



# Mindfulness and the Buddhist Path: A Public Talk

His Holiness the Sakya Trichen



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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.

## EDITORIAL PREFACE



Is the Buddha's teaching simply a form of escapism, detached from real life? Not at all. The Dharma, in fact, is a grounded and compassionate way of living—one that starts with the words we speak, the thoughts we hold, and the actions we choose.

On the path the Buddha taught, right mindfulness and right thought aren't just ideals—they are both the foundation and the key to transformation. But what do these factors really mean in everyday life? And how do we live them, not just study them?

In this talk, His Holiness brings us back to the heart of the Buddha's message: true practice isn't about empty rituals—it's about living each moment with awareness and a mind turned toward goodness.

Do you still remember what brought you to this path?

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# Introduction

**I**t is a real joy for me to be with you today and to share the teachings of the Buddha, which are the source of all happiness and benefit. As human beings, we have many different requirements in our lives, but the most important is spiritual guidance and support. These give us strength in carrying on our lives. Although the world has many different kinds of people with different cultures and ideas, one thing that is common to all—and not only to human beings but to all sentient beings—is that no one wants suffering. Everyone wishes to achieve happiness. And for the sake of happiness, people do many things, both good and bad.

In the twenty-first century, tremendous progress has been made in terms of technology and science. This progress has helped us in many ways. For example, in the medical field, we can cure many diseases very easily that could not be cured before. We can travel easily to places we couldn't travel to long ago. But at the same time, outer material progress alone does not bring real happiness.

Real happiness is not found on the physical level but only on the mental. As long as our minds are controlled by negative emotions, we cannot find real happiness. For this, we need spiritual guardians and spiritual help so that we change our minds.

### **Valuing All Spiritual Traditions**

There are many different religions in the world. I believe that every religion has its own beauty and its own way to help mankind. Even within Buddhism, the Buddha did not teach only one kind of teaching. We often say that he gave eighty-four thousand teachings, but this is not the actual number of teachings the Buddha gave; it is the number that the Buddha's disciples received. The sole purpose of the Buddha in giving teachings was to help sentient beings, and sentient beings are limitless. Therefore, the teachings are also limitless. These limitless teachings are categorized into different kinds. We all know about the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, and there are many others. Within each tradition, there are numerous schools. This shows us that one kind of teaching is not enough.

We also have many different deities: peaceful deities, wrathful ones, deities with many surrounding deities, deities with many faces and arms, deities in simplified form, etc. This is not because the deities themselves are like this; it is for the sake of sentient



beings whose minds are different. Some prefer peaceful, some wrathful, some semi-wrathful, some in a very elaborate form, some in a simplified form, etc. This shows that different spiritual practices are needed in order to suit the variety of sentient beings. Thus, we should respect all traditions, and we should also exchange ideas and techniques.

### **Lasting Happiness Comes from the Spiritual Path**

Everyone wishes to be happy and successful on both the worldly and spiritual levels. However, worldly success and happiness are only temporary. If you are not successful on the spiritual level, then lasting happiness cannot arise. The Buddha said that all compounded things are impermanent. Anything created from causes and conditions is impermanent; if any cause or condition upon which the compounded arises is missing, even one condition, then it will not happen. Thus, all mundane things are impermanent.

### **Contemplating the Four Endings**

We say that impermanence has the four endings:

1. *The end of gathering is separation.* Whenever people are gathered, they will eventually go in different directions; they will

always be separated. We normally think of family as permanent, or that we will have family ties for our whole lives, but family is also temporary. After a while, the older ones pass away, and others will move away. Eventually, everyone is separated. Father, mother, and children are together only temporarily. In the next life, this family will not be together, and there will be other families.

2. *The end of accumulation is exhaustion.* People collect wealth, power, land, and possessions, but these things will not remain. There have been great emperors in history who owned almost the whole world, but their empires did not last. As time passed, they diminished.

3. *The end of height is to fall.* When you attain great power, success, or fame, you reach a great height, but this, too, does not remain forever. The famous become infamous or are forgotten. The powerful become weak, and the rich become poor.

4. *The end of birth is death.* Anyone who is born into this world will end in death. The minute we are born, we are nearer to death with every passing second. There is no being that takes birth who will not die. Everyone has to die, whether sooner or later, and there is not even the slightest doubt about this.

In this way, everything in worldly existence is impermanent.

## Being Mindful

**W**e are often carried away by our emotions when we make decisions. For example, when we get angry, we can make very drastic decisions that are harmful. Most of the decisions that people make when they're angry are the wrong ones. After they cool down, they regret what they have done: "Oh, that was a mistake. I should have done like this, or I shouldn't have done like that." Even at the worldly level, being mindful is important. It is even more important for spiritual practice.

The mind is very powerful. Everything is mind. It is the mind that creates. The human mind, in particular, is extremely complex and very powerful; no animal's mind can accomplish the wonders that the human mind can. Humans are able to do many good things that benefit many beings. Yet the human mind can also do terrible things—much worse things than animals could ever do. There are some animals we consider to be very dangerous, such as poisonous snakes or ferocious tigers. They can harm human

beings, certainly, but how much harm can they do? They might kill one or two people at a time. But we humans, especially nowadays, can make weapons that kill thousands of people in a single moment. Therefore, our human minds are very powerful.

Because our minds are so powerful, we should think very carefully about how to make this life purposeful. By “purposeful,” I mean making oneself happy and benefiting others. If we do this, our lives will be purposeful, whatever our ideas or religious beliefs are. The purpose of our lives is to make this life happy and to help other beings, because all of us are the same.

In the Buddhist teachings, because we believe in rebirth, it is said that when we die, the present physical body will be disposed of in one way or another, but the mind cannot not be destroyed. It cannot be cremated, or washed and buried.

This is because the mind is invisible. Although you cannot describe the mind in terms of its size, shape, or color, and you cannot point to its exact location, the mind is very powerful. It is the mind and not the body that does everything. When there is no mind, there is only a lifeless body that cannot do anything at all. This mind will not disappear because it is already invisible. Something that is invisible and not solid does not just disappear. Hence, the mind continues.

The Buddhist teachings say that, because of the cycle of rebirth, all sentient beings have been one's own father, mother, and other relatives. On the basis of this, we create loving-kindness and compassion for others. Even on a worldly level, and not from a Buddhist point of view, we can see that we cannot survive without others.

When you were born, you could not take care of yourself. It was your parents who took care of you and did not let you die, who looked after you very carefully and gave you all the necessary things—food, warmth, love—in order to grow. Then, as a child, you couldn't survive alone, either. You needed helpers, companions, friends, and teachers so that you could grow up and become educated. Then, as an adult, you cannot survive alone. We all need somebody to talk to, somebody to share our happiness and our sorrows. Especially as we grow older, we need to depend more and more on the help of others. From the religious point of view, the Buddhist teachings say that all sentient beings have been our mothers. But even at the worldly level, we see how we have been brought up and how we have grown through our entire lives with the help of others.

Since our whole lives are lived in dependence on others, it is wrong to think only about ourselves and our own benefit and welfare. In

general, nobody appreciates people who are self-centered and only think about themselves. But people who think about others, people who care about others, people who have love and compassion for others—they can win the hearts of millions.

Master Śāntideva, a famous Buddhist scholar, said, “All sufferings that exist in this universe come from selfishness, from wanting happiness for oneself.” If you wish to be happy for yourself alone, you will never get it. All you will get is more suffering. When you’re self-centered, then desire arises, anger arises, jealousy, pride, stinginess, etc.—all the negative emotions. When you have these negative emotions, then you’re not happy.

Śāntideva also said, “All happiness that exists in this universe arises from wanting other people to be happy.” If you wish to be happy, then you need to think about others. If you wish everyone to be happy and make efforts toward that goal, then you can find your own happiness. From the point of view of the Buddhist teachings, we wish happiness for all sentient beings. But even if you wish happiness for your own family, neighborhood, and wider environment, and you make efforts for their happiness, then you can find happiness.

This is possible only when you are mindful. If you are mindful, you will not make decisions or undertake actions hastily. You will be

able to think carefully about the benefits and the consequences for the short term and the long term. If you do this, then the decisions you make will be the right decisions. Even if you are not successful because the decision you made was not the right one, at least you will not have the regret of having taken a decision hastily. This is why remembrance and mindfulness are very important.

In the teaching, it is said that, when you receive teachings, the first thing is to be free from the faults of the three containers.

1. The first fault is a container that is upside-down. If you try to pour something into it, it's not possible. Similarly, many people who receive teachings are not mindful or paying attention, and so nothing of the teaching can enter their minds.

2. The second fault is a container with holes in it. Whatever you pour in, it goes right through. In this case, even though someone has listened to the teachings, nothing stays in the mind. Nothing is remembered. By the time they leave the teaching, they don't remember anything. As people say, "It went in one ear and out the other."

3. The third fault is a container that is upright and has no holes, but it contains dirty things like pride and desire. Some people

receive teachings just to gain knowledge or to become famous. They think they will make some money, collect followers, etc. This motivation is greed. Teachings are meant to calm and pacify our negative emotions, but in this case, the teachings are made into a tool that activates the negative emotions. That is very wrong. Also, there are some people who receive teachings to become learned and to criticize other people or to defeat others in debate. This is based on anger.

If one's motivation is based on a negative emotion such as desire or anger, then receiving precious teachings is like taking the wrong medicine to cure your disease. It only causes more suffering. We receive teachings to practice Dharma so that we can pacify our negative emotions, so that we will have happy lives for ourselves and to benefit others. But for those who are like the third kind of pot, then receiving the teachings will cause suffering for themselves and others.

In the beginning of the teachings, we are told about these faults, one of which is not remembering and not being mindful. Mindfulness and remembrance are very important because most of the wrong-doings, mistakes, and wrong decisions that we make are from not being mindful and not having remembrance. It is very important to cultivate mindfulness and not to be carried away



by strong negative emotions like anger, pride, jealousy, etc. If we have mindfulness and remembrance, we can improve not only our mundane lives but our spiritual path.

### **The Moral Conduct of Abstaining from Actions Based on the Negative Emotions**

Whether you are a believer or a non-believer, whatever kind of beliefs you may have, nobody wants suffering. We are all doing either spiritual or worldly activities to eliminate suffering and to accomplish happiness. Thus, nobody wants to do wrong things, which are the things that cause suffering and problems for us.

We say that the base of the spiritual path is good discipline and good moral conduct. They are the foundations of all the qualities. If someone wishes to make a big building, they need a strong foundation. Similarly, if you try to practice without a strong foundation of discipline and moral conduct, especially if you are doing high practices, then the practice will not be stable and will not grow. The first aspect of good moral conduct is abstaining from wrong-doing. Doing wrong things is not right. It brings suffering.

Many people smoke and drink. These are harmful things to do. Each pack of cigarettes contributes negatively to one's health.

But people still do it, even when they know it is harmful, because they are used to it. Like the example of cigarettes, we are used to our defilements, or negative emotions, such as anger, attachment, jealousy, etc. From beginningless time until now, our minds have been associated with these defilements, and so they are difficult to stop. The teachings say that mind has no beginning. Every person's mind has continued from beginningless time, and this beginninglessness is one of the wonders. Since beginningless time, our minds have been associated with defilements, and this is why we still have such things as anger and attachment, even when we know they are harmful.

When we are angry, our faces become dark, the pulse rate and blood pressure go up, and we lose our appetites and lose sleep. Physically, anger is harmful. Whenever we have such anger, we can't help it, even though we may not want to be angry. When we are compelled to an outburst or to take angry actions, it is because we are not able to be mindful. If we are mindful and remember things carefully—such as that anger is harmful and a mistake—then even if we cannot stop the anger right away, at least we can reduce its strength. But to do this, we first need to know what is right and what is wrong.

## **The Buddhist Teachings: Virtuous in Beginning, Middle, and End**

**W**e say that the Buddha's teachings have three qualities: They are virtuous in the beginning, virtuous in the middle, and virtuous at the end.

1. "Virtuous in the beginning" means that hearing the teachings tells us what is wrong and what is right. Anger and jealousy are wrong, for example. Many people do not seem to realize this. They think that being angry is a part of life and so one should just follow through with angry actions. But when you hear the teachings, you realize that it is wrong to get angry and to have things like jealousy or pride, even though you cannot control them yet.

2. The teachings are "virtuous in the middle" when you contemplate and analyze the teachings and try use them in your everyday life. You learn that even though you cannot yet eliminate the defilements, you can suppress them and not allow things like anger to rise so much.

3. They are “virtuous in the end” because through meditation, you can eventually eliminate the defilements entirely and achieve real peace. First is hearing the teachings and then contemplating them. But the only way to eliminate the defilements completely is through meditation on what you have first studied and contemplated.

It is very easy to give rise to pride, jealousy, desire, anger, and so on, and it is very difficult to have real love, compassion, tolerance, and other good qualities. But if we try, anything can become easy. You may not succeed the first time, or the second or third, but as you try more and more, you will eventually be able to practice well.

These teachings are very precious and holy. But just by saying so, we cannot establish that the teachings are holy and precious, or the Buddha is holy, etc. Only by practicing oneself and gaining experience can someone know this. The teachings can eliminate our defilements and give us eternal peace, and we can establish this in our own experience. This is how we can establish that the Buddha, the teacher who gave such wondrous teachings, is a truly great and precious teacher.

## **Virtue, Love, and Compassion**

The first part of discipline, or good moral conduct, is abstaining from wrongdoing, the many wrong things that we do in daily life because we have been associated with the defilements from beginningless time. But in addition to this, good moral conduct also means acting positively to do virtuous actions and to benefit and help beings. In the Mahāyāna, the precepts of the bodhisattva have three aspects:

1. The precept of abstaining from non-virtuous deeds.
2. The precept of collecting virtues. This means doing the good things which are the opposites of non-virtuous deeds.
3. The precept of benefiting sentient beings.

From our own experience, we know how much we long to be free from suffering, and how much we long to accomplish happiness for ourselves. Every sentient being has these same feelings. Therefore, it is wrong to think only of one's own welfare. We have to think about limitless sentient beings, too.

Another way to approach this is through numbers: "I am just one person, but others are limitless." Between one being and limitless

beings, it is obvious which is more important. Therefore, we must try to do whatever we can to help other sentient beings, even tiny insects. We must try to save their lives because life is precious. Just as our life is precious to us, even the tiny insects hold their lives as precious to them.

When we are not mindful, we do and say many wrong things. Even if we do not have a real intention of doing wrong things, we can casually create heavy negative karmas just by saying harsh or hateful words that cause pain for others. Even though words are not weapons, they can cut a person's heart. Sometimes we act intentionally to do wrong things, and other times we act unintentionally and do wrong things because we are not being mindful. This is why mindfulness is very important.

The basis for practicing Dharma is good discipline, or moral conduct. It is the foundation upon which we can increase and maintain our qualities. But we can practice successfully only if we are mindful. Good discipline is for our benefit and happiness, but our negative emotions can destroy this cause of our own happiness. However, if we are mindful, we will be able to control the negative emotions and eventually succeed in finding continual happiness.

## Motivation

Whether our spiritual practice will become the real spiritual path or not depends on our motivation. The motivation must be pure. As ordinary persons, our intentions in practicing can cause our practices to become indifferent and even non-virtuous. I gave the example before of people who receive teachings for worldly intentions like increasing their wealth or reputation. In the example, the practice becomes harmful and non-virtuous. One's practice can also become indifferent, which means neither virtuous nor non-virtuous. It can resemble ordinary activities like eating, sleeping, and other neutral activities in our lives.

To make one's practice the real spiritual path requires two things. The first is renunciation, and the second is loving-kindness and compassion. Renunciation means thinking that the whole of saṃsāra, the cycle of rebirth, is not worthy of any attachment.

Saṃsāra is divided into two halves: the lower and the higher realms. It is easy to understand that the lower realms are nothing

but severe suffering, but we normally that the higher realms are a mixture of suffering and pleasure. However, if we think carefully, there is no real happiness even in the higher realms. The happiness we experience seems like happiness only compared to physical suffering. It is not real happiness because it depends on causes and conditions, and it will not last. This is a kind of suffering that we call the suffering of change.

In addition to physical suffering and the suffering of change, there is a third kind of suffering, which we call the suffering of the conditioned nature of phenomena. Very existence, our being born here, is suffering. Wherever we go, whatever we do, with whomever we associate, there is no satisfaction. We can think about it like this: In poor countries, there is physical suffering like hunger, thirst, and cold; in advanced countries, there is less physical suffering but much more mental suffering. Either way, it is all suffering.

Furthermore, nobody lives forever. As I said before, every being who is born into saṃsāra will end with death. No matter how successful they are, no matter how happy their lives, it cannot last. At most, a human being will live to be about one hundred years old. Living this long is very rare. After that, we will have to leave this world, and it will be of no use how successful you are, how



rich and powerful, how many family members and friends you have, or how many supporters. On the day we leave this world, all this will have no use. Thus, the whole of saṃsāra is not worthy of any attachment.

## Wisdom That Realizes Selflessness

**T**he cause of being caught up in saṃsāra is self-clinging. We cling to a self without any logical reasons. When you cling to self, then “others” automatically arise, and when you have “self” and “others,” then desire, anger, jealousy, and so on will arise. These are the negative emotions, or defilements. When you have the negative emotions, it causes suffering. To renounce saṃsāra totally, we need wisdom that cuts through the surface and digs out this root of saṃsāra, which is self-clinging. Put another way, we need the wisdom that realizes selflessness.

This wisdom is the direct antidote to self-clinging. The wisdom of selflessness begins by investigating where the self is located. If you search, you cannot find the self. We have the habitual tendency of self-clinging, but when we try to find the self, we cannot find it anywhere. With such wisdom, we can cut the root of saṃsāra.

However, to renounce saṃsāra and reach nirvāṇa is also not right. We have to think of all other sentient beings, beginning with

those who are in our lives, such as our families. They need to be saved from suffering. We call the wish to save them from suffering *compassion*, and we call the wish to place them on the path of happiness *loving-kindness*. With these two, we can generate the enlightenment mind.

It is said that the root of all the Buddha's teachings lies in compassion. This is especially important in the Mahāyāna teachings. *Mahāyāna* means big and wide, and it is called this because in the Mahāyāna, one practices not just for one's own sake, but for the sake of limitless sentient beings. To have this motivation, we need great compassion.

We all have a certain amount of compassion already, even if we are not following a spiritual path at all. For example, when we see animals or human beings in great pain and suffering, we feel pity, sorrow, and want to help. We all have a kind of root or seed of compassion, which is very important. But just this is not enough. We need universal compassion and universal love. The little compassion that we have now is based on selfish reasons, but genuine compassion is for all sentient beings, whether toward one's friend or enemy, toward those known to one or unknown, and toward all sentient beings. They are all the same.

From loving-kindness and compassion arise what is known as the *enlightenment mind*. This means one recognizes that the only way to effectively help sentient beings is to attain enlightenment. As ordinary beings, we cannot help all sentient beings. Even if we have love and compassion towards them and want to help them, our wisdom, knowledge, and power are limited. We ourselves are also in saṃsāra, and wherever the winds of karma blow us, we have to go there. Thus, we cannot help them. The only way to save sentient beings is to attain enlightenment. This wish to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings is called the enlightenment mind.

Renunciation thought and the enlightenment mind are the two motivating factors that determine your path to be a genuine one, assuring that it is the path towards enlightenment. Therefore, with every practice that we do, we should be sure we have renunciation thought and the enlightenment mind. With these two as motivations, then whatever little practice we do will become the direct cause of attaining enlightenment.

Everything I have described is possible can be carried out successfully if one is mindful and has remembrance. If we remember the instructions and teachings that we receive, the benefits we will gain, the consequences we will face, and if we are mindful act virtuously in whatever deeds we commit, whatever

actions we undertake, and whatever practices we do, then we will be able to successfully carry out the path.

## **Importance of Foundation Practices**

For those who wish to follow the Buddhist path, it is very important to do the foundation practices. I'm not talking about the uncommon foundations, but the common foundations such as I have described here—renunciation thought, loving-kindness, and compassion, and so on. They should not be done not like reciting prayers and trying to reach numbers, but in daily life when you are dealing with people. When you have a busy life and when you are in a big city, you should think that life is impermanent, that life is suffering. Evaluate whether it is worthy to have attachment to saṃsāra, what are the consequences we will face if we have attachment to saṃsāra, what are the benefits that we will gain if we give up attachment to saṃsāra, and so on.

If we think this way all the time, then we can gain insight and understanding. With that, we can give rise to proper renunciation thought and to the enlightenment mind, through which we can establish the right path, the path that will progressively carry us forward. Eventually we can attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

With this, I conclude and I wish you all the best.





■ 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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