts noble acts, is very generous and is constantly helping his people, then, even though his behavior may be a little rough, he will still be accepted and praised by his followers. The same is true for leaders. If a leader is very altruistic and loves to help others, although his words of criticism are unpleasant, he will still be approved of by those he leads.

Here, the author tells us that life is full of ups and downs. There are times of sweetness and bitterness, some of which are very difficult to endure, but spiritual practice can be used like sugar to make all of life's experience acceptable and meaningful. An old saying goes, "Bitter pills can have blessed effects, and harsh advice can be the most instructive." It means that what seems to be rough and cruel may become most beneficial in the long run. For this reason, we should take delight in accepting it. For instance, having surgery or receiving acupuncture treatment can be excruciating, but you choose to accept it because you know it is good for your health. Likewise, suffering in life is unpleasant and cruel, but if you combine it with Dharma practice, you will soon embrace it joyfully since it becomes a great assistance for your happiness and liberation.

Surely, it is not easy to accept suffering in the beginning, in the same way that someone may find it difficult to accept something new before he gets used to it. Once, as I was having a meal with a relative of mine in Chengdu, I ordered a dish that contained bitter melon. He had never tried it before and when he tasted it, he said, "What is this? It's awful!" But a few years later, bitter melon

had become one of his favorite foods. Likewise, to accept suffering in life might be a new challenge for you, but through practicing progressively, you will come to take delight in it, and at a certain point, you will gain a personal realization that a joyful attitude towards suffering makes your life much more meaningful.

● **The Story of Master Nenghai**

Whether you like the bitter taste of coffee, chocolate, or herbal medicine or not is just a matter of the habituation of your mind. If you have already come to love bitter tasting food, you'd look forward to eating them. Similarly, if you have a strong devotion to the Dharma, then you are willing to endure both the physical and mental suffering which is a part of seeking it and learning it, even though this same effort may be unbearable to others.

I've read the biography of the Han master Nenghai, whose journey to Tibet to seek the Dharma is very inspiring. Once Master Nenghai had encountered the catalog of the canons in Tibetan Buddhism in the Yonghe Temple, Beijing, he realized that the Tantrayana was well explained in a large number of sutras and shastras and developed the idea to study it in its entirety. Initially, he planned to go to Japan to seek these teachings, but having learned from Master Dayong, who just came from Japan, that the Tantrayana in Japan was not as complete as that which was available in the collections of the Tibetan Buddhism, he determined to enter Tibet to begin his study of the tantric teachings.

At that time, traveling to Tibet was extremely inconvenient, in part due to the ethnic conflicts and political factors involved. Because of these factors, Master Nenghai was forced to undergo many hardships on his journey to Paoma Mountain, Kangting in 1926. It was from that place that Master Nenghai's pursuit of Tibetan

Buddhism truly began. Having arrived at Lithang in 1927, he relied on an old Geshe who was well into his 80s and who was a teacher of great realization, having previously performed a prostration pilgrimage from Lhasa to Mount Wutai. This respected teacher praised the supremacy of the Dharma teaching in Lhasa and advised Master Nenghai to go there to further his studies. He also wrote a letter of introduction to Khangsar Rinpoche in Drepung Monastery, whom he suggested that Master Nenghai should rely upon.

Master Nenghai therefore set off from Khangting to Lhasa, together with three other people in June of 1928. It was an arduous journey, and by reading his biography, you will gain a new appreciation of what the word arduous really means. It is absolutely different from the problems we encounter when our water supply is cut off, or we have no electricity or no vegetables to cook for our supper. They carried their necessities with them, including rations, tsampa, some clothes and their tents. On the journey, Master Nenghai's shoes wore out and thorns punctured his feet as he walked across a snowfield, but because his feet were numb, he didn't feel it until he got a bit warm. Along their way, they experienced all kinds of problems and hardships, such as harsh weather conditions, the fearful howling of wild beasts at night, an unexpected robber on the road and the restrictions on Han Chinese crossing the border. They endured all of these hardships for the sake of the Dharma.

It took them two months to journey from Khangting to Chamdo, at which point they were still only half of the way to Lhasa. The next part of the journey, which was from Chamdo to Lhasa, took them another month, meaning that in total, they had spent three months traveling by foot and dealing with almost continuous hardship. After arriving at Drepung Monastery, he found that the local people there were prejudiced against him and he was allowed very little access to Dharma teachings, not to mention receiving instructions

in tantra. Eventually, he had the opportunity to meet Khanggsar Rinpoche, from whom he received quintessential teachings of the Sutrayana and the Tantrayana, such as the Pramana, and *The Ornament of Clear Realization*, as well as many tantric teachings.

Why do I tell this story? Because, if a person has a deep conviction in the Dharma and truly appreciates its inner profundity, he will be able to transcend all the mental and physical suffering associated with seeking it. If you have a sincere devotion to the Mahayana and Tantrayana teachings, then, because of this devotion, you are willing to accept whatever hardship is necessary in pursuing your goal. It is like when you fall in love and are willing to sacrifice yourself in any way for the person that you have fallen in love with, along with being willing to accept any suffering that this relationship may bring to you.

● The Sign That Joy Arises and Suffering Is Overcome

Root Text

By reflecting like this, our minds will be so suffused with happiness that the suffering we feel through the senses will become almost imperceptible and incapable of disturbing our minds.

The ways that people accept suffering vary a lot. Here, the author directs us to reflect on how suffering can bring us happiness and bliss. He suggests that we should reflect on this thoroughly and repeatedly so that we can develop a happy state of mind. At a certain point, our minds will become suffused with more and more happiness, and suffering in life and practice will become almost imperceptible and incapable of disturbing our minds. Before we began to follow the Dharma, suffering was a big deal to us. But

after learning the Dharma teaching, especially as we go deeper in our study and practice, suffering will become increasingly easy to deal with. We will also realize how naive, stupid and confused we had previously been when experiencing suffering.

Some people, before they entered the Mahayana path, outwardly seemed to be successful and glamorous as they were rich, intelligent and capable of many things, but inwardly, they had been struggling with a strong sense of insecurity which made them fragile and vulnerable. After they started to learn the Mahayana teaching and deepened their practice, their happiness increased and their negative emotions became less and less frequent. Thus, it can be said that Dharma practice makes us stronger and stronger. As a saying goes, “For the sake of fear, one starts to study and practice the Dharma, and eventually, one is able to face any fear courageously.”

The Way of the Bodhisattva says,

*Even in great trouble, Bodhisattvas
Never bring forth wrong; their virtues naturally increase.*

If we are skilled in using suffering as the path and strengthen the joy it brings, our virtues will increase, faults will lessen, and suffering will become so insignificant that it can no longer hurt us. Gradually, there will come a point where there will no longer come such a thought as, “This person has hurt me badly and so now, I am disappointed and depressed.” This is the sign that suffering is transcended.

Root Text

This is the point at which sickness can be overcome through forbearance. It's worth noting that this is also an indication as to whether difficulties brought about by enemies, harmful spirits

and so on can be overcome.

Forbearance here is different from how we usually understand it. Generally, we say the quality of forbearance is to remain strong and unperturbed or undaunted by something which has taken place. In this instance, it means not only to accept suffering willingly but also to feel happy about it. Such forbearance helps us transcend all mental and physical diseases, until nothing whatsoever can harm us. When someone tries to create hostile conditions for you, for example, if a resentful foe were to try to inflict some kind of harm on you, by feeling happy and joyfully accepting it, then they would never succeed at really bringing you any harm.

The same holds true when harmful spirits, evil forces, maras and anything else try to harm you. If you are willing to accept their attempt at harming you, feel happy about it, and take it as a rare opportunity on the path, then by this transformation, all of their efforts will be subdued spontaneously and the difficulties that were intended will be easily overcome. This is similar to the Chod practice of confronting harmful spirits and maras directly. Of course, this requires a certain level of realization, without which it would be otherwise impossible to do.

Reinforce the Attitude of Dropping and Cultivating

Root Text

As we have already seen, reversing the attitude of not wanting to suffer is the whole basis for transforming suffering into our spiritual path. This is because we simply won't be able to turn suffering into the path as long as anxiety and irritation continue

to eat away at our confidence and disturb our mind.

The more we arrive at actually transforming suffering into the path, the more we will enhance and reinforce all our previous practice. This is because our courage and good humor will grow all the more, once we can see from our own experience how suffering causes our spiritual practice and qualities to blossom.

Ordinary beings all want to be happy and to avoid suffering, but reversing the attitude of not wanting to suffer is the whole basis for transforming suffering. As we have elaborated on earlier, this transformation requires two steps: the first is to drop the attitude of not wanting to suffer, and the second is to cultivate the attitude of being joyful when suffering arises. As far as the first step goes, if we are afraid of suffering, and become agitated and irritated when suffering strikes, then there is no way that we will be able to transform it. These negative emotions will just eat away at our confidence and disturb our mind. So, confidently accepting suffering in the first place is the basic requirement for the practice of transformation.

Once we have actually transformed suffering into the path, this will bring us the courage and joy to enhance this practice. If there were no suffering, we might never generate the intention to practice the Dharma or have the opportunity to awaken. It is through suffering that we realize nothing is meaningful in samsara and it instills in us the desire to attain liberation from it. It is also through suffering that our spiritual practice and good qualities blossom. So, the more suffering that we experience, the more joy we should have. We should do well to bear this in mind. Normally we would think that the less suffering that we experience, the happier we would be, but in spiritual practice, it is the opposite. When suffering surges, one after another, we should feel happier and happier because each onslaught is an opportunity for us to reinforce our practice and to

make it blossom.

Sometimes I feel thankful to those movies and TV series, where you regularly come across the cliché that when someone is lost and hopeless with despair, they go to a temple and become ordained. Because this has been dramatized so often, many people, when they are suffering and want to find a way out, may think that they should look for a monastery with an old monk with whom they can take refuge. In the beginning, they knew nothing about renunciation or bodhicitta and came to the Dharma simply because they wanted to escape from their suffering and the difficulties in their life. After their study and practice has led to an understanding of the nature of suffering, it's very possible that by becoming accomplished in their practice, they may become great masters, extraordinary meditators, or even attain a rainbow body through the Dzogchen practice. So sometimes movies can offer a hint for people's lives and guide those who are suffering onto the liberation path. This may happen even if it was not the intention of the director or what the script-writer was trying to say.

● Start the Practice with Smaller Sufferings

Root Text

It is said that by training gradually with smaller sufferings, “step by step, in easy stages”, then in the end we'll be able to handle big suffering and difficulties too. We must go about it like this, because it is extremely difficult to have an experience of something which is beyond our level or capacity.

To directly transform big sufferings onto the path is extremely difficult, because, generally speaking, this is beyond our level or capacity. So, we are better off starting with smaller sufferings, and

to train our mind gradually. For example, when you have a bit of headache, or someone is denigrating you, or you are quite simply not in the mood to deal with problems today, just say to yourself, “I’m really happy to meet this small trouble, and I will accept it joyfully.” Gradually, this habit can be cultivated, and after a certain period of time, can lead to the ability to handle increasingly more difficult kinds of suffering.

As it is said in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*,

*There’s nothing that does not grow light
Through habit and familiarity.
Putting up with little cares
I’ll train myself to bear even greater adversity!*

This means that there is nothing that cannot be accomplished through long-term practice. If we start by accepting minor harm, we will be able to bear up against greater adversity in the future. So, familiarization and training is absolutely required. If we train gradually to bear the hardships that we encounter in seeking the Dharma, then, in the end, we will be able to handle even larger sufferings and difficulties, just like a well-trained soldier who has learned to endure the harsh conditions that he may find on the battlefield. This practice, in the initial stages, is not easy because it goes against our normal habit, which is to avoid suffering and pursue happiness. Now we need to break up this habitual thinking so that we can start to accept suffering and take delight in it. Such acceptance of suffering is meaningful and valuable.

● The Story of Chak Lotsawa

When we read the biographies of the great masters of the past, we are always deeply moved by their bravery in face of suffering. Recently, some Tibetan masters have begun collecting the biographies

of lotsawas and panditas from throughout Tibetan history. Chak Lotsawa Chöjé Pal is one of these and his biography was translated into English and Chinese and titled *The Biography of Dharmasvamin*. Chak Lotsawa was a Tibetan monk who went to Nepal and India to seek the Dharma in the 13th century. His experience is both interesting and very inspiring. His entire journey took him about 11 years to complete and he visited such holy sites as Nalanda, Vulture Peak and Bodhgaya. During that time, Tara manifested as a human woman who often came to help him to avoid danger.

There is a story that I remember vividly. When Chak Lotsawa Chöjé Pal was in Nepal, he heard that Buddhism in India had been severely damaged by Muslims, and so he was hesitant to go there, particularly as he had been advised by many that it was still very dangerous. But there were two panditas who told him to go and to be assured that he could succeed in seeking the Dharma and returning safe and sound. Finally, he decided to follow some wealthy merchants who were sending the corpses of the dead in their families to the Ganges River to India. (Taking the body of the dead to the Ganges River is as important and significant as Tibetans taking the dead to the charnel grounds for sky burial.) When he arrived at Nalanda University, he saw that most of the buildings had been damaged by Muslim invaders. Only two monasteries (viharas) were in serviceable condition, where a 90-year-old pandita, Rahula Shribhadra was still instructing a class of about 70 monk scholars.

During that time, things were very tense as there was great fear that the Muslim soldiers might return at any time. One day, the teacher Rahula Shribhadra received a message that a group of Muslim soldiers were on their way to kill them all. Fearing for their lives, he instructed his students to flee. Rahula's students asked him to go with them, but he replied, "I'm already well into my nineties. It makes no difference whether I stay or leave." In the end,

all of the disciples left except for Chak Lotsawa. Rahula told him to escape as well, saying, "You are nothing but a typically clumsy Tibetan. Why do you stay here with me? You are very likely to be killed!" Chak Lotsawa calmly replied, "I'd rather die than leave you." This greatly pleased Rahula and so he told Chak Lotsawa, "You are a very reliable person. We can run away together if you carry me on your back."

So, Chak Lotsawa placed Rahula on his back and the two of them left the monastery. Fearing the soldiers, Rahula told Chak Lotsawa to run to a nearby Temple. It was a Jnananatha temple, inside which offerings were made to a statue of the wrathful deity Mahakala. This statue naturally appeared on a rock and then was brought back by Nagarjuna, so it possessed incredible power as the true deity Mahakala. The Muslim soldiers once insulted this statue by throwing filth and garbage, but one of the soldiers died on the very night following this type of desecration. As a result, they avoided this temple whenever possible. While Chak Lotsawa and Rahula were hiding there, three hundred fully armed soldiers showed up and searched for them. Surprisingly, due to the blessing of Mahakala, the soldiers did not see them and quickly gave up and left, allowing Rahula and Chak Lotsawa to escape the danger of being caught.

Chak Lotsawa followed Rahula for a little less than 2 years and learned many teachings from him. When he announced his intention to go back to Tibet for the first time, Rahula wouldn't allow it, but one month later, the teacher said, "You have mastered the many teachings that I have given to you which are very beneficial to sentient beings. Now it is time for you to go back to Tibet and teach them to the people there." The next day, when he set off, Rahula insisted on seeing him off at the bank of Ganges River. In tears, he said to Chak Lotsawa, "You are a very good practitioner, but now is the time for you to go back to Tibet. As I am so old and

Tibet is so far away, we may not see each other in this life, but we will meet again in the pure land.” Chak Lotsawa left in sorrow and took all the teachings back to Tibet.

When I read his story, I was very impressed by how Chak Lotsawa had risked his life in order to seek the Dharma. If he had just gone there for a visit, I’m sure he wouldn’t have dared to remain there during such a chaotic time. But for the sake of the Dharma, not only didn’t the war stop him, but it inspired him even more. There are many similar cases throughout history. Whether by going to India, Tibet or other places, great masters of the past endured unbearable hardships for the sake of seeking the Dharma. They encountered dangers such as the turbulence caused by war, the lack of basic necessities, and the threat of wild beasts and poisonous snakes. Instead of forcing them to give up, these sufferings gave rise to great strength and a deep joy, and served to enhance their determination to seek the Dharma. Compared to them, whatever difficulty we experience is no big deal, and should not cause us to become timid and weak.

Following in the footsteps of the great masters of the past, we should feel joyful at the suffering encountered during the process of seeking the Dharma. It is indeed an opportunity for us to purify the negative karma that we have accumulated in our previous lives. As we have been wandering in samsara since beginningless time, we have undergone innumerable sufferings for countless ages, for which we gained nothing at the cost of our bodies. This time, if we are willing to endure any type of suffering which finds us, whether it be slander, sickness, mental afflictions or physical pains, we can attain the precious Mahayana teachings. Why then, should we not feel joyful about this? As we move forward with this practice, you will find that it is always easier to endure suffering when it first begins. However, if the suffering continues, it is fine to ask your teacher for help or to ask for his blessing to minimize the suffering.

This is quite natural since we have to make progress one step at a time, in easy stages.

Pray to the Lama and the Three Jewels

Root Text

In the breaks between sessions, pray to the Lama and the Three Jewels that you may be able to take suffering onto your path. When your mind has grown a little bit stronger, then make offerings to the Three Jewels and to negative forces and insist: "Please send me misfortune and obstacles, so I can work on developing the strength of my practice!" At the same time, always, always stay confident, cheerful and happy.

If you quit practicing when suffering or sickness occurs, it means that you are not transforming it into the path. So, in the beginning, it's very important to pray to the Lama and the Three Jewels in order to be able to transform suffering into the path and not allow it to become an obstacle. Gradually, when our minds have grown stronger, we will be able to embrace suffering and truly transform it. At that stage, we again need to pray to the Three Jewels or make offerings to the Dharma protectors or negative forces and ask: "Please send me misfortune and obstacles, so I can work on developing the strength of my practice!" For instance, you might pray to the Dharma protectors to, "Let suffering, negativity and the Covid-19 descend upon me!"

Usually we pray to the Dharma protectors and Taras, and wear amulets to protect us against adverse circumstances. But now, it is being suggested that we change our habitual thinking and to wish for suffering. It is quite hard to make this kind of change.

Indeed, this is also what happens when one is exposed to a new culture. For example, back in the 1960s, there emerged many hippies in the U.S. They rejected the mores and political views of the mainstream American culture and developed their own distinctive lifestyle. Initially, this new culture shocked the great majority of the American people, but it later attracted many, many young people and grew to become extremely popular.

Similarly, it may not be easy to understand the youngsters of today. A few days ago, when I was in Chengdu, down below my apartment building is a street that sells snacks. Every afternoon, youngsters, most of whom are college students in their twenties, wait in lines to buy these treats. The snacks are very diversified in flavor. I went down and tried some once and could not enjoy this type of food at all. I was kind of surprised that those youngsters loved it so much, but thought that it was probably because the city was just out of lock-down and they were so excited to be able to eat food that is not made at home. I couldn't help but feel how wonderful it would be if they could enjoy suffering in the same way that they enjoy those snacks.

It is usually difficult for adults to accept a new type of food with an unusual flavor, as they are more accustomed to the food that they eat on a daily basis. I, for example, first encountered the durian fruit when I was in Thailand in 1999, and even now I don't have the courage to eat it. I tried several times, but every time I just gave up immediately as its smell makes me want to throw up.

The same goes for suffering. To some people, suffering is dreadful, but to others, it is a chance to enhance their practice. It is understandable that few ordinary people would wish misfortune to befall them. Novice practitioners also would not dare to pray to the Dharma protectors and Three Jewels to send them misfortune and obstacles. But at a certain point, when one's mind has grown

strong enough, one can supplicate to the Lama and the Three Jewels to let such negativity as harm and disease befall them as a way to enhance their practice. Of course, it is also possible that if you are not sufficiently determined, that at one moment you may pray to the Dharma protectors to send you suffering, and in the next moment, when suffering has struck, that you will become afraid and begin to pray just as strongly for them to dispel it. It all depends on the strength and potency of one's mind, which requires a certain level of realization.

The author tells us whatever and whenever suffering befalls us, to always stay confident, cheerful and happy. This is the result of a high level of practice, which we may not be able to do right now. However, as long as we keep on practicing to master these methods, when suffering does arise, it will bring the best for us. Suffering that is unbearable and ugly can always be a blessing if we take it as an opportunity to train ourselves. We should have conviction in this. Even if you can't joyfully accept adversities and difficulties at this time, at least try not to reject them. Some may even pray to a wrathful deity to dispel all of their suffering, which is very likely to be in vain, for the reasons that we have explained in previous lectures. Indeed, as Mahayana practitioners, we should take the suffering of sentient beings upon us joyfully. Of course, this depends on our inner strength, which, as we have said, can be only gained through progressive practice. Thus, we should thoroughly contemplate this teaching and continue to practice, over and over again.

LECTURE SEVEN

From the biographies and theories of these renowned psychologists, we can see that while both psychology and Buddhism explore the inner world and share some similarities, psychology exists at a substantial distance from Buddhism's in-depth exploration of the mind. Psychological research is not based on a given psychologist's direct experience or realization of the nature of the mind, but from studies of patients who exhibit a particular mental disorder or an intellectual analysis of their own mental processes.

– Khenpo Sodargye

Learn and Practice the Dharma

- **Be Prepared for Impermanence**

As we at Larung Gar, now have the condition to study and practice the Dharma along with people in other places who can also receive the teaching through the Internet, it is important to remember that these conditions of being able to gather together are temporary and will change into something else after a certain period of time. As the Buddha said, “All phenomena arise from causes and conditions, as does their cessation.” We have to be prepared with the mind of impermanence, and not to take it for granted that every day I will be here to teach the Dharma and you will be here to receive the teaching. Surely this condition will not last forever, as it is under the sway of many uncertainties in both the external environment and our own internal condition.

Back in 1985, I began giving Dharma teachings in the Chinese language, and the first treatise that I explained to the Han Sangha was Shantideva’s *The Way of the Bodhisattva*. From 1985 to 2005, there was no Internet at Larung Gar and people in the outside world could only receive the teaching by means of CD, VCD or DVD. Later on, we were able to livestream the teaching and more and more people were able to join the teachings, despite all the difficulties that they need to overcome, such as arranging their busy schedule, time zone differences and so on. Unfortunately, since last year, due to a specific situation, live-streaming had to

be discontinued and now we are back to the old way of giving only on-site teaching. However, I am not sure how long even this situation will continue.

When I translated *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism* from Tibetan into Chinese, I was impressed that quite a few lineage holders of the past were able to continue teaching the Dharma for over 40 years. I have been giving the Dharma teaching to the Han Chinese now for about 35 years, but I have no way to guarantee that both inner and outer conditions will allow me to continue for another 5 years. Similarly, for those of you who have been receiving the teaching from me, do not hold the thought that we will be able to continue this situation forever, because we never know what will happen in this degenerate age.

When His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was alive, as his disciples, we all felt that Larung Gar was our home and that we would never depart from it, but now we know that even this place is undergoing various changes from both the outside and the inside, and that some people have already had to leave here and will likely never be able to return. On the one hand, it is good for us to regard the place where our root guru stays as our spiritual home; on the other hand, we need to be ready for unexpected changes. This is particularly true this year with the outbreak of the pandemic, as so many people have been heavily impacted by so much uncertainty. Because of all of this uncertainty, an acceptance of impermanence is so much needed to help us to feel relaxed and peaceful. It is also necessary to understand that it is impossible to fix ourselves upon something unchanging and that to try to cling to such an attitude can only bring us suffering.

Also, as Dharma practitioners, aware of the impermanent nature of everything, it is even more essential that we cherish the current opportunity to receive the Dharma teaching and to deepen our

realization of the precious nature of human existence, as it is endowed with infinite freedom and potential. As long as we have the chance to receive a Dharma teaching, we should not waste it, and we should do our best to internalize the teaching into our mind.

- **The Necessity of Learning the Five Great Treatises**

We will now continue with the study of the profound instruction of transforming suffering and happiness, which is the exact antidote to the various frustrations and stresses that are likely to arise during this difficult time. While it is necessary to be armed with such an applicable instruction as it prepares us for the challenges that may lie ahead, it is also important to lay a solid theoretical foundation through the study of Buddhist philosophy, and especially of the Five Great Treatises, i.e., the Abhidharmakosha, the Vinaya, the Buddhist Logic, the Madhyamika and the Prajnaparamita.

If we can learn the Five Great Treatises well, many incorrect thoughts that dwell deep in our mind can be dispelled. From beginningless time, each one of us has formed negative habitual tendencies, which have now become stubbornly embedded in our consciousnesses. Plus, having been born into this world, and due to our education and the constant influence of our families, friends, and environment, we have cultivated many flawed habits and mistaken views. All of these have directly and negatively influenced us and caused us to stray from right view and right action. Given such a situation, it is necessary to learn the treatises that offer the most delicate analysis of Buddhist philosophy, such as the Five Great Treatises, which can provide us with the knowledge to reshape our minds. With a deep understanding of the Middle Way, the Buddhist Logic, and so on, once a false thought arises,

we can easily recognize it and be armed with the weapon of discriminative wisdom, cut it off.

Otherwise, if we remain deeply loaded down with afflictive emotions and negative habitual tendencies, we will tend to blindly believe that all of our thoughts are right and reasonable. Thus, without training in Buddhist philosophy, we will naturally continue our old and erroneous patterns of thinking. It is only with the support of the right view, derived from the Buddhist study, that our mistaken views and habitual tendencies can be uprooted.

Therefore, I would like to advise everyone, especially young Buddhists, to seriously and comprehensively study the scriptures of the Sutrayana and the Tantrayana, and in particular, the Five Great Treatises. Of course, individuals who have a strong and stable faith in Buddhism can concentrate their focus on one subject, be it the Middle Way, Pure Land, or any other school or practice. But for most people, this is not the time to focus only on one subject, as their minds are still filled with numerous wrong views and they can be easily swayed by their surroundings. For these people, it is best to first cultivate and sharpen their wisdom through extensive and comprehensive learning.

● **Do the Right Thing at the Right Time**

Extensive learning should be the top priority for young practitioners since their minds are rather clear and work well at logical analysis and deduction. If a person fails to delve into the scripture study when he is young, it may be too late for him to understand the profound meaning of sutras and tantras by the time they are old, because the deterioration of memory and intelligence might make them too feeble to engage in rigorous logical reasoning. So, it is very important that we do the right thing at the right time,

otherwise, we may come to regret that we have lost the precious opportunity to achieve what would have been of great benefit to achieve. Patrul Rinpoche once said, “For those who only meditate during the years of their youth and for those who have come to study and reflect only after they are in their old age, it will be difficult to accomplish the activities of promoting the Dharma and benefiting sentient beings.”

However, there are those who just get their priorities mixed up. When I was giving teachings in our previous small Dharma hall, there was an old practitioner who left a deep impression on me. Although she seemed very kind, at that time, she was already very old and had only one tooth left, which made it so that her red tongue was easily visible. Despite the fact she was already in her old age, she was preparing to learn the Buddhist Logic. She said to me, “I have so much faith in Buddhist Logic. I’m planning to study it!” Although this spirit is quite admirable, it might not be as easy for her to succeed in the learning as the younger practitioners.

On the other hand, there are some younger Dharma practitioners who are quite intelligent, but who only concentrate their attention on the practice of chanting mantras instead of studying more extensively. A while ago, I met a lama from the Dhomang Monastery, who though over sixty years old, still had a good memory. He said to me, “I feel a little bit regretful. When I was young, I thought practice was important, so I didn’t spend much time on learning the Five Great Treatises. If I had taken the time to learn them well, I would do much better in my practice.” When he was young, he didn’t choose the path of extensive learning but instead entered directly into the path of practice. In his case, I think this was good for him because he is actually a very successful practitioner. With his capacity and devotion, he was able to focus on practice from the very beginning. But indeed, there are very few individuals who can achieve success by focusing on practice while still young. For most

people, it is crucial to study the Buddhist philosophy extensively, to rid themselves of various wrong views. This is especially true for those who had been living in rather complex environments, with all kinds of defilements that have negatively influenced their mind-set and conduct. Their mind must be reshaped through extensive and comprehensive study.

Embrace Suffering

In the last lecture, we were instructed to pray to the Lama and to the Three Jewels during our practice. When our mind is not strong enough, we pray for the ability to transform suffering onto the path. For example, we can pray to the Lama and the Three Jewels, or any deity like Manjushri or Avalokiteshvara, to help us to transform every suffering in life into the path leading to enlightenment, instead of allowing it to become an obstacle to our practice. When our mind has grown stronger and we have gained enough assurance in the strength of transforming suffering, we can continue to pray to the Three Jewels, while also making offerings to the negative forces as we wish for more misfortune and obstacles to befall us so that we can enhance the strength of our practice.

To pray for misfortune and obstacles with a joyful mind is a big challenge that ordinary practitioners dare not try. As I mentioned earlier, it is like the spirit of the Western hippie counterculture that challenged the conventional norms and the existing rules of behavior. But why do we need such a practice, you may ask? Because it has its reason and its purpose.

Generally speaking, even as Buddhists, we are so in dread of suffering that we always supplicate, "Please bless me that all will go smoothly in my practice and that no suffering or hindrance will fall upon me." But do all obstacles disappear after praying in this

way? Not necessarily. When it's time for obstacles and suffering to come, they surely will. Therefore, while it is good if they do not come, once we have understood that they are unavoidable, why not open our mind to embrace their arrival? By keeping an open mindset to the eventuality of suffering, we will be well-prepared for it when it arrives, instead of feeling completely defeated.

We can think in the following way: "It is important for me to be prepared for any eventuality. If misfortune is inevitable, then let it come and I will face it with a tough mind because there is no use to feel sad or to wish for it not to come. What's more, although the arrival of suffering seems cruel, rough and unpleasant in the short term, it will benefit my practice in the long run." Through adjusting our thinking in this way, we will come to find that these seemingly unpleasant things actually bring us either spiritual or physical benefit. Once we recognize these benefits, we will be willing to accept the associated challenges.

It is the same with our attitude towards taking medicine: medicine is bitter, but we will still take it because it is effective in improving our health. It is also the same as when we are trying to learn to accept a food toward which we have an aversion. Although opening ourselves to unfamiliar foods is a challenge, if we are willing to try it, we often find that we have gradually come to enjoy it. Likewise, even though it is challenging for us to embrace suffering joyfully, as long as we train our mind, we will be able to accomplish it as well. After all, to embrace suffering joyfully is just a matter of habituation, and as we have seen, the mind does have the potential to function in this way.

Of course, to change a habit is not an easy task. Earlier on, I mentioned my dislike of the fruit durian and I have never succeeded in trying it. I know a Khenpo who is in a similar situation. Once, after having just left the restroom, he kept looking at his robe to

check if he had carelessly stained it because he had smelled the odor of durian but did not see it. Despite my dislike of the durian fruit, there are people who are quite fond of it. Once, while I was staying in Singapore, a local Buddhist teacher who was living next to me loved eating durian. So, if someone made a gift to me of some durian fruit, I just gave it to him. Even then, I always felt my room was stinky, which often made me wake up at night to check if my door was closed tightly.

Another example is the fermented "stinky tofu". I know some Dharma friends really love stinky tofu, but every time I get close to it, I just cannot bear its smell. People have tried to convince me, "The stinky tofu is so delicious, you will like it!" But I still lack the courage to take this challenge. Similarly, although we have addressed the benefits of transforming suffering, it can still be hard for some people to break their habitual tendency to reject suffering. If even changing our eating habits is difficult to accomplish, transforming unbearable suffering onto the path is even more so.

But still, it is worth trying. Although it seems hard at first, as long as you are willing to accept suffering, you will eventually succeed. The potential of the mind is unbelievable. Our likes or dislikes, the things that we accept or reject, are largely determined by our mind. Once we see the advantage of something, our acceptance of it can be developed. Just as when we receive such medical treatment as moxibustion therapy or have an operation, even though it is painful, we will do our best to endure it or even accept it joyfully, since we know that it is good for our health.

Another example is getting a tattoo. Probably due to a different set of values, many young people, especially from places like Thailand, love getting tattoos. For example, having a butterfly, a tiger, a super star or a ball star drawn onto their bodies. Though the process is quite painful, they still joyfully endure it since

they consider that their tattoo represents a kind of spirit. “This elephant tattoo or that tiger tattoo embodies my bravery.” Once they have this thought, they can accept the process, no matter how painful it is. These are just some of the examples of how people embrace physically uncomfortable challenges. The same applies to transforming suffering into the spiritual path. Once we see the benefits of suffering, we will be able to overcome our natural repulsion towards it and open ourselves to embracing it.

Always Stay Confident, Cheerful and Happy

The core of this teaching on transforming suffering is not only to accept suffering but also to be happy about it. Whatever happens, just as we discussed in the last lecture, always, always stay confident, cheerful and happy. Such an attitude is also advocated in Shantideva’s *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, where he says,

*So, come what may, I’ll not upset
My cheerful happiness of mind.
Dejection never brings me what I want;
My virtue will be warped and marred by it.*

This might sound quite difficult, especially for a new practitioner, but if you realize how relaxed you will become, you will be more than happy to take such an attitude, which opens you to any and all eventualities. For example, with such an attitude, you will feel good whatever the weather is, regardless of whether it is raining or sunny. You will be equally happy whether you have money or not, because you will know that, “If I have money, I can accumulate merit with it; if I am out of money, it is also good because I’m worry free and can practice renunciation.” Similarly, you will no

longer worry about the condition of your health, because you will feel that, “If I am healthy, I can practice virtues more, but if I am ill, I can practice taking the suffering of others upon myself.”

When we are able to change our mindset, misfortune or chaos becomes beneficial for us because they make us understand the nature of samsara in a new light, whereas a routine life without too many challenges may easily deplete our spirit and aspiration. Take the coronavirus pandemic as an example: Before it happened, over the past few decades, we lived a peaceful and abundant life without experiencing shortages of food or clothing. Then, after the pandemic had struck, the city was in an unprecedented lockdown and we were suddenly unable to go shopping or to buy groceries. Thus, for the first time, many realized how precious it is to have even a handful of rice and vegetables, and have had to learn to accept meals consisting of some simple stuff.

So, drastic changes in life, which at first seem cruel to us, may lead us to deep and meaningful reflection that will always remain fresh in our memory. Due to these changes, we begin to see life from a new perspective and may even gain new insights into the material world and the lives of all beings. While the unwise gain little or no inspiration from the events that take place, the wise can always learn from uncommon occurrences and improve themselves.

Therefore, when something unexpected occurs, though at first you may feel that it is almost too difficult to accept, it can indeed bring great meaning to your life. The impact of misfortune depends on the way you deal with it. If you fail to adjust your view and end up breaking down, not only are you being unwise, but this kind of behavior will bring you harm instead of benefit. If however, you take it as a good opportunity to reflect on the reason behind what is taking place, instead of being knocked down, you will gain new insights and realizations that can seldom be achieved during more

normal times.

This is why the author instructs us to stay confident, cheerful and happy. Can we make it? For most of us, this is probably not easy. When everything is going well, we feel happy and seem to be optimistic about everything, but when unpleasant things strike, we start to sway with the waves of suffering, and may even end up engaging in certain kinds of unwise behavior. As ordinary beings, having fluctuations in our mood because of what happens in our life is perfectly normal. But we should never become disheartened and think that, “Because I have loads of afflictive emotions and discriminations, I am hopeless and so, there is no use for me to learn and practice the Dharma.” It is too reckless to come to such a conclusion just because we are in a depressed mood. If we think in this way, we may retrogress on the path and expose ourselves to the risk that years of effort will go to waste.

When we encounter setbacks in our practice, rather than becoming disappointed in ourselves, we should analyze the situation objectively from different angles. If we realize that, while there are irresistible causes that determine our underperformance, such as the negative karma that had accumulated in our previous lives or the unreasonable mindset we have developed in this life, there is still room for us to improve as long as we make the right effort. Whatever happens, it is wise and always necessary to carefully examine and come up with a clear understanding of a situation so as to come to the right judgement.

Those are some recaps and remaining points from the last lecture. Have you prayed to the Dharma protectors to bestow you with misfortune, as you’ve learned from the previous teaching? It is great if you have tried to put this into practice, but if you think of it as just a theory, then it will remain nothing more than a theory and will bring you no real benefit.

Distance Yourself from Ordinary Social Activities

Root Text

When you first begin this training, it is vital to distance yourself from ordinary social activities. Otherwise, caught up in everyday preoccupations and busyness, you will be influenced by all your misguided friends, asking questions like: “How can you bear to put up with so much suffering...so much humiliation...?”

Besides, the endless worrying about enemies, relatives and possessions will cloud our awareness, and upset our minds beyond all our control, so that we inevitably go astray, sliding into bad habits. Then, on top of this, we’ll be swept away by all kinds of distracting objects and situations.

This instruction is also very important. If you want to transform suffering and happiness into enlightenment, where should you start? You should be away from the hustle and bustle of the city or noisy crowds, as these places will make it more difficult for you to focus on your practice. As a beginner, it is best to practice in a solitary place, like a secluded temple or a quiet retreat center. If you can’t find such a place, then as much as possible, you should at the very least, attempt to avoid ordinary social activities which will cause you to be distracted by all kinds of objects and situations. So, if the situation allows, it’s best to remain in solitude as you refine your practice. You might, for instance, engage in the five preliminary practices or some other type of meditation practice, while remaining in full retreat. This is very necessary for beginners.

- **Always Put What You Learn into Practice**

As a Buddhist, if you are only interested in Buddhist theory, whether the Five Great Treatises or any other tantric text, you may well reach the point that you are well spoken and eloquent in expounding it, yet, if you have neither contemplated its meaning nor put it into actual practice, then you will have gained no practical benefit and cannot count on what you've learned to sustain you in the face of suffering. Therefore, no matter what kind of teaching you receive, even if it has only been listening to a few Dharma talks over a very short amount of time, try to put what you have learned into practice on a regular basis. One who has meditated on the teaching gains a deeper understanding and personal experience of it than one who has never actualized it can ever achieve. As a result, when explaining the same teaching to others, the explanation by the one who has meditated on it, will be more thought-provoking and inspiring, even if it is something as simple as the preliminary teachings of the Dzogchen tradition, such as the preciousness of human existence or the impermanence of life. Thus, practice is essential.

It is great that in both Han and Tibetan Buddhism, actual practice or meditation is highly valued. For this reason, in Tibetan Buddhism, group practice is very popular. In the past, some Han Buddhist practitioners chose to practice individually in a thatched shed or a cave, while others chose to meditate together in monasteries. The way that group mediation in the Han tradition is handled is very special. During the meditation, there is a supervisor who observes the session holding a thin slat of wood. If people doze off during the meditation, they will be "blessed" by a spank from the supervisor. According to the history of Han Buddhism, some masters have attained enlightenment at the very moment that they received such a "blessing". This is the reason that so many

practitioners became Zen masters and attained realization during the Tang, Sui and Song dynasties. From the *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, recorded during those periods of history, we can discover how, through hard work and devoted practice, these practitioners were able to achieve uncommon enlightenment.

As a matter of fact, if like them, we concentrate our efforts on our practice, we will also experience tangible signs of achievement. At Larung Gar, a short group meditation session is required in every class. At the beginning, some supervision is necessary, but gradually, practitioners will form a good habit of meditation. As long as one makes a constant endeavor, benefit and blessing will begin to emerge. Even in classes on the Five Great Treatises, which focus more on learning the philosophy, it is also necessary to do the group meditation, even if it is just for a short while during every meeting.

It is better if people can start meditation from an early age. I have seen children from many different countries practicing meditation. Some are little monks and some are pupils. Their manner of meditation is lovely. Though they sometimes fall asleep while meditating, it is very good to see them develop the habit of meditation while they are still very young. A habit developed during childhood will not easily be changed over the course of one's life. So, it would be great for parents to help their children form the habit of meditation. For instance, if a child is naughty or has made some kind of mistake, instead of a spanking, the parent can have them meditate for a while.

- **Why Keeping a Distance from Ordinary Social Activities Is Good**

To begin the actual practice, the key is to distance ourselves from ordinary social activities. The reason for this is that ordinary people are easily swept away by distracting objects and situations. Being caught up in everyday preoccupations and busyness, one can easily be entangled by endless worry about relatives, friends, enemies, possessions and so forth. Meanwhile, it is very likely that one's misguided friends will criticize the practice of transforming suffering as being cowardly and humiliating. Ordinary beings' minds are so feeble that under such conditions, it is very difficult to be unmoved by these disturbances and distractions and thus, they will find it difficult to not only endure suffering, but to practice the Dharma instruction with perseverance.

Therefore, it is necessary to choose an appropriate place to start our practice, keeping in mind that many great masters have started their practice in solitary places. An appropriate environment is not only needed for embarking on spiritual practice but also for the quality of the outcome that we wish to achieve. This is similar to athletes who wish to win a gold or a silver medal in a sporting competition, most of whom have spent many hours of concentrated practice in a closed environment before they have entered their competitive events.

So, a solitary place is a necessity for spiritual practice. If you start your practice in a crowded place where you can become easily preoccupied with social activities and time spent around misguided friends, your practice will only remain skin-deep and when suffering strikes, it will be impossible for you to transform it onto the path. On the other hand, a solitary place provides favorable conditions that enable one to delve deep into the Dharma and actualize it within their mindstream. Without such a procedure,

even if one has stayed in a Dharma center, a Buddhist institute or by the side of a great master, Dharma king or khenpo, even if one has done so for years or decades, one will still be defeated when suffering befalls. Therefore, we have to rely on a solitary place and delve deep into whatever we've learned through contemplation and meditation, and thus build a solid foundation which we can rely on as we begin our journey along the spiritual path. If we can follow this approach, even just a few Dharma teachings can transform our mind swiftly and we will soon experience how the Dharma has changed our life for the better.

Start Your Practice in Solitude

Root Text

But in the solitude of a retreat environment, since none of these are present, your awareness is very lucid and clear, and so it's easy to make the mind do whatever you want it to do.

In the solitude of a retreat environment, since there is none of the aforementioned distractions and afflictions, our mind will naturally be lucid, clear and capable of doing whatever we want it to do, whereas in a noisy place where worldly matters are taking place, it is likely that regardless of how hard we try to meditate and chant mantras, we will make very little progress and very few benefits will be gained. Indeed, a solitary place assists the mind to become tame and pliable. This is especially true in those sacred places that have been blessed by Guru Rinpoche or other lineage masters, where one's mind will become even more tranquil. As it is taught in the *Thirty-Seven Practices of the Bodhisattvas*,

When unfavorable places are abandoned, disturbing emotions gradu-

ally fade;

When there are no distractions, positive activities naturally increase;

As awareness becomes clearer, confidence in the Dharma grows—

To rely on solitude is the practice of a bodhisattva.

● Practice Step by Step

Speaking of Dharma practice, it is necessary to understand the importance of taking a step-by-step approach to practice. In the past, masters of the Nyingma tradition would require disciples to first finish the five preliminary practices and then to focus on Shamatha practice for 4 to 5 years. After the disciples' minds had become tamed and pliable through these practices, the master would give them such Dzogchen instructions as Tögal and Trekchö. These days, things are very different from the traditions of previous masters. Some modern masters casually give the highest Dzogchen teachings to their students without first bestowing on them the necessary empowerments and without requiring them to first finish the preliminary practices.

In the beginning, due to the power of these profound teachings, these disciples may feel quite comfortable that all afflictive emotions seem to have been easily cut through, and the teacher may also feel pride in his ability to deliver the Dzogchen teaching. However, lacking the proper prerequisites for giving and receiving the teaching, it is very possible that before long, the student develops more afflictive emotions, while at the same time, the teacher is also negatively affected. Therefore, when we follow the Vajrayana path, we would do better to stick to its time-honored tradition of first laying a solid foundation through the required preliminary practices. Beginning with the qualified preliminary practices is indispensable for anyone who wishes to continue on with the Vajrayana practice. Otherwise, jumping directly into the more

advanced practices without the proper basis, is likely to be as dangerous and futile as constructing a building on a thin sheet of ice. Although it may at first appear to be a magnificent accomplishment, inevitably, it will not withstand the test of time.

● Even Chöd Practitioners Start in Solitude

Root Text

It is for this very reason that when practitioners of Chöd train in “trampling right on top of suffering”, at the beginning they put off doing the practice using the harm caused by human beings and amidst distraction, but instead make a point of working with the apparitions of gods and demons in cemeteries and other desolate and powerful places.

Chöd is a profound secret practice that purposely trains practitioners of a high level in “trampling right on top of suffering”. But even such a practice is not suitable to begin while surrounded by others or amidst distractions. This is because the practitioner is very likely to fail when this practice is attempted in these conditions. Comparatively speaking, transforming suffering caused by humans is more difficult than transforming suffering caused by evil spirits or demons. The reason for this is that human beings share the same emotions, and when among a crowd of fellow humans, negative emotions such as lust to someone, or hatred towards one’s competitors, can be easily triggered.

So, it is better for practitioners of Chöd to, at first, go to the desolate places where evil spirits dwell, such as deserted charnel grounds, perilous rivers or wild mountains, to practice subjugating the fierce negative spirits that live there, and then later, to enter the crowd of humanity to work with the harm caused by human beings. In

fact, in India, all of the great Mahasiddhas of the past, including Padmasambhava, initiated their Chöd practice in the eight great charnel grounds. Even such adept practitioners recognized the need to choose solitary places to initiate their practice, so it's even more true for us ordinary practitioners.

However, it is also true that if one's practice is not yet up to a certain level and still lacks sufficient power to protect one from the harm of evil spirits, it is not a good idea to practice in either the charnel grounds or other desolate and powerful places, even though one might develop this idea simply out of curiosity. "I'd like to practice in the eight charnel grounds since that is where Guru Padmasambhava used to practice and he had blessed these places with his practice." Without getting into the idea of practicing in all of the eight charnel grounds, it is not impossible that you could become ill after staying in even one charnel ground. So, before you have gained the confidence that comes from having practiced sufficiently, do not rashly attempt to practice in such powerful places.

● **Charnel Grounds: Not a Tourist Place**

Speaking of charnel grounds, many people these days have begun to treat them as destinations for tourists; this includes the charnel ground here at Larung Gar. This is quite wrong. I once heard that some tourist groups were queueing up and readying their cameras to watch the unusual sight of a sky burial. When the dead bodies were carried to the sky burial platform, they started to cheer and clap their hands, completely ignoring the fact that this is a solemn occasion. Indeed, a place of sky burial in the Tibetan region is the same as a funeral parlor is in other places, all of which are places of sorrow where people part forever from their beloved friends and family members.

I did send both of my parents' remains to the charnel ground and the occasion was totally different from a normal visit. If tourists take pictures and clap their hands, quite simply, they are showing a lack of respect for the dead as well as annoying the family members who have gathered to bid farewell to their departed loved ones. In the Han region, people say "the dead deserve the highest regard". So, even in a cultural context, respect for the dead is highly advocated, not to mention also being universally true from a religious perspective. This is the reason why we do not want to open the place of sky burial for tourists. Besides, what is there to watch and take photos of? When someone dies, even if they had been amongst the most glamorous of ladies or gentlemen when alive, in death, their corpses are equally dreadful. Milarepa said, "This thing we call a corpse, so fearful to behold, is already right here—our own body." The fearful corpse is the same as the body we have right now. What's so special about watching it being consumed?

Many people, however, think of the charnel ground at Larung Gar as a famous place, so they desperately want to visit it and take some photos there. In fact, the buildings and other structures in a charnel ground are cultural symbols built to express solemn respect and care for the dead. To treat them in the same way as a view of some exceptional scenery, which has been established to attract and delight tourists, goes against the spirit of respecting life and tradition. No one would go to a funeral home just so they can merrily take photos to show their friends back home what a corpse looks like. Such behavior would definitely displease the family of the dead. So I feel happy that, at least at present, the charnel ground is not open to the public due to the pandemic lockdown. And for the long run, I am personally opposed to opening the charnel ground to tourists.

The Summary of Transforming Suffering

Root Text

To sum up: Not only so that your mind will not be affected by misfortune and suffering, but also to be able to draw happiness and peace of mind out of these things themselves, what we need to do is this: Do not see inner problems like illness, or outer troubles like rivals, spirits or scandalous gossip, as something undesirable and unpleasant, but instead simply get used to seeing them as something pleasing and delightful.

Now we come to the conclusion of the previous teaching. When confronted with misfortune and suffering, if we really want to let our mind to not only remain undisturbed, but to give rise to a feeling of happiness and joy, what should we do? First, we need to avoid and abandon the attitude of rejecting inner problems such as illness, and outer troubles such as rivalries, spirits, or scandalous gossip, as undesirable and unpleasant. Second, we need to change our thinking to see them as pleasing and delightful. In other words, in order to transform our old thinking pattern of rejecting both inner and outer problems into an attitude of embracing them, we must see what we had previously rejected, as opportunities to benefit our practice. This is important.

For example, when you get sick, tell yourself, “Now is a perfect chance for my practice”; when your enemies attack you, think to yourself, “I am happy and joyful to have such an opportunity for spiritual progress”. The same method applies when you encounter evil spirits or harsh words. Misfortune and suffering are precious opportunities for promoting our spiritual growth. During normal times, we are more likely to remain dull and make very

little progress, whereas when an undesirable situation occurs, we are stimulated to become introspective and to make full use of the teachings that we have become familiar with. This kind of stimulation is very precious to Dharma practitioners.

For instance, when things are normal, you may feel quite pleased with your practice, but when others attack you with such words as, “You have stolen my things! You are nothing but a thief!” or “You are so ugly that I can barely stand to look at you.” How are you going to react then? Good practitioners are able to calmly accept these harsh situations and transform them onto the spiritual path, whereas poor practitioners, especially those who lack a strong sense of self-sufficiency, are likely to be hurt badly, even if the attack is about something quite trivial.

● Mind Is the Key

According to the study of psychology, people have different levels of self-sufficiency, which is the quality of feeling secure and content with oneself, or a deep-rooted sense of inner completeness and stability. People with a strong sense of self-sufficiency are not very much bothered by other people’s opinions of them. For example, if you believe, as is taught in the *Uttaratantra Shastra*, that everyone possesses Tathagatagarbha, you will be quite self-sufficient. Whatever others may say about you, whether they say that you are ugly or if they wrongfully accuse you of something of which you are innocent, you feel unharmed and will remain quite confident. However, if you have a weak sense self-sufficiency, often feeling inadequate, insecure, inferior or lonely, you may easily get hurt enough to give up on yourself. For example, you may feel that other people are speaking ill of you when they are actually talking about someone else, but because you already feel bad about yourself, you may suffer a serious breakdown.

Therefore, the mind plays a key role in facing problems. As long as one is mentally sufficient, no matter how much pain one experiences, one will perceive it positively, and good practitioners will embrace it as a precious chance to benefit their practice on the path. Ordinary practitioners are generally willing to practice only when favorable conditions exist. For example, when they are in good health, have sufficient food and clothing, enough money and a satisfactory shelter, as well as during nice weather. When all conditions are favorable, ordinary practitioners then think, "This is a good opportunity to practice, I shall do some meditation." But for superior practitioners, they do not wait for all favorable conditions to be in place, they find the opportunity to practice regardless of any adversity. When things go wrong, to the point that nothing is going well, they say, "This is the perfect time to practice." So, as you can see, there is a huge difference between ordinary and superior practitioners.

● Viewing Suffering as Beneficial

Root Text

To accomplish this, we need to stop looking at harmful circumstances as problems and make every effort to view them as beneficial. After all, whether a thing is pleasant or unpleasant comes down to how it is perceived by the mind.

Take an example: someone who continually dwells on the futility of ordinary, mundane preoccupations will only get more and more fed up as their wealth or circle increase. On the other hand, someone who sees worldly affairs as meaningful and beneficial will seek, and even pray, to increase their power and influence.

In order to attain the spiritual state in which we are happy even

during times of misfortune, it is important that we make every effort to abandon the thought that harmful circumstances are problematic, but instead consider them to be good and beneficial. When you get sick, overhear harsh words, or are hurt by others, try to regard it as something good and avoid seeing it as harmful. We have to understand that whether something is perceived as pleasant or not is nothing more than the perception of our dualistic mind. Things themselves have no inherent nature and it is our mind that labels them as either good or bad. Once we have accepted the idea that something is “pleasant” or “unpleasant”, it then appears so to us.

For instance, some Dharma practitioners find worldly preoccupations, such as prosperity, fame and wealth, meaningless; the more they have, the more they turn away from them. They will not be happy even if they become famous, are surrounded by many people who praise them or their business makes a lot of money. In spite of their good fortune, they feel that these things are all troublesome. There are others who see merit in these things and will seek and even pray for position, fame and wealth at any cost. They admire those who have lavish houses, luxurious cars, high position or are surrounded by many people, and would be extremely happy if they were to obtain those things for themselves. Therefore, we can see that whether something is desirable or not depends on one’s perception of it.

For the same reason, one’s perception of suffering determines if one is willing to accept it or not. Take disease for example: People who are vulnerable to and horrified by illness will be quite worried when they get sick, “What should I do? Will I die this time?” Once, a Tibetan monk said to me, “I’m afraid to go to hospital. If it gives me a diagnosis of terminal cancer, I would not be able to handle it.” However, for practitioners who have trained themselves in transforming suffering, they accept sickness joyfully. “It is good!”

Even if they were to be diagnosed with cancer, they would not be scared, “No need to worry! It might be a good thing. I still have time to make virtuous aspirations before my life ends.” So, in any given situation, one can choose different attitudes with which to face it and different methods with which to deal with it.

● **Psychology vs. Buddhism**

To be honest, Buddhist methods of adjusting the mind are rarely mentioned in the research of other fields, including that of modern Western psychology. Psychologists or psychiatrists are supposed to be the experts at giving guidance to patients who suffer from various mental disorders, but sometimes even they suffer from insecurity and unhappiness. I am not professional in the area of psychology, but I have consulted with several Western psychologists regarding the history and development of the field of psychology. As a relatively new field of science, psychology has only existed for a little more than 100 years. Before it was formalized as a science, there was no field of scientific study that specifically focused on the human mental condition. Since the early stages of its development, there have been many schools of psychological theory. Among the field’s most influential pioneers are Sigmund Freud, and his students Carl Jung and Alfred Adler, each of whom founded their own schools that reflected their own views of the human condition. Unfortunately, even these great psychologists were not able to attain total mental peace and spiritual freedom in the course of their own lives.

Speaking of Alfred Adler, his school of individual psychology is comparatively optimistic. Adler thought that the basic psychological element of neurosis was a sense of inferiority. So, in Adlerian psychology, the goal is for the patient to come to feel a sense of

competency and connection by overcoming their feelings of inferiority. Adler's approach encourages one to overcome the limitations of one's past and to develop the confidence to transform both oneself and the world one lives in. Because Adler's methodology focuses on developing personal initiative and encourages personal development, it is welcomed by many Westerners and has many adherents.

Adler's system of psychological thinking was based, to a large extent, on his own personal experience as the third oldest child and second son in a family of seven children. He was a frail boy and developed rickets during his early years, before being struck by a near-fatal bout of pneumonia at age 5. These serious health conditions, coupled with his rivalry with his older brother, led to feelings of inferiority that plagued him throughout his childhood. Adler believed that these early life experiences were the major factors which drove him to become an excellent physician. Later, in his famous book, *What Life Could Mean to You*, Adler shared with his readers how to overcome inferiority, transcend one's limitations and find meaning in life.

While it is admirable that Adler was himself a good example of self-transformation, and his ideas and spirit have attracted and been found to be useful by many, he never received the full regard of his teacher, Sigmund Freud. This led him, very early on, to withdraw from Freud's inner circle. Freud related many phenomena, such as one's dreams, to one's past experiences, while Adler's psychology was more future-oriented and based on the belief that people are motivated more by their expectations of the future than by their past. This was probably due to Adler's early feelings of inferiority and how he worked to overcome these feelings and strive for significance, mastery, success and completion. Because of their irreconcilable ideas, Adler severed his ties to Freud and went on to develop his own theories of human behavior.

Similarly, another famous student of Freud was Carl Jung who also went on to establish his own unique approach to psychoanalysis. Early on, Freud held Jung in the highest regard and at one time even considered that Jung would be his successor and would carry on his research. He even managed to get Jung elected as the president of the newly formed International Psychoanalytical Association. One of Freud's primary areas of research was the interpretation of dreams as a means to gain insight into an individual's unconscious processes. Jung embraced this approach and this eventually became his area of expertise and specialization. One of Freud's most famous books is titled, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which he explained the mechanism, material and sources of dreams. In it he revealed that in the dream state one is able to access the earliest impressions of one's childhood, the experiences in one's waking life, and in particular the impressions of recent days.

Although Jung initially embraced much of this approach and the study of dreams eventually became his area of expertise and specialization, as time went by, their divergent ideas drove them further and further apart. One of the primary reasons for this rift was that Jung fundamentally disagreed with Freud's obsession with the libido as the primary driver of human behavior, which Freud believed was his most important work. According to Freud, all unusual psychological phenomena could be connected to one's sexuality. While Jung held a fundamental disagreement with Freud on his sexual theory, Freud cast a withering eye on Jung's keen interest in religion, mysticism, and the paranormal as expressions of the collective unconscious.

Jung's approach to psychology was greatly influenced by religion, and in particular, Tibetan Buddhism. The book, *The Essence of Jung's Psychology and Tibetan Buddhism*, introduces some important aspects of Carl Jung thinking and explores the many similarities between Jung's thoughts and certain aspects of Tibetan Buddhism. In his

book *Psychology and Religion*, Jung states, “For years, ever since it was first published, the *Bardo Thodol* (*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*), has been my constant companion and to it I owe, not only many stimulating ideas and discoveries, but also many fundamental insights.” Even though Jung had drawn some ideas from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, he had not delved into it deeply enough, as is obvious from some of his ideas about Tibetan Buddhism and his interpretation of dreams including what dreams might reveal about one’s future development.

In the later phases of their relationship, Jung’s view differed from Freud’s in that Jung believed that while sex does play an important role in human behavior, it is not the root cause of all problems. As a result of the terrible disappointment felt by Freud in Jung’s unwillingness to go along with his theories, by 1912, their relationship had cooled substantially and was finally severed in 1914.

From the biographies and theories of these renowned psychologists, we can see that while both psychology and Buddhism explore the inner world and share some similarities, psychology exists at a substantial distance from Buddhism’s in-depth exploration of the mind. Psychological research is not based on a given psychologist’s direct experience or realization of the nature of the mind, but from studies of patients who exhibit a particular mental disorder or an intellectual analysis of their own mental processes.

In psychology, it is said that everyone has a certain level of mental illness, which differs only by their symptomology. This is quite similar to a Buddhist idea expressed in *The Way of the Bodhisattva* that, “The cares that people squander on themselves in ignorance convulse the universe with madness.” However, modern psychology does not recognize the core understanding of Buddhism that attributes the fundamental mental affliction to ignorance. As Bud-

dhists, it is not necessary for us to advocate for Buddhism or for psychology. As long as one takes an objective view, and strives to practice and experience the Dharma teaching, one will appreciate the excellence of Buddhism, either regarding its methods of adjusting and training the mind or in any of its other aspects.

Without the actual realization of the nature of the mind, even famous psychologists, such as those mentioned above, were not able to fully free themselves from suffering. The *Shurangama Sutra* says, "You should first be clear about this temptation to avoid returning to samsara, but if you are deluded and do not recognize it, you will fall into the unintermittent hell." This means that we will not enter into samsara, once we have realized the nature of the mind and all phenomena through enlightened wisdom. But if we are not able to break free from the delusion of external illusory phenomena and internal incorrect thoughts, we will remain caught up in samsara and even worse, will be forced to spend the remainder of our existence in an unrelenting hell.

LECTURE EIGHT

Tenpe Nyima Rinpoche left these supreme instructions in this world about 100 years ago, at a time that not as many people suffered from severe mental illness. But in the modern age, people are in desperate need of these direct and powerful instructions to help them to cope with their mental afflictions. It is amazing that this great master exactly understood the mindset of modern people and so long ago was able to offer them the best medication for their well-being.

– Khenpo Sodargye

Happiness Is Determined by the Mind

As we mentioned in the previous lecture, people normally see harmful circumstances as unpleasant and therefore think of them as the source of their suffering. On the other hand, they see favorable circumstances as pleasant and thus consider them to be the source and root cause of their happiness. Yet, in spite of how difficult it is to shift one's perspective, it is possible to change our thinking to the point where we view suffering as pleasant and beneficial, so that we can come to truly embrace suffering. This is because whether we see something as pleasant or unpleasant, in the simplest of terms, comes down to how it is perceived by the mind. If we have developed the habit of perceiving a particular set of circumstances as a problem, then these will be seen as a cause for suffering, whereas if we view them as beneficial, they will become, for us, a cause for happiness.

For example, someone who likes distractions will see a noisy and chaotic city as pleasant and a source of happiness, while for someone who loves tranquility, an environment such as the one described above, becomes a source of suffering. Similarly, if we were to speak of a particular cave in the mountains, someone who enjoys solitude will see it as comfortable and may even wish to stay there for their entire life, while those who have a desire for constant social engagement won't be able to stay there comfortably for even one day. So, to reiterate, given an identical set of circumstances, people will experience these circumstances in different ways, as a

result of their particular attitude towards them.

To understand that the mind functions in this way is crucial to our mind training. If the quality of being pleasant or unpleasant were an intrinsic quality that was inherent in things, such a quality would be perceived in the same way by all people in an undifferentiated manner. But this is obviously not the case, as how we perceive things is closely related to the habitual tendencies of our individual mind. If our old habitual patterns of thinking remain, we will continue to regard happiness as having a fixed nature that is subject to being completely determined by external objects and situations. But if we are willing to reconsider our habitual way of thinking and put out the effort to break through our old patterns, we will arrive at the conclusion that external things are nothing more than minor factors affecting our feelings, while the true determining factor is our own thinking. If we train our mind to see suffering as beneficial and pleasant, even though to do so might seem quite difficult, and in contradiction to our old habitual patterns, this attitude can help us to embrace suffering instead of fearing it.

This profound teaching, as it is taught in Mahayana Buddhism, is deserving of our deep and constant contemplation. Because the words used to convey this teaching are simple, one might feel that this teaching is easily accessible and widely available, but the truth is that this teaching reveals the essential secret of our mind on the phenomenal level and can only be obtained through the transmission of our lineage masters, which is like a golden key that can help us to unlock the amazing treasury of our mind. If we don't have access to this golden key, just reading through the text by ourselves will not enable us to taste its delicate and profound meaning.

This teaching can be expounded extensively or as briefly as a presentation of one or two sessions. Regardless of the manner in

which it is presented, the most important thing is for us to deeply reflect on its meaning and apply the instruction through actual practice. It is only in this way that we can experience its amazing benefits, and it is only in this way that we can declare that we've truly acquired this sublime instruction. Someone without a good connection to Buddhism may not believe this, but as long as one reflects on its deep meaning, objectively and intelligently, one will find that it reveals a truth that is certain and irrefutable.

Among the many types of knowledge that we acquire in the course of our lives, few can be applied to ease our suffering and bring us peace. Whether we have grown up or lived in the West or in the East, what we have gained through school education, scientific research, or life experience, for the most part has only served to increase such afflictive emotions as desire, hatred and ignorance, all of which are sources of suffering. On the other hand, what we are being taught in this text has the capacity to protect us from a feeling of being lost in this chaotic material world. This is because by uncovering the secret of the mind, we learn that suffering or happiness is never determined by external things and as long as we watch over and work on our mind as guided by this teaching, we can bring fundamental change to our life and will easily solve all of our problems. For this reason, a profound pith instruction, such as this one, is the most beneficial type of knowledge for us to build up and sustain our happiness and well-being.

The Benefits of Transforming Suffering

- **The Seven Types of Benefits**

Root Text

With this kind of training then:

- our mind and character will become more peaceful and more gentle;
- we will become more open (and more flexible);
- we will be easier to get along with;
- we will be courageous and confident;
- we will be freed from obstacles that hinder our Dharma practice;
- we will be able to turn any negative circumstances to our advantage, meet with success, and bring glory and auspiciousness;
- and our mind will always be content, in the happiness born of inner peace.

To follow a spiritual path in this degenerate age, we cannot be without an armor of this kind.

Here the author tells us the benefits of training ourselves to transform suffering. First is that our mind will become peaceful and gentle. If one is impetuous, vulnerable, restless or often afflicted by agitation and anxiety, it indicates that one's mind is not well-disciplined or under control. Once we truly understand that all external things are projections of the mind, and that the nature of the mind is free from the four extremes and eight elaborations, our mind will gradually become tamed and pliable, or to put it another way, it will become as mild as tsampa soup laced with butter. Regardless of what we become occupied by during the day, or dream of at night, our mind will remain pure and serene. This is a sign of true gentleness.

Second, by training in the transformation of suffering, instead of being rigid and stubborn, we will become more open and flexible, happy with whatever we have and wherever we are. I had placed a post on my Weibo account (equivalent to *Twitter* in China) early this year, which says,

For superior practitioners, both solitary and bustling places are places for their Dharma practice.

For middling practitioners, only a solitary place is the place for their Dharma practice.

For inferior practitioners, there is nowhere that is the place for their Dharma practice.

Unskilled practitioners are likely to remain inflexible and rigid and easily get annoyed, no matter where they are. Just like Sakya Pandita says in his *Treasury of Good Advice*,

Even in the forest, malicious people deteriorate,

Even in the city, noble people remain serene.

One sees that forest animals are wild and ferocious,

But the best horses are well-disciplined, even in town.

Without training the mind, even if one remains in a solitary place for decades, one will still tend to become easily irritated and aggressive. A tiger spends its whole life on a remote mountain, its tendency to attack will not change at all. If, on the contrary, we are able to tame our mind, we will not be annoyed by external things.

Japanese Zen master, Musou Soseki, once said,

When your eyes are covered by something,

The entire three realms become small.

When your mind is worry free,

Even a single bed becomes broad.

Another Zen Master, Wumen Huikai (Mumon Ekai), wrote a poem with a similar meaning,

*Ten thousand flowers in spring, the moon in autumn,
a cool breeze in summer, snow in winter.
If your mind isn't clouded by unnecessary things,
this is the best season of your life.*

When our mind has been trained to be open and flexible, the world will become broad and beautiful in our eyes, even if our only possession is the bed on which we sleep.

Third, we will be much easier to get along with, and we will be able to get along well with people who are either superior or inferior to us, as well as people of good or bad character. Sadly, there are some people who, in spite of having a sharp intellect, have a great deal of difficulty getting along with others or have what is commonly called poor emotional intelligence. We can all agree that it is not good to introduce conflict into our interactions with the people around us. We can also agree that building a good rapport with others is a necessary quality for each of us.

Fourth, if we are well-trained in the transformation of suffering, we will be courageous and confident in all of our dealings regardless of whatever situation we might find ourselves in. If we are afraid of challenge, we will remain paralyzed by fear and our practice will never come to fruition. It sometimes happens that practitioners become very nervous when talking with me and constantly look around them like a sparrow, that always remains on the lookout for an attacker, even while eating. As practitioners, we should not allow ourselves this feeling of insecurity but should remain courageous and calm, regardless of what kind of difficulty we have to face.

Fifth and sixth, once we have become skilled at transforming suffering, all negative circumstances can be turned into our advantage and will bring us glory and auspiciousness, and as a result, we will be freed from all obstacles that hinder our Dharma practice. For most of us, to completely avoid any encounter with unfavorable circumstances to our spiritual path is almost impossible. Yet, if we remain strong-minded and free of the fear of suffering, we will be able to extricate ourselves from any and all obstacles. For those who are vulnerable and sensitive, anything that makes them annoyed can become an obstacle to their peace of mind: a mouse running on the ceiling at night, the sound of heavy rain and thunder, sickness, quarrelling with others, not eating well, listening to the harsh words of others, family issues, and so on. People who are not grounded in a calm and stable state of mind seem to encounter adversity in all circumstances.

On the other hand, by viewing suffering as beneficial, nothing will seem to be a big deal. Circumstances that are thought of as negative and inauspicious by others, can actually become an advantage to our own auspiciousness. Since I arrived here 35 years ago, I have witnessed various adversities that Larung Gar has undergone, some of which are hard to imagine. I have also encountered many difficulties in the pursuit of my own Dharma activities. If others had met these same adversities, they might not have been able to sustain themselves, or to continue their Dharma practice for benefiting others. However, since most of us at Larung have kept an attitude of regarding each of those adversities as an opportunity to better ourselves, we've been able to successfully overcome them and turn them into another advantage for our progress. Thus, in these ways, the wisdom of transformation helps us to transcend all negativities.

Seventh, when we have become skilled in this practice, our mind will always be content in the happiness born of inner peace. What-

ever occurs to us, instead of feeling anxious, panicked or agitated, we will be fearless and remain as unmovable as a rock. An experienced practitioner is always content and accepts whatever happens as an opportunity to deepen their practice. For example, after having been diagnosed with advanced cancer, a pessimist would almost certainly become depressed and filled with a feeling of hopelessness. On the other hand, an optimist, who was filled with a feeling of contentment and fearlessness, would think, “I’ve already been living in this world for so many years. It is now time to arrange everything, as best I am able, before my death.” The ability to remain in such a calm and peaceful state regardless of circumstance, indicates a high level of spiritual practice.

In this degenerate age, we are all subject to the five degenerations, these being: 1) the degeneration of disturbing thoughts, 2) the degeneration of lifespan, 3) the degeneration of time, 4) the degeneration of view and 5) the degeneration of sentient beings. In addition, people are tormented by such calamities as flood, war, epidemic and famine. In such a tough environment, without a strong mind, it is difficult to survive, not to mention the challenge of attaining freedom from it. Therefore, it is essential for each of us to wear this armor of transforming suffering in order to advance our spiritual journey. During their lives on Earth, H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche and many other lineage masters experienced huge adversities that are unimaginable to us. Thanks to their strong resolution and the armor of their spiritual practice, they were never defeated by external forces. As their lineage disciples, although we dare not say that we are as replete with all of their qualities as a tsa-tsa made from the mold of their spiritual heritage, at least when we encounter negativities in our lives and Dharma practices, we should be able to transform these negativities into the path to enlightenment, rather than giving up on our Dharma practice. Each of us should cultivate a firm and strong resolution in the face

of any negativity. In fact, to survive in this world and to continue our Dharma practice, this is what we must do.

- **Misfortunes Vanish on Their Own**

Root Text

Because if we're no longer tormented by the suffering of anxiety and irritation, not only will other kinds of suffering fade away, like soldiers who've lost their weapons, but even misfortunes like illness will, as a rule, vanish on their own.

The suffering of anxiety and irritation is very difficult to overcome and will leave one vulnerable to many types of adversity. Sometimes, male practitioners, though outwardly tall and strong, are more susceptible to certain kinds of obstacles than female practitioners, and will often give up shortly after having experienced adversity befalling them, saying things like, "I no longer wish to go on as I've already tried my best." Sometimes I will kid them that they are acting like little girls. Maybe my kidding is not always appropriate, but I do feel that some of them are too fragile.

But if we are able to transform suffering, we will no longer be tormented by anxiety and irritation. Consequently, other kinds of suffering, such as slander and humiliation, will fade away and those that would cause us harm will be like soldiers who have dropped their weapons to the ground and can no longer use their guns and knives to defeat us. What's more, all misfortunes, whether they be illness, the negative influences of Mara, or others, will become powerless and vanish on their own. Illness is actually related to our state of mind. If we stay calm and strong, even if we are in hospital, we won't be scared by any diagnosis. Instead, we will be quite at ease, even if we are seriously ill. It is even possible

that when confronted by such a peaceful attitude, illnesses may vanish on their own.

As a matter of fact, being strong and perseverant is an indispensable quality of a noble being. It is quite normal for anyone to encounter many kinds of negativities in the course of achieving their life or career goals. Faced with these obstacles, people of great inner strength will never give up nor waver from their highest intentions. But for those who are not strong minded, it's easy to be enthusiastic early on in their practice, but give up quickly after being faced with certain kinds of obstacles.

At Larung Gar, a number of khenpos and khenmos take turns in the administration of different departments. I have noticed that some of them are very enthusiastic at the beginning of their turn, but end up feeling exhausted after only a couple of years and after a while can only think of going on retreat to solitary places. There are two khenpos, who are in charge of the financial department here at Larung Gar, that oversee the running of several stores that make money to support the living expanses of the whole sangha. At the beginning, they thought the market at Larung Gar was too small, so they wanted to expand it. They were full of confidence and when outlining their plans stated, "In order to better support the sangha, we must open one store in Lhasa, one in Xining and another one in Sertar." We suggested that they focus on the managing of the existing stores first, because running several stores at the same time is not that easy. In spite of this, they insisted on kicking off their plan as stated. Yet, after a few years, not only had they not opened any new stores, they did not even want to manage the existing stores anymore.

It is possible to adopt a similar attitude regarding our spiritual path. Some practitioners are very diligent at the beginning of their practice, thinking that because life is impermanent, it is a waste

of time to take any rest. I also had a similar thought when I first arrived at Larung Gar. Once, H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche asked us to take a short summer break to enjoy the beautiful weather and have some fun. But I thought that for me, no break was necessary and I chose to spend all of my time learning the Dharma. However, as time goes by, such enthusiasm can gradually fade away.

● The Wheel of Constant Happiness Turns

Root Text

The saints of the past used to say:

“If you are not unhappy or discontented about anything, then your mind will not be disturbed. Since your mind is not disturbed, the subtle wind energy (Tib. *Lung*) will not be disturbed. That means the other elements of the body will not be disturbed either. As a result, your mind will not be disturbed, and so it goes on, as the wheel of constant happiness turns.”

Our body consists of four elements: earth, water, fire and wind. When our mind is disturbed, the wind energy in our body will be disturbed as well, throwing the other three elements of our body out of balance. For example, when one is angry, their breathing will become shortened and erratic, indicating that their wind energy is disturbed and it will throw their entire body out of balance. On the contrary, when we are in a good mood, the wind-energies, channels and essences in our body will function properly, and the other three elements of the body will be in balance as well. If the four elements are in balance, our mind will not be disturbed and we will feel calm and happy. As it goes on, the wheel of constant happiness turns.

So, the body and mind are closely related. If one is always unhappy and anxious, their wind energy will remain constantly disturbed, causing an imbalance of the four elements, which in turn, reinforces the person's unhappiness and can even cause them to age more quickly. However, for those whose minds remain calm and undisturbed, their physical condition will not deteriorate, even in times of suffering. Take Nelson Mandela's experience as an example. Those who were imprisoned with him, by the time that they were released, had become grey-haired and seemed very old. Yet, when Nelson Mandela was released, he looked almost the same as before his imprisonment, and his hair color hadn't changed either.

So, the best way to avoid getting old quickly or becoming unhealthy is to develop a good mentality, which works much better than all kinds of skin care products, nutritive drugs or supplements. With a good mentality, we will remain constantly happy and healthy. But if we remain strongly attached to something or outcome and because we lack a proper method to train our mind, we will always be discontent and unhappy and we will surely not have good mental or physical health. Those practitioners who live and practice in mountains, might not eat exquisite food or wear elegant clothing, but they are nourished by nature, and have integrated the Dharma into their mind so that they are constantly undisturbed and their wheel of happiness continues to turn.

Ordinary beings may not be able to apply what they've learned into practice immediately, but even to understand the teaching literally is much better than not knowing it at all. With this instruction, we can easily identify an improper thought and a deluded mindset as the root cause of our physical and mental disorders. As practitioners, we should make every effort to arrive at a mental state of happiness and contentment, rather than one in which we are easily disturbed by negative circumstances. However, it is only

through perseverance and practice that we can reach such a state. If we do not use the teaching to train our mind, even if we have taken refuge in the Three Jewels, have received monastic ordination, or have been studying Buddhism for years and gained a thorough intellectual understanding of its philosophy, there is still a long way to go before we can actually tame our mind and eradicate our mental afflictions.

This is because mental afflictions can be eradicated only through one's practice rather than through one's view. Establishing a certain view means to only have an intellectual understanding, but not a personal experience or realization of the teaching. For instance, understanding the origin of suffering and mental afflictions as well as the methods to eradicate them, is just to have the view, with no power to truly eradicate them. In order to gain the power to eliminate these afflictions, one has to personally follow the Dharma path and to practice these methods, gradually evolving from a green hand to an experienced practitioner. Even if we've attained some personal experience or a certain level of realization, we still need to continue the practice until the teaching fully merges into our mind and rids us of mental afflictions. This is why bodhisattvas of the first bhumi and above, still advance their practice in order to completely eradicate their afflictions, as well as their habitual tendencies.

● **Negative Spirits Are Scared Away**

Root Text

Also:

Horses and donkeys with sores on their backs
Are an easy prey for scavenging birds.

People who are prone to fear,
Are easy victims to negative spirits.
But not those whose character is stable and strong.

The first sentence is an analogy. If their saddles don't fit well, horses or donkeys will often have sores on their backs. The same goes with yaks if they are over-loaded with goods or if the saddles are crooked. When the backs of these beasts of burden become covered in sores, they become quite terrified when crows and magpies come to them, as these scavenging birds will take advantage of their weakened condition to prey on them. However, if they don't have any wounds on their backs, they are very calm and not at all scared. Likewise, people who are prone to fear are easy victims to evil spirits, whereas those who are brave and strong will not be.

In an early translation of the *Sutra of Sundry Metaphors* there is a story that on a snowy night, five people stayed overnight in a temple where there was a wooden statue of an evil spirit. Four of them intended to chop up that statue for firewood to keep them warm. The fifth one was really afraid of being harmed by the spirit, and insisted that they not do so. The evil spirit, who had been watching unseen, said to himself, "This person is afraid of me, so I will choose him as the target to become my food." When the person overheard the spirit speaking, he became brave and strong, and woke up the other four and together they burned the wooden statue to keep warm. As a result, the evil spirit did not dare harm any of them and fled. So, it sometimes happens that when facing atheists who are not afraid of them, evil spirits can do nothing to them. In the past, some holy mountains and monasteries of great blessings in the Tibetan region, were ruined by non-believers. Because they didn't believe in karma or the six realms, even the fierce gods and spirits who were responsible for protecting those mountains and monasteries could not drive them away.

If our mind is shaken and indecisive, Maras will be delighted. In the *Mahasamghata Sutra Requested by Akasagarbha Bodhisattva*, it states:

*If there is a crack in the mind,
The mind will be shaken.
When the mind is shaken,
Maras get their chance.*

When the mind is in a state of vulnerability or worry, unfavorable things will happen. Normally people say, “The more you are afraid that something will happen, the more likely it is that it will happen.” For instance, if you are very worried about losing someone or encountering ghosts, then it is very likely that you will experience these things. This is because external things are merely the manifestation of the mind; the more your mind fabricates something, the more possible it is that such things will appear in front of you. When a certain negative thought sneaks into your mind, it creates an opportunity for Maras to do something bad to you.

The *Prajnaparamita Sutra* also tells us that those that are the most frail and indecisive, are the ones that are the most susceptible to the harm of mountain spirits, earth spirits and so on.

In *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, Shantideva says,

*When they find a dying serpent,
Even crows behave like soaring eagles.
Therefore, if I am weak and feeble-hearted,
Even little faults will strike and injure me.*

By nature, crows are very timid, but they will behave like eagles when they find a dying serpent, and will jump on and off the serpent’s body, dragging it around until it is dead. Likewise,

practitioners, who are weak and feeble-hearted, are like dying serpents that can be bullied at will by crows who would be afraid to attack if they were healthy and strong. Practitioners like this, are easily defeated by minor setbacks, because, to them, those minor setbacks are as powerful as an eagle that is able to trample or destroy them with little or no difficulty. Therefore, we should stay courageous in our Dharma practice and follow in the footsteps of H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, whose entire life was heroic and valiant, not in the sense of one who needs a gun to protect themselves, but as one who possesses a sword of wisdom to cut through all obstacles on his spiritual path. We do need to abandon the negative attitude of, “I am a pathetic loser”, “I am unfortunate”, or “My life is completely ruined”. All of these self-defeating words can only make us vulnerable and lead us to become easy victims to negative spirits. But by being confident and strong-minded in our lives, even Maras won’t be able to harm us.

The Wise Seek Happiness from Within

Root Text

Thus it is that the wise, seeing that all happiness and suffering depend upon the mind, will seek their happiness and well-being within the mind. Since all the causes of happiness are entirely within themselves, they will not be dependent on anything external, which means that nothing whatsoever, be it sentient beings or anything else, can do them any harm. And even when they die, this attitude will follow, so that they will always, always be free and in control.

This conclusion is very important. The wise and the fool have different ways to seek happiness and avoid suffering. Wise and

genuine Dharma practitioners seek happiness and avoid suffering from within because they know that all suffering and happiness depends upon their own mind and that all of the causes of happiness are entirely within themselves. You may think that happiness can be gained through relationships, wealth or high position, but actually the cause of happiness is within yourself, just as you are. Everybody is indeed an amazing treasury unto themselves, because at the end of the day, happiness comes from a contented mind, or a strong feeling of self-sufficiency. With a state of mind like this, you will live a happy life, while lacking it makes happiness unreachable.

● **How We Discern Happiness and Suffering?**

From the viewpoint of the Buddhist Logic and the Abhidharma, happiness is a twofold sensation of pleasure that can be categorized as physical pleasure combined with mental pleasure, which can be only discerned by the mental consciousness. Western psychology tells us that pleasure is obtained through the five sense organs which provide us with our experience of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. In Buddhist Logic however, we talk about the five sense consciousnesses; these being visual consciousness, auditory consciousness, olfactory consciousness, gustatory consciousness and tactile consciousness, each of which is cognizant but non-conceptual. It is only through the mental consciousness, or on more general terms, the ordinary beings' conceptual mind, that people are able to discern happiness and suffering. For example, tactile consciousness, being non-conceptual, cannot judge whether a touch to the body is pleasant or unpleasant. What makes this distinction is our mental consciousness, which is conceptual in nature and has the function of discrimination. Therefore, the sensations of pleasure and displeasure depend entirely on our

conceptual mind, which in turn is subject to its habitual patterns. If we realize this, a sense of contentment can be easily cultivated in our mind and happiness will follow naturally. Without this understanding, happiness will always remain far away.

The *Sutra of Buddha's Bequeathed Teaching* says, "People who are content, even though they might sleep on the ground, are peaceful and happy. Those who are not content, even though they might abide in the heavens, are still dissatisfied. Those who are not content, even if they are wealthy, still they are poor. Those who are content, although they might be poor, they are truly rich." I quite like this teaching and it really tells us a lot. With a contented mind, even homeless wanderers can feel happy and can find joy in singing songs, while those without a contented mind, even though they may be rich and living in gorgeous homes, may spend their life filled with pain and unhappiness.

Contentment in Buddhism is more than a feeling of satisfaction brought about by the ownership of material possessions. It is a feeling that arises when one is free from all desires. For example, if you can develop a feeling of contentment in your relationships, then regardless of whom you spend your time with, or who you come in contact with, you will always feel happy and peaceful. On the other hand, those who are continually asking for more in their relationships, will seldom be satisfied, but will feel continual sadness and will never stop hoping and dreaming for someone better to appear in their life. There are some famous pop stars that frequently start new relationships but can never seem to find their true love. Instead, they suffer the pain of one breakup after another. The same goes for status and position. People in lower positions are always hoping to be promoted to higher positions. However, without a contented mind, position and status will never become the cause of their happiness.

Therefore, those that are wise always have a feeling of contentment because they know that the cause of all happiness is entirely within themselves. As a result, they will not be harmed by sentient beings or anything else. Even when they die, happiness will follow them and they will continue to enjoy their freedom. Some practitioners can accept whatever happens or whatever is assigned to them. No matter what they are doing, they are happy, and also make others happy. They have the ability to get along well with anyone and are able to face any situation calmly. Due to this habitual pattern, even when they become severely ill or on the verge of death, they are able to stay calm and peaceful: “It is okay if sickness or death is coming for me. I can spend my time on my sickbed reciting mantras.” Such a relaxed and flexible mind enables them to be happy at any time.

● The Bodhisattvas Practice the Same Way

Root Text

This is just how the bodhisattvas attain their meditative stabilization (samādhi) called “overwhelming over all phenomena with bliss”.

Abiding in the state of meditative stabilization called “overwhelming all phenomena with bliss”, is a particular practice of bodhisattvas of the first bhumi and above. With the achievement of this realization and samadhi, they are happy at any time and under any circumstance, even if their body were to be cut with knives. From the biographies of many great masters, we have seen that many of them underwent gruesome torture during the time of the Cultural Revolution. They were stabbed by burning hot knives, but even in the face of this unendurable pain, they never had the thought to abandon the Three Jewels, and instead said to

themselves: “I have had to give up my physical body countless times in samsara, but this time my body is being sacrificed for the Three Jewels. I will take delight in it!” With such a courageous mind, they were able to endure all of their physical suffering.

Unlike these great masters from days gone by, people of today seldom suffer such unimaginable physical pain as a result of such extreme circumstances. Instead, they mainly experience the mental suffering that comes from karmic retribution, habitual tendencies and from personal clinging. Most of time, the suffering they experience is not such a big deal that they should feel self-pity or become sad and depressed with the feeling that, “I am the poorest one in the world.” Indeed, as long as we are surviving in this world, our life is always good.

For me, I’m not sure how I will end up spending my later years. The worst situation that I can imagine in this world would be to become a beggar or to be imprisoned. But, as I think over these two situations, I feel that even if my life were to end up with either of these outcomes, I won’t think of it as suffering, however much other people would pity me.

As Jetsun Milarepa said,

When all delusions cease, the mind abides in happiness.

I’m not unhappy. Happy is what I am.

With this happy mind, all things are happy.

I feel happy with everything.

I cannot say that I have attained such a high level of realization, yet, due to the blessings of the Three Jewels and my years of practice under the guidance of great masters, I think I can be happy in any circumstance. Just as Jetsun Milarepa said, “With this happy mind, all things are happy.” As is taught in the *Seven Points of Mind Training*, as long as it’s beneficial for sentient beings, whether

I die, fall sick or remain healthy, any situation is fine with me. My state of mind may fluctuate due to certain circumstances, but my resolution to stay calm and benefit sentient beings will not change.

When I read the biography of Lord Atisha, he appeared to change his mind from time to time. Sometimes he was critical and said, “The Tibetan regions are so poor that it is like a world of hungry ghosts” and other times, he gave praise that, “The water in the Tibetan regions is extremely pure. If we had the same water in India, we would offer it to the Three Jewels every day!” But one thing that didn’t change for Lord Atisha was that he always thought of benefiting sentient beings rather than seeking personal peace and bliss.

● **Keep It as the Best Antidote to Your Mental Afflictions**

Here the author tells us that happiness can be found within oneself, and it is unrealistic to seek happiness elsewhere. This is the truth upheld by wise and noble beings and is the best antidote to our mental afflictions. Although it is difficult to transform all suffering into enlightenment immediately after receiving this teaching, if you can read a few pages of this text every day, then after five or six years, you will be amazed by how fundamentally you have changed from within. Before receiving this teaching, you might be a person full of suffering and frustration, but through internalizing the pith instructions of this text, you will become very happy and able to face any circumstance joyfully. It might be that before receiving this teaching, your way of thinking was immature or even naïve, but with the blessing of this text, you will surely become more mature and understanding. It is as if a person with heart disease were to take an effective medication that had the ability to cause the heart to function better than ever before.

As I have read many articles on eastern and western psychology, and have also learned about research findings on the cures for mental illness from many celebrated universities, I believe that what Tenpe Nyima has presented in this text is much more meaningful. He left these supreme instructions in this world about 100 years ago, at a time that not as many people suffered from severe mental illness. But in the modern age, people are in desperate need of these direct and powerful instructions to help them to cope with their mental afflictions. It is amazing that this great master exactly understood the mindset of modern people and so long ago was able to offer them the best medication for their well-being.

It is kind of a pity that there are so few listeners at this time, due to the pandemic and for many other reasons. If I give a teaching on the Great Perfection, there's no doubt that lots of people will attend it, even if they are not able to truly understand it. Some people may have such thoughts as, "Since I have such a great capacity for receiving Dzogchen instruction, and as I am not experiencing a feeling of suffering, I do not need this teaching." I would guess that some practitioners might be falling asleep right now as I'm giving this teaching, or there may be others who are cooking or eating as they are listening. Indeed, it is difficult for even the wise to fully absorb this teaching, not to mention those who are distracted or sleepy. So, I'd like to urge you to reflect deeply on this teaching and you will be surprised with what you have learned from it.

● **Foolish People Seek Happiness from Outside**

Root Text

However, foolish people chase after external objects and circumstances in the hope of finding happiness. But whatever happiness they do find, great or small, it always turns out like

the saying:

You're not in control; it's all in others' hands.
As if your hair were caught up in a tree.

What you'd hope for never comes to be; things never come together; or else you make misjudgments, and there is only one failure after another. Enemies and thieves have no trouble harming you, and even the slightest false accusation will separate you from your happiness.

Sadly, most people these days laboriously seek happiness outside of themselves. I often wonder why they don't look inwardly, as one can only look in vain for happiness in the external world. Whatever happiness one hopes to find in this short life, whether it is great or small, based on a relationship, wealth or fame, at the end of the day, it is as the saying goes, "You're not in control; it's all in others' hands, as if your hair were caught in a tree." This Tibetan saying exactly describes the situation of those who seek happiness outside of themselves. If our hair were caught in a tree, our body would be trapped. Only when our hair is released from the tree, will we be free to go where we want. It is also similar to the situation of a yak who is fastened to a wooden post and cannot run away. If we chase after external objects and circumstances in the hope of finding happiness, we are giving the control of our happiness to others' hands. As a result, we are never able to attain true happiness. It is only after we have gained freedom from the control of others and no longer hope to find our happiness in anything outside of ourselves, that we can find our own happiness.

That's why the author tells us that if we try to seek happiness outside of ourselves, what we hope for never comes to be, never comes together or it turns out that we have made a number of misjudgments and now are left to face one failure after another.

Take romantic relationships as an example. If you think that a relationship is the source of your happiness and thus base your happiness on your lover, then the happiness that you are wishing for cannot come to be. Even if some amount of happiness comes, it is much less than what you have expected or it is not what you want at all. Your lover feels that what he or she does is an expression of the love that they have for you, but what you ask for is something else, or even totally opposite to what you receive.

Take material wealth as another example. You may think wealth is a source of happiness and thus you are desperate to make money. But you find that money does not bring you happiness, or even if it brings you some amount of happiness, it is not enough or is not the type of happiness that you were hoping for, as you were looking forward to something else.

It is of great importance to understand this principle, because the reason that people cannot be as happy as they expect to be, is that they build their happiness on other people or on something outside of themselves. As a result, the reality is never what they were wishing for and it never seems that they are able to reach their goal. Parents often regard their children as the source of their happiness, or family members count on each other to bring them happiness. However, what they can get from their children, lovers or families, seldom fulfill their expectations or meet their requirements. When people feel that others have failed them, they become disappointed and frustrated, and then often cause others to suffer because of their own frustration and disappointment.

Besides other people, can external objects and situations such as fancy houses, luxury cars or beautiful scenery, bring us happiness? On certain level they will, but they are not the determining factor of our happiness. Some people spend their entire life travelling around the world, delighted by the different cultures and landscapes they

encounter on their journeys. However, if they know nothing about adjusting their mind, and continue to rely solely on external experiences to find their happiness, they will fail to enjoy their travel and end up bothered by various afflictive emotions. It is only with a proper mindset that we can truly appreciate the beauty of external things.

Even worse, if we keep chasing after external things, enemies will have no trouble harming us, and even the slightest false accusation will separate us from our happiness. There are cases that on a beautiful wedding day, the bride feels that the whole movie-like romance has suddenly ended because her father or mother-in-law has inadvertently said something unpleasant. This is because happiness is fragile when it is based on the external world, and will fall apart upon any tiny change from the outside. It is said in the *Sutra of the Heap of Jewels* that if someone throws a stone at a dog, the dog will go after the stone; however, if someone throws a stone at a lion, the lion will ignore the stone and attack the person. Likewise, those that are wise know that happiness depends solely on their own mind and so they seek it within, but fools blindly believe that happiness exists in the external world, and thus give enemies and thieves the opportunities to harm them, and even the slightest false accusation can make them anxious.

● The Analogy of a Crow and a Cuckoo

Root Text

However much a crow looks after a baby cuckoo, it can never turn it into a baby crow. In the same way, if all your efforts are misguided and based on something unreliable, they will bring nothing but fatigue for the gods, negative emotions for the spirits, and suffering for yourself.

The author uses an interesting analogy of a crow and a cuckoo to further describe this situation, which should serve to inspire us. When a crow raises a baby cuckoo in its own nest, no matter how much the crow looks after the cuckoo, eventually one day the cuckoo will fly away and never come back. It is impossible for the cuckoo to become the crow's own baby. In the Tibetan region, crows stay in the same place for the entire year, while cuckoos fly to warmer places during the winter. If a crow wrongly believes that the baby cuckoo is its own child, it will be left weeping and alone when winter comes and the baby cuckoo flies away to a warmer place.

In this analogy, the baby cuckoo represents external objects and circumstances which cannot be relied upon. No matter how hard you work on controlling external things, they can never become a stable source for your happiness. Even if those external things bring you a certain amount of happiness, the happiness that they bring is merely temporary and transient, and may even make you more disappointed. As a result, if all your efforts are misguided and based on something unreliable, they will bring nothing but fatigue for the gods, negative emotions for the spirits and suffering for yourself.

This is how *samsara* works. No matter what effort people spend on external things, the outcome will leave them miserable. The gods, even they intend to help, may feel fatigued and wonder, "Why are these people so foolish? However we assist them, it is in vain." The sympathetic spirits, likewise, may also become annoyed, feeling that these people are just too silly. Normally the spirits don't have an altruistic or compassionate mind, but they will still generally feel pity for those who seek happiness from outside themselves, only to end up with nothing. Those people are the ones who suffer most, because, just like the baby cuckoo that will never grow to become a crow, external things will never bring them happiness.

This analogy is really a unique and sublime pith instruction for us to contemplate. Among over 7 billion people in this world, a great number of them are like the mother crow in the analogy, and continue to seek happiness from external objects and circumstances, but will never succeed in eradicating their suffering and mental afflictions. We are so fortunate to receive this pith instruction and by using it to train our mind, to be able to engender fundamental change within ourselves.

The Essence of a Hundred Instructions

Root Text

This “heart advice” brings a hundred different essential instructions together, into one crucial point. There are many other pith instructions on accepting suffering and hardships in order to practice the path, and on transforming illness and destructive forces into the path, as taught for example in the “Pacifying” tradition. But here, in a way that’s easy to understand, I have given a general outline of how to accept suffering, based on the writings of the Noble Śāntideva, and his wise and learned followers.

Tenpe Nyima Rinpoche tells us that this is a kind of heart advice brings a hundred different essential instructions together because it reveals the essential secret of the mind on the phenomenal level. Without this knowledge, we can never find true happiness, and will instead, be overwhelmed by various difficulties. As Jetsun Milarepa says, “If the mind pursues external circumstances, a variety of problems will occur. Such Dharma practitioners will be in suffering.”

Dharma practitioners must, at the very least, gain a meaningful

grasp of pith instructions such as this, otherwise, it will be difficult for us to deal with the most basic problems in life, and we will be like a doctor who, in spite of having cured many of his patients of their ailments, is unable to reduce his own suffering. Without mastering such a pith instruction, we may talk about spreading the Dharma and benefiting sentient beings as long as we are happy and healthy, but when problems such as negative emotions or circumstances occur, we will hardly be able to help ourselves, let alone help others.

What Tenpe Nyima Rinpoche teaches us here is truly a crucial pith instruction. Most people, especially those living in big and chaotic cities, work very hard in order to make money, maintain good relationships and lead a happier life. Buddhism encourages people to pursue a better life, but to entirely rely on the external objects and circumstances to attain happiness is an unrealistic approach. Some psychologists or philosophers have reached the conclusion that happiness cannot be found in either the outer or inner worlds. This is incorrect. If, as we have so often seen, even such animals as small yaks or young horses can be happy as they run through the summer grasslands, then human beings can also find happiness. It is, however, imperative that we gain the awareness that while our happiness may be conditioned by external things, it is mainly determined by our own mind.

In terms of the teaching on transforming suffering into enlightenment, there are many instructions, practices and theories introduced from within the spectrum of Buddhist teachings. This is true in Chod, Dzogchen, Mahamudra and in Han Buddhism's prajnaparamita teaching, as well as in many other traditions. In this text, the teaching is based primarily on Shantideva's *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, in which many related instructions are elaborated, and also includes the writings of many of his wise and learned followers such as Lord Atisha, Kunchen Longchenpa, and Ju Mipham

Rinpoche, whose teachings are easy to understand and also very applicable.

To this point, the taking of suffering as a path to enlightenment through the lens of relative truth has been fully explained. This teaching is very important and useful for ordinary people as a means of dealing with suffering in the same way as a wise person, when packing for a trip, will take along some trusted medicine in case they should become ill while traveling. In our own life's journey, it is not at all uncommon to become "sick" with mental afflictions, so it is my hope that these simple but effective instructions can be a kind of medicine that you can always carry with you.

Transforming Suffering Through Absolute Truth

Root Text

ii. Through Absolute Truth

By means of reasoning, such as "the refutation of production from the four extremes", the mind is drawn towards emptiness, the natural condition of things, a supreme state of peace, and there it rests. In this state, let alone harmful circumstances or suffering, not even their names can be found.

Even when you come out of this state, it's not like before, when suffering arose in your mind and you would react with dread and lack of confidence. Now you can overcome it by viewing it as unreal and nothing but a label.

I have not gone into detail here.

Here the author briefly talks about the method of transforming suffering through the lens of absolute truth.

In *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way*, Nagarjuna says,

*Not from itself and not from anything else,
Not from both and not without a cause,
Does anything whatsoever,
Anywhere, at any time, arise.*

This means that nothing is produced from itself, produced from something else, produced from both itself or any other, or produced without a cause. Except for production from these four extremes, there is no other way that a thing can come into being. Therefore, there is no phenomena that has ever arisen, including harmful circumstances and suffering.

The refutation of production from the four extremes is extensively explained in *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way* and in the *Introduction to the Middle Way*. By studying these texts, especially the *Introduction to the Middle Way*, you will be convinced that ultimately, no phenomenon has ever been produced. If we realize this ultimate truth and rid ourselves of our attachment to anything, then even the names of harmful circumstances or suffering cannot be found.

In the Zen Master Yongming Yanshou's *Mind Mirror*, he says, "All virtues and non-virtues, suffering and happiness, causes and effects exist on the phenomenal level, while none of them exists on the ultimate level. On the ultimate level, I say nothing can be attained." So, relative truth and ultimate truth are also expounded in Han Buddhism. On the relative level, there are virtues and non-virtues, suffering and happiness, causes and effects, but on the ultimate level, even the names of these things cannot be found.

To arrive at this conclusion, we need the scriptural teachings and logical arguments provided in the Middle Way. One of the sharpest points of reasoning in the Middle Way, to prove the non-arising of phenomena, is the refutation of the existence of the indivisible particle of matter and the indivisible moment of consciousness, both of which are expounded in the ultimate view of the Vaibhashika and Sautrantika schools. In the twelfth chapter of Kunchen Longchenpa's *Wish Fulfilling Treasury*, he introduces several ways to refute the existence of the indivisible particle of matter and the indivisible moment of consciousness, by observing whether the occurrence of a certain event has a duration of time. One of the methods to refute the existence of the indivisible particle is as follows: According to the Vaibhashika and Sautrantika schools, sunlight is formed by indivisible particles of matter. Suppose a shaft of sunlight, shining into a room, consists of one hundred indivisible particles. If I shoot an arrow that passes through these one hundred particles, is there a gap of time as the arrow passes between each particle? If the answer is no, then it will give rise to an obviously wrong conclusion that an aeon is equal to a moment; if the answer is yes, then the so-called indivisible particle can no longer be said to be indivisible, because it can be divided into the part that first come into contact with the arrow and the part that later come into contact with the arrow.

The same method applies to the examination of the indivisible moment of consciousness. For example, if there are two people standing in front of me, let's call them person A and person B. To my conscious awareness, it seems that I recognize both of them simultaneously as a single thought that takes place in a single moment of time. But what appears at first to be a single moment, can actually be divided into two separate moments. Why? Because, even though it seems to me that in that single moment, a simultaneous recognition of both person A and of person B is

taking place, mental consciousness can only have one thought at one time. So, what I had at first thought of as a single moment, actually consists of two separate moments, the first, in which I recognize person A and the next, in which I recognize person B. The very moment that I recognize person B can be even further divided into two parts: the part that is closer to the moment I recognize A and the part that is further from the moment I recognize person A. Does each of these different parts have a duration of time? If no, again it will give rise to an obviously wrong conclusion that an aeon becomes equal to a moment; if yes, then they can continue to be divided into two parts, a part that is closer to the previous moment and a part that is closer to the next moment. As a result, that single moment in which I recognize person A and person B, can be actually divided into two, four, one thousand, or an uncountable number of moments. At first, we may feel this single moment to be indivisible, but through logical analysis, we come to the realization that this is not the case. The so-called indivisible moment of consciousness does not, in fact, exist.

There are also a number of unique processes of reasoning to prove the emptiness of all phenomena in the *Wish Fulfilling Treasury*, which are not commonly found in such other treatises as *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way*, *The Adornment of the Middle Way*, *Sixty Stanzas of Reasoning*, and *Seventy Stanzas on Emptiness*. Once you gain the conviction that all phenomena are ungraspable on the ultimate level and are illusory and dream-like on the relative level, then you can rest your mind in such a state and will find that even the name of suffering cannot be found. Hence you won't be bothered by, or afraid of suffering because, like the son of a barren woman, it does not truly exist at all.

The author here does not elaborate on the analytical arguments of the Middle Way, the methods of Dzogchen to bring the mind to rest, or the pith instructions of the Mahamudra for practicing,

but only briefly touches on the ultimate state of mind. It simply states that in emptiness, the natural condition of all phenomena and the supreme state of peace, not even the names of harmful circumstances or suffering can be found. When I first read this teaching, I was really struck by it and spent a good deal of time pondering its meaning. Although it simply uses only a very few words, it clearly states the central truth of all things and therefore, inspired me deeply. In the past twenty or thirty years, I've been studying the Middle Way almost every year and am quite familiar with its reasonings and arguments, but still, this simple sentence touches me deeply and brings me great benefit.

On the conventional level, we endeavor to transform suffering into enlightenment, but on the ultimate level, we cannot find even the name of suffering, so what is there to be transformed? By studying such treatises as *The Adornment of the Middle Way*, *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way*, and the *Wish Fulfilling Treasury*, we will become more and more fully convinced that suffering does not intrinsically exist. Therefore, there is nothing whatsoever to be afraid of. Suffering is only a label fabricated by our dualistic mind, and does not possess any intrinsic entity.

I would like to advise any intelligent youngsters, particularly those that are capable of making a rigorous logical analysis, to make an in-depth study of the Middle Way and Buddhist Logic. Through study, one's discriminative thoughts can more easily be destroyed. If those who believe that the Buddhist teachings are incorrect, are lacking in value or are not worthy of one's time and attention, were to take the time to delve into the study of the Middle Way and, through the application of proper reasoning, examine any of its statements, their unreasonable doubts will be quickly eliminated and they will begin to gain a true appreciation of the wisdom of Buddhism, and will also come to realize the huge gap that exists between Buddhist philosophy and such Western traditions as the

philosophical musings of Aristotle and Plato, or the psychological theories of Adler, Freud or Jung.

LECTURE NINE

It is really a pity that ordinary people spoil their advantages in return for the causes of suffering. As Dharma practitioners, we must use happiness as a favorable means to acquire the Dharma because once the Dharma has been acquired, happiness and well-being will continuously arise. Thus, Dharma and happiness can and do support one another and allow the cycle of happiness to continue to turn.

– Khenpo Sodargye

Invest Your Happiness for Inexhaustible Gain

9

Cherish the Dharma Teaching

The pith instruction, *Transforming Suffering and Happiness into Enlightenment*, is presented in three parts: the wholesome beginning, the wholesome middle, and the wholesome ending. In the presentation of the wholesome middle of the main text, we discussed how to use suffering as a path to enlightenment through the lens of both relative truth and absolute truth. Today, as we approach the teaching on how to use happiness as the path to enlightenment, we will once again follow the approach utilized by Tenpe Nyima of offering this important teaching through the perspective of both relative and absolute truth.

- **Fierce Diligence is the Key**

Most people are acutely aware of the experience of suffering, thus they resonate strongly with the practice of the transformation of suffering and find it to be particularly beneficial. By consistently keeping this instruction in mind, they find that not only are they not intimidated by adversities, but they discover that, with practice, they are able to experience immense joy in the face of suffering. In the course of their practice, some confident and experienced practitioners will deliberately pray to the Three Jewels and the negative forces to send them pain, obstacles, and unfavorable conditions, in order that they can use these negative circumstances to strengthen their practice of transformation. It sometimes happens, that we

may experience certain kinds of suffering or misfortune when receiving a profound teaching, as well as a heightening of the level of pain when engaging in such sublime Mahayana practices as the transformation of suffering. In cases like this, we should consider this additional level of discomfort as an exceptional blessing from the buddhas and bodhisattvas, to help us advance our practice. This should be a reason to feel happy, and should cause one to exclaim, “My practice is indeed meaningful! By the blessing of the Three Jewels, I’m in grave pain!”

To develop a progressive course of practice mainly depends on oneself. I sincerely wish for you all to immerse yourselves in this teaching and to integrate it into your mindstream because while it is short in length, this instruction is concise and quintessential and can truly help you to grow into a genuine and powerful practitioner. Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many Dharma friends are unable to join us for this teaching. The lessening of opportunities to receive the Dharma is disappointing. On the other hand, this might not be completely a bad thing. There will be lecture notes, video recordings and soundtracks available later on for those that were not able to attend in person. By acquiring this pith instruction of Tenpe Nyima through any medium, many people can certainly master the skill of transforming adversities into advantageous growth and thus will not so easily regress in their spiritual practice when faced with obstacles. During the period in which one is immersed in study, extended rhetoric or a prolonged period of time is not necessary. As long as one exerts themselves fiercely, they will develop a deep insight into the simple and concise phrase, “taking suffering as the path to enlightenment”. By paying close attention to a few short lectures, such as these we’re having now, an impact of paramount proportions can take place within the mind.

However, without diligent practice and in-depth reflection, the

lectures alone cannot be expected to, on their own, bring about even the slightest change, even if one has been listening to the teaching for many years.

As a saying from *Gems in the Dharma Garden* goes,

*Living a life for a hundred years
Of being indolent,
Is less meaningful than
Living one day of earnest effort.*

Without exertion directed toward cultivating devotion and strengthening one's practice, the result will be meaningless, even though one has spent a century living an indolent life. There are cases of students who still generated wrong views or denigrated their guru despite the fact that they had been the close attendants of their guru for twenty or thirty years. Little do they know how much their wrong views and slander have severely damaged, not only their own mindstream, but that of others as well. Consequently, the present and future lifetimes of this kind of individual will, almost certainly, be meaningless and miserable.

On the other hand, if one encourages themselves to devote their body and mind fully to the Dharma and put a short but succinct instruction into vigorous practice for even one day, the benefits will be immeasurable. By reviewing the history of the great masters of the past, we find that they may not necessarily have spent a long time engaged in the pursuit of the Dharma. As we mentioned earlier, the great Tibetan translator Chak Lotsawa had spent only a couple of years in India, yet, after returning Tibet, he was more than competent when it came to propagating the essential Dharma to benefit vast numbers of sentient beings. Master Faxian of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, made a pilgrimage to India and studied there for about ten years, after which he brought back home a great number of Buddhist texts written in Sanskrit and translated them

into the Chinese language. Also, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche spent only six years studying in Sershul, before he initiated his own Dharma spreading activities.

● **Spread the Teaching Regardless of Chaos and Uncertainty**

These stories should serve as a vivid encouragement for us later practitioners. No matter where or how we advance our Dharma pursuit, there will surely be hurdles and unfavorable conditions along the way. Regardless of these, if we can transcend these obstacles and fully immerse ourselves in our studies, we will surely achieve great accomplishment in our practice, while also benefiting other living beings. I am confident that for those who have absorbed the Dharma deeply into their minds through study and practice, especially for those who are still young, many proper occasions for spreading the Dharma will surely arise in their future.

Today's world is undergoing rapid changes that are creating more and more stress and disorientation. It is like the spring weather that brings with it extreme changes. Here in the Tibetan mountains, we may be enjoying the warm sun one moment, only to be drenched by a thunderstorm in the next, followed moments later by the return of a clear and cloudless sky. When a certain era collides with one's life, one may feel helpless and deprived by the lack of opportunities and creativity, and perplexed at having to face an unknown future. Yet, without any indication or forewarning, a circumstance of great occasion could emerge out of nowhere. The alternation of favorable and unfavorable circumstances could easily throw someone off guard, but if we take advantage of all available opportunities to engage in Dharma study and practice, a pith instruction as simple as the transformation of suffering, can enable us to benefit others over the long run. Instead of feeling stranded in

the face of uncertainty and chaos, we may find ourselves surprised to discover that there are so many chances to share the Dharma teaching with others.

After having received the teaching on Tenpe Nyima's *Transforming Suffering and Happiness into Enlightenment*, even a minor amount of additional training can be very useful. Hence, I'd like to encourage you to not only gain familiarity with this teaching, but to share it with others. Of course, if you're not interested in this teaching, or if you've never practiced or explored it, it would be pointless to attempt to share it with others. Although the number of people in today's audience is relatively small, one's experience of the teaching can be nonetheless momentous, if it has truly touched your heart. Now, each of you is wearing a mask and because of this, I can hardly recognize who you are. One's nose is such a distinguishable facial feature that perhaps that is why burglars always cover their noses carefully (*audience laughs*). . . Regardless, I believe that in ten, twenty, or many more years later, some of you that have gathered here, will spread this sublime teaching to every corner of the world. Of this, I am quite confident.

● Fully Devote Your Body and Mind to Seeking the Dharma

As a matter of simple fact, this succinct instruction on transforming suffering and happiness surpasses the value of any amount of material wealth. Could happiness be guaranteed if one were to be given a million dollars, or a luxurious car like a Porsche, a Mercedes Benz or a Rolls-Royce? Unlikely. Nonetheless, if one were to be offered the wisdom of transforming suffering and happiness, they would benefit from it for the rest of their life. Even in the final moments leading up to one's death, one would still be able to hold a joyful state of mind as they prepare to enter into the next

life. So, in addition to such sophisticated tantras and shastras as the Five Great Treatises, this “tiny” piece of instruction can be a source of great spiritual wealth for everyone who receives it. As this spiritual richness is of paramount value, I’m asking you to listen attentively and to reflect on it deeply.

I can still recall the old days when we were studying earnestly with H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. The living conditions then were considerably worse than what we have today, to the point that everyday life was what I’d call an “ascetic practice”. We had no electricity and had to collect firewood by walking around the mountains and there were many times that the wood that we collected was too damp to start a fire. I was living, at that time, in a tiny mud-brick house with “window panes” made of plastic boards so that the fading rays of light could shine through. Once, my uncle, who was my father’s elder brother, stayed with me overnight. Unlike my father, who was always optimistic, my uncle was quite the opposite. He had always been stubbornly against my decision for monasticism and that night in my poor abode, after being unable to make a fire for cooking, he complained, “You could have made plenty of money by being a teacher. What’s the point of having this kind of life? You’re going to regret it!” My uncle then began to recite a list of one acquaintance after another and their incomes. While it’s true that my living conditions were poor at that time, my attention was fully devoted to my Dharma study. My thought was that since I had given up on a secular pursuit and success, it would be a true failure if I didn’t strive with my full attention and effort in my Dharma practice. This idea motivated me to study wholeheartedly, without paying attention to the disapproval of my friends and relatives.

I hope that my personal story will encourage you. Throughout our course of study, we must push and inspire ourselves from within, with the feeling that “I must acquire the Buddhadharma!” Look at

the great masters who overcame great obstacles as they traveled overland from China to India. I heartily admire their bravery, resilience, and unshakable faith. Prominent Chinese masters like Master Fazun, Nenghai, Dayong, and other lesser-known monks also made their way across the mountains and into Tibet, in pursuit of the Dharma. With a strong determination, they disseminated the wisdom that they had found once they had returned to their homeland.

That being said, we must deepen our knowledge by taking certain steps to solidify our study and practice. It would be disheartening if we were to squander the opportunity for Dharma study due to having been lured away by unimportant and meaningless distractions. Keep in mind that we do not live for the purpose of indulging in pleasurable activities, but rather to acquire the Buddhadharma, as this is what constitutes what we would consider to be a purposeful life. We should be less concerned with food, living conditions, etc., as long as our necessities of life are assured on the most basic level. Some people pay too much attention to the foods that they eat or the houses in which they live, and spend their time engaging in disputes with their Dharma friends while feeling dissatisfied with one thing after another. Sadly, they don't spend as much time contemplating the Dharma, though that would be a much more worthwhile way to spend their time. This is truly a pity.

Happiness May Block Our Spiritual Path

Root Text

2) How to Use Happiness as the Path to Enlightenment

i. Through Relative Truth

Whenever happiness and the various things that cause happiness to appear, if we slip under their power, then we will grow increasingly conceited, smug and lazy, which will block our spiritual path and progress.

● Happiness Makes You Conceited and Smug

Some may wonder, “Isn’t being happier better? Why should happiness have to be transformed?” Here is the reason. When we are happy due to having become famous, wealthy, because we are in good health, or when we encounter certain things that cause happiness to appear, like walking outdoors beneath the beautiful blue sky, getting together with a friend to have a good meal or putting on beautiful clothes, in moments like these if we fail to turn our happiness into something that advances our spiritual path, all of these will offer little more than entertainment and a few moments of temporary happiness. As a consequence, we will have fallen under their power and gotten lost, giving rise to many negative consequences.

When we are in pain, we notice it quickly and encourage ourselves to “Be strong!” However, when we are happy, we easily become overwhelmed by this strong feeling and ignore its faults, which ends up blocking our spiritual progress by encouraging such

negative characteristics as arrogance, self-conceit, and indolence. Should we become addicted to these happy feelings, it is certain that these negative character traits will only grow increasingly stronger. If we take a moment to reflect on this, we can definitely identify people that we know who become overly conceited and smug when they are happy. Sadly, too often we underestimate these latent defects of happiness and believe that no harm can come of it.

A book titled, *The Lucifer Effect* by Professor Philip Zimbardo, discusses the kind of factors that lead good people to engage in evil actions. Back in 1971, Dr. Zimbardo masterminded a prison simulation study, now known as the Stanford Prison Experiment, which was intended to measure the effect of role-playing, labeling, and social expectation on human behavior, over a period of two weeks. In the experiment, twenty-four college students were randomly assigned to play the role of either prison guard or inmate in a simulated prison environment. Not long after the experiment was initiated, the guards became so brutal that the experiment had to be shut down after only six days. The experiment immediately came under attack on methodological and ethical grounds, and Zimbardo claimed that “social forces and environmental contingencies” had led the guards to behave so badly.

From this experiment we can see that even an ordinary or unimportant person can be convinced to believe that they are superior to others by virtue of such external factors as an increase in authority, money or fame. I’ve also observed a similar reaction in people who have been selected as group leaders or project managers. After being selected, some who had been quite modest in their manner, soon became imperious in their treatment of others. The change in their attitude was drastic, as if they had been selected to be a high governmental officer. Once they had gained this new “status”, they even began to ignore their families and friends. So, when people

possess fame, wealth, good looks, etc., the flattery that they receive from others encourages them to become arrogant and conceited.

This is why we need to reconstruct happiness as a reinforcement for our spiritual pursuit. Should one transform happiness into a beneficial means for spiritual growth, a promotion or a compliment won't make them smug, and they will remain humble and mindful that there are many other admirable individuals who are far more competent. Many of us have witnessed the "humbling progress" of a boss whose superior has arrived from the main branch to check on things in his or her office. If you have time, I'd recommend you take a look into *The Lucifer Effect*, as this study in social psychology is certain to provoke some thoughts on the influence of social forces and other factors that trigger people's tendency to become evil. This deserves our reflection.

● The Faults of Being Arrogant

As Dharma practitioners, we need to be aware of all the potential downfalls that happiness may bring us. *The Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom* says, "If a man is arrogant and holds himself in high regard, the nectar of the Dharma cannot flow into his mind." Also, a common analogy used in the sutras to describe someone of this type, is that of an arrogant mountain that cannot contain a meritorious body of water. From this, we can conclude that if an individual fails to transform happiness into an advantage for his spiritual practice, he is likely to be headed for a downfall despite however successful he may appear to be.

Ju Mipham Rinpoche reminds us, that since all samsaric phenomena are illusory and dreamlike, neither be proud of being rich nor become discouraged when hitting rock bottom. If we take a moment to think about the futility of worldly enjoyments, we can

come up with some shifts to our thinking such as, “Sure, I’m quite famous and rich, but who am I when compared to the wealthiest person in the world?”, or “Yes, I’m much taller than most people, but that’s nothing to be arrogant about”, or even “Certainly, I’m doing pretty well lately, but that doesn’t guarantee a happy tomorrow.” It is quite true that an arrogant person can stumble and fail in his later years or in his future lives, regardless of how successful or marvelous he may appear in the present moment.

During Buddha Shakyamuni’s time, there was a sangha of 500 members that included an old bhikkhu whom everyone detested. This was because he was so dull that, even though all 500 monks had tried to help him, he still couldn’t memorize even one stanza of the Buddha’s teachings, even after many years of their efforts. Because of this, all that he was allowed to do was the sweeping. On one occasion, the king invited the whole sangha to receive a grand offering. The old monk was so depressed over his plight that he was about to hang himself from a tree. The Buddha observed that it was the proper occasion to enlighten the old bhikkhu, so he transformed into a tree god and scolded him, “Your suicide would be meaningless! Instead, you should feel contrite for your arrogance. Back in the time of Buddha Kashyapa, you were a Tripitaka master with 500 students, but because you were so proud of your intelligence, you always belittled others. Also, because of your arrogance, you were unwilling to share all of your Dharma knowledge with your students. Now in this life, your karmic result is to be so dull that you are incapable of learning the teachings.”

Hearing this, the bhikkhu felt deeply remorseful. The Buddha then revealed his form in a blaze of light and taught the old bhikkhu a few stanzas. Shocked by seeing the Buddha’s true body and hearing his teaching in person, the bhikkhu felt extremely happy and meanwhile lamented his previous wrongdoing. He then quickly entered a concentrative meditation and attained arhathood.

As a result, he was able to recall his countless previous lives and all of the Tripitaka teachings. The Buddha then instructed him to go to the palace and take the first seat at the grand offering, explaining to him that the 500 monks in the sangha members were actually his previous students from his previous life, and that he should now guide them to enlightenment in this life. When he was seated in the first position, the sangha were unhappy at his behavior but kept their opinions to themselves as the king was present. However, when the old bhikkhu started to give the teaching, they were all amazed and truly felt regret at their previous attitude of belittling him. As a result of the old bhikkus teaching, all 500 monks attained arhathood in that exact moment.

From this story we can see that in the time of the Buddha Kashyapa, this old bhikkhu had actually been a distinguished Tripitaka master who, with arrogance, had looked down on others. As a karmic retribution, after numerous life times and in this time of Buddha Shakyamuni, he still had to suffer from insults from the sangha. Nonetheless, he taught the Dharma wonderfully after his karma had been purified and his previous accomplishment was revealed. This story should serve as a reminder that even though one has gained a bit of merit, wealth, or other envious qualities, one should not be excessively overjoyed. It is a sign of wisdom to recognize that happiness is not as reliable as one might expect and that suffering is also not as impenetrable as one might imagine. It is pointless to feel smug about our advantages or to feel inferior because of our disadvantages. One could very easily fall sick or lose one's wealth and reputation overnight. The alternation of that which brings us pleasure and that which brings us displeasure in samsara is like a sudden change of the weather. This constant fluctuation between happiness and suffering is the exact situation of all sentient beings. So, we would do better not to become too attached to either state.

- **It Is Difficult to Cope with Happiness**

Root Text

In fact it's difficult not to be carried away by happiness, as Padampa Sangye pointed out:

We human beings can cope with a lot of suffering,
But very little happiness.

This is a piece of sterling advice from Padampa Sangye, the great Indian Siddha and the founder of the lineage of Chöd. When one stumbles upon something that is causing him some kind of misery, one's strength is put to the test. Some people demonstrate resilience, composure and wisdom, and are thus able to cope with the difficulty and help others. I've seen some individuals, who seem unreliable, yet when certain bad situations occur, they are the first who stand up to the crises. While some people are tough enough when confronted with challenges, their determination can be undermined by pleasure. This is because ordinary beings easily submit themselves to worldly enjoyment, and then when overwhelmed by happiness, easily lose their direction.

We've seen some monastics who at first took on ascetic practice diligently, but a few years later, their attitude has changed dramatically as they have gained a reputation, offerings, and so forth. I once had some monastic students who were very devoted and unafraid of ascetic practice but their mindset changed noticeably once they had gained increasing numbers of followers. I also recall a visit by a former student, that when he came to see me, behaved like he was a big tulku. He kept telling me, "I'm doing pretty well with my Dharma activity. The government likes me and offers great support. Here are my students and big sponsors. . . And oh! I will be attending a science conference..." Well, as far as I'm

concerned, he doesn't know anything about science. I'm worried that with his arrogance, the quality of his Dharma activity is more than a little questionable.

So, we should all take this teaching from Padampa Sangye as a reminder for us, that ordinary people can cope with a lot of suffering, but very little happiness. We have learned from history that some renowned practitioners experienced tough times during the calamitous days of the Cultural Revolution in China. Unfortunately, as the climate of religious freedom later improved, some of them succumbed to the influence of materialism in the form of the showering of money and other offerings. Some even ended up denouncing their monastic vows! As we can see, it is not easy to avoid being carried away by happiness. When stricken by misery, some people fail to cope with it, while some brave ones are able to work through it with a strong mind. But these same individuals could fail when it comes to transforming happiness into enlightenment, and end up with the indulgence and downfall into pleasure and thereby quickly retrogress on their spiritual path.

Unite Happiness with Dharma Practice

- **Happiness by Nature Is Suffering**

Root Text

That's why we need to open our eyes, in whatever ways we can, to the fact that happiness and the things that cause happiness are all actually impermanent, and are by nature suffering.

So try as best you can to arouse a deep sense of disillusion-

ment, and to stop your mind indulging in its usual apathy and negligence. Say to yourself:

It is crucial for us to recognize the true nature of happiness and the things that cause happiness. In Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*, he describes happiness as suffering in disguise or as an illusion created by conceptual thoughts. *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way* directly tells us that happiness is actually suffering because it is ever-changing, and when it turns into something else, it throws those who cling to it into great pain. When we take a deeper look into happiness, we will reach the conclusion that it is devoid of substantial meaning. Happiness is illusory and dreamlike on the level of relative truth, and unattainable on the level of ultimate truth. Through various means and observations, the insubstantiality of happiness can be tested and verified.

As is stated in Ashvaghosha's *Buddhacharita*,

*Happiness in the human and celestial realms
Should be regarded as insubstantial.
See the world as a game for fools,
In which all forms are empty and lacking existence.*

All worldly happiness is none other than an absurd game for fools. Although this game appears before us, when we apply wisdom to examine it, we will come to the conclusion that this game is indeed empty and devoid of any substantive existence. When seen through the perspective of ultimate truth, even its name cannot be found.

Realizing the deceptive nature of happiness, we know that it is not worthwhile to attach ourselves to it. There's nothing reliable or that can be counted on, so it is pointless for us to cling to it, or become lost in any pleasure or enjoyment in this phenomenal world.

The *Dhammapada* says,

*As a day passes by,
Life diminishes.
Like fish that are experiencing water loss,
What is there to be happy about?*

In a pond that is drying up slowly, the fish are doomed to die. As observers, we see that the fish continue to swim around merrily in the receding water and we feel empathy for their ignorance. It is the same with the cattle on their way to the slaughterhouse. Though they seem untroubled, the lamentable fact is that they are unaware of their imminent death. We are in the same position as those cows or fish. With every day that passes, we are getting closer and closer to our death, and the wise among us know that all the happiness that ordinary people experience will come to nothing. Given this fact, what is there left for us to be proud of? Once we have experienced the knowledge of the truth of all conditioned phenomena, we will shed our arrogance and no longer insist that happiness is something solid and permanent. Consequently, we will generate a deep sense of renunciation towards the phenomenal world and motivate ourselves onto the path of Dharma practice and no longer engage in indulgences, distractions or futile activities. In other words, a deep sense of disillusionment with happiness will enable us to stop our mind from indulging in its usual apathy and negligence.

- **Be Aware of the Good Side of Happiness**

Root Text

“Look: all the happiness and material wealth of this world is trifling and insignificant, and brings with it all kinds of problems

and difficulties. Still, in a certain sense, it does have its good side. Buddha said that someone whose freedom is impaired by suffering will have great difficulty attaining enlightenment, but for someone happy, it is easier to attain.

Now we know that happiness may not necessarily bring us any benefit, but is more likely to be associated with many defects and problems. As lovely as worldly pleasures may seem, they are a mixture of happiness and defects, making our experience of happiness trifling and insignificant. Whether the cause of our happiness is wealth, romance, status, or any other enjoyment, all of these causes contain latent suffering and other faults that lie hidden beneath them. However, being aware of this does not mean that we should negate all the qualities of happiness. Instead, we should follow a middle way in which extremes are avoided. But what, we may ask, is the good side of happiness?

As the Buddha said, someone whose freedom is impaired by suffering will have great difficulty in practicing the Dharma and attaining enlightenment. People in prison, those that suffer from sickness, poverty or disability and all those who are deprived of freedom are at a disadvantage in terms of their Dharma practice. The lack of basic freedoms, necessities and living conditions prevents many from engaging in Dharma practice. Also, for most people in the modern world, although they may have a strong wish to learn or practice the Dharma, they might be hindered by family, career and many other issues. There are others who possess the proper conditions but because they lack faith in the Dharma, they cannot engage in Dharma practice, too. This is another type of no freedom, because a lack of devotion makes their mind incompetent to receive any Dharma teaching.

On the other hand, a happy individual who possesses such good conditions as adequate basic needs for living, social support, a

loveable appearance, a healthy body, a positive mentality and so forth, can practice the Dharma and cultivate bodhicitta easily. Although some practitioners have tried their best to carry on their Dharma practice despite food shortages, lack of adequate shelter and a shortage of many other necessities, sadly, they were unable to make it past the insurmountable challenges that they concluded were the result of lack of merit, combined with their negative karmic effects. There are other cases of individuals that were completely powerless and had so little freedom due to being so occupied by work and other things, that they weren't even able to take a week off from their busy lives for Dharma practice. So, those who are endowed with sufficient freedom and happiness and thus are able to embark on the Dharma path and who, because of this, are very likely to make good progress towards enlightenment, really are very fortunate.

- **Transform Happiness into the Dharma Path**

Root Text

“What good fortune then to be able to practice the Dharma in a state of happiness like this! So, from now on, in whatever way I can, I must convert this happiness into Dharma, and then from the Dharma, happiness and well-being will continuously arise. That’s how I can train in making Dharma and happiness support one another. Otherwise, I’ll always end up where I started—like trying to boil water in a wooden saucepan.”

If we possess all the necessary conditions to practice the Dharma, we should feel really happy and appreciate our good fortune. Some practitioners are very content with the status quo of having support from families and friends, having enough savings to acquire the necessities for living and practice and having sincere devotion to

their teacher and the sangha that protects them from generating wrong views. In a situation like this, where one is endowed with all the favorable conditions for Dharma practice, one should joyfully appreciate their good fortune and feel truly blessed by the Three Jewels and the merit that comes from positive karma. Furthermore, one should think of their happiness as an advantage for acquiring the Dharma, instead of squandering ones' favorable conditions and rendering them meaningless.

Many worldly people enjoy wealth and other satisfying conditions but use these advantages on insignificant matters or squander them on various types of misconduct. Distractions and indulgences of this kind are a waste of one's good fortune and fail to create a positive cycle or to make a better investment of one's happiness. As a matter of fact, to encounter a delightful state such as is described above, does not come easily, as it requires many virtuous conditions. It is really a pity that ordinary people spoil their advantages in return for the causes of suffering. As Dharma practitioners, we must use happiness as a favorable means to acquire the Dharma because once the Dharma has been acquired, happiness and well-being will continuously arise. Thus, Dharma and happiness can and do support one another and allow the cycle of happiness to continue to turn.

We should always contemplate in this way: Thanks to the accumulated merit from the past, I've obtained a state of happiness. I shouldn't be distracted by temporal pleasure and let my happiness go to waste. Rather, I should take this happiness as an advantage to engage in Dharma practice wholeheartedly. If I remain confined by insignificant pursuits, I will not develop even the most basic secular knowledge, regardless of how austere a practice I adopt.

The *Buddhacharita* says,

By exhausting the body through austerity,

*One's mind will be frantically disturbed.
Thus, one cannot give rise to worldly wisdom,
Let alone transcend all sensory faculties.*

If worldly wisdom cannot arise, how can we expect to acquire transcendental qualities? Hence, when we are happy and endowed with favorable conditions, we must strive to study, contemplate and practice the Buddhadharma by every means that is available to us. This is a graded path of first acquiring worldly wisdom and then cultivating transcendental wisdom. Through this process, we can make Dharma practice and happiness support each other and have a positive interplay between the two.

In *The Compendium of the Dharma* (Dharmasamuccaya), it is said,

*To engage in the practice of virtues with joy,
One will attain the most supreme happiness.*

In my opinion, having the opportunity to hear, contemplate and practice the Dharma is the most precious and rarest of all good fortunes, even if in order to do so, we have to experience all sorts of hardships. If we are diligent in our listening, contemplating and practicing of the Dharma, we are assured of a happy future because according to karmic law, the effect shared by these causes will be the opportunity, in the future, to continue to engage in Dharma practice, which in turn brings us happiness, thus allowing for the creation of a positive cycle. However, if we spoil our happiness by committing non-virtuous actions, we will suffer through cyclic existence lacking any meaningful purpose.

● Do Not End Up Where You Started

While we should not become attached to the things that bring us pleasure, we do need to apply the state of happiness when

we engage in Dharma activities. The future of each one of us is unpredictable, as each individual is subject to their own karma. In spite of this, if one has the opportunity to learn about the Dharma, even if it is only for a few months or a year, one should consider it as one of the most meaningful and vital opportunities of one's lifetime and make full use of it. Too often, people feel indifferent towards things that are already in their possession. For instance, some people don't realize how happy and beloved they were, until their parents have passed away. In a similar way, we might not notice how delightful it is when we are showered by the bliss of the Dharma. Once a precious opportunity has gone, we will often reminisce about the good time it afforded us. That being said, we should sincerely cherish the Dharma teachings and their blessings whenever we have access to them. Every time we receive a Dharma teaching, it is of utmost importance to be aware of its preciousness.

If one were to take the good fortune of receiving the Dharma for granted, and neither cherish such an opportunity nor allow their happiness to support a Dharma practice, then he or she is failing to apply their advantages towards their optimal purpose. Without a positive cycle between happiness and Dharma practice, one is likely to conduct non-virtuous deeds, generate improper intents, and accumulate negative karma. As a result, they will be depleting the causes of happiness accumulated from the past, as well as exhausting their merits at a rapid pace, and will soon end up with nothing, like an unplugged electronic device that has run out of charge. Or to use another analogy, if we attempt to boil the water in a wooden container, in the end there will be nothing left as the wooden container will be consumed by the flames and the water will be entirely dissipated.

Therefore, if we fail to transform happiness into the path to enlightenment and do not make use of it as an advantage to engage in

virtues, we will end up where we started, or even deteriorate into a worse state where nothing of any value remains. Some practitioners, when they first begin to study the Dharma are extremely assiduous. Unfortunately, their enthusiasm wanes soon after certain negative conditions have appeared, among which could be unsupportive friends, distractive environments or one or more of many others. Though many of these practitioners got off to a good start, they ended up with quite a miserable outcome. Actually, even if we find that we are not able to become accomplished practitioners, we should hold to the bottom line of never receding on our Dharmic path. If we can maintain this attitude throughout the entire course of our lives, then we are guaranteed to have a life that is filled with meaning and purpose. Otherwise, it is very possible that we will waste all of our existing advantages, regardless of how enviable they are, and regrettably ending up in a miserable and pitiful state. So, we should do our best to be mindful of our daily behavior and build our resonance with the Dharma teachings through daily prayer and practice.

● The Whole Vision Behind Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland*

Root Text

The main point to get here is that whatever happiness, whatever well-being, comes our way, we must unite it with Dharma practice. This is the whole vision behind Nagarjuna's *Garland of Jewels*.

Whatever happiness or well-being comes our way, we must unite it with our Dharma practice for optimal effect. In particular, we should always hold a thought of dedication whenever we are happy. "I wish for all beings in the three realms to feel the same joy

that I'm experiencing right now. May my happiness be dedicated to their welfare." We can exercise this simple type of mind training every time we experience something that brings us pleasure, even if it something as simple as tasting some kind of delicious food. That way we can be thinking of the welfare of other sentient beings all the time. A Dharma friend once said, "I'm hesitant to give away this delicious food, but I can 'visualize' giving this to you!" (*audience laughs*) Well, this could be another way of uniting happiness with Dharma practice.

Great masters of the past reminded practitioners not to waste the value of either happiness or suffering. In the state of delightfulness, we should contemplate, "As transient as happiness is, it is a blessing from the guru and the Three Jewels. May this happiness be delivered to all sentient beings." By upholding an intention of dedication in this way, we make good use of our happiness. Similarly, we should make good use of suffering by reminding ourselves of the benefits of adversity that are constructive for our improvement, instead of complaining or blaming others. Take illness as an example; we can expand our mind by thinking, "An infinite number of sentient beings are also experiencing similar suffering. May I take their suffering upon myself." If you receive an injection that causes you to feel pain, then think, "I'm happy to accept this pain on behalf of all living beings who have experienced similar suffering." Thus, the value of your pain will not be wasted.

By acting in this way, great masters of the past never squandered their experiences of happiness or suffering, but rather treated them as a beneficial means to enhance their spiritual practice. For ordinary people however, when they are in pain, they cry out, "Wah, wah, wah. . .", and when exhilarated, again cry out, "Whoa, whoa!" Other than uttering these loud exclamations, they do not take these experiences to a deeper level. As practitioners, we should

approach our life's experiences in a different manner. For instance, whenever we are happy, we should immediately realize that it is as unreal as a dream or an illusion. Sometimes, when I come across the scattered bone fragments of yaks as I stroll around the hills, I generate a deep sense of impermanence and renunciation. By thinking of how these yaks trod on the same path that I'm walking on, I'm reminded of the fact that my own death will befall me sooner or later. Some people may feel this kind of thinking is pessimistic and unnecessary, but it is a valuable practice that helps to break through delusion.

There are many ways to incorporate practicing the Dharma into our lives. Uniting happiness with Dharma practice is the whole vision that underlies Nagarjuna's *Garland of Jewels*, or as it is now commonly translated, *The Precious Garland*. In that text, Nagarjuna offers advice on how to conduct ourselves for developing happiness in our ordinary life and how to develop our practice for the achievement of the realization of emptiness.

For example, he says,

*You receive pleasure in this life from enjoying your wealth.
Pleasure in the next life comes from giving it away.*

Nagarjuna also addresses the ubiquitous causes of death:

*The causes of death are numerous;
Those that sustain life are few,
And even they can cause death.
Therefore, always practice the Dharma.*

As a matter of fact, all of our life's experiences can become spiritual friends on our path to enlightenment. We can take a look into Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland* for more advice on the integration of

painful or happy experiences with spiritual growth, as this is the quintessential intent of that text.

● Discontentment Wastes Your Life

Root Text

Even though we may be happy, if we don't recognize it, we will never be able to make use of that happiness as an opportunity for practicing the Dharma. Instead, we'll be forever hoping that some extra happiness will come our way, and we'll waste our lives on countless projects and actions. The antidote to this is to apply the practice wherever it is appropriate, and, above all, to savor the nectar of contentment.

If we fail to unite happiness with Dharma practice, and fail to recognize it as an advantage to our spiritual growth, then even if something brings us pleasure, the happiness that we feel cannot become a favorable condition to enhance our practice. Say for instance that you are healthy and free of any sickness, or you are wealthy and without any financial worries, or you are doing fairly well in most aspects, yet, if you are not aware that such happiness needs to be used to support your Dharma practice, then your happiness will only go to waste and become meaningless. In this case, you may well keep on wishing for some kind of additional happiness and end up wasting your life on endless projects and meaningless actions.

It is quite common for a person to enjoy many favorable conditions, and yet, because they are unaware of their advantage, spend their time demanding more and more, thereby wasting their entire life with an attitude of dissatisfaction. So, if someone were to ask you, "Are you happy? When do you feel the happiest?" As a practitioner,

your answer should be, “The present moment is my happiest moment, because I have whatever I should have. I have a healthy body, a positive mentality, adequate necessities and the freedom to enjoy the blue sky.” If, on the other hand, you think, “I’m not happy at present but I will be soon! I’m about to kick off a big project and I’m sure I will become rich and powerful if everything goes my way.” This mindset of wishing for something better or fearing that you will lose something, can make people squander their life without ever finding meaningful purpose. Sadly, without controlling their desires properly, many people live their entire lives in such a state. Therefore, in order to generate an antidote to this, we need to cultivate the mind of contentment.

Mandhatri, the universal king, at one time possessed immense wealth and great power that was spread over the four great continents. Driven by his desire, he reigned over the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods, and even shared the throne of Indra, the king of the gods. Yet, he was never satisfied, which caused him finally to fall to earth and die. This account is recorded in such sutras as the *Sutra of Mandhatri* and the *Madhyama Agama*.

In the *Madhyama Agama*, there is a verse which goes,

*With celestial rain of jewels,
A greedy man is insatiable.
Covetousness is only suffering and devoid of happiness.
This, a wise man should know.*

Every living being has a different life trajectory and a different accumulation of merit. One’s level of wealth indicates how much merit one has accumulated in terms of material possession, so there’s no point to envy those that are richer than you. The same goes for one’s appearance, which is a ripened result of one’s previous karma. So, we should feel happy with whatever we possess, as it is not helpful in any way to feel discontent with this

or that. Ordinary beings tend to feel destitute all the time, so they can't stop themselves from being in continual pursuit of something that they think will bring them contentment. They are occupied by all sorts of trivial matters and seldom are aware that very soon, their life will come to a sad and futile end.

Therefore, the antidote to wasting our life on useless pursuits is to be content with everything, and to always apply the Dharma practice whenever it is appropriate. As we quoted in the teaching of the *Sutra on the Buddha's Bequeathed Teaching*, during our last session, "People who are content, even though they might sleep on the ground, are peaceful and happy. Those who are not content, even though they might abide in the heavens, are still dissatisfied." Master Lianchi, the eighth patriarch of the Pure Land School, advised, "By understanding the merit of contentment, afflictions in life are resolved all at once." So, we should always remind ourselves, "I'm happy with what I have." By appreciating and upholding such a sense of contentment, all afflictive emotions can be pacified.

Western economists regard greed as a positive force in society as it provokes discontent, which motivates people to work hard and seek to improve their lives. They consider contentment to be a demotivational factor that hinders people from developing their fullest potential. Actually, this thought is not entirely incorrect because discontent does incite people's desire. On a certain level, it is true that we do need to better our lives, however, we should keep in mind that material pursuits will never come to an end if our desire gets out of control. Desire for external things can become endless and insatiable, and no matter how much we manage to acquire, it rarely ends with a sense of contentment. Therefore, while it is necessary for us to work hard and make a better life for ourselves, we should know that, after a certain point, more material wealth won't make us happier, but will, in fact, bring us

more troubles. It's for this reason that Nagarjuna tells us, "Always be content; if you know this, yet have no wealth, true riches you'll have found."

Of all the sources of great wealth, contentment is supreme. With contentment, one will still be happy and will still feel rich even if this person has lost all of his or her material wealth. That's why we should all savor the nectar of contentment. Again, the source of the feeling of contentment isn't limited to the acquisition of money and status. The various sources of pleasure in this phenomenal world are all associated with unthinkable defects, which can only be avoided by a sense of contentment. Should our minds be conditioned by the feeling of destitution, the more we chase after worldly pursuits, the more we will increase the feeling of having been deprived. However, regardless of our physical circumstances, contentment will always leave us feeling relaxed and at ease. Once we feel this sense of ease, favorable conditions will emerge naturally, one after another.

Other Ways of Turning Happiness into the Path

Root Text

There are other ways of turning happiness into the path, especially those based on recalling the kindness of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and on the instructions for training in bodhicitta, but this will do for now. As with using suffering as the path, so with happiness too, you need to go to a solitary retreat environment and combine this with practices of purification and accumulating merit and wisdom.

It is true that there are many other methods of transforming happiness into the path to enlightenment, such as recalling the blessings from the guru and the Three Jewels. When a beam of warm sunshine touches you on a cold day, or a cool breeze caresses you as you sit in the heat of the noonday sun, remind yourself that these are kindnesses of the guru and the Three Jewels. Always hold the feeling of gratitude that whatever happiness we enjoy has been bestowed upon us by the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and is a blessing from them. This is a way to transform happiness onto the path by means of being grateful to the Three Jewels.

Another method is the training of bodhicitta. When we train our minds in bodhicitta, little by little, our mindstream will gradually become filled with more joy and happiness. Then, according to the essence of bodhicitta, we should dedicate all of our happiness to all sentient beings with the aspiration of benefiting them. So, the instruction of bodhicitta inspires us to offer all of our happiness for the benefit of all living beings, while the recollection of the Three Jewels motivates us to be grateful for their kindness in bestowing us with happiness.

So far, we've talked about transforming happiness by uniting it with our Dharma practice, which is a pivotal perspective in Tenpe Nyima's teaching. The techniques for transforming happiness are similar with that of transforming suffering. The true nature of happiness is suffering, impermanence and emptiness. Through contemplating its nature in this way, we can gain deeper insight into our experience. Many forms of happiness are transient and, in fact, are nothing more than illusions created by our dualistic mind, or are, in themselves, the causes of suffering in disguise. By recognizing their deceptive nature, we will not be arrogant towards our happiness.

As it is with the transformation of suffering, when practicing the transformation of happiness, beginners should stay away from crowds and when possible, should go to an environment where they can practice in a solitary retreat. Meanwhile, this practice should be combined with the purification of karma and the accumulation of merit through mandala and Dharmapala offerings, and by the recitation of the Hundred-syllable Vajrasattva Mantra or the short Vajrasattva mantra.

Root Text

ii. The Absolute Dimension

This is the same as for turning suffering into the path.

As we did with suffering, here we can examine the existence of happiness on the ultimate level by looking at its production from the four extremes. We may inquire: is it produced from itself, from something else, from both itself and something else, or is it produced without a cause? Through this observation, we know that, when viewed through the lens of ultimate truth, not even the name of happiness can be found, let alone its inherent existence, so we can conclude that viewed from the perspective of ultimate truth, this so-called happiness is unattainable. If we have agreed that suffering is insubstantial on the ultimate level, then we will have no problem in acknowledging the non-existence of happiness on the same level.

When we understand the true nature of happiness, which is that it is devoid of existence when viewed through the lens of ultimate truth, and transient and illusory when viewed through the lens of relative truth, we will have no trouble in holding onto the conviction that there's nothing about it that is deserving of our clinging. Therefore, it is silly for us to feel smug or conceited about

our happiness, as it can only cause the failure of our Dharma practice, or even worse, cause us to accumulate more negative karma, which will lead to a miserable consequence that we would never wish for.

To conclude, whether in painful or happy circumstances, an authentic practitioner should remain calm and undeterred from one's primary intention of benefiting all sentient beings. If one were to cry an ocean of tears due to certain kind of suffering, or burst into laughter so loud that the entire world could hear it, this would only indicate that one is an unskilled practitioner. In that case, even the God Indra would be annoyed and might ask, "Will someone please make him stop?" Of course, this is an exaggeration. As human beings, we all experience the common feelings of suffering and happiness. When they emerge, instead of fluctuating between laughter and tears, let us instead stay calm and relaxed and turn them into beneficial means towards enlightenment. This is certainly the best practice for all of us.

LECTURE TEN

The type of lion-like practitioner practitioners, whenever suffering and happiness occur, will make use of these as opportunities to practice. These experienced practitioners are not afraid of losing anything because they have realized the truth of no-self. With this realization, they possess the knowledge that in samsara, although suffering and happiness appear one after the other, neither will last for long, as they are impermanent on the phenomenal level and ultimately do not exist. When we are well trained in the practice that Tenpe Nyima teaches here, we can transform any circumstance into the spiritual path, any time we wish.

– Khenpo Sodargye

Turn Yourself into a Lion-Like Practitioner

10

Auspicious Coincidences

Today is the Dragon Boat Festival, and on this very auspicious occasion I have decided to give to you the oral transmissions of Ju Mipham Rinpoche's *Yamantaka Sadhana* and the *Wrathful Guru Mantra Visualization*, as well as the transmission of the Vajra Armor Mantra. After these transmissions are complete, I will briefly share with you a couple of stories relating to the auspicious signs of the rainbow.

- **Giving the Oral Transmission of Several Wrathful Prayers**

The reason that I am giving these oral transmissions today is related to the origin and customs of Dragon Boat Festival, which is considered to be an important holiday by millions of Han Chinese. In the Chinese tradition, this festival commemorates Qu Yuan, a poet and a statesman who lived during the Warring States Period in ancient China. When Qu Yuan heard the news that his former kingdom, the State of Chu, had been overtaken, he tragically committed suicide by jumping into the Miluo River on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month. Upon hearing of the woeful news, people raced out in their boats in the hope of saving him or salvaging his body from the river. They tossed Zongzi (sticky rice wrapped in bamboo leaves) into the river to feed the fish and to prevent his body from being nibbled on by the finny creatures.

The customs of the festival vary in different areas, but most families will hang a picture of Zhong Kui, a famous exorcist, in their houses and burn calamus and moxa to prevent becoming victims of an epidemic and to drive away evil spirits and demons. These practices are a part of long-standing folk tradition but might have some actual benefit because all phenomena are manifestations of the mind. In fact, this practice is similar to the practice of burning incense and making smoke offerings to ward off harmful influences in the hope of preventing them from causing harm to oneself and others.

On this special day, many Han Chinese greet each other by saying, “Peace and health on Dragon Boat Day” and eating Zongzi in celebration of the festival. While these are unique customs, in order to gain peace and health, reciting mantras, such as the Yamanta, are likely to be more effective. The year, 2020 has been a rough year for many people. In addition to the difficulties related to the coronavirus pandemic, there have been many other calamities, such as the invasion of swarms of locusts, as well as other attacks by nagas and other evil forces. In such an environment, we need to apply different means to protect ourselves, which is why I’d like to give you the oral transmission of the *Yamantaka Sadhana*, which I myself received many years ago from His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche.

● Two Stories of Rainbow

Secondly, I’d like to share two stories about rainbows which have a personal relevance for me. Usually, I am reluctant to talk about myself, which may be because I have a shy and conservative type of personality, and so, that is at least a part of why I don’t generally speak much about the stories in which I am personally involved. When I accompanied H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche abroad

several times, I had some special experiences but I seldom talk about them with anyone. Last year, I wrote the memoir *Gone with the Dream*, which is a record of my spiritual journey to India, Bhutan and Nepal, while accompanying H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche on a journey that took more than six months to complete. Every time I would recall a story in which I was a central participant, I would feel a reluctance to write it down, even though the experience is real and a part of my memories of that time. In any case, it is my hope that the two stories that I will share with you today could be meaningful to some of you, so I'll take this chance to tell them.

I was born in 1962, in the communal land of Luo Ke Ma, in Drakgo. During the time that H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was alive, a lay practitioner donated 60 or 70 thousand RMB for me to build a stupa in the place where I was born, but at that time, I ignored the proposal. However, a few years ago, this proposal was brought up again, and this time, while I didn't give any permission for the stupa to be built, I didn't act to prevent it either. My thought was just to let it be. I gave them the money that the lay practitioner had previously donated, and a small stupa was built in my birthplace. I haven't visited it yet and, in truth, have not given it too much attention, one way or the other.

However, a few days ago, on the 21st of June, some Tibetan staff from the restaurant Larung BHC went to pay homage to some of the monasteries in my hometown. It was the last day of Saga Dawa, the day when the solar eclipse occurred and it also happened to be the Father's Day. It was a sunny day with a blue sky and white clouds, but when they went to visit my birth stupa, they saw a beautifully colored rainbow above it. When they told me about this, I was at first quite doubtful, but it turned out to be true, as they sent me a beautiful photo that they had taken at the time.

If a rainbow appears on a clear and sunny day with blue sky and

white clouds, instead of after a rain, it is often considered as a sign of auspiciousness. Certainly, I am not very attached to most phenomena, let alone a rainbow; so in general, there is really no need to be particularly drawn to it. However, some stupas that display auspicious signs can be particularly beneficial for curing disease, increasing longevity and bringing auspiciousness in all aspects of life. As this stupa might be among those that offer such blessings, I wanted to share this with you.

Another story is that on June 6, 2015, I went to give a talk at the Graduate School of Education at Peking University. The talk started at 2 pm and was scheduled to end at 4 pm, but it ended up finishing at 4:30 pm because so many questions were raised. Although the talk was held in a lecture hall that was intended to hold 500 people, almost 700 people showed up, so some of them had to sit on the stairs and others stood out in the corridor.

Actually, over the ten years between 2009 to 2019, I have been invited to Peking University nine times and have given many teachings there. On that particular day when the talk had finished, we came out of the lecture hall and saw a very beautiful rainbow spread over the entire sky. As we drove out of the east gate of the campus, the rainbow was there the entire time. The driver and some of the professors from the university told me that even though they had been in Beijing for decades, it was the first time that they had seen such an amazing rainbow. Anyhow, it might have been an auspicious sign, as ever since that time my Dharma activities have been going quite smoothly and successfully.

● **The Way of Appearance Depends on Your Devotion**

It's very common to see rainbows here in this valley. Maybe there are many other cities where it's also normal to see rainbows and

they are not considered to be anything special. Around 1986, a great master, who had just returned from abroad, came to visit H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche. His manner was quite haughty and when he said, "While I was giving teachings in so-and-so place, there appeared a rainbow...", His Holiness replied, "What's so unusual about a rainbow? There are often rainbows in summer because a rainbow's appearance is the work of raindrops, sunlight and humidity, not necessarily your merit." The visiting master remained quiet for a while after hearing this reply and once again began with, "I manifested such numinous power. . ." His Holiness did not seem happy at this and proceeded to refute his statements one by one.

However, at other times, H. H. Jigme Phuntsok would observe auspicious interdependency and, on special occasions, would point out that the appearance of a rainbow was an auspicious sign. For example, when His Holiness was giving teachings on the Six Bardos in Dawu in the Kham area, a rainbow appeared along with some other special signs that were considered to be an auspicious indication. Also, khata-shaped clouds appeared in Sarnath when His Holiness visited there in 1990, and a cloud of the same shape appeared when the foundation for the Great Shrine Hall at Larung Gar was laid in 1991, His Holiness was very happy with these auspicious signs, and commented on the fact that they indicated the successful propagation of the Dharma.

In fact, the blessings of the Three Jewels are inconceivable and the power of dependent origination is also inconceivable. However, as ordinary people with naked eyes and deluded thoughts, we are barely able to perceive the quality of wisdom and compassion of these inconceivables. By viewing the forms of certain special appearances, we can either believe them to be signs of auspiciousness or simply view them as illusory and temporary manifestations, like dreams, mirages or clouds. It is up to us to determine whether

certain appearances are auspicious, inauspicious or simply irrelevant; this depends on our devotion, the depth of our wisdom and the situation in which we perceive these appearances. Like the Dragon Boat Festival, some may feel it to be an auspicious occasion in which certain things can be easily achieved, some may feel it is just a folkloric celebration and nothing special, while others may feel it to be an example of a tradition that should be honored and celebrated.

I'm not usually the type who loves to talk about his personal stories, because there's nothing special when an ordinary practitioner like me gives a teaching or takes a Dharma trip. His Holiness once composed a long-life prayer for me, and regardless of the occasion, whenever people would start to chant it, I would usually become very unhappy and would want to leave immediately, feeling that I would become hypocritical or boastful if I were to focus on myself too much. But there are times when certain auspicious signs might be beneficial for sentient beings and favorable for creating auspiciousness, which is the reason that I am sharing these two rainbow stories with you today, as I do so with the wish that they might bring you some benefit.

What This Training Brings

At this point in the training, we have finished our discussion on how to use both suffering and happiness as the path to enlightenment through the lens of relative truth and of absolute truth. Now we will continue with the remaining parts of the text, in which the benefits of transforming both happiness and suffering are elaborated.

- **It Enables You to Practice Constantly**

Root Text**What this Training Brings**

If we cannot practice when we're suffering because of all the anxiety we go through, and we cannot practice when we're happy because of our attachment to happiness, then that rules out any chance of our practicing Dharma at all. That is why there is nothing more crucial for a practitioner than this training in turning happiness and suffering into the path.

By and large, ordinary people are unable to avoid allowing their practice to be interrupted in the face of suffering, regardless of whether their suffering is caused by poor physical health, mental afflictions, lack of food and clothing, family issues, career pressure, or even harsh weather conditions. On the other hand, when they are happy, they indulge themselves in their self-defined happiness by traveling continually, enjoying delicious food, entertaining themselves with all kinds of recreational activities or spending all of their time and energy socializing, all of which leads to their never taking the time to practice. So, for those who are not perseverant, both suffering and happiness can provide justification for interrupting their practice. Yet, when people such as these are in the neutral state, they often behave in an indolent and ignorant manner and remain in a meaningless state with little or no effort being expended toward spiritual practice. As a result, they are ruled out of all opportunities for spiritual practice because, except for suffering, happiness and neutral states, there are no other states that people experience.

As Dharma practitioners, there is nothing more pathetic than to give up one's practice over and over again due to one thing or another, because life is so transient that soon there will be no time left to practice. Masters of the past never stopped their

practice regardless of whether they were experiencing suffering or happiness. When dramatic changes were taking place in Tibetan history, many of which were very harsh on spiritual practitioners, those well-known masters of old didn't give up their practices but continued to teach and pursue the path of the Dharma. When the situation changed for the better, and fame and wealth came to them, this also did not cause them to divert from their practice.

We are all bound to experience cycles of happiness and suffering in our lives. When everything goes well, for instance, we are showered with wealth and fame, we may become attached to it and forget to practice. When we are young and attractive, we may, intoxicated by our appearance, also not practice, but instead may throw away our Dharma books or forget where we last put them down. It is even possible that we may become so infatuated with our own appearance that we can't stop looking in the mirror and end up exclaiming, "Who else in the world possesses such exquisite beauty? I must be a celestial being!" Our appearance in the mirror may even cause us to cry out in ecstasy. However, when we are in anguish, we may become so immersed in our suffering that we think, "I am much more miserable than all of the beings in the three lower realms." At times like these, practice becomes the least possible activity on our list. When we allow the fluctuations of happiness and suffering to affect us in this way, we will never find a moment for our practice since happiness and suffering continually occur one after the other, creating a condition that is quite unfortunate for a practitioner.

No one knows what will happen in the future. Due to the difference in each person's karma, some might be happy, while others are not. Some may enjoy a peaceful life without many ups and downs, while others have to undergo almost continual pain. Some seem to be always cheerful, while others always look stern and never smile. There are also those who are temperamental and very

unpredictable. They are happy at one moment and sad the next. When they are delighted, they are like lovely celestial beings, but when they suffer, they are worse than the Yakshas. Regardless of where we are in this lifelong spiritual journey, we should try not to give up our Dharma practice for any reason. There are some who will say, “I have no time to quarrel with you now because I need to chant my daily prayers, but I will come to find you after I have finished.” This is also fine, because even though he hasn’t entirely abandoned bickering, practice is his priority. This is not a worst-case scenario, as he doesn’t give up practicing even when suffering, but still keeps right mindfulness. To be a good practitioner, it is very important to be able to practice the Dharma whether one is happy or stressed.

● **Be a Stable Person**

Generally speaking, a stable person makes people around them feel safe and that they can be relied on; whereas an emotional person makes others feel insecure. When we look back to the time before we started our journey in Buddhism, we might have impressed others as a person who, at one moment was lovely and a pleasure to spend time with, while in the next moment was perfectly detestable. As we began to progress in our practice, no matter how painful, sad or distressed we were, we did not easily show it on our faces and people around us were not able to notice anything unusual. This is good for both our everyday life as well as our Dharma practice.

In the case of monastic Dharma teachers and teachers in general, some are quite nice even when they are displeased. They may mention their displeasure but they will do so in a tactful manner that makes no fuss and hurts no one’s feelings. However, some tend to get more fired up: when they are gratified in class they

appear as if they are performing a Vajra dance on the throne, but when they are sad and melancholy, their tears rain down on the Dharma scriptures placed before them. Personally, I don't think this kind of emotional behavior is good for one's students. Of course, some great masters may embody distinctive characters, such as Lord Atisha who, as stated in his biography, manifested quite an unpredictable temper. The same can be said for H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, who sometimes appeared wrathful, sometimes delighted and at other times, would sob and lament for the suffering of all living beings.

People's personalities vary due to their karma. Some, although they get angry easily, are not bad people. Others, although amiable most of the time, will make others fearful when they lose their temper. Time will show us what type a person belongs to. As the old saying goes, "Time tries us all." However, it is absolutely the case that a perseverant practitioner will not discontinue his Dharma practice in any circumstance or due to any emotion. This is how it can be determined whether one is an authentic practitioner or not.

● It Turns You into a Lion-Like Practitioner

Root Text

And if you do have this training, no matter where you live, in a solitary place or in the middle of a city; whatever the people around you are like, good or bad; whether you're rich or poor, happy or distressed; whatever you have to listen to, praise or condemnation, good words or bad; you'll never feel the slightest fear that it could bring you down in any way. No wonder this training is called the "Lion-Like Yoga".

If one cannot turn suffering and happiness into the path, all appearances may arise as their enemies. For example, some monastics, when they are sent to a temple that is located in a remote area, will complain that it is too lonely and will be unable to stay for even one night. On the other hand, if they are sent to a temple located in a city, they will complain that it's too noisy and once again will find even a single night painful. When staying in a hotel situated on a busy street for a night or two, they complain about the honking of cars, the noise made by passersby or the whistle of trains passing in the distance. If the hotel is quiet, they are just as likely to complain that the silence is too depressing. Unlike those described above, practitioners who have embodied this training in the transformation of suffering and happiness, will be at ease anywhere and for however long is necessary.

Unlike those who can only get along with good people, experienced practitioners can get along equally well with all people, good or bad. To those who are troubled by intense afflictive emotions, they can skillfully benefit and convert them. They also are able to remain unaffected by whatever situation they find themselves in. If countless numbers of people come to offer them praise and support, they take it as dreamlike and illusory. If they find themselves in appalling circumstances, such as imprisonment or grave illness, they will readily accept that as well. Whatever they hear, whether praise or condemnation, good words or bad, they remain unmoved. They are not afraid of losing anything because they have realized the truth of no-self. With this realization, they possess the knowledge that in samsara, although suffering and happiness appear one after the other, neither will last for long, as they are impermanent on the phenomenal level and ultimately do not exist. When suffering and happiness occur, practitioners such as these, will make use of these as opportunities to practice.

This type of practitioner can be called a lion-like practitioner. Just

like a lion roaming in a snow mountain, unafraid of other beasts or ferocious creatures, they are strong and fearless under any circumstance. They do not feel the slightest fear that anything will bring them down in any way. The reason why people feel insecure today is that their minds are full of fear. They are afraid of being gossiped about, belittled, despised, or having their flaws exposed. In the *Establishing the Truth Treatise*, a text translated into Chinese by Kumarajiva which mainly refutes the statement that “all phenomena are truly existent”, it states, “The wise and the fool both experience sorrow and pleasure without exception, but the wise are free of resentment and attachment.” All of us, monastics and lay practitioners alike, experience suffering and happiness as long as we have not yet reached the first bhumi of a bodhisattva or attained the fruition of Arhathood. However, the wise will not generate aversion when they experience suffering and will not dwell in desire and commit negative karma when they experience joy. This is a clear distinction between the wise and the foolish. So, we should reinforce our practice and emulate the behavior of a lion-like practitioner.

To arrive at such a state requires long-term practice, otherwise, we won't be able to hold onto our intention to practice when suffering and happiness occur. Without practice, negative circumstances, such as bad words from others or the loss of beloved ones, will upset, dishearten or maybe even completely defeat us, resulting in our not being able to engage in practice. Favorable circumstances, on the other hand such as praise, success, meeting with good friends or going to lovely places, may make us so happy that we forget to practice. However, when we are well trained in the practice that Tenpe Nyima teaches here, we can transform any circumstance into the spiritual path, any time we wish.

- **It Helps You Get Along Well with Anyone**

This training is extremely applicable and can be considered to be crucial for modern people. Without the knowledge of how to transform suffering and happiness, we are often unable to handle interpersonal relationships properly. If we cannot successfully manage our interpersonal relationships with others, it will inevitably lead to difficulties in our life and practice, and impede our ability to function well within a Sangha community. For instance, in spite of having a strong faith in the Three Jewels, there are some who aspire to volunteer in the Sangha community but often fall into discord with others in their team because they are unable to handle their emotions properly. I used to say to our volunteers, “You leave together holding hands but come back going separate ways.” This includes some of our Khenmos, who, when they were young, went camping together on the grassland during their summer break. Yet, they ended up quarrelling, leaving their tent on the grassland and coming back angry with one another. My guess is that it was because they didn’t practice the instruction of transforming suffering and happiness. If it were to happen now, I’m sure the result would be different.

One of the reasons that people’s propensities and karma vary considerably is because they may be reborn from different places. There are some from Southern Jambudvipa, some from Western Aparagodaniya, some who are descended from the heaven above and some who have just emerged from the hell realms. Considering these differences, how can we expect for everyone to easily get along with us? If we cannot fit in comfortably with the people around us, we cannot be in harmony with them. It’s like the Tibetan saying that it is impossible to fit many yak horns into one bag as all the horns curl in different ways. Therefore, we should observe our mind honestly at every moment so that we can create a harmonious

environment between the people around us.

As regards interpersonal communication, I do not find it difficult to handle it properly with people here at Larung Gar or in other places. Despite the various identities of the people I encounter, whether they are theists or atheists, monastics or lay people, governors, masters or students, even if they disagree with what I say during our conversation, I won't take offense. Instead, I always make a sincere effort to understand their opinions and differing points of view, which is a quality that I owe to the teachings and instructions I have received over these many years. When I was at school as a young boy, I was a bit hot-tempered, didn't get along well with others and often got into fights. I can't remember particular details of where I used to read and study, but I can clearly recall where I had fights with others. When I find myself in one of those places, the memories return and I think, "Oh, here is where I fought with someone." Tibetan Kids usually don't fight at school, so we would agree on a specific time and place, such as under a tree or near a spring or a river, and we would meet there to have our fight. This was an unspoken tradition for us. After I came to Larung Gar, I'm pretty sure that I can say that I've never fought with anyone here.

- **It Enables You to Experience the Splendour of an Unimaginable Bliss**

Root Text
Whatever you do, your mind will be happy, peaceful, spacious and relaxed. Your whole attitude will be pure, and everything will turn out excellently. Your body might be living in this impure world of ours, but your mind will experience the splendor of an unimaginable bliss, like the bodhisattvas in their pure

realms.

With this training, whatever we do, wherever we go, whomever we have contact with, whatever we eat or wear, our mind will always be happy, peaceful and relaxed. A wise person will remain at ease regardless of whether he is gloriously dressed or clothed in rags. We need to develop an attitude like this in our life, as it is a state that is derived from Dharma practice. Through the practice of transforming suffering and happiness, we will gain a pure attitude and because of this, we will perfect our virtue, aspiration and happiness. Although we live in this corrupted and degenerate world, and we live among people with no beliefs or full of inverted views, our mind will experience the splendour of an unimaginable bliss. We'll be like bodhisattvas such as Mahasthamaprapta, Avalokiteshvara, Manjushri and Akasagarbha, who live in those pure realms and are never bothered by afflictions, nor are they tormented by sufferings, no matter where they go. Although our life may appear no different from everyone else's, eating, sleeping and doing all kinds of everyday things, our mind will be completely different as we are not as sensitive to the normal pitfalls and so, unlike many others, we will not easily fall prey to suffering.

This teaching expresses an important truth. I hope that those who are listening right now to this teaching, or those who have decided to study it in the future, can put it into practice. Since we all have habitual tendencies, it is impossible to avoid all suffering, but once we familiarize ourselves with the teaching, I believe that, sooner or later, certain changes will happen to us. In the same way that a person with a chronic disease can be cured through long-term medication, with this training, our habitual tendencies will be gradually changed and transformed, and our mind will experience the splendour of the bliss of the bodhisattvas.

- **It Will Be Your True Friend**

Root Text

It'll be just as the precious Kadampa masters used to say:

Keep happiness under control;
Put an end to suffering.
With happiness under control
And suffering brought to an end:
When you're all alone,
This training will be your true friend;
When you are sick,
It will be your nurse.

Kadampa and Ningmapa have lots of pith instructions about this practice. Here, the Kadampa masters tell us that with this training, we can keep happiness under control and bring suffering to an end. The reason that happiness needs to be kept under control is because it often invites such negative afflictions as arrogance, pride, jealousy, laziness and distraction. It is easy for us to be brave in the face of suffering, however, if we were to become rich, our luxurious lifestyle could quite easily exhaust our merit. For example, people with wealth often show off to others by buying a fancy car or expensive gold and silver jewelry as soon as they are no longer short of cash. In the Tibetan regions, some love to buy golden rings and show off everything that they have that is made of gold. At any opportunity, they will wear all of their jewelry that is made from coral, gold, silver, agate and amber, the weight of which can be over dozens of kilograms. Walking with all of this jewelry creates a very loud sound causing people to think that those who wear jewelry in this way must possess great wealth. Yet, some of these people may have borrowed much of this jewelry just to show off; in some cases, they may not even own even one gzi

bead of their own! Ultimately, we can say that gold or jewels are no different from any other kind of stone. The behavior of those who act as if wearing gold makes them special only indicates that they are carried away by their happiness instead of taking it into the spiritual path.

As a Dharma practitioner, if we are too happy, too excited, or too hurried to do something, we are actually not at ease. The same is true in times of suffering; rather than getting bogged down by it, we should instead, accept it and use it as the path. If we can keep happiness under control and put an end to suffering, then this training will be a good companion that makes us happy when we are all alone. When we are sick, this training will be our nurse. A nurse is not necessarily a person with a white uniform and a special hat. If we can transform suffering when we are sick, it will be as if there were a nurse taking care of us. So, with this training, we need nothing more as the training itself is our best companion.

As Jetsun Milarepa once said,

*No one to stand round my corpse
And no one to mourn my death—
If I can die thus in this mountain retreat
The aims of this yogin will be complete.*

While you are listening to this teaching, you may feel confident about your ability to apply this instruction in your practice. But if you fall sick, you may start to blame external things again. This is due to a lack of practice. With sufficient training, you will, without question, become a lion-like practitioner. When you are all alone, you won't be bored nor pessimistic, nor will you feel that you have been abandoned by your family or others. Instead, as the Kadampa masters did, you will understand that what you experience is the result of your karma from previous lives, and moreover, that

all of these experiences of suffering and happiness are the best opportunities to improve your spiritual practice.

It is crucial, during times of suffering and happiness, not to abandon such practices as your daily prayers or meditation. More importantly, we need to transform our suffering and happiness into the path by seeing both suffering and happiness as favorable conditions for practice. In this way, neither suffering nor happiness will become an obstacle to our practice. This instruction embodies the great secret of our mind and is the most precious teaching of the great masters of the past. Ordinary people are generally inclined to fall into extremes and when suffering strikes, they become overwhelmed, angry and end up committing misdeeds. As a result, they only accumulate more negative karma that then causes them more suffering in this and in future lives. On the other hand, when they are happy, they oftentimes become very much carried away by it and end up doing something stupid and extreme, which will cause them to ruin themselves and others. This is why transforming both suffering and happiness is so important.

- **It Makes Attaining the Extraordinary Samadhi Easier**

Root Text
Goldsmiths first remove the impurities from gold by melting it in fire, and then make it malleable by rinsing it over and over again in water. It is just the same with the mind. If by using happiness as the path, you become weary and disgusted with it, and by taking suffering as the path, you make your mind clear and cheerful, then you will easily attain the extraordinary <i>samādhi</i> which makes mind and body capable of doing anything you wish.

Gold, silver and iron can all be purified with fire and water by using the appropriate methods. After refining, they will become less brittle and can no longer be easily broken. Likewise, by using happiness as the path when things are going well, we won't become arrogant, but will instead remain malleable and pliable. Furthermore, by using suffering as the path when it strikes, our mind will become purified and we won't accumulate negative karma by generating such negative afflictions as aggression. As a result, we will easily attain the extraordinary samadhi which makes the mind and body capable of doing anything we wish.

As is extensively explained in the *Abhidharmakosha*, pliancy or ease is a quality of meditative absorption that allows one's mind and body to be capable of doing anything one wishes, either by focusing on something outside of ourselves or concentrating on certain inner thoughts. Normally without any training, our mind is like a naughty child. When you want the child to do homework, he runs outside to play, and when you want him to go outside to play, he stays inside glued to the iPad. However, once we have gained the quality of pliancy attained from samadhi, our mind will act as we wish. When we abide, our mind will be as stable as Mount Meru; and when we want it to focus on something outside of ourselves, it will comply as quickly as an arrow takes flight when released from a bow.

● It Perfects Your Discipline

Root Text

This instruction, I feel, is the most profound of all, for it perfects discipline, the source of everything positive and wholesome. This is because not being attached to happiness creates the basis of the extraordinary discipline of renunciation, and not being

afraid of suffering makes this discipline completely pure.

As they say:

Generosity forms the basis for discipline;
And patience is what purifies it.

Discipline is the source of everything positive and wholesome. Whether we are learning the Pratimoksha or the Bodhisattva vows, we need pith instructions to perfect them. In this regard, the transformation of suffering and happiness into enlightenment is the most beneficial and profound instruction. One who grasps this pith instruction will certainly become a practitioner that upholds pure precepts. There are two reasons for this. First, through this training, we will no longer cling to happiness, but instead will see it as painful, illusory, impermanent and empty. In this way, we will create the basis for upholding the vows of monastic ordination and the precepts for laities. Those who break their vows usually do so because they view happiness as having a true substantial existence, and thus become carried away by it. Second, this training enables us to be unafraid of suffering and to transform it into enlightenment, makes our discipline completely pure. Basically, transforming happiness becomes the fundamental cause of upholding the discipline of renunciation, and transforming suffering further purifies our discipline because we will no longer fear hardship or suffering.

As is said in the sutras, the practice of generosity means you are willing to give away your wealth to others and is the result of transforming happiness, which forms the basis for discipline. In addition to this, patience can purify our discipline, because without patience, which is actually the result of transforming suffering, we will be unable to endure hardship and austerity, and this inability will cause us to fall prey to such negative emotions as anger.

- **It Assists You to Realize Emptiness**

Root Text

By training in this practice now, then when you attain the higher stages of the path, this is what it will be like:

You will realize that all phenomena are like an illusion, and
To be born again is just like walking into a lovely garden.
Whether you face prosperity or ruin,
You'll have no fear of negative emotions or suffering.

This verse is from the *Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*. It expresses that those who have realized emptiness will have gained the wisdom to know that on the ultimate level, the true nature of all phenomena is emptiness, while on the conventional level, they are like magical illusions or dreams. Driven by their great compassion to sentient beings, those that have attained these higher stages of the path, will fearlessly take birth wherever there is a need, as if they were walking into a lovely garden. Whether things go well or badly, whether they face prosperity or ruin, they have no fear of negative emotions or suffering.

This verse is very important, so you'd better be able to recite it. It talks about a very high level of realization. According to Ju Mipham Rinpoche's commentary on the *Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*, this is the realization of a bodhisattva of the first Bhumi and above. Nonetheless, those who have gained a thorough understanding of emptiness will have similar experiences. By training in this practice, one will realize that all phenomena in samsara are like a dream or an illusion and wherever one goes, one will be as free of worry as if they were walking into a lovely garden. This person will have no fear in the face of prosperity or ruin, or even if he were to travel to places with epidemics, AIDS, or natural disasters. This

is a very desirable state as most modern people spend their entire lives concerned with personal gain and loss, or consumed by their desires and worries, right up until their last breath. How free and elegant they would be if they were to achieve the realization of emptiness!

How the Buddha Transformed Suffering and Happiness

Here the author illustrates how the Buddha transformed suffering and happiness both before and after his enlightenment. In order to accomplish this benefit for ourselves and others, we must master the equality of happiness and suffering, and learn to treat them equally.

- **In His Causal Stage**

Root Text

Here are some illustrations from the life of the Buddha. Before he attained enlightenment, he abandoned the kingdom of a universal monarch as if it were straw and lived by the river Nairañjanā without a care for the harshness of the austerities he was practicing. What he showed was that in order to accomplish our own ultimate benefit, the nectar of realization, we must have mastered the one taste of happiness and suffering.

According to the sutras, there were different types of universal monarchs, or Chakravartins, as they were known. At his birth, Prince Siddhartha was prophesied to become either a universal monarch with great power or a buddha. Early in his life, he

abandoned the kingdom of a universal monarch, as if it were nothing more than a handful of straw. This was how he used happiness as the path. After leaving the palace, he lived by the river Nairañjan for six years practicing various austerities, taking only a drop of water and a single grain of rice each day, until in the end, he accomplished his own greatest benefit by realizing the ultimate truth. This is how he used suffering as the path.

We here have also transformed suffering and happiness in a similar way. Some of you have discarded all your wealth, fame and status to study Buddhism, which is not an easy choice to make. In this way, you've transformed your happiness onto the path. You abide in a secluded place to practice or to do a full retreat, and every day you carry your own water and cook for yourself. Although you don't undergo the same degree of austerity that the Buddha did, you focus on your Dharma practice and never waste time, so, in this way, you have transformed suffering onto the path as an ordinary practitioner.

● After Enlightenment

Root Text

Then after he attained enlightenment, the chiefs of humans and gods, as far as the highest realms, showed him the greatest reverence, placing his feet on the crown of their heads, and offering to serve and honor him with all manner of delights. However, a brahmin called Bhāradvāja abused him and criticized him a hundred times; he was accused of sexual misconduct with the impudent daughter of another brahmin; he lived off rotten horse fodder for three months in the land of King Agnidatta, and so on. But he remained without the slightest fluctuation in his mind, neither elated nor downcast, like Mount Meru

unshaken by the wind. He showed that in order to accomplish the benefit of sentient beings, again we have to have mastered that equal taste of happiness and suffering.

After his enlightenment, while the Buddha was being shown reverence by the chiefs of humans and gods, he felt neither proud nor elated. This is how the Buddha transformed happiness into enlightenment. When he was abused, slandered, and badly treated, the Buddha didn't feel sad or downcast, and in this way, the Buddha transformed suffering into enlightenment. In all situations, the Buddha's mind remained without the slightest fluctuation, like Mount Meru, unshaken by the wind.

Here are a few stories about how the Buddha transformed suffering onto the path: The first story is about the brahmin, Bharadvaja, and can be found in Nagarjuna's *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*. At first, this vile brahmin slandered the Buddha in five hundred ways, but the Buddha did not generate any aversion or hatred towards him. This so impressed the brahmin that he then praised the Buddha in five hundred ways, to which the Buddha also generated neither joy nor pleasure.

At one time or another, most of us will receive either compliments or slander. This happens frequently to celebrities in today's electronically connected age. When this happens, even though we haven't achieved the realization of the Buddha, we should respond nonchalantly, and use our discriminative wisdom to analyze the situation in this way: when you are praised, examine whether you actually possess the qualities you are being commended for, and when you are being vilified, try to consider whether this is being done by someone with ill intentions. On the Internet, when you say something that others do not agree with, tens of thousands of people may revile you, however, when your words are in accord with the intentions of others, they are quick to give you a thumbs

up. It is extremely important to recognize that both of these reactions are without any substantial meaning, and therefore, you should remain unshaken whether they mean glory or ruin.

The second example took place while the Buddha was teaching to a large audience. A brahmin girl, who had tied a wooden tub to her belly with a rope, stood up and accused the Buddha of having had sexual misconduct with her and claimed that she was pregnant with his child. At the time, Indra who was attending the Buddha, transformed into a mouse, ran into the girl's dress, bit through the rope holding the wooden tub in place and caused it to drop to the ground. The audience immediately discovered her scheme and realized that the Buddha was innocent of any misconduct and that it was the girl who had got herself "pregnant". Even then, the Buddha showed neither hatred towards the girl nor delight in having his innocence revealed to all. Other stories of the Buddha being slandered can be found in his biography, as well as in other sutras such as the *Great Sutra of Secret Means*.

The last story about the Buddha is related to King Agnidatta and is recorded in the Vinaya. When King Agnidatta saw that the kings of several neighboring countries had all extended royal invitations to the Buddha and had made reverential offerings to him, King Agnidatta felt that it would be an embarrassment to him if he didn't also extend an invitation and make an offering to the Buddha. With this thought in mind, he invited the Buddha and his 500 disciples to spend the rainy season on his land, to which, the Buddha accepted. The king then announced that during Vassa, the Rains Retreat, he would be making regular offerings to the Buddha and his 500 disciples, and that during those three months, not only would no one else be allowed to make an offering to the Buddha, but that whoever disobeyed this order would be immediately beheaded. After this, the king began to have a recurring dream that his entire palace was surrounded by white curtains. Not knowing what this

meant, he asked his state teacher about it. Although the teacher recognized that this was an auspicious sign related to the making of offerings to the Buddha, because he held a different religious belief, he viciously told the king that this dream was a bad omen and that his life and his throne were both at risk. He suggested that the king should go into hiding for three months, to which the king agreed.

When the Buddha, accompanied by 500 monks, arrived at the country of the king, no offering was forthcoming because the king, himself, was in hiding. Day after day, the monks returned from their daily alms rounds with empty bowls because no one dared to defy the king's order that no one should make offerings to them. It was very difficult for the monks to survive during the three-month retreat without any provisions. At that time, a horse dealer with 500 horses and lots of horse fodder was passing through and decided to stop in that country to avoid the rainy season. Thinking he wouldn't be staying in the country for very long, he decided to ignore the king's order and offered some of his horse fodder to the Buddha and the sangha, as it was the only food that he possessed. The Buddha gratefully accepted his offering. Because the monk, Maudgalyayana, was suffering from rheumatism, he was unable to eat horse fodder and so decided to go on retreat to a nearby mountain top accompanied by Shariputra, and while there, the god Indra provided them with offerings. The Buddha and the remaining 498 disciples, had nothing to eat but rotten horse fodder for the next three months, which is certainly not a pleasant experience.

Seeing this, Ananda wondered, "As the Buddha has accomplished Buddhahood, why does he still have to eat such awful food?" Aware of Ananda's thoughts, the Buddha gave his food bowl to Ananda, who was surprised to find that the food inside of it tasted very delicious. Thus Ananda realized that, "The Buddha's

realization is very different from ours.” According to the sutra, that the Buddha had to eat rotten horse fodder was due to his karma in the causal stage. In one of his previous lives, upon seeing a buddha of that time, he had become very jealous and reviled that buddha by saying, “This Sramana should eat horse fodder.” At the time, even though he had not yet achieved enlightenment, he had a following of 500 disciples, and the 498 of them had generated a similar attitude to that buddha. Because of this, even after the Buddha had attained Buddhahood, he still had to experience the ripening of his karma, together with the 498 disciples. The two disciples who didn’t follow his behavior, and were not forced to survive on horse fodder, were Maudgalyayana and Shariputra.

Through these stories, we know that whether he was being smeared or praised, whether forced to eat horse fodder for three months or experiencing the pain of being pierced by thorns, the Buddha’s mind remained as unshakable as Mount Meru, and he benefited all beings equally. This is attributed to his realization of the equality of self and others, and of all phenomena.

Afterword

Root Text

Afterword

A teaching like this should really be taught by the Kadampa masters, whose very lives enacted their saying:

“No complaints when there’s suffering,
Great renunciation when there’s happiness.”

But if it’s someone like me who explains it, then I’m sure that

even my own tongue is going to get fed up and cringe with embarrassment. Still, with the sole aim of making one taste of all the worldly preoccupations my second nature, I, the old beggar Tenpe Nyima, have written this, here in the forest of many birds.

Above is the content of the wholesome beginning and the wholesome middle. Now we come to the wholesome ending and make our concluding statement.

Many Kadampa masters are very experienced in transforming suffering and happiness. They won't complain or act as if they are susceptible to suffering even when it strikes close to home. When there's a cause for happiness, they won't become attached to it, but instead will generate a strong sense of renunciation because they know there is no true happiness in samsara. Unlike these master practitioners, when unfavorable conditions occur, ordinary people complain, "I'm in bad mood", "Something is always going wrong", "I'm afraid of going out", "I'm having digestion problems recently", "I get nightmares", "The food is too spicy, too salty, too greasy", etc... However, when they are happy, they become very cheerful, and inclined towards arrogance and indolence.

The author is very humble and tells us that such a teaching should really be given by a Kadampa master that has mastered the transformation of suffering and happiness and has realized their equality, so that the audience can be fully convinced. Now, faced with having explained the teaching himself, even his own tongue feels embarrassed and is likely laughing at him. Such a personification is a type of rhetoric that is often seen in Tibetan texts. Its meaning is that he must be boasting about something, so his own tongue, who is closest to him, knows this exactly and as a result is certain to be laughing at him. I'm sure that if some of the more accomplished practitioners were to explain this teaching to

you, you might find it more convincing. When a person like me, who is very inexperienced in this training, gives such a teaching, he might be inviting mockery from his own tongue. But, at least up until this point, I haven't heard my tongue laughing yet, so maybe it does not find fault with my efforts.

Still, the author composed this text in order to pacify his desire for the eight worldly dharmas and to cultivate virtuous roots. By reading and learning teachings of this type, we can also pacify our own attachment to the eight worldly concerns. "The old beggar" is Tenpe Nyima's humble way of addressing himself. He also states that this text was written in the forest of many birds, which is a holy site near the birthplace of H. H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche in Qinghai Province, where there are now a number of practitioners in retreat.

I translated this text in Chengdu during this year's coronavirus pandemic, and was for me a form of practice that allowed me to transform suffering and happiness into the path. Now the teaching is completed.



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