



# The Human Distinction: Mind as the Primary Practice

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

Humans possess a unique capacity to create either immense benefit or tremendous harm. Despite our natural desire for well-being, we often find ourselves in a self-defeating cycle, amassing the very causes and conditions of our own suffering.

This teaching examines the mental habits that keep us bound, moving past the surface of ritual to address a stark truth: lasting change is not found in external recitations, but in the fundamental transformation of the mind.



# The Human Distinction: Mind as the Primary Practice

**S**angchen Gyudra has requested that I give an online public teaching. I would like to extend my greetings to all those watching and listening.

In our ever-persisting and changing cosmos, sentient beings are limitless. From among them, we as human beings are distinguished in having a tremendous capacity for thought. If we choose to create benefit and happiness, we are capable of doing so in abundance. For instance, leaving aside a religious perspective, if we simply consider things in terms of the common good, humans—unlike other types of beings—have the capacity to engage in activities of major significance that bring tremendous benefit to vast numbers of beings. Conversely, however terrible any sort of being might be, humans have an even greater capacity to cause tremendous harm to vast numbers of beings.

In any case, as human beings we all have the desire to lead a meaningful life, which may be reflected in terms of happiness

in this life and well-being in future lives. As illustrated by the example of humankind, all beings are equal in seeking happiness and not wanting to suffer. While this is the case, nevertheless, as is taught:

*Beings have the wish to be rid of their suffering;*

*Yet suffering is precisely what they pursue.*

We all long to be free of suffering; and yet, because of the obscuration of our ignorance and delusion, for the most part we remain embroiled in suffering while we go on creating the causes of further suffering.

So, rather than that, given that we all value our own best interest, it is very important for us to reflect on the possibility of finding happiness—achieving well-being in this life and happiness in future lives. How, then, can we bring this about? All phenomena arise through the interdependence of causes and conditions. They do not arise in the absence of causes and conditions. They do not arise causelessly, nor do they arise erroneously, nor do they arise when the necessary causes for their arising are incomplete. They arise only when the interdependence of the necessary causes and conditions is complete.

Now, what we want to avoid is suffering: distress of all

kinds, including physical and mental pain. How does suffering—in whatever way we might experience it—originate? Suffering is not conjured up through the magic of gods, nāgas, or other beings; nor does it happen by accident or sheer chance. What, then, is the origin of our suffering? As individuals, we accumulate karma. We then experience suffering as the result of the negative karma we have generated. This is why we must eliminate our negative karma.

As to how to eliminate it, first we need to address the question: what is negative karma? Fundamentally, we have ignorance, self-cherishing, and a pattern of fixation on the baseless notion of self. Hence, it is taught:

*When “self” exists, “other” is conceived.*

Once the notion of “self” is established, the notion of “other” is derived in relation to that. Based on the perceived distinction between self and other, attachment, aversion, and delusion develop: attachment to that which pertains to oneself, aversion to that which pertains to other, and delusion with respect to actions and their results. When there is attachment, aversion, and delusion, any actions motivated by these mental states constitute nonvirtue. What is nonvirtue? *Nonvirtue* is “that which arises

from attachment, aversion, and delusion.” Whatever derives from greed, hatred, and delusion is taught to be nonvirtue. Such unwholesomeness includes physical nonvirtue, verbal nonvirtue, and mental nonvirtue. Because of the karma we accumulate in these ways, in this life we experience physical illness, mental distress, and failure to achieve success. All such undesirable situations arise on the basis of the negative karma we have accumulated as individuals. This is why we need to abandon negative karma. However, abandoning negative karma is no easy task. The reason for this is that throughout time immemorial we have become thoroughly habituated to mental afflictions, which means that those afflictions cannot be eliminated immediately. In the meantime, negative karma leads us to disaster. Unbearable misery is the consequence of bad karma.

Even if we understand this, in practical terms counteracting this pattern is very difficult. How, then, should we train ourselves? We must change our minds. No matter what kind of disposition we might have, that will not cause us to end up in the pits of hell. It is our negative karma that can cause us to experience the blazing flames of a hell realm. Beyond that, all the different kinds of suffering we wish to avoid—each and every instance of unwanted pain—arise due to the negative karma we have accumulated. Hence, we need to eliminate our negative karma.

As to how we can achieve this, in general there are many ways to eliminate negative karma. Broadly speaking, this can be done by reflecting on the faults of wrongdoing and the benefits of virtue, but the essential thing is to bring about change in the mind. It is a fact that all the various afflictive mental states—greed, anger, and delusion, as well as arrogance, jealousy, and the others—have the effect of harming us and bringing us to ruin. There are many ways of abandoning the afflictions by means of such contemplation. The key point, in any case, is to make progress in changing our minds for the better—this is of prime importance.

Now, generally speaking, it is very important for us to recite liturgies and make aspirations. But what is of greatest importance is what Lord Buddha taught: there are many ways to practice Dharma—physical practice, verbal practice, and mental practice—but of them, the most important is to practice with the mind. Basically, body and speech are secondary to the mind, which is primary. For that reason, if we don't ensure that change is taking place in our minds, regardless of however much we might recite liturgies or repeat mantras, these methods will not be so effective (not that there will be no benefit at all—certainly there is considerable benefit).





■ 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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