



Buddhism in Uncertain Times

His Holiness the 43rd Sakya Trizin, Gyana Vajra Rinpoche



"The Sakya Tradition" Publications

2023 © All Rights Reserved



This work is provided under the protection of a Creative Commons CC—BYNC—ND (Attribution—Non—commercial—No—derivatives) 4.0 copyright. It may be copied or printed for fair use, but only with full attributions, and not for commercial advantage or personal compensation.

For full details, see the Creative Commons license.

Published by “The Sakya Tradition”

<https://sakyatradition.org>

Email : info@sakyatradition.org

Wechat ID : sakyatradition

Weibo : sakyatradition

IG: the_sakya_tradition

Facebook: TheSakya

Soundcloud: the-sakya-tradition

Youtube: @TheSakyaTradition

Twitter: Sakya_Tradition

Strictly Not for Sale. Free Distribution Only

Acknowledgement

His Holiness the 43rd Sakya Trizin, Gyana Vajra Rinpoche bestowed this teaching online, at the request of Tibetan Education Fund on August 8, 2020. In 2023, this English transcript was prepared, edited, and published by The Sakya Tradition, Inc., a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving and making widely available the precious Dharma teachings of the glorious Sakya lineage. The text was translated into the Chinese language by The Sakya Tradition translation team.

This publication was made possible by the generous donations of Maria Julia Silva, Gerald Keane, and Cheah Poh Peng. We also want to thank all volunteers for their dedication and effort in putting this teaching together.

By the merit of this work, may Their Holiness the Sakya Trichen, the 42nd, and the 43rd Sakya Trizins enjoy perfect health and very long lives, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.

It is a pity to return home empty-handed after visiting a treasure island.

It is even more pitiful if we have obtained this precious human life and encountered the Dharma yet not putting it into practice.



We do many things to get close to our Dharma teachers. Is it for us to show that we have close relationship with them? And is this the actual purpose of the teacher-student relationship?

What is Dharma? Do we need to follow the sequence of learning, contemplating, and meditating in order to truly practice?

In this teaching, His Holiness deciphers the meaning of Dharma practice and illustrates how Dharma serves as our reliable life-savior in the uncertain era of the twenty-first century. If we understand the key to proper Dharma practice, all of us will be able to return home with an abundance of treasures.

CONTENT

Buddhism in Uncertain Times	1
Questions and Answers	12

Buddhism in Uncertain Times

The Buddha searched only for the truth, the truth without any sugarcoating. Finding the truth this way is not an easy task. Then, after he found it and attained enlightenment, he spoke about what he found. He told us the truth that he saw, what life is about, without making anything easier or harder than he discovered it to be.

If we examine our experience of uncertain times in the light of the Buddha's teachings, we will find that the anxiety and suffering of uncertainty is the result of our defilements—our anger, desire, and ignorance. The defilements cause our experience of suffering. If we investigate further, we will find that the mind tarnished by defilements has two basic attitudes: doubt and expectation, or fear and hope. Then, if we investigate these doubts and expectations, we will see that they arise from self-clinging and self-cherishing thoughts. According to

the Buddha, once we get rid of our self-clinging, we will attain buddhahood or enlightenment.

This is much easier said than done. In just a few seconds, I have described the journey from the human state all the way up to buddhahood. The difficulty is to realize buddhahood in our lives. It is quite easy to understand, merely with our minds, the negative aspects of the defilements: that anger is not good, desire is not good, ignorance is not good. Any Buddhist—any sensible human being—can see that. Until we realize these insights in our lives, we will continue to experience pain and suffering.

As Buddhists, we understand that to eliminate the experience of difficulty or suffering, we must practice meditation. The short-term benefits of meditation include bringing the mind into the present. Usually, our minds are primarily occupied with the future or with the past. Rarely are our minds in the present. Even when we are thinking about the present, we are usually also thinking about the future. Then, thinking of the past, we may remember suffering that we experienced and might experience again in the future. This future is like a blank canvas. It has not yet arrived, and we cannot know it, and so we fill it with our imagination. Having minds crowded with desire, anger, and ignorance, we approach the future through fears and expectations, and so there is no end to our suffering. It is

like walking in the dark: we experience the uncertainty of not knowing what is in front of us, whether a wall or a hole that we might fall into.

If we can bring our minds into the present, however, we can remain calm and relaxed. If we can remain this way, there will be no feeling of uncertainty. The present is already here, fully. Bringing the mind into the present allows us to be at peace because the fear of uncertainty and all of the negative emotions are diminished.

A second benefit of meditation is that, with training in bringing our minds into the present, we will be more focused and have greater mental control. With our minds in the present, we are less occupied with things that we cannot know, and this gives us greater focus. The point of meditation is to direct that focus, once we have achieved it, to the examination of our suffering and its causes, our self-clinging or self-cherishing thought. When we do this, we find that there is no such thing as the self we cherish, no anger, desire, or ignorance.

When we are faced with uncertainty and difficult times, we stop thinking sensibly. Many people think that becoming an educated person is what makes someone think sensibly. This isn't the case. There are many educated people who do all

kinds of things that are wrong and not sensible—committing suicide, for example. We are all subject to stop thinking sensibly when we are faced with uncertain times or difficulties, while bringing the mind into the present can help us think sensibly and clearly. Imagine that you are asked to walk along a narrow path at a high altitude; to the right and left there is nothing but empty space. One’s imagination of falling will take over. But the Buddha said that everything is the mind. If we can control our minds, then our fear and suffering will diminish. I once saw a video of a bridge in China with a walkway made of transparent glass over a very deep valley. People were literally dragging themselves along the bridge, rather than walking upright, because they were so filled with fear. I think that this is a good example of the Buddha’s teaching, showing that if we have control over our minds, we will be able to act with certainty and fearlessness. I think it is very important to understand this point.

When I say control, I mean having balance. With balance, most of our problems, our troubles and suffering, will go away, whether in our personal relationships, our meditation practice, or our jobs—in every aspect of our lives. Suppose that you love someone very much. It could be your child or a parent or spouse. But if you cling to them—for example, holding children too tightly in your arms all day long—this would be too much, lacking balance. It is similar with taking medication: there

needs to be balance. Taking too much medicine and not taking any medicine at all are probably both dangerous and not right. We need balance with our meditation, too. When we start practicing, we cannot do it for long periods of time. It is said that when we begin to meditate, we should do it only for short periods of time, but with many sessions. Slowly, as we practice, we will be able to prolong our meditation.

The Buddhist texts tell us that the mind is like a waterfall. In the stream of the mind, thoughts follow one after another like the flow of water. The mind actually consists only of these many thoughts that come one after another, just as a waterfall consists of many droplets of water that flow one after another. As we slowly gain control over our minds, we will begin to experience it less as a busy waterfall than as a calm lake. When this happens, there will be no more uncertainty.

Of course, this does not mean that we should stop worrying about things entirely. We must take care when we are driving, walking, and so on. In the present time, during the pandemic, we should be careful to wear masks, sanitize our hands, and so on. Although it is normal to stop thinking sensibly when confronted with difficult times, it is important that we do not dwell on these things. One trick that I suggest for people who are going through a difficult time is to imagine that someone

else is having the same difficulty. Ask yourself: what kind of advice would I give that person? We can then listen to our own advice. I think that this is a good way to practice.

We can also study the Buddha's life and the things he taught to help us understand the significance of balance. The Buddha was born as Prince Siddhārtha in Kapilavāstu. He led as luxurious a life as you can possibly imagine. A prince in those times could have anything that he wanted and anything that the world had to offer. But the Buddha gave up everything in his search for the truth. Leaving the palace, he went into the jungle and other harsh places where he experienced many difficulties. He practiced meditation rigorously, and he barely ate any food, only a small grain of rice each day. After six years of such ascetic practices, he declared that this was not the right way to find the truth. Rejecting the extremes of both luxury and asceticism, he then taught the middle path: we do not have to live as ascetics in the jungle, or give up all our possessions, to find the truth. In this way, the Buddha's teachings began with the importance of balance.

In the present, many people are interested in practices that will help them gain prosperity and success in this life more than enlightenment. But success in this life is not the goal of the Buddha's teachings. The Buddhist teaching is to go beyond saṃsāra. Right now, we are controlled by anger, desire, and

ignorance. These three defilements determine everything that we see, feel, and do; if we wish to defeat them, we must take control of our lives.

The Buddha taught that every sentient being is equal. We all possess the same buddha nature, whether we are Asian, American, Australian, African, of any race or continent, rich or poor. This even includes insects and animals. However, the basic nature of our minds is covered over with defilements, just as the light of the sun and moon can be covered over by clouds. Once we remove the defilements of anger, desire, and ignorance, we will become enlightened. Enlightenment does not come to our minds from the outside; it is not something that someone gives to us. Neither is it necessary to go anywhere to attain it. As soon as we discover the truth, we are enlightened, in that very moment. We can all become enlightened in this very lifetime, in this very place where we are now sitting.

Of course, as I said before, understanding the teachings intellectually and implementing them in our lives are two different things. It is like the difference between talking about swimming, the motions of the arms and legs, and actually swimming. It is much easier to talk about than to implement. We must make an effort to follow the Buddhist path through a commitment to a daily practice, and the first thing we

need, if we are to do this, is the genuine belief, “I too can be enlightened.” Without having this thought, progress on the path will be difficult.

It is human nature to worry and to doubt. However, as the great Śāntideva said,

Why be unhappy about something

If it can be remedied?

And what is the use of being unhappy about something

If it cannot be remedied?^[1]

When there is a problem, if we know that there is a solution, then there is no reason to worry. And if there is no solution, nothing that we can do, then there is, likewise, no point in worrying.

We should understand that the suffering of uncertainty comes from the defilements of anger, desire, and ignorance, and our sense of self, with our hopes and fears. Self-clinging and self-cherishing—the sense of “I”—is at the root of all our suffering. It is very beneficial to understand this, but it is a long process, too. There is no easy path out of the suffering of saṃsāra. Furthermore, we should not imagine that someone else can do it for us.

No matter how many initiations or teachings we have received, Buddhism cannot help us if we do not implement the teachings in our lives. The Buddha's teachings are great, meaningful, and beneficial, but most of the time people who hear them do not practice them. Instead of practicing the teachings, we prefer to receive blessings, or we want someone to do prayers for us to make our lives easier. Of course, prayers and teachings are great blessings, but the question is, what do we do with such blessings once we receive them? There are many great masters at this very moment in time, in all the traditions, and maybe we have received teachings from some of them. But are we really implementing their teachings and blessings in our lives? Suppose that there is a rich person, but this person does not know how to use their wealth, and so they live in poverty. What would be the point of possessing such wealth?

I sometimes joke that we want to receive everything from our masters except the teachings. Similarly, we might perform many acts of service—cooking for our teachers, washing for them, cleaning the temples—everything except following their teachings, the most important thing and the only thing that they really want from us.

My request to you, as a follower or student of our great teachers, is that you practice thinking, even for short periods

of time, about what you are doing. In other words, practice examining your mind, even in the smallest things that you do. I am not asking you to undertake a big retreat. Buddhism is really about examining ourselves, our minds, and finding the truth this way.

For example: whatever feelings I am experiencing, I should ask myself, why I am feeling this way? Why am I happy? Why am I sad? Why am I angry? Is it due to my ego? Is it due to my arrogance? My desire? My ignorance? Examine ourselves this way, we will find that, most of the time, our anger and other negative emotions will dissipate. But, of course, if we stop thinking this way, then we will again experience anger.

The mind is something that we need to train, just like the body. If you are an athlete, you need to practice your sport. If you are a cook, you need to practice your culinary skills. In any career, we need to practice to acquire experience. Likewise, the mind also needs practice, and we can perform this practice in our ordinary, daily lives. If we see something on television, or read about something in the news, if we see someone or some animal that is suffering, we can practice compassion and selfless thoughts. Scientific studies are showing that selfless and altruistic thoughts make us happier. Likewise, the more self-clinging that we have, the more we will experience suffering.

This is a good way to start practicing Buddhism in daily life. If we start with small things, as we progress, we can work with bigger things to overcome stronger defilements.

With this, I will end my talk today. However, before I stop, I would like to do a short meditation with you. Imagine that there is a statue of the Buddha in front of you. It does not have to be anything complicated or detailed. For this meditation, I ask you to keep your mind on the statue of the Buddha that you are imagining in front of you. Do not allow your mind to roam. Now, just for a moment, we will practice this meditation. [pause]

Some people might have difficulty keeping their minds on a mental image like this. We can also use the sound of a bell or some other sound as an object to focus on. Regardless of the object, if we do this kind of meditation for short periods with many sessions, then we will be able to increase our practice gradually to longer periods of time without much difficulty or strain.

If you have any questions, I will be happy to answer them.

Questions and Answers

Question: You began the teaching by sharing with us that most of our problems come from lacking balance in our lives. I would like to ask about a balance between self-confidence and self-grasping. We hear that we should be confident in ourselves because we have the buddha nature. But we also hear that all of our problems are due to self-grasping. How can we balance these two ideas?

Answer: Both extremes are not good, having too much self-confidence and having too little self-confidence. But to have basic confidence that by doing practice you can achieve buddhahood is very important, and I believe that many students lack this confidence. Of course, we can make mistakes through over-confidence, too, by becoming too relaxed, for example, or thinking that we can do as we please. I think it is important for us to understand the necessity of own contribution to our practice. Thinking “I am the greatest” is not right, but many times, I see that people think practice is something to be done by lamas, or something to do on retreats in secluded places. They may be willing to help others with these practices, but

they are not really trying to help themselves. It boils down to balance, because with too much self-clinging, too much self-confidence, you might feel that you don't need a teacher or any guidance, and of course, this is not the right way.

Question: How can I explain interdependent origination and the law of karma to a ten-year-old?

Answer: One very easy way to explain it is to say that whenever you have “right” then you also have “left.” When I talk to my children or to students in our school, I tell them that just like they want to be happy, other children want to be happy. If they want to play with some toys, there are other children that also want to play, in just the same way. Maybe they like to eat sweets and enjoy holidays; other children feel exactly that way, too. I think it is important to teach them how to place themselves in other people's perspectives, because if we always only talk about things without emphasizing this, then children may get confused and not understand. So, I think it is helpful when talking to children to emphasize equality among everyone, that every living being is the same as we are.

Question: If we have taken samayas but we are having difficulty upholding them, then how can we continue our practice? Should we change our goals?

Answer: *Samaya* means vow or commitment. As Buddhists, to begin with, we agree to adhere to the four major precepts: no killing, no lying, no stealing, and no sexual misconduct. These are the most basic Buddhist commitments. In the Vajrayāna, samaya means the promises that you make with your guru. These may be very customized, very personalized.

Let us say that I undertake a commitment to stop drinking, or to stop smoking, or to stop lying. Of course, if I can accomplish this right away, then that is very good. We should undertake our commitments to the best of our abilities, and effort is very important. But making a commitment does not mean that we are not allowed to make mistakes. We are all human; we make mistakes. It is important that we do not allow our mistakes to hinder our practice.

Question: This question is about meditation. When we meditate, our legs can become sore. When that happens, should we just keep focusing the mind or is it okay to move our bodies to relieve the discomfort?

Answer: As I have said, in the beginning, we should practice meditation only for very short periods. The mind and the body both need time to adjust to practicing meditation. The lotus position is difficult in the beginning. You can start by doing it each day for a short time, such as two minutes. Then, slowly extend this to five minutes, ten minutes, twenty minutes, and so on. The posture of the body should help the mind to meditate. The goal is not to sit in the lotus position just for itself. If you do your meditation sitting in a chair, lying on a bed, or while walking—we have walking meditation, also—I think that this is fine. The important thing is to control the mind, to bring the mind to the present and to a focused point. The lotus position is the best posture because it helps stabilize the winds of the body, but if someone cannot do it, then there are other ways to practice.

Question: If the fundamental problem is ignorance, is the solution for us to read more books? How should we address ignorance? How should we handle this problem in our lives?

Answer: Most of the time, we do not want to think for ourselves. We just want a quick solution, some answer that we can obtain from some source. For example, when we have a math problem, we reach for our calculators. Books can be a

help, giving us some ideas and guidance. But if we do not think for ourselves, bringing the mind to the present and focusing, then reading all the books in the world will not help us much. Remember that from the inside, we are already enlightened; we are all buddhas. If there are 200 people listening to this talk today, that means we have 200 buddhas here listening to this conversation. It is important to take whatever teachings from books that are valuable and implement them, but my first suggestion is for everyone to just think.

Question: Is depression a form of self-cherishing? If I have this emotion which I know is not right, but I also just cannot control it—how can I deal with this situation?

Answer: If you have that kind of emotion going on in your life, the first thing to do is to try to understand it and to recognize the emotion for what it is. After that, you can find a solution. Recognizing that this type of emotion is a problem is the first step towards placing it under control. If we are unable to recognize a problem or realize that something is a defilement, then it would be much more difficult to resolve. Recognizing that your depression is due to self-cherishing thoughts is a very good start. As I said before, examine the emotion, examine your mind.

Of course, if you are in the middle of depression, then it will be very difficult for you to do such an examination. Therefore, as I said earlier, you can also imagine that someone else is going through the same situation that you are going through. Ask yourself then what advice you would give to that person. It is always easier to give advice than it is to receive it. Try in this way to think what is the best solution for that person's difficulty.

Depression is like quicksand. The more we dwell on it, the deeper we go into it. So, another way is to think about things other than the depression. This will help us come out of it more easily.

Question: When we practice meditation, the goal is to reach a point of no self-grasping (selflessness of a person) and also no object-grasping (selflessness of phenomena). After accomplishing this, what comes next?

Answer: As I have said, it is easy to have intellectual knowledge about Buddhism, to know that our difficulties are due to our defilements, that anger is not good, desire is not good, and ignorance is not good. But to implement the teachings in our lives, to meditate, to think about and to examine our problems—this is very difficult. When we have reached the point of truly

understanding our defilements, then we will find that our self-clinging and self-cherishing are totally gone. If there are no self-cherishing thoughts, then we will be at ease, with no more uncertainty. At that time, we can focus all our thoughts on other sentient beings. That is the next stage. We cannot think about all other sentient beings while we are busy thinking about ourselves—it is difficult to mix two thoughts together. In the Mahāyāna tradition, we practice and seek enlightenment for the sake of others and not just for ourselves.

Question: When I do meditation, I always have thoughts about things that I regret, like killing many fish or insects. What can I do in this situation?

Answer: Regret is a positive thought because it means recognition of a mistake—you brought suffering to the animals. One thing that you could do is to pray for them, but also for all beings. When we meditate or pray, it is important that we do it for the sake of all sentient beings. If I pray for the fish that I killed, and then I pray also for all sentient beings, the prayer becomes greater. The more sentient beings are included in prayer or aspiration, the more the prayer becomes powerful and effective—even for the individual fish with which you started.

You could also perform lamp offerings. You can also dedicate the merit of your daily practice, such as your *sādhana*, or your circumambulation of *stūpas* and temples—whatever practices you do. Merit is very important. Without it, we cannot become enlightened. Any practice or meditation, any act of compassion, any selfless thought—these produce merit.

Dedicating the merit from our prayers or other good deeds to the benefit of all sentient beings makes it much greater. When we begin to pray, we start by saying, “I and all sentient beings....” In the middle, we do the practice for all sentient beings. When we conclude, we dedicate the merit to all sentient beings. These three points are the same across all the teachings and all traditions. You might think that you can, for example, give 50% of the merit to others and keep 50% for yourself. But it does not work that way. Dedication is not like a physical thing that can be divided, like a cake that we can divide in two, half for others and half for ourselves. The more sentient beings that are included in the dedication, the greater the merit will become.

Notes:

[1] Śāntideva. *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. Translated by Stephen Batchelor. Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.



- His Holiness the 43rd Sakya Trizin, Gyana Vajra Rinpoche, is the second son of His Holiness the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin). He belongs to the noble Khön family, whose successive generations have provided an unbroken lineage of outstanding Buddhist masters.

At an early age, Rinpoche undertook his training in the principal rituals and prayers of the Sakya lineage. Rinpoche has received from His Holiness the Sakya Trichen most of the major initiations, empowerments, oral transmissions, blessings, and pith instructions that are inherent to the Sakya lineage. Furthermore, Rinpoche has received numerous common and uncommon teachings from some of the pre-eminent teachers of Tibetan Buddhism of our age.



**“The Sakya Tradition”—Delivering the
Precious Sakya Teachings Accurately
and Entirely in Your Native Languages**

<https://sakyatradition.org>

2023©All Rights Reserved