



Basic Human Goodness and the Spiritual Path

His Holiness the Sakya Trichen



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<https://sakyatradition.org>

E-mail: info@sakyatradition.org

Wechat ID: sakyatradition

Weibo: sakyatradition

IG: the_sakya_tradition

Facebook: TheSakya

Youtube: @TheSakyaTradition

Twitter: Sakya_Tradition

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By the merit of this work, may His Holiness the Sakya Trichen enjoy perfect health and a very long life, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.



What sets us apart from a buddha? Is it feasible for an ordinary being to attain buddhahood?

The Buddha asserted that each sentient being possesses buddha nature, the inherent potential for enlightenment.

If this is indeed the case, why haven't we reached buddhahood yet?

In comparison to other sentient beings, humans have an advantage in achieving enlightenment because we all possess fundamental human virtues and have the capacity to cultivate them. These virtues serve as the foundation for enlightenment and are the key to attaining genuine peace, happiness, and success.

Given that we already possess the necessary conditions, why can't we attain lasting happiness? Why do we continue to experience moments of sadness and dissatisfaction?

For those who seek liberation and aspire to attain enlightenment, how can they do so?

In this teaching, His Holiness gradually imparts the essential principles for achieving both worldly and spiritual objectives, aiding us in gaining a deeper understanding of ourselves and our minds. This understanding will enable us to face life's challenges with confidence.

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Part One
Developing Human Qualities

Outer and Inner Progress

The world in which we live is full of different peoples, ideas, beliefs, cultures, and traditions. One thing that is common to everyone, however, is the wish to be free from suffering and to accomplish happiness. Every individual, every society, is making efforts of all kinds for the sake of happiness. During the last century, tremendous progress has been made in the fields of science and technology, bringing great benefits. Many diseases that were once incurable can now be easily diagnosed and cured. We can visit many places that were once completely unknown. Many benefits have come from advances in communications technologies and other things.

At the same time, this outer or material progress cannot resolve the problem of our fundamental suffering. It cannot bring real peace and happiness to those who are seeking these things. Moreover, unless and until we make inner spiritual progress, this scientific and technological progress will make the world more dangerous, more violent, and more disturbed. This is why it is important that we make inner spiritual progress. Only by combining outer progress with inner progress can we truly make the world a better, more harmonious, and peaceful place.

Irrespective of one's race, religion, political beliefs, or tradition, it is important that everyone develops what we call basic human qualities. I believe that all the major religions of the world teach the importance of love, compassion, tolerance, and forgiveness. By developing these basic human qualities, we can make ourselves better human beings. This is the only way that we can achieve real peace and happiness.

But it is difficult. We all know that doing this would bring real benefit, but it is difficult to put into practice. The reason it is so difficult—easy to say and difficult to do—is because our minds have been associated with the defilements, or negative emotions, for such a long time.

Mind and the Defilements

According to the Buddhist tradition, the mind has no beginning. There is no time at which we can say a particular person's mind began. Mind is beginningless, invisible, and immaterial. It is one of the world's great wonders. We understand where the physical body comes from, how it develops, and how it is maintained. We can see these things with our own eyes and touch bodies with our own hands. We can describe the size, shape, and color of physical things. We also know that, one day, our physical bodies will be disposed of in one way or another.

The mind is something very different from this body. The body will disappear, but the mind is already invisible. Mind is invisible and immaterial. We can't see it with our naked eyes, and we can't touch it with our hands. We can't describe the size, shape, or color of the mind. Yet, it is obvious that our minds exist. Without our minds, none of us could function. Without mind, the body is inanimate—a dead body. The mind is the most important thing, and it will not cease to exist at death like our bodies will. As an immaterial thing, it cannot be cremated, buried, or put somewhere else.

I said that the mind has existed since beginningless time. It is self-caused and continuous. Yet despite the continuity of mind since beginningless time, it is also always changing. The minds we had as babies or as children were very different from our older minds. Yet, we can remember because of the unbroken continuity of the mind all the way back to infancy, to birth in this world, and before. The continuity of the mind has never stopped, and it will not stop. Our present minds are joined together right now with these bodies, but our minds existed before these bodies. The continuity of the immaterial mind is one way to prove that there was life before the present life.

From beginningless time until now, our minds have been associated with the defilements, or what we call negative

emotions. We are caught up with the defilements because we lack wisdom; we do not know reality. Because of this long and continuous association, it is very easy for negative emotions to arise, such as desire, anger, jealousy, and pride. Even a single word can trigger a negative emotion. One word can provoke jealousy; one word or a certain look can give rise to anger. We know that these are not good, that they are faults, because whenever a negative emotion arises, we will not feel good. For example, when anger arises, the face flushes and the blood pressure increases. The whole body-mind system is disturbed. Even if we do not want our peace and happiness to be ruined, we cannot help it because we are so habituated through very long association with negative emotions.

Take the example of people who smoke or drink. They know that it is harmful. Smoking can cause dangerous diseases, and it is harmful not only to oneself but to other people. Drinking, too, can cause terrible damage to the body. But people who smoke or drink are so used to these things, that even when they know that the behavior is harmful and they wish to quit, it is very difficult for them to do so. Like this, we have been associated for so long with the defilements that it is difficult to give rise to the basic human qualities of love, compassion, tolerance, and forgiveness. Instead of these qualities, others arise spontaneously: jealousy, pride, anger, desire, and so on.

How Spiritual Practice Works: Natural Purity of Mind

We must make efforts to change our minds, to change our ways of thinking. Spiritual practices can help us make this change. The first step is to become aware that our own negative emotions are the cause of all our suffering and our problems. Many people do not even notice that the negative emotions are harmful; yet, they cause all our misery and suffering. The danger—our greatest enemy—is not outside us but is in our own minds. No external enemy can cause as much suffering as our defilements. The second step is to suppress the negative emotions, make them less active, and to be less involved with them. This is what we must try to do.

Finally, through meditation and other spiritual practices, we can completely eliminate the negative emotions. Once they are eliminated, the basic or true nature of the mind will reveal itself. In this way, what we call liberation and enlightenment are possible. According to the Buddha's teachings, every sentient being possesses buddha nature—not only human beings. To possess buddha nature means that there is no difference between the true nature of our minds and the true nature of the buddha's transcendental wisdom. They are the same; there is no difference at all. In the true nature of things, sentient beings and the buddha are not different. This is sometimes also

called natural purity, which means that the true nature of the mind is pure and never stained with the obscurations.

Nevertheless, there is a vast difference between ordinary, helpless sentient beings and the buddha. We do not have the freedom or the abilities of a buddha. In the Buddhist tradition, we believe in karma. We must go wherever the winds of our karma blow. We have no choice. Karma is the law of cause and effect based upon our actions and the defilements. Because of karma, we cannot simply decide what we want and have it. We may want to live for a long time and be healthy. We want to be happy. But we can't just wish or decide it. We have no choice and no freedom because of our karma. Against our wishes, we will get sick, we will die, we will encounter unhappiness. This is why we have no genuine freedom and are helpless. Unlike us, the buddhas are totally free from all forms of obscurations. They have fully developed all possible good qualities. This is why the difference between sentient beings and the buddha is like the difference between earth and sky. Yet in spite of this difference, when we consider the natural state, or the basic nature, there is no difference.

Because we believe that all sentient beings have this natural purity or buddha nature, we believe that every sentient being has the opportunity to become a fully enlightened buddha.

At the moment, however, we are not free because we lack the wisdom that sees the true nature of the mind. Lacking this wisdom, we cling to the self. We all have this habitual tendency to think about self, or to think as an “I,” because it has been built up over many lifetimes.

The “I” Cannot be Found: Fundamental Ignorance

However, if you examine it carefully, this “I” cannot be found anywhere. If there is an “I” or a “self,” it must be locatable in a name or the body or the mind. But by itself, the name is empty. Any name could be given to anybody; a name can be changed. Therefore, the name is not the self. As for the body, if you examine your body from head to toe, if you examine each and every part of it—the hair, skin, blood, bones, skin, veins—you will not find a “self” anywhere. Then, there is the mind: It may seem like the mind is the self. But the mind is changing all the time. Even yesterday’s mind is different from today’s. Yesterday, you thought in a different way than you do today. Although there is continuity to the mind that allows us to remember things, the mind is changing every moment. Something that is always changing cannot be the self. If the self was yesterday’s mind, then today’s mind would be another self.

Therefore, we conclude that there is no actual thing that is called a self that can be located—not in name, body, or mind.

Even in our ordinary language, we talk about “my body” and “my mind,” just like we say “my house,” “my car,” or “my relatives.” But the house is not “I,” the house belongs to you. Similarly, the body is not “I.” The mind is not “I.” One’s mind is happy in one moment, and it is unhappy in the next. The mind belongs to you, but obviously the mind itself is not you. Where, then, is this self, or the “I,” that owns all this? That owns not only your possessions but your body and your mind? You will not find this great owner who owns everything. It cannot be found anywhere.

Conventionally, we experience this self or “I” who performs actions and who receives the rewards, who does both meritorious deeds and sinful ones. However, in reality, there is no such self: When we analyze it, we find that there is no logical reason to say that this self exists. This fundamental error is what we call basic ignorance. Due to our lack of wisdom, we cannot see reality or the true nature of the mind. Instead, we cling to self. Even when we know that there are no logical reasons for it, we take the body and mind and all the aggregates together, and we focus on this collection of factors, and we think that there is a self there.

This is the fundamental ignorance, the biggest error. Whenever you have the self, then there will be the other. It is just like right

and left. If there is a right side, then there will be a left side. They are dependent upon each other. It is logically necessary. And so, thinking as a self, we think of self as number one. No matter how much we love other beings, we will love the self in the first place.

The Three Defilements and Changing the Mind

Naturally, there will be desire regarding the self and anger regarding the other. This is how the three root defilements arise: first, ignorance, and then desire and anger. Next, whenever you have the three root defilements, you will have the others, such as jealousy, pride, stinginess, and so on. In this way, all of the defilements arise with which we have been associated since beginningless time. Because these defilements arise, we take actions—physical, verbal, and mental. Our actions are just like planting seeds on fertile ground. In due course, they will ripen into the results. *Karma* in Sanskrit means action; this is how the law of karma operates. Life goes on and on in this way, from rebirth to rebirth. We are never free from the suffering of saṃsāra, this cycle of existence. We describe it as a wheel of life, going round and round. At the moment, we have this life in this particular body; then, we will leave this world, and we will be reborn. Another life will begin. The cycle goes on and on this way without end.

Now the thing to do is to know this, and then to become free from the defilements. As long as we are associated with defilements, we will never be free from suffering. All existence in saṃsāra is suffering. The way to free the mind is to change our own mental attitudes. According to the Buddha's teachings, everything is created by our karma, our own actions. Buddhists do not believe that there is a transcendent being who created everything, all our happiness and all our suffering. Everything is created by our own deeds and arises through our own karma.

Some traditions believe in a creator who made everything, who created the whole world. We have to pray to this creator because our happiness and suffering depend upon the creator. The help that Buddha gives is different. The Buddha gave us the teachings to show us the correct way, to help us see what is the right way and what is the wrong way. In Buddhism, we do not pray to an outer being, we pray to ourselves; we make aspirations. The Buddha has shown us that happiness and suffering are created by our own deeds, and he has shown the path to liberation. I have many friends in India who believe in a creator. When they face sufferings or disasters, they fight with their deities or their gods. They say, "Why did you give me such suffering; why did you give me such punishment?" In Buddhism, there is no such thing. If you fight with the deities,

they will answer, “I have tried to help you. But due to your own negative deeds, you must face such-and-such a situation.” There is no point in fighting with deities because we believe in karma.

Wish for Others to Be Happy

In Buddhism, the way of salvation is to help oneself to become a better human being. Happiness will not come from praying to deities or praying to the Buddha; we will not receive happiness as a gift. We have to make our own efforts and make ourselves happy. We can achieve what we are seeking if we develop our basic human qualities, such as love. Love is very important. According to the Buddhist teachings, love is the sincere wish for another to be happy and to have the cause of happiness—just as every mother wishes her child to be physically healthy, mentally happy, and to have the causes of happiness, so that they will enjoy happiness forever.

Just as we long for happiness, so does every other sentient being from the tiniest insect up to the gods. It is not right just to think of one’s own happiness; we should think of all sentient beings because all have the same feelings and the same wish. The great Indian master Śāntideva said, “All the happiness that exists in this world arises from wishing for other beings to

be happy.” Even in the worldly sense, we see that people who are selfless or who care for others, people who help others, are widely admired. Everybody respects people like India’s Mahatma Gandhi, who worked selflessly and without caring for his own name or for his position but caring for the masses and for others. All over the world, Mahatma Gandhi is respected, even today. Śāntideva also said, “All the suffering that exists in this world arises from wishing to be happy for oneself alone.” Even in the worldly sense, nobody loves people who are selfish, or people who only care for their own well-being and benefit.

Freeing our minds and reaching happiness will not come from outside us. Of course, as Buddhists, we believe that prayers are powerful. I do not say that prayers and rituals do not work. They help us to a great extent. But the primary factor is from our own side; it is our own effort. Śāntideva said that the difference between ordinary sentient beings and buddhas is that ordinary sentient beings have cared only for their own benefit and happiness from beginningless time until now. We have worked hard, day and night, caring for ourselves and working for our own benefit. Yet, all that we have achieved this way is more suffering, endless rebirth in the cycle of saṃsāra.

Great suffering exists in the world today. When you read newspapers, most of the news is about suffering in one way

or another, whether natural disasters, man-made disasters, or conflicts. Even in our ordinary lives, we face many problems such as mental suffering, material suffering, financial problems, legal problems, marriage problems—all kinds of suffering. Always, we think about suffering in a selfish way, and our actions to avoid suffering have achieved only more suffering. We must now think about this more carefully. Instead of thinking about ourselves, we must begin to think about others. This is not easy to do right away. It may be easy to say, but it is not easy to do.

Start Small and Then Expand

To begin, we should act in our immediate surroundings with those who are near: your family, friends, and associates. Practice love, compassion, and tolerance towards them, creating just a small group at first. Even within your own family or circle of friends, you will see how much difference it makes. Then, when you have learned some patience, love, and compassion, you can expand, slowly, the circle for whom you consciously cultivate these qualities. As an ordinary person, it is difficult to practice love and compassion for all sentient beings. But if we do it step by step, beginning with a group that is close to us, and then expanding slowly, it is possible. In this way, we can make the world more livable, more harmonious, and more happy.

Many Religions

There are many different religions in the world, and I believe that every religion has its own special qualities. I think that a variety of religions is necessary. There are so many different kinds of people that one religion is not enough. It would not be suitable for everybody. For certain people, Hinduism is more suitable. For some, Christianity is more suitable. For others, Islam is more suitable. For certain beings, Buddhism is more suitable. We need different medicines to cure different diseases. In fact, even different medical systems are necessary. For example, some diseases respond best to allopathic medicine, but others respond to Ayurvedic medicine. Then, for certain diseases, traditional Chinese medicine is more suitable. Religion is like this.

I'm speaking here as a Buddhist and from the Buddhist point of view. Many people come to Buddhism looking for the highest practices, thinking that they can gain liberation and enlightenment almost instantly. That is not possible. You have to work hard. Before you can think about becoming a good religious practitioner, you must become a good human being. And what is a good human being? I believe that this means developing our basic human qualities like love, compassion, tolerance, and forgiveness. I believe that this is true for every religion: first, you must learn to be a good human being.

These basic human qualities are important for our own benefit and for the benefit of others. They can be learned beginning with one's closest circle first. I have already mentioned love. In Buddhism, *love* means the wish that everyone will have happiness and the cause of happiness.

If you try to see how people really are from a place of genuine love, you will see that, in reality, no one is happy. Everyone is suffering in different ways. People who do not have wealth suffer physically from lack of food, clothing, and homes. People who have wealth also suffer. They have mental sufferings in addition to such things as illnesses, things that will eventually affect everyone. Everyone is suffering in one way or another.

Wish for Others to Be Free from Suffering

In Buddhism, the sincere wish that everyone will be free from suffering and the cause of suffering is called *compassion*. There are different kinds of compassion in the Buddhist teachings, but this is the basic meaning. Compassion is very important. Think how unbearable it is when you have pain, whether physical pain or mental pain like anxiety. Think how you long to be free from such suffering. All sentient beings have the same feeling, from tiny and invisible insects up to humans and gods. No one wishes to have suffering, even for a single moment. Instead of thinking of our suffering alone, we must think of others.

After all, our lives are totally dependent on others. Without our parents, for example, we would not even have been born. Right after birth, if our parents had not taken great care of us, not one of us would have survived. A newborn baby cannot live for long without someone to care for it. At that time, you could not eat, talk, or do anything for yourself. Your parents gave you food and protected you from danger; they kept you warm when you were cold and cool when you were warm. They raised you, teaching you to speak, walk, eat, or work. When you became older, there were others who educated you. With the help of your teachers and friends, you became a better and better person. As an adult, too, we cannot survive alone. We need companions, friends, others with whom we can share our feelings and problems. As we grow old, we will depend more and more on others. We need help when we are sick and when we are aged. Across the course of our lives, from beginning to end, we depend on others. How can we just ignore others, then, and think to care only ourselves alone? It is not logical, and it is not right. Just as we ourselves wish to be free from suffering, so every sentient being has the same feeling, the same wish. We must think about the suffering of other beings.

Even though we cannot really help them—we do not have the ability right now—we should at least have the intention. We can share in their sufferings and their problems, discuss things

with them, and care for them. We can bring some kind of relief even through simple acts like touching and consoling, advising, and talking.

Compassion like this is very, very important. All the religions of the world emphasize the importance of compassion. In the Buddhist tradition, all the teachings of the Buddha are based on compassion. Then, within Buddhism, the tradition called Mahāyāna Buddhism is explicit that its root is compassion. Mahāyāna means the great vehicle or path. This means that one is not seeking liberation for oneself alone. In the Mahāyāna, we seek enlightenment for the benefits of all sentient beings. This wish to help sentient beings cannot arise without compassion; compassion is the root of all the Mahāyāna teachings. Without it, one cannot practice Mahāyāna practices.

We say that compassion is the most important thing in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end. In the beginning, it is important as the motivation. In the middle, every practice that we do in the Mahāyāna is, ideally, not to one's own benefit; every practice is for the benefit of others. So this also cannot arise without compassion. Finally, when we achieve enlightenment, compassion is also fundamental because all the activities of a buddha are for the benefit of all sentient beings. It is said that in the beginning, compassion is like a seed; in

the middle, it is like water and fertilizer; in the end, it is the ripening of the crop.

Compassion is the source of all benefits, of all happiness and peace. We may pray to deities or gods for the accomplishing of our wishes, and this kind of prayer is important. It helps us, at least psychologically. But prayers alone will not accomplish our wishes. Practicing compassion is the sure way to do this. Religion aside, even in a worldly way, compassion is beneficial. Anyone who practices compassion will naturally experience happiness. Everything arises from causes and conditions. The actions that we do out of compassion, whether physical, verbal, or mental, will result in peace and happiness. It cannot be otherwise. This is why compassion is so important even for mundane life.

Bear Unkind Words and Deeds Patiently

A third basic human quality is tolerance. *Tolerance* means being able to bear whatever unkind words or deeds you encounter. Also called patience, tolerance is the opposite of anger. Among all the defilements, anger is the most harmful. According to the Buddhist tradition, physical, verbal, and mental actions that arise from anger disturb not only your own peace and happiness, they disturb the peace of your family and friends—the whole circle around you. In the future, these actions will

cause you to fall into the lower realms. Śāntideva said that all the virtuous deeds that we have done over thousands of aeons can be destroyed in a single moment of anger—all the virtue from our acts of generosity, making offerings, and good moral conduct. An aeon is a very long time, and Śāntideva says that the virtue accumulated for *thousands of aeons* can be destroyed this way. There is no worse sin—no worse nonvirtuous deed—than anger.

The opposite of anger is tolerance, or patience. Patience is very difficult to practice but if you can, it has great benefits. Its benefit is as great as the sin as of anger is great. Tolerance can accumulate merit to that extent. As an ordinary person, however, it is difficult to practice. If you lose your temper when someone says unkind things and you want to say unkind things in return, this is not right. If someone says unkind things, or if they look at you in a mean way, it can be very difficult to be tolerant, but if you can tolerate this just one time, then you will be able to tolerate it another time. Then, you will be able to tolerate it a third time. As you practice, eventually it will become much easier. Practicing patience will have great benefit.

These are basic human qualities that I believe are very precious and valuable, the real source of all happiness and benefit. We should try to practice them as much as possible.

The Way to Eliminate the Negative Emotions: First Suppress, then Uproot

It is said of the Buddha's teachings: "Virtuous in the beginning, virtuous in the middle, and virtuous at the end." In the beginning, we do not yet know what is right and what is wrong, but the Buddha, who has obtained omniscient wisdom, knows exactly. He gave us the teaching that the defilements cause all our suffering. In the beginning, it is virtuous that we hear this. Once we hear it, we begin to realize that the fault lies not on the outside but within our own minds. Our negative emotions cause all our unhappiness and suffering. In this way, we gain wisdom through hearing the teachings.

Once we have realized, because we have analyzed what we heard, that the cause of our suffering is our own negative emotions, then we will be able to suppress the negative emotions. When anger rises, we learn to suppress it because we know what are its faults, what are its harms and the extraordinary damage that anger does. Instead of activating anger, we suppress it. In this way, anger becomes inactive and it will not cause harm and suffering any longer. This is how it is virtuous in the middle.

Once we have heard the teachings and analyzed them, and once we have suppressed the negative emotions to some

extent, we can meditate. Through meditation, we can go beyond suppressing the negative emotions to digging them out by the root. In this way, anger can be completely uprooted and removed so that it will never appear again in our minds. This is how the Buddha's teaching is virtuous in the beginning, middle, and in the end.

We must hear the Buddha's teachings and then analyze them for ourselves and think about them. Then, if we put them into practice, we will see the benefits of the teachings. The Buddha never said that everyone must follow his teachings because they are the best. Instead, he invited everybody to see for themselves.

Testing Gold

In Buddhism, logic and reason are very important. The Buddha said that monks, nuns, and the wise should analyze his teachings like we analyze gold. When we buy gold, we have to make sure it is genuine; we cut, scratch, or otherwise test it, and only when convinced that it is genuine do we buy it. Similarly, the Buddha said that we all must analyze the teachings that he gave, just like we would analyze gold. We should only accept them after we are convinced that they are genuine teachings and worthy of being accepted. As Buddha said, once we accept them, we should practice them and then

see the benefits that arise. Then, we will realize how precious they are, how beneficial. This is how one becomes convinced that the Buddha is great.

We can make ourselves better human beings by following the Buddha's teaching this same way. We should study and analyze these teachings and then put them into practice and see for ourselves that love, compassion, and tolerance bring us happiness. This happiness cannot be accomplished through outer material progress. You cannot buy tolerance, love, or compassion; you cannot ask a doctor or someone else to give them to you, as through some kind of surgery. We have to develop our basic human qualities ourselves. In this way, we will find all the benefits and happiness that we seek.

Questions and Answers

Q: You said that we have basic feelings of love, compassion, and tolerance. We also have basic defilements like desire, anger, jealousy, and pride. Why is it easier to feel the defilements than it is to feel the basic human qualities?

A: As I mentioned in the beginning, it is because we've been associated with the defilements not only for this lifetime but for many lifetimes in the past. It is a habitual tendency that we have been building up, life after life. I gave the examples of drinking and smoking, which are harmful, but people become accustomed to these behaviors. It is very difficult for people to stop them, even when they have the intention to quit. Similarly, defilements are very difficult to dissociate ourselves from, and basic human qualities are very difficult to give rise to. This is because of our habitual tendencies.

Q: When I try to practice tolerance, it is difficult. When something is bothering me and it is so real to me, how can I be patient?

A: As I said, if you realize how important tolerance is, then you can try to practice it—one time, and then another. If you can do it the second, third, and fourth times, it will eventually become easier. You will make it a habit. There is nothing that will not become easier once you start, but in the beginning, it can be very difficult.

Q: You said in the first part of the lecture that the “I” is not the mind and the “I” is not the body, so we cannot prove the existence of “I.” Do you believe that the “I” doesn’t exist at all, but that there is something superior to the mind that does exist? Or, do you believe that there is something there in the “I,” and we get to know the true nature of the “I” at the time of enlightenment?

A: Yes, the true nature of the mind is actually beyond description. In Buddhism, we talk about the relative truth and the absolute truth. Relative truth is the way we reach the absolute truth. In the relative truth, we do have an “I,” because if there is no “I,” then there is no one who strives to reach liberation. In the relative sense, there is someone who performs virtuous deeds and receives the benefits of those deeds. There is someone who performs nonvirtuous deeds and receives suffering from them. If there is no self, then these things could not operate, of course.

In reality, however, when you reach the absolute level, then there is no “I.” The “I” is only an illusion. Until you are awakened from this illusion, there is a self, although in reality, there is no self. It is like the example of a dream. While you are dreaming, you have many experiences that produce many feelings, whether happy, sad, fearful, and so on. But when you

are awakened, you see that there was nothing, not any sign of what you saw in your dreams. Similarly, when you reach the ultimate level, there is no “I”—no self. But at the relative level, there is a what we call not-a-logically-proven-self.

Q: When you are doing meditation, you have to be aware, right? But when you are aware of yourself there, how can you realize the ultimate truth, that there is no “I?”

A: Meditation has many different levels: basic meditation, higher meditation, and the highest meditation. In basic meditation, of course there is a self. In our practice, we have the self who practices; there is somebody, and we are still in the state that is like a dream. However, as you go further into higher meditation, the closer you come to ultimate reality and there is less and less feeling of self.

Part Two
Following the Spiritual Path

I explained the importance of trying to make oneself a better person as a first step. With that as a base, we can then try to become good spiritual practitioners. As I said, there are many different kinds of people, different cultures, traditions, and ideas in the world, yet everyone wishes for the same thing, which is to be free from suffering and to achieve happiness. This is the common concern for this life, shared by everyone. In the mundane situation, everyone wishes to have a long life, good health, happiness, prosperity, and to fulfill their wishes, and we can achieve more happiness by cultivating the basic human qualities of love, compassion, and tolerance. Now I will talk more specifically about the Buddhist spiritual path.

Impermanence, Rebirth, and the Need for Spiritual Practice to Cultivate Wisdom

The Buddha taught that all compounded things are subject to the four endings:

- *The end of gathering is separation.* Any gathering of people, such as this one, will end in separation. We will all go our separate ways.
- *The end of accumulation is exhaustion.* We accumulate wealth and many other things, but it cannot remain forever. No matter how much we accumulate, it will eventually be exhausted.

- *The end of height is to fall down.* No matter how high your status—your position and power—it will not remain forever. Eventually, no matter the height, we all fall down.

- *The end of birth is death.* Anyone who has been born into this universe will die. There is nobody who has been born but did not die. Of course, it is different for the noble ones who have gone beyond the worldly level, but ordinary people with defilements will have to die as a result of their karma.

Although we all want happiness for this life, we know that this life is not permanent. Everyone knows that nobody will live forever. We know that anyone who has been born into this world will die. There is not even the slightest doubt about this. The Buddha's teaching explains that all compounded things are impermanent. "All compounded things" means anything whose existence depends on causes and conditions.

There are many people who do not believe in a next life. They think that this is the only life and that when this life ends, there is nothing else. Others believe that there will be life after this. There is a third group of people: those who say that they do not know and do not take a stance one way or the other. Excluding the third group, the argument is between those who say that there is a next life and those who say that there is not. Among those who say there is not, the reason they often give is that no

one has even seen it. However, this is not a valid reason. There are many things that we have never seen and that we cannot see, yet they exist. People who claim that there is no next life have no valid reason for believing that there is no next life.

People who say that there is a next life can point to logical reasons for it. We know that the mind is invisible and immaterial. It cannot be cremated or buried or otherwise disposed of, like our bodies can. We know that our consciousness has continued, unbroken, but always changing, since we were born in this life—and even since we were conceived in our mothers' wombs. The mind is continuous, invisible, and it is not the body. It is logical to suppose that it will continue in the future.

As I said in part one, the mind has existed since beginningless time. It is self-caused and continuous. Yet despite the continuity of mind since beginningless time, it is also always changing. The continuity of the immaterial mind is one way to prove that there was life before the present life. Furthermore, although the true nature of the mind is pure and never stained with the obscurations, our minds have been associated with the defilements, or what we call negative emotions, from beginningless time until now.

According to Buddhism, the basic human qualities that I discussed in part one—love, compassion, and tolerance—are a very important part of spiritual practice. They help us to suppress the defilements. But we must do more than suppress them. We need to eliminate them entirely, and for this wisdom is absolutely essential. It is said in one of the commentaries that the root of all the good qualities, visible and invisible, is wisdom. “Visible qualities” refers to things that we can see here and now. “Invisible qualities” are things like the next life, liberation, enlightenment, and so on. The root of these lies in wisdom. We say that wisdom must be combined with compassion. Compassion is the most essential practice or method, but it is necessary to combine it with wisdom.

Buddhism and Three Kinds of Spiritual Paths

All Buddhist teachings can be divided into Buddhist science, Buddhist philosophy, and Buddhist religion. Buddhist religion, or Dharma, is what Buddhists practice—things like taking refuge, creating the enlightenment mind, and so on. Buddhist science means Buddhist explanations of the world, of existence and entities. There are many different philosophies in the world that give different explanations of these things. Of course, most ordinary people do not bother with questions about the nature of reality, or the reality beyond this one that

we see, hear, and feel. More intelligent people do wonder about these things, and they ask why we are here, what is beyond all this, and what is the nature of reality. After carefully investigating these questions, intelligent people have produced different answers. This is why there are many different philosophies. Within Buddhism also, there are many different philosophical schools.

In Buddhism, generally, we describe three different kinds of spiritual paths: the small person's path, the middle person's path, and the great person's path.

The Small Person's Path: To Enjoy Higher Rebirth

The first is called *the small person's path*. Because it is a spiritual and not a worldly path, there is the understanding that this life is not permanent; the consciousness will have to leave this world and this body at death. We will have to leave everything behind, including our family, friends, possessions, and even this precious body to which we have been joined since we were conceived in our mothers' wombs. We have taken great care of this body: When it was hot, we have tried to cool it down. When it was cold, we have tried to warm it up. When it was hungry, we have fed it. But we will have to leave this precious body behind when we die.

Only the consciousness will remain, the continuum of consciousness. It will leave this body just like a hair is pulled out of butter. At that time, our virtuous and nonvirtuous deeds, and not the will of the gods, will determine where we will go as we enter the next life.

Nonvirtuous deeds, performed from the defilements or the negative emotions, will cause us to fall into the lower realms—the hell realm, the hungry ghost realm, or the animal realm. We cannot see the hell realm or the hungry ghost realm, but authentic sūtras and commentaries explain them in great detail: the sufferings experienced there, the life spans of the beings there, and so on. As for the animal realm, we don't need to depend on the commentaries or the sūtras. We can see how animals suffer with our own eyes. If we as human beings had to face such situations, it would be unbearable.

The small person's path is to wish to be reborn in the higher realms out of fear of falling into the lower realms. The higher realms are the human realm, the demi-god realm, and the god realm. We know about the human realm. The demi-gods are between humans and gods. As for gods, there are many different levels. We speak of three dhātus, or realms: kāmadhātu, rūpadhātu, and ārūpadhātu. The kāmadhātu means the realm of desire. This is where we are now. Also

within the kāmadhātu are six different levels of gods. Above this is the rūpadhātu, which means the realm of forms. It has four main divisions and seventeen subdivisions. Higher than this is the ārūpadhātu, which means the formless realm. It also has four main divisions.

The small person's path, based on wishing to be born in the higher realms, is to practice the ten virtuous deeds and to abstain from the ten nonvirtuous deeds. Even this very basic or lower spiritual path depends on wisdom. In order to practice this path, you must know what are virtuous deeds and what are nonvirtuous ones, and this requires an element of wisdom.

The Middle Person's Path: To Attain Liberation

Next is *the middle person's path*. The middle person's path is to recognize that the nature of existence in the higher realms is suffering, just as it is in the lower realms. The lower realms have intense sufferings, while the higher realms appear at first to be a mixture of suffering and happiness. But, if we analyze the nature of existence in the higher realms carefully, we will see that there is no real happiness there, either. It is all suffering.

The teachings describe three different kinds of suffering. The first is the *suffering of suffering*. This refers to suffering that we

normally consider to be suffering, things like physical pain and mental distress. These are mostly evident in the lower realms, but we experience them in the higher realms as well.

Next is the *suffering of change*. This refers to things that we normally consider to be joy, comfort, or pleasure. However, they appear this way only in comparison to the suffering of suffering. If you carefully examine the matter, you can see that they are only another form of suffering. For example, consider a person who lives in a very poor condition with a house lacking facilities and comfort. If this person moves to a house with modern facilities and many comforts, then they will feel pleasure and joy. However, if such facilities and physical comforts were the true cause of a person's joy and happiness, then the longer a person stayed in such a place or house, the more joyous they would become over time. But it is not like this. When someone first moves to such a place, of course they feel joy. But as time passes, they will find something is lacking. Although worldly happiness appears to be genuine, it is another form of suffering in reality. We call this the suffering of change.

The third is the *suffering of the conditional nature of phenomena*. This means that our very existence itself is suffering, although we usually consider mere existence itself

to be indifferent in terms of feelings. Indifferent feelings are another form of suffering.

In this way, we recognize that the lower realms contain unimaginable suffering, while the higher realms contain no real happiness, either. The whole of saṃsāra, from the highest heavenly realm to the lowest hell realm, is of the nature of suffering, although the kinds and degrees of sufferings are different. As long as we are within the cycle of existence, there is not a single spot worthy of attachment. When someone realizes that there is no real happiness to be found and nothing worthy of attachment in the entirety of saṃsāra, they will earnestly wish to be totally free from saṃsāra. This is the wish to gain liberation. When a person is seeking such a stage of liberation, we call this the middle person's path.

To gain such a state, it is necessary to cut the root of saṃsāra. Without doing this, one cannot achieve liberation. What is the root of saṃsāra? It is self-clinging. From beginningless time until now, we have clung to the self, even without any logical or valid reasons. Self-clinging is the fundamental ignorance. When we cling to self, the other arises. When there is self and other, then attachment and anger arise: attachment to one's own side and anger toward what is other. Then, more negative emotions arise, such as jealousy, pride, and so on. With these

defilements, we create karma, we take actions. As a result, we are caught in saṃsāra. To be liberated from saṃsāra, we must cut the root of saṃsāra which is self-clinging.

To do that, practicing love and compassion is not enough. We need to acquire the wisdom that realizes selflessness. This is the direct antidote to self-clinging. Therefore, we can say that wisdom is very important on the middle person's path. Without the wisdom that realizes selflessness, there is no way to accomplish liberation from saṃsāra. With it, you can cut the root of saṃsāra.

The cycle of existence is like a fire that will go out naturally once the fuel is exhausted. If you keep adding fuel, then the fire will keep burning. When you realize selflessness, the fuel of the defilements will be exhausted, and you will be totally free from saṃsāra. This is how one can obtain liberation, which is complete peace. When there are no defilements, everything stops, and one is placed in the state of peace. This is the middle person's path, to achieve what we called nirvāṇa.

The Great Person's Path: The Way of the Bodhisattva

The third path is *the great person's path*. This is the path of the bodhisattva. Like the small person, the bodhisattva realizes that this is not the only life; there will be rebirth and

a next life. Like the middle person, the bodhisattva realizes that saṃsāra is full of suffering. The entire cycle of existence contains nothing worthy of attachment. It is like a fire, or a nest of poisonous snakes, or a prison. We have had countless lives before, and we will have countless lives in the future unless we attain liberation. The bodhisattva is different from the middle person, however, because the bodhisattva does not seek to attain liberation alone but seeks what we call *non-abiding nirvāṇa* and *enlightenment*. The bodhisattva wishes to attain enlightenment and to dwell in non-abiding nirvāṇa for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Thinking about the countless lives that we have had in the past, we realize that every sentient being in the whole of saṃsāra has been our father, mother, child, friend, and so on. However, we do not recognize each other in this life. From beginningless time in saṃsāra, there has not been a single place where one has not been born or a single sentient being who has not been one's dear mother. They have been this person to us not only once but countless times. Now, however, we do not recognize them. We see some people as enemies, some as friends, and many others indifferently. But countless times in the past, they were our parents, and they gave us much love and much care.

To ignore them now and to seek your own welfare,

accomplishing liberation or nirvāṇa, would not be right. Even at the worldly level, if your family or other loved ones are in a difficult situation and experiencing great suffering while you are in a safe and a happy place, you would not feel happy about it, if you are a good-hearted person. Even if you couldn't help them directly, you would try to comfort them or try to share their miseries. If all sentient beings are our very near ones, then to ignore them and abandon them and to seek one's own liberation is not right.

We should think of all sentient beings this way. Sentient beings have no limit, just like space has no limit. When we draw boundaries, and you go one step towards the north, then you are one step further from the south. But if there are no limits, then you are not nearer to anything or further from anything, no matter how many steps you take. Similarly, there is no limit to sentient beings; they are innumerable and all of them long for happiness and freedom from suffering. Because of ignorance and lack of wisdom, however, they are experiencing great suffering. Lacking wisdom, sentient beings are actually creating more and more suffering.

Seeing this, the bodhisattva takes responsibility for removing the suffering of saṃsāra for all sentient beings and vows to attain enlightenment, or non-abiding nirvāṇa. Non-abiding

nirvāṇa is beyond the extremes of existence or nonexistence. One extreme is saṃsāra, or the cycle of existence, full of suffering and faults. The other extreme is nirvāṇa, inactive, complete peace and calm. Those are the two extremes. Non-abiding nirvāṇa is above both. With great wisdom, you can cut the root of saṃsāra, which is self-clinging, and thus one will not remain in the extreme of existence in saṃsāra. Then, with great compassion, you will not remain in the extreme of nirvāṇa, either, in complete peace and calm, and inactive. You would not be able to benefit others this way.

To obtain non-abiding nirvāṇa is the goal of the bodhisattva. *Bodhisattva* means someone who has taken a vow to liberate all sentient beings, just like the Buddha created the enlightenment mind in the beginning, or the wish to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. Then, in the middle, he accumulated wisdom and merit for three countless aeons. Finally, he attained full enlightenment. Those who wish to follow the same path take a vow to do that, and they are called bodhisattvas. When you take the bodhisattva vow, you enter the race of the Buddha, or the Buddha's lineage. You are in line for attaining buddhahood, or enlightenment.

This has different levels. There are those who have taken the bodhisattva vow but are still in saṃsāra at the worldly level,

and there are bodhisattvas who have reached the beyond-worldly level, and so on. The beyond-worldly level of the bodhisattva is reached with the first stage, or the first bhūmi. This is also called reaching the path of seeing. The difference between the first bhūmi and complete enlightenment is like the difference between the new moon and the full moon. It is called the path of seeing because at this stage you see ultimate reality although you cannot see it fully, and this is why it is compared to the new moon. As you progress further on the path, wisdom increases, so that eventually, when you reach buddhahood, or ultimate enlightenment, wisdom is like the full moon.

The main practice of the bodhisattvas is called the six pāramitās, or six perfections. They are generosity, good moral conduct, patience, endeavor, meditation, and wisdom. The last is wisdom, but in reality, each of them must be connected to wisdom before they can truly be called perfections. For example, generosity means giving, whether material things or Dharma or fearlessness or love. The practice is called generosity, but unless and until it is linked to wisdom, it cannot be called the perfection of generosity.

Combining Method and Wisdom

The first five of the perfections are the method, and the sixth is wisdom. The five without wisdom are like blind persons

who cannot walk on the road. Wisdom is like the person with eyes. Only when the first five perfections are linked to wisdom do they become the direct cause of enlightenment. Otherwise, while they are certainly meritorious deeds, virtuous deeds, they are not the cause of enlightenment, or buddhahood.

When wisdom is linked to generosity, it becomes the perfection of generosity. When it is linked to moral conduct, it becomes the perfection of moral conduct. When it is linked to patience, it becomes the perfection of patience. When it is linked to endeavor, it becomes the perfection of endeavor. When it is linked to meditation, it becomes the perfection of meditation.

Developing our basic human qualities such as caring, loving-kindness, compassion, tolerance, forgiveness, and so on is the foundation upon which a spiritual practice can be built. It will lead to a happy life for oneself, but it will benefit other beings, too, because you will not be harming other beings. These things are like the method side, virtuous and meritorious, but until they are combined with wisdom, they will not result in buddhahood.

The method side is like a vehicle, or like feet, and wisdom is like a pair of eyes. To walk on the road, you need both. With the feet and the eyes together, you can see the path with your

eyes, and you can walk with your feet, and you can reach your destination. Both sides are important, but wisdom is especially important because it is the way to see things.

As I said in part one, we all have buddha nature. In a sense, the true nature of our minds is pure—naturally pure and never stained with the obscurations. If the obscurations were part of the nature of the mind, then they could never be purified. It is the nature of coal to be black, so that no matter how much you wash it, a lump of coal will never become white. Because the obscurations are not in the nature of the mind, they are only temporary. We can purify the mind with the right methods, and it becomes pure because the obscurations are only temporary. The way to purify the mind is through wisdom. With wisdom and method together, we can reach enlightenment.

Whether you follow the small person's path seeking to continue in the higher realms, or the middle person's path seeking nirvāṇa, or the great person's path seeking ultimate enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings—whichever of these paths you follow, wisdom is absolutely essential. Developing wisdom depends on cultivating the method side, and cultivating the method side depends on wisdom, because that is how they become perfections. We need to emphasize both.

The great Indian master Candrakīrti composed a commentary or shastra (Skt. śāstra) on the Madhyamaka philosophy, or the Middle Way, called the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, or the *Entry into the Middle Way*. It was customary in ancient times to begin a book with an homage, such as an homage to the Buddha or to some deity that you respect. You pay homage and request that your work will be carried out without obstacles and that people who study the book in the future will be able to study it without obstacles. When Candrakīrti composed the *Madhyamakāvatāra*, he did not pay homage to the Buddha or to any deities. Instead, he paid homage to compassion. He explained his reason for this choice: the Buddha developed all the qualities of a buddha and achieved such a great state because, when he was on the path, he practiced compassion. This is what enabled him to reach such a great state fulfilling his own purpose and the purpose of others.

Compassion combined with wisdom is the highest attainment. These are the two most important things to cultivate, and they should be cultivated together because they are like the two wings of a bird. To fly in the sky, you need both wings. Likewise, to reach ultimate enlightenment, you need wisdom and compassion.

Entering the Buddhist Path: Taking Refuge

I said that there is no limit to sentient beings, just as space has no limit. All have different mentalities and different views. The Buddha gave different teachings to reach different kinds of practitioners, so that within Buddhism, we have the Theravāda teachings, Mahāyāna teachings, Vajrayāna teachings, and so on. In the same way, we have a variety of religions in the world. Different religions are necessary to help different kinds of people, and I respect every major religion of the world. Each one has an important role to play in helping mankind. Each religion has its own beauty, and we should respect all religions.

Regarding Buddhism, as I mentioned before, there is Buddhist science and philosophy on the one hand, and Buddhist religion on the other. Buddhist science is a way of explaining external and internal phenomena, how they arise, how they are composed and maintained, and so on. Anybody can study this knowledge. You don't have to be a Buddhist. Regardless of your religious beliefs, studying Buddhist science and the Buddhist way of perceiving the phenomena that we encounter can enrich and enhance your thinking and your perception.

Then there is the Buddhist religion, or the Buddhist Dharma. This is exclusively for people who practice Buddhism. If

someone chooses the Buddhist religion and wishes to follow the Buddhist way, how should they begin? The first step is what we call taking refuge. Buddhists take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, which we call the Triple Gem or the Three Jewels.

Whenever you set out on a journey to an unknown destination, the first thing you require is a guide who can show you the correct path. As Buddhists, we take refuge in the Buddha as our guide. The way that the Buddha helps sentient beings is not by performing miracles. We do not just pray to the Buddha, and then the Buddha saves us from saṃsāra. That is not the Buddhist way or the Buddhist explanation. The Buddha himself said that he has shown us the path to liberation, but our liberation depends entirely upon ourselves. The guide can show you the correct path, but you have to take the trouble of walking or travelling on the path yourself if you want to reach the destination. This is how we take refuge in the Buddha as our guide.

Then, we take refuge in the Dharma. Dharma means the teachings. We take refuge in the teachings as the path that leads us to our destination. It has two aspects: the teachings themselves but also the realization that the Buddha and the bodhisattvas have attained. When you study the teachings,

you gain the three kinds of wisdom: first, the wisdom gained through hearing and study. Then, through discursive analysis and contemplation, you gain another kind of wisdom. You become convinced or certain in the knowledge that you possess. Then, finally, when you practice meditation upon what you have studied and contemplated, you can eliminate all your obscurations and attain true wisdom that sees the nature of reality.

In general, we speak of the two obscurations: obscurations of the defilements and obscuration of knowledge. The first kind refers to the defilements. From basic ignorance, or not knowing reality, all the other defilements arise, such as desire and anger. The second kind, the obscuration of the knowledge, refers to the way that dual, conceptual thought blocks us from ultimate wisdom and prevents us from seeing the true nature of reality. Conceptual thoughts are linked with the three realms, and they arise on the basis of subject and object. Conceptual thoughts arise and flow like a stream, one after another, and they block us from seeing reality.

Taken together, the two obscurations prevent us from seeing the true nature of our minds. If we want to eliminate them, we need to follow the path that is shown in the teachings, and this is why we take refuge in the Dharma.

Finally, we take refuge in the Saṅgha. The Saṅgha means the community of the followers of the Buddha, and especially those bodhisattvas who have taken the path to enlightenment. Then, the true Saṅgha is those who have reached the irreversible state.^[1]

Different Levels of Refuge

Refuge includes different levels, such as worldly refuge, beyond-worldly refuge, Theravāda refuge, and Mahāyāna refuge.

Worldly refuge has two kinds: *object worldly refuge* and *intention worldly refuge*.

Object worldly refuge means taking refuge in worldly objects. When people are desperate, in pain or distress, they will seek refuge in all kinds of spirits, such as trees, mountains, and other types of worldly deities in order to overcome their suffering. We call this *object worldly refuge*.

Intention worldly refuge means taking refuge with a worldly intention, regardless of the object. Although we might take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, our motivation or intention might be to gain worldly aims. Many people go to temples to burn joss sticks and light lamps because they wish for prosperity, a long life, good health, and success. The

object of refuge might be correct—the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha—but the intention is worldly. Worldly prosperity and gain are not actually worthy of attachment. No matter how much power you acquire, no matter how much wealth you gain, these things are like a mirage. When you see a mirage from a distance, it looks like water. It is said that animals in the desert who are thirsty will run towards it, thinking that it is water, but then it disappears. Prosperity and power at the worldly level are like this. They cannot fulfill our real wishes or our real needs.

Beyond-worldly refuge refers to Hinayāna^[2] and Mahāyāna refuge. The first kind is taking refuge in order to be an Arhat. Among these practitioners, the shravakas (Skt. śrāvakas) take the Saṅgha for their main object of refuge, and the pratyekabuddhas take the Dharma for their main object of refuge. In the Mahāyāna the main object of refuge is the Buddha because our ultimate objective is to attain enlightenment.

Four Factors of Refuge

All these levels of refuge can be characterized by four factors: the cause, the object, the duration, and the purpose.

First, there are three causes for taking refuge: fear, faith, and compassion. To take refuge out of fear means that when seeing

the suffering of saṃsāra one wishes to overcome or avoid it, and so one seeks somebody who has the power to solve this problem. To take refuge from faith, especially faith with wisdom, means that you are convinced that the Buddhist way or path is the true and genuine way to overcome suffering and to accomplish the ultimate goal. To take refuge out of compassion arises when you see sentient beings who are suffering, and you wish to save them, and you know that the way to save them is to enter the Dharma path.

The second factor is the object. In all Buddhist traditions, the objects of refuge are the same: the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha. However, the explanations of the objects are different in different traditions.

According to the Mahāyāna, the *Buddha* means the Buddha possessing the three kāyas, or bodies: the dharmakāya, the saṃbhogakāya, and the nirmāṇakāya. We do not mean that the Buddha has three persons, but that the Buddha has three aspects. The dharmakāya means *the body of reality* and it refers to the transcendental wisdom of the Buddha. Dharmakāya is defined by having the double purity. The first is the basic or natural purity that we all possess. As I have said, for every sentient being, the true nature of the mind is pure. The second purity is the purity that is gained by eliminating the two

obscurations. We all have natural purity, but only buddhas have the purity that comes from clearing the obscurations. The buddhas eliminate the obscurations through the accumulation of wisdom and merit. We speak of the dharmakāya that only buddhas possess, but actually there is nothing new to be gained. It is the elimination of obscurations, so that the basic purity of mind, which is not known to us right now, is revealed. It's just like lifting a curtain so that you can see what is beyond it.

The second is the saṃbhogakāya. This means *the body of enjoyment*. When all forms of obscurations—obscurations of defilements and obscurations of knowledge—are eliminated, the ordinary physical body is transformed into a buddha's body with thirty-two signs and eighty qualities. The ordinary voice is transformed into the sixty branches of melodies of Brahmā, for example, and the ordinary mind is transformed into omniscient wisdom, and so on.

The third body is called the nirmāṇakāya, which means *the body of emanations*. While the saṃbhogakāya remains in the buddha realm, a buddha can send emanations to wherever is desired, whenever is desired, and in whatever form is desired. The form can be human, animal, god, or something else, and the point is to help sentient beings.

Regarding the Dharma, I already mentioned that the Dharma also has two aspects: the teachings and the realizations that the buddhas and bodhisattvas have gained. Regarding the Saṅgha, in the Mahāyāna, we take the true Saṅgha to be the bodhisattvas who have already reached the irreversible state.

The third factor is duration. This is related to the aim of the path. For a Mahāyāna practitioner, we take refuge from this moment until enlightenment is reached, because our ultimate purpose is to attain full enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

The fourth factor is the purpose, as whether to reach liberation for oneself alone or to reach enlightenment.

Four Special Characteristics of Mahāyāna Refuge

On the basis of the four factors that I have just described, we can point to the four special characteristics of Mahāyāna refuge. Regarding the cause, although Mahāyāna refuge includes all three causes—fear, faith, and compassion—the main cause is compassion. Regarding the object of refuge, in the Mahāyāna we take refuge in the Buddha possessing the three kāyas, as I explained. Regarding the Dharma, in the Mahāyāna we take refuge specifically in the Mahāyāna teachings and in the realizations of the buddhas and the bodhisattvas. Regarding

the Saṅgha, in the Mahāyāna we take refuge in the true Saṅgha of bodhisattvas who have reached the irreversible state.

The third factor, duration, gives the third special characteristic of Mahāyāna refuge, which is to take refuge until complete enlightenment is won. The fourth factor gives us the fourth special characteristic, which is to take refuge with the goal of reaching enlightenment for the sake of liberating all sentient beings, not for one's own sake alone, but for the sake of limitless sentient beings, to save them from the suffering of saṃsāra, and to place them on the path of happiness.

Conclusion

Although the gods are in a higher place that is better than the human realm in many ways, in terms of a good base for practicing the Dharma, a human life is much better. In the god realm, there is so much enjoyment that they do not bother to turn to Dharma. They enjoy so much happiness that they never feel the need for it or see the reason for it, and so they do not bother to make the effort to practice the Dharma. In the human realm, although we have some comfort, joy, and happiness, we have suffering at the same time: physical pain, mental anxiety, fear of meeting enemies, fear of separation from loved ones, the dissatisfaction of not being able to fulfill our wishes, sadness at not being successful, fear of failure—all the problems that

we face in everyday life bring us suffering. This suffering causes us to seek a spiritual path, to look for liberation and enlightenment. As far as having a base to practice the Dharma is concerned, a human life is much better than a life in the god realm.

The sūtras and commentaries explain how important it is to obtain a human life endowed with all the necessary prerequisites for the practice of the Dharma, such as freedom from the unfavorable conditions and possession of the necessary conditions. Such a life is precious and very difficult to obtain from many points of view. Having such an opportunity is rare. Thanks to our own merits and our prayers and aspirations, today we have these human lives with all the necessary conditions. We must not waste this golden opportunity but should utilize it in the best way, so that we can obtain some concrete result in this lifetime. Wasting this great opportunity would be like returning from an island of treasure with empty hands and not even one precious jewel. If we just pass the time in the ordinary way pursuing simple pleasures and goals like the animals do, then it would be a great loss. There can be no greater loss than losing this opportunity to practice Dharma. If we want to practice, then we should emphasize both method and wisdom in the way that I have described here. One side is method, which includes loving-

kindness and compassion and the other basic human qualities, and the other side is wisdom.

I have also explained the Mahāyāna way of taking refuge to enter Dharma practice. From there, you would begin to follow the bodhisattva path, which means creating the enlightenment mind and practicing the six perfections. You would then proceed further and further, eventually to ultimate enlightenment, gaining the three kāyas and an inexhaustible unceasing wheel of activities. A buddha's activities, in one form or another, are never ceasing as long as saṃsāra remains.

Questions and Answers

Q: My five-year-old daughter asked me, “Where is the Buddha, and how can I talk to the Buddha?” How can I answer my daughter?

A: The Buddha is not in any specific place. As I said, everybody’s mind has buddha nature and is of the nature of ultimate wisdom. This is the dharmakāya, which we fail to see because of the obscurations. But when we eliminate the obscurations, then we will see that we possess the dharmakāya, which is the body of reality. The body of reality is as vast as space.

Q: Your Holiness will be giving an initiation at Sakya Thenpel Ling. It is a very rare chance to receive it. My question is, is it proper to receive the initiation without knowing the meaning or the deities of this initiation? Also, is there any commitment?

A: It depends. You receive an initiation on different levels. The real initiation occurs only with the full understanding of the participants and the one who is giving the initiation. However, it is difficult for everybody to understand everything. So long as you have sincere devotion and the right motivation, then the initiation is like planting a seed on fertile ground, even if you don’t understand it fully at the time of the ceremony. During the initiation, we will try to explain the meaning, but it all

depends on the participants and whether or not you have the right motivation, which is the most important thing. Because such initiations are the highest level of teachings, you must have the right motivation, which is to seek enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

Q: Are deities and protectors the same as gods?

A: The word *gods* has different meanings. When we talk about worldly gods in the god realms, or gods residing in the form and the formless realms, or the *kāmadhātu*, or the realm of desire, we mean gods at the worldly level. These beings are better than human beings, but they are still in *saṃsāra*. According to the Buddhist teachings, there are many different gods of this kind. In Buddhism, we also have worldly deities who, although they are still within *saṃsāra*, have certain powers to help us—to protect us, for example.

Then, there are deities who are beyond the worldly level, and these are not the same. The Buddha's ultimate wisdom is beyond any form or symbol. But to help sentient beings, the Buddha appears in these forms, for our sake. There are many of these deities, and some of them are peaceful, some are wrathful, some have many hands, many heads, or many surrounding deities, and so on. These things symbolize different aspects of buddhahood.

Q: How can I suppress anger besides practicing meditation?

A: There are many antidotes to anger. Of course, meditation is the most advanced and the most effective way to suppress anger. But it is difficult for ordinary people. The best way for ordinary people is to remember the consequences that you will face by indulging in anger. From the start and all the way to the end, anger has only faults. The minute that anger arises, it disturbs your peace. Your face becomes dark, you lose your appetite, you lose sleep, it disturbs your physical system. It also disturbs your family and your circle of people. Its immediate effect is very harmful. Then, eventually, anger can lead us to fall into the lower realms where there is unimaginable suffering. By remembering these consequences, you can abstain from getting angry. Nobody wishes to have the experience of suffering.

Q: Your Holiness, how can we exhaust the fuel that you spoke of and achieve selflessness?

A: The fuel is the defilements, and the defilements arise from self-clinging. When you cling to self, then desire, anger, pride, jealousy, and other defilements arise. But when you examine self-clinging, you see that it is like mistaking a rope for a snake. When it is dark outside, in places where there are snakes, it is easy to mistake a rope on the ground for a snake, and immediately you will experience fear and anxiety. But once

you realize that it is not a snake, then all your fear and anxiety will disappear. The defilements arise from self-clinging, but when you examine this, you see that there is no reality to it, there is no separate entity, no existence of self, and this naturally decreases the defilements. When the defilements are exhausted, the fuel is gone.

Q: How can we deal with the five aggregates or skandhas, which are associated with the “I”?

A: On the basis of the five aggregates, we cling to self. We think that there is one thing, a self, when there is a collection of aggregates. If you analyze them, separate them, you see that there is not one, but many things together, and each of them also has many things together. You can see that they are together only at the relative level. In reality, there is no such thing. This will lessen clinging to self and appearance as real.

Q: Is *buddha nature* a name for the mental qualities of emptiness and luminosity?

A: Buddha nature is luminosity, or the basic clear light. It is just a name because the ultimate truth is beyond any description, beyond explanation, and beyond perception. Yet, this is the true nature of all phenomena. It is never arising, or never born. When something is never born, it cannot reside; when

something does not reside, it can never cease. At the same time, it is there. It is nothing to be realized, and yet to realize this truth is the ultimate goal.

Q: Your Holiness, could you please share with us your thoughts on guru devotion?

A: In all the Buddhist traditions—the Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna—the spiritual master is very important. One shouldn't take a spiritual master straightaway. A teacher must be examined from the disciple's point of view to determine who are the genuine teachers, or genuine masters. Then, from the other side, masters also examine the disciples. When both are convinced by this examination, a guru-disciple relationship can be established. Once you have done this and you are convinced that this is a true master that can show you the true path, then it is very important to keep this pure relationship. In the Mahāyāna tradition, it is said that the guru is like a buddha. We are not fortunate enough to see the real Buddha, or to hear him, but through the spiritual masters, we can hear the Buddha's teachings. Therefore, one should look upon one's spiritual master as like a buddha.

Notes:

[1] “Irreversible state” refers to bodhisattvas who have reached the eighth bhūmi. At this level, there is no longer any possibility of backsliding. The trajectory towards complete buddhahood cannot be reversed.

[2] The terms *Hinayāna* and *Mahāyāna* are best understood with reference to motivation: *Hina-*, meaning small, means that one seeks personal liberation from saṃsāra but not enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. *Hinayāna* is not a synonym for *Theravāda*. Because the goal for both *Hinayāna* and *Mahāyāna* practitioners is beyond saṃsāra, they are both classified as *beyond-worldly refuge*.



■ His Holiness the Sakya Trichen is revered as the forty-first throne holder of the Sakya lineage of Tibetan Buddhism. Born in Tibet in 1945, His Holiness is from the noble Khön family, whose predecessors date to the early days of Tibetan history and established the Sakya order in the eleventh century. In his youth, His Holiness received intensive training in Buddhist philosophy, meditation, and ritual from eminent masters and scholars.

Widely regarded as an emanation of Mañjuśrī, His Holiness is the spiritual guide to many in the next generation of Buddhist teachers and practitioners, and has bestowed Sakya's core teaching cycle known as the Lamdre (the Path with the Result) in both eastern and western countries. His Holiness manifests profound wisdom and compassion, tirelessly working to establish monasteries, nunneries, and educational institutions and to impart the Buddha's teachings to countless students around the world.



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