

THE FOUR SEALS OF DHARMA

Books by
Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro Rinpoche

The Four Seals of Dharma
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THE FOUR SEALS OF DHARMA

Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro Rinpoche

Translated by Lorraine Wu Chen



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Sogyal Rinpoche

Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro is one of the most important Tibetan Buddhist masters alive today. As demonstrated by his many writings, he is not only exceptionally learned in the traditional Buddhist teachings, but is also deeply familiar with science, western philosophy and the modern world. Here in this short text, drawn from a series of lectures, he encourages us to remember the Buddha's fundamental message on the real meaning and purpose of life: the cultivation of genuine wisdom and compassion. I am a deep admirer of Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro and supporter of his work.

A stylized signature or calligraphic mark in black ink. It consists of several fluid, interconnected strokes that form a unique, abstract shape, characteristic of Tibetan calligraphy.

Foreword

I would like to thank the directors not only for creating this opportunity to honour Khen Rinpoche, but also for giving me the chance to write a few introductory words for this auspicious occasion.

Actually I am not the right person to do this. First, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro Rinpoche needs no introduction. He speaks for himself by his example. Even if you need someone to give an introduction, it should not be done by someone shady like me who eats betel nut and is found wearing very colorful clothes, and hanging around with colorful people in colorful places.

Nevertheless, I have requested to do this, because I do have something I want to say. In this degenerate time, the glory of the Buddha is dim. The weight of the Dharma is not felt. I know that the Buddha said one should not depend on the person but on the truth. But the actual realization of the Dharma is extremely rare for most of us. The words of the Dharma are too vast and deep, and most of us are too lazy to pursue them, let alone to comprehend them. So even though we know we should not rely on a person, we human beings have the habit of looking up to something tangible in human form as a role model.

So teachers, masters, and spiritual leaders are very important. And we have no shortage of such teachers,

masters, and lamas today. In fact we have far more of them than used T-shirts. This is an age when even teenagers have the name His Holiness. But genuine upholders of the Dharma are as rare as stars in the daylight, and the few that we have are hardly shining.

As the Buddha said, only an enlightened being can judge whether another person is enlightened or not. So I cannot really say who is a perfect being and who is not. But at least, even in this age, we do still have interest in Dharma practice, and so naturally the expounder of the Dharma becomes important.

Even though, as I said, my lifestyle is colorful and I cannot make judgements on others, there is probably one good thing about which I can boast – that at least I do know that I should worry about the survival of the Dharma. And there is good reason to be concerned, good reason to be worried. In fact we should be panicked.

That I have this deep concern, of course, is solely the blessing of my own masters, who themselves spent so much time and energy worrying about the survival of the Dharma. Through their blessing and guidance, I have learned not to just worry about the Dharma in my own backyard – Tibetan Buddhism – but I have learned to worry about Shingon Buddhism in Japan, Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and more. My worry may not be constant, but at least at times, I do worry.

I also worry that there are not many who worry. Even the aging lamas with gray hair and wrinkled skin don't seem to worry. Well, they may worry somewhat, but generally only in relation to their own temples, or at best, to their own lineage.

So this is why I want to express that it gives me so much hope just knowing that Khen Rinpoche exists on this earth, because his actions have spoken louder than his words. And please make a really big note about this because, even though I have no pure perception, and am very critical and arrogant, I want to say that I have been observing Khen Rinpoche closely.

I have not received any teaching from Khen Rinpoche. I did try to listen to some recordings, though I gave up because his dialect is too strong for me, and I have flipped through some of his books. But these are not the real reasons for my respect. I feel that Khen Rinpoche is not just a teacher, but he is actually a model. As we know, every teacher needs a teacher for himself. And Khen Rinpoche was groomed for many years by one of the greatest beings, Jigme Phunstok Rinpoche, and he manifests that extraordinary tutelage today in his work and in his life.

As many of you know, Khen Rinpoche is also the administrative Khenpo of one of the most important seats, Serthar Larung. And here my impression of Serthar Larung has nothing to do with there being so many monks and nuns. Rather, I have observed what they do and what they have achieved. I have also observed how they spend their money and where they spend their money. And I have observed whether this institute is only producing empty-headed scholars or whether it has genuinely practising practitioners. In all these dimensions, Serthar Larung excels.

I also want to note that the Khenpo in front of us is not the son of some rich, high, prestigious family. He is not the cousin or brother of some very important lama, and he doesn't have HH in front of his name. Who he is and what he has

accomplished is through his own merit and genuine dedication and practice, and this is inspiring for so many practitioners.

I especially want to single out how precious it is for the Chinese-speaking world, including Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, that Khen Rinpoche speaks your language. Even though Buddhism is growing in the West, in my lifetime I don't see the Buddhadharma being adopted and practised by a sizeable percentage of Americans and Europeans. And we know that the Buddhadharma is far from flourishing in the very birthplace of Buddhism, in India. By contrast, Buddhism has contributed so much to Chinese civilization in the past and has a major resurgent role to play in Chinese society today. So for the Chinese-speaking world, it is such a priceless opportunity for you to have a direct link with Rinpoche.

For all these reasons and more, I want to request Rinpoche to take care of himself and to live long and to eat less butter.

Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche

This is the transcription of Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche's introductory speech at the public talk given by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro in Taipei, Taiwan on January 22, 2015.

A Note about the Author

Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro was born in 1962 in Drango (Luhuo) County in Sichuan Province's Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. In 1984, he received monastic ordination at the world-renowned Larung Five Sciences Buddhist Institute (Larung Gar) in Serthar, becoming a disciple of the preeminent spiritual master, H.H. Chogyel Yeshe Norbu Jigme Phunstok. After many years dedicated to the study of the five main sutric treatises and tantric scripture, he was awarded the title of Khenpo in recognition of his scholarship.

For more than twenty years, Khenpo has overseen monastic education at Larung Gar, producing successive generations of accomplished students. During the 1990s, he gave a series of dharma teachings in Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan. Over the past decade, Khenpo has concentrated efforts in Tibetan areas, promoting environmental awareness, education, vegetarianism, and the importance of protecting living beings and abstaining from taking life. At the same time, he has sought to deepen the broader Tibetan community's understanding of basic dharma, and to this end has traveled widely giving teachings to lay audiences. Placing great importance on the promotion of Tibetan culture, Khenpo has founded libraries and schools. Notably, he has also coordinated a team of language specialists and scholars representing all Tibetan regions to collaborate on the compilation of a tri-lingual (Tibetan-Chinese-English) dictionary of new vocabulary terms.

Two volumes have been published in the past five years:

Chinese-Tibetan-English Illustrated Dictionary of New Daily Vocabulary

Chinese-Tibetan-English Dictionary of New Daily Vocabulary

Over the last ten years, Khenpo has been committed to deepening his understanding of western science and philosophy, and is utilizing contemporary methods to disseminate Buddhist culture. Khenpo has published extensively on Buddhism in Tibetan, Chinese and English languages. His Tibetan publications include four volumes of collected writings; his Chinese monographs include the *Wisdom Light Series*, *Stories of Transmigration*, *Buddhism: Superstition or Wisdom?*, *The Heart Sutra and Quantum Physics*, *The Secret Code for Unlocking Tibetan Buddhism*, *Tibetan Buddhism: Lifting the Veil of Mystery* and *Comprehending the Book Called Life*; translated English publications include *Daily Inspiration from Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro*, *The Right View*, *Are You Ready for Happiness?* and *The Handbook for Life's Journey*.

Translator's Note

I have always been impressed by the strong sense of purpose and urgency in which Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro Rinpoche communicates the timeless wisdom of the Dharma. His lectures invariably begin with generating bodhicitta, the aspiration to attain full enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. His teachings, given directly in Chinese without any translation, are clear and substantive. Drawing on Western science and philosophy to illustrate his point, he also offers a fresh and valuable approach to explaining Buddhist doctrine. In this book, Rinpoche gives a complete overview of the Four Seals of Dharma, both in theory and practice.

The Four Seals are the fundamental viewpoint of Buddhism — the true nature of all things. The first seal states all composite phenomena are impermanent; the second, all contaminated things are unsatisfactory; the third, all phenomena lack self-existence; the fourth, nirvana is true peace. The first three seals are the practice, while the last seal is the result. The first three are the cause, the fourth its effect. By practicing the first three seals, we can attain genuine peace.

One cannot overestimate the importance of understanding and practicing the Four Dharma Seals, since they are the basis of cultivating renunciation and bodhicitta, and realizing emptiness. The concept and practice are equal in importance. Without right understanding, our practice is blind. Without practice, right understanding is useless. We can eradicate our

afflictions and attain liberation only with the perfect union of the two.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to translate this book. A special thanks to Angela Liu for her valuable comments and meticulous review of the translation, Thinley Chodron for her very helpful suggestions on the publication of the book, and May Gu for bringing us together on this project. Over the years, I have been fortunate to receive precious teachings from many Dharma masters and teachers, without which this effort would not be possible. To them, I am indebted. Finally, I would like to acknowledge and give thanks to my husband, Li-chieh Chen, whose strong and unwavering faith in the Dharma first inspired me to walk the same path.

It is my sincere hope that anyone interested in Buddhism can derive benefit from reading this English edition.

Lorraine Wu Chen
Taipei, Taiwan
May 2017

SUMMATION

The Four Seals of Dharma

All Composite Phenomena are Impermanent.

All Contaminated Things are Unsatisfactory.

All Phenomena Lack Self-Existence.

Nirvana is True Peace.

WHAT IS A DHARMA SEAL?

The Three Dharma Seals are the axioms that distinguish the Dharma from non-Dharma, Buddhism from non-Buddhism. They are essential to establishing what the Dharma truly is.

The Three Dharma Seals and the Four Dharma Seals are actually the same thing since the first three seals are the practice, while the last seal is the result. The first three are the cause, the fourth its effect. By practicing the first three seals, we can reach the state of nirvana.

As in any practice, we must first know its underlying concept. It is only after full apprehension of the concept that practice can proceed. Without right understanding, our practice is blind. Without practice, right understanding is also useless. Hence, one complements the other; each is indispensable. We can eradicate our afflictions and attain liberation only with the perfect union of the two. Accordingly, before we discuss the actual practice of the Three Dharma

Seals, we must also know its concept.

How did the concept of the Three Dharma Seals originate? According to the sutras, when Sakyamuni Buddha was about to enter parinirvana, a disciple asked the Buddha, "If a non-Buddhist or some other person comes along after you are gone to give teachings and proclaims that to be the Dharma, how should we discern if it is the true Dharma?" The Buddha replied, "After I am gone, any belief or teaching which incorporates the Three Dharma Seals is the true Dharma; any belief or teaching which not only excludes but also refutes the Three Dharma Seals is not the true Dharma."

What is a dharma seal? The "dharma" herein refers to Buddhadharmā, the teachings of the Buddha; the "seal" is a handprint or stamp, which means it does not change. The Three Dharma Seals are called "dharma seals" precisely because they are a fundamental view in Buddhism that will never change. To be sure, this is just the standpoint of exoteric Buddhism. Another interpretation is that the "seal" is likened to a king's seal. When the king's seal is fixed on a royal document or edict, it assumes special significance – it is a confirmation of a royal decree which cannot be defied or altered. In the same way, the Three Dharma Seals confirm the authenticity of the Dharma; without the Three Dharma Seals, it is not the Dharma.

What are the Four Dharma Seals?

The first seal states all composite phenomena are impermanent; the second, all contaminated things are unsatisfactory; the third, all phenomena lack self-existence; the fourth, nirvana is true peace.

WHY SHOULD WE PROPAGATE THE FOUR SEALS?

Why should we practice the Dharma Seals?

There are three main reasons sentient beings perpetuate in samsara: first, clinging to impermanence as permanence; second, seeing activities that are inherently unsatisfactory as joyful; third, mistaking a non-existent self for a truly existent self. With these three forms of attachment, good and bad karma is created. With good karma, beings take rebirth in the upper realms of the gods and human beings; with bad karma, beings take rebirth in the lower realms such as hell, unable to transcend samsara and attain liberation.

Actually, the cause for liberation arises inside the self, not outside. Here we are referring not to our body but to our thoughts or mind. By overcoming the three forms of attachment, we can be free of mental afflictions and bondage; if these three forms of attachments are not eradicated, liberation cannot be attained.

How do we overcome this attachment? Not by burning incense, praying, or prostrating to the buddhas! Not by supernatural powers! The only way is to realize wisdom. Why is wisdom the only method that works? Because all three forms of attachment are basically manifestations of ignorance. Just as we use light, the opposite of darkness, to dispel darkness, we use wisdom, the opposite of ignorance, to dispel ignorance; all other methods are ineffective. Wisdom here denotes insight that fully apprehends impermanence, suffering, and selflessness. Although the practices on impermanence and suffering appear simple, they are essential to the path of liberation and must therefore be undertaken. By relying on these three types of wisdom, we can cut through the

three forms of attachment that bind us to samsara. There is no reason liberation cannot be attained under the circumstance.

The Three Dharma Seals are not only the view of Sakyamuni Buddha but also that of all the buddhas of the ten directions and three times. Any buddha that turns the wheel of Dharma will expound the Three Dharma Seals. All that is transmitted pertains to the Three Dharma Seals; in whatever manner the teachings are given, their essence is the Three Dharma Seals, even in Vajrayana Buddhism. Although the uncommon view of Vajrayana speaks of emptiness and clarity, it also espouses impermanence, suffering, etc. at the same time.

Whether in Mahayana or Vajrayana, the teachings cannot deviate from the Three Dharma Seals — they are the essentials of Buddhist doctrine. This is the very reason why we choose to discuss it here.

It is neither useful nor necessary to talk about other practices such as Dzogchen and Mahamudra at this time. If we bypass basic practices such as renunciation and bodhicitta for the more advanced methods, we will come up empty-handed in the end. Those who want to understand the advanced practices from a conceptual standpoint can listen to other teachings or read up on them. My purpose is to establish a method of practice that can benefit you and allow you to progress on the spiritual path. Thus, I shall not elaborate on methods that are not helpful to you now, or in which the results are barely perceptible.

Human birth is hard to come by. Having acquired human birth, we should cherish this opportunity. Although spiritual practice is difficult, we should also welcome the challenge, since it is only by way of practice that we can transcend

samsara.

There are some who believe we will still undergo many lifetimes in samsara. How can we say this is our only opportunity?

Indeed, even the slogans on the main roads say “We live but once!” but in fact this is not so. As sentient beings with strong karmic imprints, we will continue to take rebirth in samsara over countless lifetimes; however, without practice, we will only end this life in spiritual decline. As you know, beings who take rebirth in the lower realms — even in the most favorable animal realm — do not have a chance to practice Dharma, let alone hear the sacred designations and mantras of the buddhas. Beings in the hungry ghost and hell realms are even less likely to have this chance. Therefore, however busy or difficult it may be, we must still seize the moment to practice. If we forgo this most propitious opportunity, we cannot be sanguine about coming back as human beings again.

In this book as well as in my previous lectures, there is a complete explanation of the basic practice which can be undertaken by everyone in stages. If we are serious in our practice but do not see much in the way of results, we cannot be blamed. However, if we do not practice at all, it is really regrettable.

Actually, concept and practice are essential aspects of any method; the two are inseparable. Of these, concept is likened to our eyes when we take a walk, while practice is our footsteps. We can proceed to walk only after seeing the road ahead; however, if we only see the road but fail to take steps, we will never arrive at our destination. In the same way, we should fully comprehend the underlying concept in

the practice before we begin. But concepts are no more than knowledge found in the books. Except when one is truly enlightened, whatever is gained through listening or thinking — be it listening to the Dharma, reading, or contemplating — is considered conceptual knowledge. If this knowledge is not put into practice, it will not be very helpful in eliminating our afflictions. Having established the right understanding, we must then begin to practice. The purpose of listening to the Dharma and applying the teachings is to eliminate afflictions and attain liberation, not only for ourselves but also for all sentient beings.

In this book, we shall first discuss the underlying concept in the Four Dharma Seals, then the actual practice itself. The two are equal in importance.

UNDERSTANDING

THE FOUR DHARMA SEALS

All Composite Phenomena are Impermanent

In the Nirvana Sutra, it is said:

Of all plantings, the autumn planting is most important; of all footprints, the elephant's tracks are most reliable; of all thoughts, the thought of impermanence is most sacred.

WHAT IS COMPOSITE PHENOMENA?

In Buddhism, “composite phenomena” are all things — whether physical matter, mental factors, or their respective activities — that arise from causes and conditions and are subject to cause and effect. “All composite phenomena are impermanent” means all things that depend on causes and conditions for their arising are impermanent.

WHAT IS IMPERMANENCE?

Impermanence can be divided into two kinds, inner and outer. The world of living beings, the sentient world, is referred to as “inner,” the physical world of mountains and rivers, the non-sentient world, as “outer.” Each kind of impermanence can be further classified as continuous or momentary.

OUTER IMPERMANENCE

Continuous Impermanence denotes impermanence that can be examined from a macroscopic standpoint. For example, in *Abhidharmakosa*, reference is made to the four stages of formation, abiding, disintegration, and void in the one billion world systems; phenomena which people can observe – the changes in the four seasons each year, the transformation of the moon from a full moon to crescent during the first and second half of each month, and the shift from day to night, from sunrise to sunset, over the course of twenty-four hours each day – all belong in the category of continuous impermanence. These principles are easy to apprehend; no one would think of denying this type of impermanence. Nonetheless, because of the absence of practice and contemplation, many people hold on to the view that things are permanent and long lasting. This attachment to permanence is of two types: one is innate and the other imputed.

The first type of attachment is common to all sentient beings, including animals. As an example, from the time a building is constructed until such time it is demolished, we will think the building is a permanent structure which does not change. Even if there are changes to the building, we believe they are only superficial and not structural. In this and all other similar cases, the attachment which has no theoretical or empirical basis is innate or inherited at birth.

To eliminate innate attachment to permanence, we should contemplate continuous impermanence. This is because a lot of undesirable thoughts, afflictive emotions, and karmic formation come entirely from our ongoing adherence to things being permanent. For instance, if we think a car can last a long time and is useful until such time it breaks down, the

desire to own a car will arise; we may take any number of measures, even theft, robbery, and fraud, to realize this goal, thereby creating bad karma from killing, lying, etc. The source of afflictions, karmic formation, and all such problems is the attachment to the car, while the cause of this attachment is our adherence to permanence. If the latter is not eradicated, we cannot resolve the problems mentioned above.

Nevertheless, just as in the case of a patient who has access to medical books at his or her bedside and also knows what prescription, medication, and type of treatment can cure the illness, this knowledge is no use if he or she refuses to receive treatment. Although we all have an understanding of continuous impermanence, simply knowing it is useless. Without actual practice, our perception of things as permanent will remain essentially unchanged.

The most significant impact on us in everyday life is adherence to continuous permanence, which leads to the production of all kinds of emotional negativities and to bad karma.

Momentary Impermanence is the basis of continuous impermanence. All composite phenomena are impermanent in that they are momentary: the moment they come into existence, they disintegrate. In other words, whatever is created is annihilated in the same instant.

From a macro perspective, all things that are created abide in the world for a time before they disintegrate – the process of arising and ceasing cannot be instantaneous. However, in examining phenomena on a microcosmic level, we discover all things arise and cease at the same time.

Consider the following: suppose we divide time into an infinitesimal moment so small it cannot be further divided, can we still separate this time into a moment of arising and a moment of ceasing? No, we cannot. If we could, this moment would then be divisible, not indivisible. If there is only arising but no cessation in this indivisible moment, things would arise indefinitely and abide forever; if there is only cessation but no arising, what is it that has ceased to exist? Is it physical matter, mental phenomena, or something entirely different? We know that nothing exists apart from physical matter and mental phenomena. Within this indivisible moment, arising and ceasing can only happen at the same time. All things in the world are destroyed the instant they are created; their arising and cessation exist at the same time. Such is momentary impermanence.

What can we learn from this principle?

For instance, when we look at the wall facing us, in the past we would think it is a still structure; now we can apprehend the process of arising and ceasing that takes place in the wall each instant. The wall is no longer the same structure it was a moment ago.

Sakyamuni Buddha expounded this principle two thousand years ago. Modern physics also acknowledges the continuous process of small particles arising and ceasing in a moment, in one thousandth of a second or even one ten-thousandth of a second. However, what the Buddha taught is more profound and explicit than modern physics, since the concept of an indivisible moment which is significantly smaller than one thousandth of a second or one ten-thousandth of a second is virtually inconceivable to us. The arising and ceasing that

takes place in such a moment is so subtle we cannot begin to comprehend it.

We are accustomed to thinking all matter undergo the three stages of becoming, abiding, and cessation. But in this microcosm, we cannot experience arising and ceasing at all; arising and ceasing simply do not exist. Arising is ceasing; ceasing is arising.

This principle, contrary to the conventional view, shows the so-called notion of becoming, abiding, and cessation is a complete misconception. In Buddhism, it is known as “momentary arising and ceasing”; in modern physics, it is called “motion in a microcosm.”

We cannot apprehend this with our eyes but can experience it through our consciousness. When our visualization practice reaches a certain stage, we become very conscious of subtle matter and can observe it as clearly as if it were under a microscope. For instance, in examining the wall, we can clearly see each brick, each speck of dust in the brick, the space within the dust, the arising and ceasing of each particle, and so forth — like taking a picture with a high-speed camera. The entire world is an illusion in that moment; all phenomena come into being, abide, and cease to exist within the illusion. Like in the *Heart Sutra*, “form does not differ from void, void does not differ from form; form is thus void, void is thus form,” arising and ceasing are the same thing.

How is this realization useful? What does it have to do with liberation?

With this realization, we can cut through our attachment to permanence. For instance, the perception we used to

have that a building is a permanent structure from the time it is constructed to the time it is demolished would now be completely overturned. Again, suppose this place used to be a vacant lot before a building was constructed on it; later when the building was torn down, it became a vacant lot again. It took many years for the building to come into being, from nothing to something and back to nothing; but we can also be certain that all along, in each instant of its existence, change was taking place through a continuous process of arising and ceasing.

By contemplating on continuous impermanence, we can eradicate our long-lasting adherence to permanence. It is very useful to be able to cut through this attachment. Although we cannot experience the momentary impermanence in matter, by seeing things as unreliable and impermanent, we do not develop excessive attachment to them; we are mindful there is no point in caring about something which cannot be counted on. In this way, we can gradually dissolve attachment. Once attachment is eliminated, greed, anger, and other afflictions will also disappear. Without afflictions, we will not create bad karma and can thus transcend samsara.

The above pertains to outer impermanence.

INNER IMPERMANENCE

What is inner impermanence? The term “inner” denotes sentient beings. The sentient beings referred to here are not plant life but living beings that can experience suffering and happiness.

Inner impermanence can also be classified as continuous or

momentary.

Continuous impermanence is easy to understand, like when we undergo successive rebirths as a human or god in the previous life, as a human in this life, and as a human or animal in the next life; or when we experience the various changes within this lifetime, i.e., birth, infancy, childhood, youth, manhood, aging, and death. These changes which we can clearly observe not only in ourselves but also in other beings constitute continuous impermanence.

Momentary impermanence denotes the arising and ceasing that take place each instant in our body and mind as in the world outside.

In *Abhidharmakosa*, it is said samsara does not exist on its own or apart from mind and matter. These two factors underlie the formation of the entire world.

Following the previous analysis on physical matter, we shall next discuss the mind.

Every thought that arises in our consciousness or mind is subject to arising and ceasing. The moment a thought arises, let us follow the thought, observe where it comes from, and divide the thought into many time segments.

For instance, the sutras say: when we recite the three syllables “OM AH HUM,” three separate thoughts – OM AH HUM – will also arise within our consciousness. Then examine the thought “AH” in the middle and divide it into three segments: the first is next to “OM”; the second is in the middle; the third is next to “HUM.” Each of these segments can be divided again and again until such time we come upon

the smallest part that ordinary human consciousness can grasp. Within this indivisible part, arising and ceasing are sure to also take place at the same time. From this, we can infer that the so-called mind or consciousness only exists for an instant; there is no world or person apart from this instant.

As an example, when we are listening to Dharma teachings, we think I exist, but actually the so-called "I" only exist within an instant. If we assume, in a succession of ten moments, that the fifth moment is "I," then the first, second, third, and fourth moments constitute the past, while the sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth moments are the future; the only moment in which I exist is the fifth moment. All things that are gone cannot exist – in any corner of the world, planet, or time frame; all things that have yet to come also cannot exist. Only the fifth moment remains, but this too will pass instantly. At which point we will think the sixth moment is "I," then the seventh and eighth. When all the moments successively step into the present, we will continue to designate each moment as "I."

This is likened to a mala: although it is formed by one hundred and eight individual beads, as each bead passes through our forefinger and thumb, we can only count up to the bead immediately ahead.

Similarly, a person's lifetime is sure to contain incalculable moments, but the only one we can hold on to is an instant; the past is gone and the future yet to come. Yet we persist in thinking: "I" participated in an event to release living beings yesterday, "I" am now at an event to release living beings, and "I" will again attend an event to release living beings tomorrow. Our notion of "I" embraces not just yesterday and

tomorrow but also a very distant point in time in the future. Actually, the real "I" exist only in an instant.

PRACTICE IMPERMANENCE

After understanding the concept of impermanence, we must get in the practice of examining how mind and matter are impermanent. In so doing, we will discover the world we live in cannot be relied on at all – it is impermanent not only from a macroscopic viewpoint but also moment to moment. We live in a world of illusion, but have yet to recognize it.

This world of illusion is described in the American film *The Matrix*. The directors Larry Wachowski and Andy Wachowski, with whom a friend of mine is acquainted, have a substantial interest in Buddhism and have based the film on certain Buddhist concepts. At the end of the movie, we discover what appears to be a normal world of reality is actually controlled by an artificially intelligent computer called "Matrix," and that all the people and circumstances in it are computer programs.

In the same way, the flowers, buildings, tables, and so forth which we can see all exist in only a moment. When countless moments join together, they form a continuum; when countless specks of dust come together, they form physical objects like buildings and vehicles, even mankind.

By just practicing impermanence, we can reach a state of mind that apprehends the entire world as an illusion.

However, we are instead deceived and lured by appearances because of our senses – our eye, ear, nose, tongue. Due to the eye's limitation, we see the wall, table,

etc. as still objects that do not change, not as something that is impermanent. According to Buddhist logic, when the eye consciousness sends out the wrong information to the mental consciousness, the mental consciousness is also deceived. The source of this misinformation is the eye faculty. At birth, we are given the wrong message by our eye consciousness the first moment we open our eyes and observe the world outside; this misinformation is then stored in our mind, with no further thought of examining appearances at a deeper level. This is our innate attachment to permanence.

The other kind of attachment to permanence is acquired in life. It pertains to a misconception derived from incorrect reasoning that is accepted in non-Buddhist schools. When people acknowledge the view that things are permanent, they compound an error by reinforcing their innate attachment to permanence with the non-Buddhist idea of permanence. This attachment is said to be imputed.

The imputed attachment to permanence takes us on a detour in life. The innate attachment to permanence gives rise to common afflictions – desire, anger, and ignorance – which cause karma and keep us in samsara. These are all the result of seeing things as permanent.

Sakyamuni Buddha once said, “Among all footprints, the elephant’s tracks are most reliable; among all thoughts, the concept of impermanence is most sacred.”

In what way are the elephant’s tracks most reliable? The elephant will only choose a safe path to tread, not a dangerous one. If we follow the elephant’s tracks, we will reach our destination safely.

Why is the concept of impermanence most sacred? By reflecting on continuous impermanence, we develop the motivation to practice. When our practice becomes lax, just thinking about impermanence – in life and in all worldly things – generates a strong desire to practice. If we practice momentary impermanence, it will be the basis for realization of no-self. This is because what is perceived to be “I” cannot exist when change is happening moment to moment. The realization of emptiness and no-self will come after a period of practice. Therefore, we must practice impermanence, and with practice, attain progress.

Presently, there are many empowerments and teachings given on Dzogchen and Vajrayana Buddhism; there are also many people who claim they want to practice Dzogchen and receive empowerments. However, serious practitioners of impermanence and bodhicitta are few and far between. This is why we never see progress. We are true practitioners only if we earnestly undertake basic practices like impermanence and suffering. At that point, our worldview will be entirely different; however difficult or harsh life’s circumstances, there will be nothing we cannot think through and accept.

How do we engage in visualization practice? In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, an introduction on how to practice continuous impermanence is given in the chapter on impermanence of life. Following the conceptual overview of the Four Dharma Seals in this book, an explanation shall also be given on how to practice momentary impermanence.

All Contaminated Things are Unsatisfactory

In the Treatise of Four Hundred Verses, it is said:

*There is no boundary in this ocean of suffering; the ignorant man
who finds himself in its midst cannot help but fear.*

OVERVIEW

What are contaminated phenomena? The various schools of thought, Sarvāstivāda, Sautrantika, Cittamatra, and so forth, give different interpretations of what is contaminated and what is not contaminated. In *Abhidharmakosa*, this difference is explained at length. From the standpoint of Mahayana Buddhism, everything that is impure is contaminated – this includes all kinds of attachment and object of attachment; everything that is pure is not contaminated – this includes the absence of any attachment and object of attachment, a state attained by bodhisattvas from the first stage up when abiding in the truth of reality.

What do we mean by attachment and object of attachment? As an example, when the eye consciousness perceives an object, attachment is formed. The object of attachment is that which is perceived by the eye consciousness. The eye

consciousness and the object, that is, the attachment and the object of attachment, are separately known as the grasper and the grasped.

A pure or uncontaminated state is one in which grasper and the grasped all disappear; it is also the meditative state of bodhisattvas of the first and higher stages. Apart from the state of the buddhas and that of the realized bodhisattvas, all other states that contain grasper and the grasped are deemed impure or contaminated.

From this standpoint, whether it is the impure world in which we live, or the pure land of the buddhas, as long as there is attachment and object of attachment, it is contaminated and unsatisfactory.

One may ask if even the pure lands of the buddhas and bodhisattvas are contaminated, then the pure land of Amitabha and the Copper-Colored Mountain where Padmasambhava resides must also be filled with suffering. Yet, how can there be suffering in Amitabha pure land?

Actually, the sutras discuss three aspects of suffering: suffering of suffering, suffering of change, and all-pervasive suffering. Although there is neither suffering of change nor suffering of suffering in Amitabha pure land, there is all-pervasive suffering. This suffering pertains to the momentary impermanence of phenomena mentioned earlier. The outer and inner worlds of Amitabha pure land are impermanent. This is not to say the Western pure land will disappear one day, but that changes are taking place there moment to moment. Because changes are taking place each instant, suffering also exists in the Western pure land at the microscopic level.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SEEING CONTAMINATED THINGS AS UNSATISFACTORY

The purpose of practicing the Second Dharma Seal is to develop renunciation. This renunciation is the genuine intention to be free from suffering in the six realms of rebirth in samsara, not in pure land. Hence, whether there is suffering or not in Amitabha pure land is irrelevant to the actual practice. We only need to understand this point.

Seeing contaminated things as unsatisfactory generates renunciation. Without renunciation, the entire effort we place on reciting the sutras, prostrating to the buddhas, burning incense, as well as practicing generosity, moral conduct, patience, etc. is no more than worldly activity. The best result we can expect is to avoid rebirth in the lower three realms and return as human beings or gods, all of which has nothing to do with liberation. However great our worldly blessings, we cannot transcend samsara.

The real objective of our practice is liberation, not rebirth in the higher realms. As such, we need to establish a path to liberation, with the primary requisite being renunciation. All practices that lead to liberation are based on renunciation. Renunciation is extremely important since we cannot progress to methods in subsequent stages without it. The purpose of seeing all contaminated things as suffering is to give rise to a resolution of complete renunciation.

Although the practice of renunciation is explained in great depth in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* and also time and again in our lectures on this topic, the Four Dharma Seals contain a set of practices of their own. Thus, we shall still teach the actual practice of “all contaminated things are

unsatisfactory” following the overview on the concepts.

THREE ASPECTS OF SUFFERING –

Suffering of Suffering, Suffering of Change, All-Pervasive Suffering

To understand why contaminated things are suffering and dissatisfaction, we must first know the Buddha expounded two kinds of suffering, inner and outer. The outer kind pertains to the material world, the inner kind to the mental world of suffering.

One may think suffering is basically a feeling; as such, it belongs to a mental world which is inside, not outside. The material world outside is devoid of feeling. Without feeling, how can it be considered suffering?

Although there is no suffering in the world outside, i.e., mountains, rivers, and so forth, the external world is also deemed suffering because it is nonetheless the source of suffering.

Apart from these two classifications, there are also three aspects of suffering: suffering of suffering, suffering of change, and all-pervasive suffering.

We need to distinguish between these three aspects of suffering in order to truly apprehend why contaminated phenomena are unsatisfactory. This differentiation is necessary because of the very broad range of things that are considered impure. If we see suffering only as mental anguish, we have a limited understanding of what suffering is.

1. *Suffering of Suffering*

In the sutras, suffering of suffering is defined as having a feeling of suffering when it occurs; as soon as it disappears, a feeling of happiness arises. For instance, when we are sick, we feel pain; when we recover, we feel happy. Hence, physical pain from illness is suffering of suffering.

Why is the word “suffering” repeated? This alludes to the great intensity of the suffering. That aspect of suffering which all living beings, whether human or animal, perceive alike and reject, and which is clearly recognized as a painful feeling, is said to be suffering of suffering. This suffering is found primarily in the lower three realms; it is also evident in the human and god realms, for example, in the eight basic types of suffering of human beings such as birth, aging, sickness, and death.

In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, suffering of suffering is clearly expounded. This aspect of suffering in each of the six realms is explained in great detail and is therefore not repeated here.

2. *Suffering of Change*

In the sutras, suffering of change is defined as not having a feeling of suffering when things are progressing; however, when they end, a feeling of suffering arises.

This suffering is found primarily in the human and god realms. The gods here refer to those in the desire realm.

For instance, the gods in the desire realm enjoy good health, long life, and favorable living conditions; they also have certain

supernatural powers. There is a sense of happiness under these circumstances; however, when this so-called “happiness” comes to an end, it is followed by distinct and unbearable suffering. One must know the feeling of well-being up front and the great suffering that follows are somewhat related.

Why is that? To use an analogy, a person who has led a life of poverty and hardship will not find it difficult to endure suffering because he or she is already used to it; on the other hand, a person who is accustomed to a good life free of obstacles will have a difficult time if he or she encounters the same hardship. Their subjective feeling will differ — the latter experiencing far more suffering than the former.

This disparity occurs because the latter is used to living the good life and is therefore unable to cope when suffering suddenly arises. For this reason, Sakyamuni Buddha said the happiness we experience up front is also a form of suffering.

If so, does the feeling of happiness exist at all? In *Abhidharmakosa*, the Buddha did not deny that tainted happiness exists, but that it is happiness only in relation to suffering of suffering; thus it is both happiness and suffering.

Why is it happiness as well as suffering? From the standpoint of suffering of suffering, suffering of change is happiness; for instance, when good health is compared to illness, good health is happiness. However, from the standpoint of suffering of change, it is suffering because a feeling of suffering arises as soon as good health is lost. The happiness ordinary people experience is transitory; since it leads to suffering at some point, it is also a form of suffering.

People generally take a simplistic view of suffering: as

long as they are not undergoing suffering of suffering and are feeling happy at the moment, they do not think this is suffering. The Buddha, going beyond this notion, taught us even if we experience happiness, all that is contaminated is also suffering.

3. *All-Pervasive Suffering*

The term “all-pervasive” is synonymous with “composite” in “all composite phenomena are impermanent.” It refers to all things that arise from causes and conditions and are subject to cause and effect. They are all unsatisfactory.

The sutras define all-pervasive suffering as such: whether it exists or dissipates, one does not experience any suffering; nonetheless, it is called all-pervasive because it leads to other kinds of suffering.

All-pervasive suffering exists mainly in the form and formless realms. Sentient beings there do not experience notable suffering such as birth, aging, illness, and death, nor happiness such as good health and longevity. These beings are reborn in the form and formless realms because they attained meditative absorption in their previous life — a state of meditation which is inherently subtle and tranquil and which does not, as a result, produce any feeling of significance at the moment of rebirth. Although the form and formless realms do not have suffering or happiness, they are nevertheless impermanent; hence sentient beings there only experience all-pervasive suffering, not suffering of suffering or suffering of change.

From the standpoint of the three aspects of suffering, the three worlds and six realms of rebirth are filled with suffering.

Buddhism holds that all contaminated things are unsatisfactory but also acknowledges there is temporary happiness. There is no contradiction in these views, since suffering is absolute in samsara while happiness is relative. Renunciation arises when we contemplate and practice the teaching that all contaminated things are unsatisfactory or that samsara is suffering.

BUDDHISM AND RENUNCIATION: NEITHER PASSIVE NOR PESSIMISTIC

Some people run into problems when they practice contemplating samsara is suffering. I've come across people who go to extremes: before they do the practice, they are confident about life, their work, and the world, and feel good about everything; however, after doing the practice, the world turns grey, they lose interest in everything and become extremely passive and listless — to the point of seeing no meaning in life at all.

Is renunciation the same as passivity and pessimism? No, it would be a mistake to think so.

Just as bodhicitta is more than mere compassion, it is, with compassion as the base, the resolve and courage to attain Buddhahood in order to liberate all sentient beings; renunciation is more than just apprehending samsara is suffering, it is also the determination to seek liberation for oneself.

After contemplating on the nature of samsara, we will know samsara is full of suffering — if it is not suffering of

suffering, it is suffering of change or all-pervasive suffering. The things people covet, such as wealth and position, are all temptations that are transitory and unreliable. Those who make the pursuit of material pleasures their only goal in life will likely experience despair, disappointment, and pain after contemplating suffering of samsara. On the other hand, in recognizing all of the above, we as practitioners should probe further and ask: is there no goal more worthwhile than the pursuit of wealth and position? Is there no accomplishment to be attained other than wealth and reputation? While these pursuits are not meaningful, it doesn't mean life is meaningless. Apart from seeking high office and material riches, we also have a far greater and more precious aspiration which we didn't know about until Sakyamuni Buddha pointed it out to us, that is, to attain liberation by following the path.

Sentient beings in general, certainly the beings in hell and even the gods, do not have the opportunity to practice on the path of liberation. To establish a foundation for practice on the path of liberation, one must start in the human realm. Gods can also practice if they laid the basis of the practice in their previous life as a human being; thus, establishing this foundation in a previous life as a human is the only condition that governs whether they can continue to practice or not.

Although devas in the form and formless worlds are highly accomplished in meditative absorption, this type of meditation only yields tranquility; it does not bring forth realization of wisdom and therefore has nothing to do with liberation at all.

In the three worlds and six realms of rebirth, mankind has the best opportunity to attain liberation. Thus, human birth

is very meaningful and should be cherished. Only with such appreciation can we establish the right values and outlook on life.

We have lived in delusion and held inverted values in the past — we ignore things that are important and relentlessly pursue things that are completely unimportant. After contemplation on the unsatisfactory nature of samsara, we can change how we think and bring meaning to our lives.

For this reason, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* goes on to discuss the merit of liberation right after explaining samsara is suffering and other preliminaries. The teachings are given in that order to prevent everyone from losing courage due to sadness or disappointment after they contemplate impermanence and suffering; also to help everyone realize they spend their entire lifetime pursuing things that are of no value, building personal wealth and fame, and taking material pleasures as their only sustenance in life. Yet all of this — however much effort is exerted — is unreliable.

Even if we become rich, what good is it? After getting up in the morning, a lot of rich people spend two hours in a beauty treatment, followed by another two hours in the gym; after their workout, they do an hour of acupuncture; in the time remaining after lunch, they socialize. Even if they dedicate a great deal of time to looking good and staying healthy, they cannot avoid old age and illness in the end.

Prior to understanding this point, we spend the entire day seeking material pleasures and placing all our hope and effort on building wealth; when we no longer see the significance in these activities, we become extremely despondent and think there is no meaning in life at all. This disappointment

is not surprising since the lifestyle just mentioned is basically meaningless. There is, however, a path of liberation which gives us courage and allows us to realize: it is wrong to invest all my effort in material pursuit; my life has been totally meaningless up to now; I cannot continue to live the same way; I shall strive to attain liberation from this moment on.

Going to the other extreme, some people may act impulsively at this time — they quit their work and abandon their family to take monastic vows.

Of course, if one can truly persist on the monastic path, it is certainly very good; family members should also understand and give their support. This is likened to a family of seven people who care for each other and get along very well; when one person dies, the rest of the family cannot follow him or her. Separation will happen sooner or later; hence, if one member in the family chooses to lead a monastic life, the rest should give their blessing instead of compelling the person to follow in their footsteps.

A person who has left behind all worldly concerns to live as a monastic should seize this rare opportunity to practice with dedication and diligence.

But some people cannot persist in this effort. After a year to two, or even within a few months, they regret their decision and want to return to their old ways. By that time, however, they have lost their job and family and have nothing to fall back on. Nor do they appear to have made progress in the practice which initially they could not wait to get started.

These two extremes are the result of inadequate training and unrealistic expectations.

As Buddhist practitioners, we should be steady and dutiful, unlike some people who are blind in their faith and obsessed with supernatural powers. To do otherwise is to denigrate the Dharma and adversely affect our practice.

Although practice is important, many lay practitioners have to make a living as well. Knowing samsara is suffering does not mean we can do without food and clothing. One cannot begin to talk about practice if basic necessities in life are not even met. Therefore, means of livelihood as well as occupation are necessary. We ourselves have to determine how to balance work with practice.

While these are not actual methods, they are necessary to know before our practice begins. In particular for the Chinese, it is important to understand this point.

Some people think because Buddhism propagates “samsara is suffering,” its ideology is passive and pessimistic. This could not be further from the truth. Buddhist doctrine is not passive; it is extremely pro-active, but its goal and direction are different from that of mundane beings. Ordinary people work to make money; Buddhist practitioners work to have money to live on, but their real aspiration is to liberate all living beings.

Liberation is not a myth, but an objective and realistic goal to elevate the discriminating mind of ordinary people to the wisdom mind of the buddhas. To accomplish this grand aspiration, practitioners can forgo worldly pursuits such as fame and wealth; they are far-sighted and pro-active. Ordinary people are just the opposite; they lack vision, cannot see beyond this lifetime, and hence do their utmost to get ahead in this life only.

Buddhist doctrine is also not pessimistic. Pessimism is an attitude that sees the dark side of things or expects the worst to happen. From this standpoint, mundane beings are actually the real pessimists. However successful their lives and career may be in youth, they are disheartened as they get older by failing health and the loss of their best years, and give up on themselves; in particular, terrified of death, almost all become grief-stricken and tearful at the end of their lives. If this is not pessimism, what is?

True Buddhist practitioners are not pessimists even though they look upon money and fame as things of little value. This is because they are fully aware their spiritual development is not impaired by the body’s physical decline; wisdom and compassion will always follow them like a shadow in old age and even in death. Awaiting them from afar is a state of clarity and bliss; thus, far from being defeatist, they are optimistic and full of confidence. Because they have this aspiration, they can practice tirelessly and without regret. We need not fear suffering nor lose hope; with effort, we can free ourselves from the shackles of samsara and attain absolute happiness.

There are very few people now who are truly willing to study the sutras themselves. Most come across the teachings only by hearsay and conclude Buddhism is pessimistic and passive as soon as they are told “life is impermanent” and “samsara is suffering.” This is a complete mistake.

A Buddhist practitioner must first be able to see through the vanity of money, fame, etc. To “see through” is to know these things fade like the cloud and smoke, and that none are worth pursuing. Of course, even if we have this understanding today, we may not be able to give them up right away. The

Buddha did not expect us to do so either; even if he did, we would not be able to comply. Nonetheless, the inability to forgo these things does not imply samsara is not suffering, nor does it suggest we cannot give them up in the future.

Although we understand these concepts on an intellectual level, putting them into practice is difficult. Until our practice reaches a certain stage, we will remain attached to success and recognition in this world, and to material pleasures. Without a doubt, it is only by way of practice that this attachment can be diminished or eradicated.

Perhaps some people will ask what level of realization I have attained if I can deliver the teachings so convincingly. I certainly cannot claim any achievement for myself. I am like a parrot that can repeat the teachings exactly as taught by the Buddha. This does not imply, however, that you do not need to practice. Although my own practice is inadequate, my guru was an accomplished master and the Buddha attained enlightenment; like the media, my role is to communicate their teachings to everyone.

As we all know, Sakyamuni Buddha was not born in Tibet or China, and entered parinirvana a long time ago. However, due to the work of his disciples, the Dharma has been propagated worldwide, the wisdom of the Dharma remains undiminished, and the torch of the Dharma continues to be passed generation after generation. Without people to communicate these teachings, we would not understand the real essence of *Kangyur* and *Tengyur* — the Tibetan *Tripitakas*, nor would the Dharma continue to flourish.

For example, the Buddha turned the wheel of the Dharma three times and expounded 84,000 methods to suit people

of different propensities. On the surface, it would appear there are some contradictions in the teachings at each stage; however, from the commentaries of the past Buddhist masters, we are able to apprehend the real significance of the teachings and the ultimate viewpoint of the Buddha. Hence, the purpose of pointing this out is to keep you from taking a roundabout path.

If our practice is inadequate, we should not really see it as a problem. We want to learn and practice precisely because our practice is not good enough. If our practice is very good from the start, is it even necessary to listen to the Dharma or propagate it? No, it isn't!

To a non-practitioner, it is essential to be able to self-reflect. This is likened to putting pressure on oneself — ordinarily, when we do not reflect on our actions and thoughts, we are complacent and do not see our shortcomings; however, once we self-reflect, we discover we have not advanced in either learning or the practice and become remorseful. This pressure is an impetus that drives us to engage in practice.

It would be a pity if you do not practice at all after I have explained the methods. It is not my effort that I regret but that you have wasted your precious life and time and missed an invaluable opportunity.

Whether your practice was good or not in the past is not very important. The key is in the future — in how you can gain faith in the right view and subsequently put it into action.

The fundamentals of the practice are first cultivating renunciation, then bodhicitta. Before renunciation is developed, we can maintain the regular daily practice of

reciting the sutras, but focus the remainder of our time entirely on cultivating renunciation. Once renunciation is developed, we should set aside everything and focus one-pointedly on cultivating bodhicitta.

All Phenomena Lack Self-Existence

In the Samyuktagama Sutra, it is said:

If it were not, it would not be for me; it will not be, it will not be for me.

WHAT IS "SELF"?

As we all know, Buddhism is a doctrine that asserts the absence of self. We need to know what "self" is, in what way the "self" does not exist, and why it is inherently empty.

Firstly, what is self?

In Buddhism, "self" can be divided into two kinds: one is "self in person"; the other is "self in phenomena." Here, self is called "bdag" in Tibetan. Although the Chinese written word for "self" is the same for "I, me," it does not necessarily mean "I," as in "you and I," but things having real and substantive existence.

In the Middle Way (Madhyamaka) school, there are two modes of existence: one is true existence, that is, things really exist; the other is nominal existence, that is, things exist from a conventional standpoint but not inherently. That which truly exists is called "self."

The “self” in “self in person” connotes “I, me” to some extent, for instance, “I want to make money,” “I want to go to work,” “I want to have a good life,” “I want to have a long and healthy life,” etc. The “self” in “self in phenomena” is entirely different; it only denotes true existence.

WHAT IS “SELF-ATTACHMENT”?

What is “self in person”?

Since birth, every sentient being has held on firmly to the belief that a “self” exists. Whether a person is illiterate or learned, a newborn baby or animal, every living being has this attachment. This attachment to the self that we are born with is the innate self-attachment.

Another kind of attachment is acquired in life and is said to be imputed. It is based on views from the wrong literature and on incorrect reasoning. This misapprehension can be traced to many non-Buddhist religions and certain philosophical schools of thought.

For instance, in Descartes’ famous quote “I think, therefore I am,” the implication is we can think, question, and investigate whether things outside exist, but we cannot doubt the existence of the “self.” Since the “self” is doing the thinking, e.g., investigating the structure of buildings, flowers, plants, and so forth, the thinker or investigator must exist. Otherwise, how can the thinker or investigator think and investigate? Therefore, it is without a doubt that I exist. For a long time, this proposition has been held up as a standard by many followers and supporters, and has served as proof of the existence of the “self.”

This mistaken imputation in the teachings and in logic strengthens self-grasping. As we are already born with the innate attachment to self, lacking the necessary knowledge and training, the attachment to self becomes even more entrenched and difficult to overcome.

UNCOVERING THE ENEMY – “SELF-ATTACHMENT”

People usually believe an “enemy” is someone outside, a certain animal, a particular organization, etc. Buddhism asserts our real enemy is not outside; the most fearsome enemy is inside – it is our self-attachment.

The ancients say: “Fortune and misfortune do not come through the door; only we ourselves invite them.” The happiness and suffering we experience are entirely of our own choosing. If not for one’s innate attributes, nothing can harm us – not the raging fire in hell, the hunger and thirst in the hungry ghost realm, or the evil spirits and wild beasts in this world. Our foremost enemy is self-attachment. It is this attachment that gives rise to greed, anger, delusion, and arrogance.

Ordinarily, people think victory is success in a conflict or struggle involving the defeat of an opponent. However, this cannot be true victory since the victor is actually the victim and the loser.

The conventional view is that if I defeat or kill an enemy, I have won. But I do not know with this action I have actually created the cause for taking rebirth in hell, so am I not bringing injury upon myself? If today’s triumph leads to suffering in hell, am I not the victim and the loser?

Sakyamuni Buddha always instructed his disciples not to seek victory by challenging others, but to find everlasting victory by contesting oneself – specifically, one’s self-attachment. As a true Buddhist practitioner, we must do battle with our afflictions and with our self-attachment.

In sum, we have to first establish what self-attachment is, then know that it is self-attachment which is our real enemy.

Once we have affirmed self-attachment as our foremost enemy, we need to focus our effort entirely on eradicating it.

To be sure, this is from the standpoint of exoteric Buddhism; the Vajrayana view and practice is somewhat different. However, when we only have a very basic understanding of exoteric Buddhism, it is pointless to discuss the Vajrayana view. There is nothing fundamentally incorrect about the exoteric position, so we should first rely on this method in the early stages of our practice.

In the past, we have never doubted or investigated whether the “self” exists; we have always taken its existence for granted. If you are in a crowd of people who have never heard the Dharma before and exclaim “I am not sure I exist” or something to that effect, others are certain to question your state of mind.

People often say this is superstition or that is superstition; actually, believing in the existence of “self” is the utmost in superstition. It is an extremely blind form of belief, but we ordinary people have yet to realize it.

If not for the Buddha’s teaching, we would never apprehend this truth, however intelligent, clairvoyant, or knowledgeable

we might be. The philosophical schools in the East and West cannot give us an answer to this question, nor can modern science. Most of the objects of examination and the scope of Buddhism are completely different from that of science. Other religions have not really addressed this question either, because they all recognize the existence of self on different levels and conduct all their practices and charitable works from this conviction.

Only in Buddhism can practitioners cut through the root of self-attachment and see this as the goal in their practice.

Although we cannot completely uproot “self-attachment” at the start, we must, like the archer, know our target – the object at which we are going to take aim. Only then can we shoot the arrow of no-self at “self-attachment” and eliminate it.

Normally, the “self” is that which we cherish and like the most. Regardless of our rank in life, we all think we ourselves are the most precious. Apart from me and my life, there is nothing more important in this world. This mindset is “self-attachment.”

LET US LOOK FOR “SELF”

It is our intent now to eradicate the “self” and our attachment to “self.” How do we eradicate it? “To shoot a man down, first shoot the horse; to capture the bandits, first catch the leader.” To cut through self-attachment, let us uncover its source.

The source and external factors in self-attachment are the

five aggregates, or skandhas.

The concept of the five aggregates in Buddhism is quite elaborate and will not be discussed here. In everyday language, the aggregates can be classified into three categories: physical body, mental factors, and their respective activities. These three categories comprise the entirety of aggregates that make up an individual.

The activities of the body are relatively easy for everyone to understand; the activities of the mind include all kinds of thoughts, views, beliefs, etc. In the twenty-four hours each day, everyone experiences a variety of thoughts that come and go, arise and cease. These are the activities of the mind.

All of us believe in the existence of a “self.” This so-called “self” pertains to the three categories mentioned above. No one would dispute our body is the “self”; other religions and certain branches of study acknowledge our mind is the “self”; the activities of the body and the mind are also considered part of the “self.”

Is there anything apart from these three categories that can be called the “self”? No, all other things are external matter. We would never think this flower is me or this house is me; because of this mindset, these things have never concerned us in our investigation of the “self.” If the “self” truly exists, it must exist in the three categories or the three combined. If we do not find a “self” in any of these three categories, the so-called “self” cannot possibly exist.

We have always believed: I am *independent*. To be independent means wherever I go, I see myself as distinct and separate from others; although I have parents, siblings,

and relatives, I am not they, they are not me. Aside from this, we also believe: I am *permanent*. To be permanent means, for instance, I believe I lived as a god in my previous life, I now live as a human, and I will continue to live in my next life, possibly as a god, a human, or even an animal; regardless, I will always live on.

When we begin to examine and understand the “self” along these lines, we run into difficulty. The problem is that we discover none of the categories – physical body, mental factors, and their respective activities – correspond with our idea of the “self.” In fact, they all contradict what we think the “self” is.

1. *Is Our Body the “Self”?*

Firstly, our body is not a distinct entity. Just from a macro perspective, everyone knows the body is a complex mechanism, like a car which is made up of many different parts. There is nothing independent about the body, so how can we call it the “self”? The body cannot possibly be the so-called “self.”

2. *Is Our Mind the “Self”?*

Secondly, our mind is not a distinct entity either. It is a collection of discursive thoughts, conceptual fabrications, feelings, etc., like a building constructed from steel, cement, glass, and other materials. There is nothing independent about the mind; hence, the so-called “self” also cannot exist in the mind.

3. *Are the Activities of the Body and Mind the “Self”?*

Next, what about the activities of the body and the mind? We should know that apart from the body, physical activity does not exist independently or on its own. For instance, when we go from one room to another, we call this physical activity. During the process, the body has neither gained nor lost anything; still the same entity, it has merely moved to a different place. Similarly, the activities of the mind are not separate from the mind. The arising and cessation of good and bad thoughts are called mental activity. When thoughts of kindness, compassion, faith, etc. come and go, there is no independent arising or cessation that is separate from these thoughts. When they come, we call it arising; when they go, we call it cessation. That's all. Accordingly, the so-called "self" does not exist in the activities of the body and the mind either.

Aside from these three categories, we cannot find anything in or outside our body that corresponds to the so-called "self."

The Buddha taught that if we hope to find a "self," we can forgo our investigation and continue to cling blindly to this "self." To pamper and satisfy it, there is a lot we can do – seek fame, acquire wealth, etc. However, to do so would be a great disappointment, since we have already looked for it and discovered the so-called "self" cannot be found anywhere.

Most people in the world, like Descartes, have never questioned whether they exist or not. They take their existence for granted: "How can I not exist when I am clearly right here? This is nonsense!"

Here I wish to remind everyone again that Sakyamuni Buddha never denied the conventional existence of the "self." The conventional "self" certainly exists. Because of its relative existence, we have to work to support it. However, does it

truly exist? Is this concept correct? Our objective now is to examine and analyze its existence at the absolute level, not relative level.

Resisting change and following what others do and say are signs of ignorance. Even if it is common knowledge, inculcated by family and society and in school, we can all reexamine its premise. In regard to matters of life and death, and liberation, we should be even more careful about checking it out. Do not attempt to reach conclusion hastily. Instead, examine carefully and arrive at an answer on our own so as to cut through self-attachment.

This investigation is not undertaken in depth here, but will be explained in detail later in the actual practice.

Although a lot of Buddhist practitioners are vegetarian, nine out of ten have all had seafood in the past and have committed substantial negative karma. In just this lifetime, over tens of thousands of lives have been killed to satisfy people's appetite. Who did these living things die for? Why did we pay to eat seafood in the first place? Why did the restaurant owner ask the chef to kill? And why did the chef consent to kill? It's all because of this "self." Because of the "self," the proprietor of the restaurant, as well as the employees, have committed the same karma; because of the desire of this "self," they were all accomplices. That being the case, what is "self"?

Once we come to the realization from our practice that there is no "self," no living thing will have to die to satisfy our craving for certain foods; not only that, we will no longer create negative karma or take rebirth in hell. It is our attachment to the existence of an inherently empty entity that so many lives have been sacrificed, that so many have paid a

heavy price.

Who Goes to Hell If There is No Self?

Perhaps some will ask: if there is no “self,” how can the so-called “self” descend into hell?

Although the “self” does not truly exist, as long as we remain attached to it, we will perpetuate in a cycle of rebirth, so will the hell realm continue to exist. Therefore, we will still suffer the torments there.

Eating seafood is just one example. There have been endless positive and negative retributions in our samsaric existence since beginningless time — we have experienced innumerable cycles of birth and death, incalculable lifetimes in hell and in the animal realm, and inconceivable suffering. Some of our lives have ended so pitifully it is shocking and frightening. This is entirely because of the “self.” To satisfy and sustain it, we have created all kinds of karma. With every action, there is always a consequence which we alone have to bear.

This “self” that brings us great suffering deserves to be purged; accordingly, we must examine, analyze, and expose it. Questions as to whether there is life or water in other planets are not important. Mankind has since time immemorial always inhabited its own planet; living beings in other planets have never disrupted or interfered in our everyday life. This “self” on the other hand has a direct impact on our entire cyclic existence and has given us endless trouble. Hence, we must uncover its true face, examine whether it really exists or not, and determine if our attachment is blind or in accord with

logic.

This extraordinary insight is attributed to Sakyamuni Buddha. Apart from the Buddha, no philosophy, religion, or science has looked for the “self” in this way. Even the most intelligent people in the world have not considered this point; it is unique to Buddhism. Sakyamuni Buddha did not give teachings on science, philosophy, and other disciplines. It is because he considered these branches of study to be useful, but not necessary. However advanced or precise their knowledge and technique, they cannot resolve the basic question of birth, aging, sickness, and death.

What is “self”? It is like pointing to the sky and saying “this is me” or “that is me” — there is nothing in empty space. Similarly, there is nothing that is substantial, independent, and permanent in any of the places we believe the “self” can be found.

For this reason, Sakyamuni Buddha instructed us to first cultivate renunciation and bodhicitta, then realize emptiness in order to eradicate the “self.”

“Self” and “Self-Attachment” Are Not the Same

“Self” and “Self-Attachment” are two different concepts. For instance, when we see a bunch of flowers, the flower is the object outside; our eye consciousness is the subject inside. Like the flower, “self” is the external object; like eye-consciousness, “self-attachment” is internal, subjective, and of the mind.

Everyone has “self-attachment” — “I want to release captured animals,” “I want to go to work,” etc., but apart from

this attachment, where is the so-called “self”? As an example, when we see a flower, our eye consciousness, that is, a sense perception that we experience, exists; the flower outside also exists; thus both exist. However, the object of “self-attachment” – the “self,” which in Buddhist terms is called perceptual object condition — is nowhere to be found. Since it cannot be found, our attachment is basically a misapprehension.

Consider the following: if I think the book in my hand contains English or Chinese words, I can flip through each page to check; if I do not find any English or Chinese words in the book at all, can I still insist they are in the book? Certainly not. I would say to myself, “I have made a mistake! There are no English or Chinese words in this book.”

Similarly, it is our belief all along the “self” exists and that undertaking activities such as acquiring wealth and killing animals to sustain its existence is a matter of course. Due to this self-attachment, we are still ordinary people.

To sum up, the three main points of our discussion are: first, what is “self”; second, what is “self-attachment”; third, establish “no-self” via analysis.

Although it is easy to discuss and accept the concept of “no-self,” this understanding is only of limited use to us at present.

A lot of people have asked this question: if I already know for certain the “self” does not exist, why do I still have these afflictions?

It is because our afflictions cannot be eradicated if we only understand the concept but do not engage in practice. In *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, this point is also made: “When

the tendency of cognizing emptiness is weak, desire will still arise; if one persists in practicing emptiness, the habit of seeing phenomena as real will end.” Without practice, we cannot really grasp the concept of “no-self”; we cannot quickly overturn the attachment to self that has been deeply ingrained in us since beginningless time. To cultivate the wisdom to overcome this attachment, we must practice. As we gain strength and power in the practice, our attachment to the self will gradually weaken.

Having said this, however, the *Treatise of Four Hundred Verses* states: “Human beings with few blessings will not raise doubt; those who have doubts can destroy the three worlds of existence.” That is, the cause of our cyclic existence can be damaged if we are able to entertain reasonable doubt about emptiness — Do I lack true existence? Do all phenomena lack inherent existence? It is possible the self does not exist! It is possible all phenomena are empty! When the cause is impaired, we will not remain in samsara for long. If harboring doubt alone is of such great significance, then comprehending and accepting the Middle Way doctrine is even more remarkable.

Nevertheless, from the standpoint of actual practice and eliminating afflictions, we cannot overcome our problem just by understanding the doctrine alone.

The discussion above pertains to self in person; the following is an introduction to self in phenomena.

WHAT IS “SELF IN PHENOMENA”?

Apart from oneself and sentient beings, all things in the

world, including the sun, moon, stars, earth, etc. are called “phenomena.”

The Chinese character for “phenomena” and “dharma” is the same, but has different meaning. “Phenomena” is interpreted in various ways; in Chinese, the term “things” is a close approximation — except that part of “things” relating to sentient beings, classified as “self in person,” is excluded. Other terms such as “physical matter” or “mental events” cannot fully capture its significance.

Strictly speaking, among sentient beings, only the person himself or herself can be considered self in person because the “self” does not form an attachment to any other being. However, since sentient beings are all classified in the same category, insentient things are generally called “phenomena,” sentient beings are called “self in person.”

What does “self” mean? Ordinarily, we think the circumstances in a dream are not real while experiences during the day are real. If we perceive the world outside to be truly existent, i.e., real and not illusory, this belief in true existence is called “self.” In the Middle Way doctrine, the “self” is clearly defined as a distinct and permanent entity which exists in its own right and does not depend on other things to come into being.

WHAT IS “ATTACHMENT TO SELF IN PHENOMENA”?

In general, when we see a flower, we believe the flower that is here today was also here yesterday, and that it exists even if it is replanted elsewhere. We would not entertain the idea that it is not a flower, as it would only be a pile of particles

after being broken down into molecules, atoms, etc. This kind of attachment is “attachment to self in phenomena.” And the object of this attachment is the flower.

The question then is whether this flower exists or not.

Based on the method of analysis described above, this flower cannot possibly exist. Although it does not exist, we nonetheless cling to the appearance of the flower as real.

To cut through this attachment, we must use logic. Although we cannot overcome attachment entirely by logical thinking, the Buddha recommended it as a start.

Why is that? Because the first step is to transform the way we think; at present, logic is still very effective in bringing about this change.

LET US LOOK FOR “SELF IN PHENOMENA”

Why do we want to look for the self in phenomena? Why do we want to follow this logic and thought process? How is the flower’s existence connected in any way with our liberation? Certainly, if we think this flower is real, the desire to acquire it arises; to pay for it, we must then go to work. In so doing, a lot of things will start to happen. However, if we see the flower only as a cluster of atoms or as energy and, moreover, know that it appears to us as a flower only because our eye consciousness is mistaken in its perception, we will suffer far less anxiety. Without attachment, karma will not be created.

Because we form a strong attachment to ourselves and everything outside, including the flower, and perceive them

as truly existent, desire arises for things we covet and anger at things we find repugnant. When thoughts of desire, clinging, and enmity pervade our minds, we create karma; once karma is created, we are bound in samsara, unable to free ourselves from cyclic existence. This is why Ch'an Buddhism places constant emphasis on "non-attachment."

However, some lay people have misinterpreted this exhortation. The principle of "non-attachment" is the core concept in Ch'an which many topics and discourses in this school are based on. Having read selected Ch'an teachings and heard the case stories of a few Ch'an masters, a number of people assume the supreme path to liberation consists of just staying detached. Hence, at the start, they refrain from forming any kind of attachment – neither releasing animals from captivity nor practicing the preliminaries; they continue to smoke, drink alcohol, eat meat, and even order live seafood to consume without misgiving. Because they claim that upholding the precepts, releasing animals from captivity, practicing the preliminaries, protecting life, etc. are all forms of attachment that obstruct the attainment of liberation. Actually, these are all misconceptions.

If problems could be solved just by staying detached, it would make life easy for everyone. However, things are never that simple. Although ultimately we want to cut through attachment and abandon all such activities that are undertaken due to ignorance, we hold on tightly to the concept of not forming attachments even when we do not yet have a method to eradicate attachment. This too is a kind of attachment – we are in fact attached to the concept of "non-attachment." Thus, until we have a method at hand that effectively cuts through our attachment, we must not be detached.

In areas where the Chinese now populate, there are many transgressions and misconceptions of this kind. In earlier lectures, I have already mentioned some of the problems that are more serious or commonplace, and shall not repeat them here.

NOT FINDING THE "SELF" ≠ FINDING "NO-SELF"

The section above deals separately with concepts of the self in person and attachment to self in person, self in phenomena and attachment to self in phenomena, and how these things are harmful to us.

A number of people have come to me with a specific question: although we look for the "self" and do not find it, does it imply the "self" does not exist? Many things, like electromagnetic waves for instance, can neither be seen nor heard. Without the aid of instruments, we cannot possibly count on our five senses to know where to look for them. However, this does not imply these things do not exist. In the same way, we cannot conclude the "self" does not exist simply because it cannot be found.

This kind of reasoning is both logical and understandable. Nonetheless, there is a very important question which is raised not only in discourses on the emptiness of self but even in Dzogchen, i.e., what constitutes the realization of no-self? Does it mean that by way of simple reasoning and analyzing the physical and mental aspects of self, as long as the self is not found, it is considered realization of no-self? No, not finding it does not answer the question.

In the process of realizing no-self, we should distinguish

between two stages: the first is not finding the self; the second is not only failing to find the self but also recognizing with certainty it does not exist. It is realization of no-self only when the non-existence of self is directly perceived.

Among Dzogchen practitioners, this is also a problem. Although some can abide in a meditative state that is free from mental discursion, they have not gained realization of any kind. This is not the state of realization of emptiness.

The sutras are very clear on this point: many people are afraid of snakes; if we see a snake enter our room in the daytime, can we feel safe in the evening when there is no light in the room? Even if we have checked every corner of the room for the snake and do not find it anywhere, we would still be afraid. We are inclined to think: I saw the snake enter the room and did not see it leave; although I did not find the snake, that's only because I have not found it yet; it should still be there!

What should we do at that time? It would be best to light up every corner of the room, as in daytime, then examine and ascertain the snake is nowhere to be found. In so doing, we can relax and think: actually the snake is not in the room; perhaps it left when I was not noticing. Only then will our fear of the snake disappear.

Similarly, we cannot solve our problems simply by not finding the "self" in the body or mind. Only after clearly and directly realizing there is just no "self" can we claim to have gained realization of no-self in person. This view on no-self in person is also asserted by Mipham Rinpoche.

The same can be said of the absence of self in phenomena.

In the Middle Way doctrine, the investigation into the absence of self in phenomena is similar to the analysis we just conducted on the flower. This kind of analysis is easy to understand, even when explained according to the principles in physics. Matter can be broken down successively into its components; ultimately what is left is a large pile of infinitely minute particles – called dust, in Buddhist terminology. We will find the flower appears in its form and color only at the macro level; in reality, the so-called flower does not exist apart from dust.

Consider, for example, a gathering of people which is called a crowd; within the crowd, individuals can be grouped by family. After the groups are formed, the so-called crowd is just an assembly of families; apart from these families, the crowd does not exist as a distinct unit. But the so-called family is also a relative concept; apart from the individual members that comprise it, the family does not exist as a separate entity. If a family consists of five people, each of the five people is distinct; without these five people, there is no family to speak of.

In the same way, apart from dust, the so-called flower, vase, etc. do not exist. At that juncture, it is not that we do not find these things but that we are fully aware they don't exist at all. In other words, as we look at the flower and analyze it, the flower is at once non-existent.

Not finding the self and not having true existence are two very different things – a point that can easily be mistaken. We must understand that no-self is realized only after clearly recognizing no part of self exists.

If we examine each brick or steel beam in a building and do

not find anything substantive there, it does not mean we have realized no-self. Many philosophers and scientists cannot find the “self” either. Can we infer they have realized no-self? Actually, the “self” does not exist in and of itself, so no one can find it whoever he or she may be. Descartes would not have found the “self” if he had looked for it. Be that as it may, philosophers and scientists still have this attachment and stubbornly believe the “self” exists, whether it can be found or not; they do not believe there is no “self.”

We should be concerned, not so much with not finding the “self,” but with knowing there is no “self.” Hence, at the beginning of our practice, we should not set our sights too high — on practices such as Dzogchen and Mahamudra. The first step is to clearly investigate where the root of samsara, afflictions, or the so-called “self” is.

Because the “self” does not truly exist, no one can locate it; a person who hears the teaching for the first time and contemplates on its meaning after returning home will not be able to find the so-called “self” either. But this will not cut through afflictions right away. Only with further investigation can one conclude with certainty — it is not that there is a self that cannot be found, but that there is actually no self at all.

Having established the view of no-self at that point, no further examination is necessary. The subsequent step is to practice.

As in taking a walk, if we have a clear view of the road, we can walk briskly ahead without worrying what is in front or behind us.

THE RATIONALE BEHIND “NO-SELF” – A CLOSER LOOK

Strictly speaking, it is best to realize emptiness before one undertakes the practice of all phenomena lacking self-existence; however, realizing emptiness is not easy since there are many basic requirements such as the preliminaries that have to be completed.

Regardless, one who practices emptiness must at least understand the underlying concept; only then can emptiness be practiced. If we do not even know what no-self or emptiness means, we will not know how to practice emptiness. Hence, prior to teaching the practice of no-self, I shall first explain the principle of “no-self” — why there is “no-self,” that is, why the “self” does not exist. With this understanding, the practice can then proceed.

The concepts of self in person, self in phenomena, attachment to self in person, and attachment to self in phenomena have already been discussed up front. We have also explained why we should cut through attachment, and given a simple introduction to the Buddhist concept of five aggregates — defining the aggregates as body, mind, and the activities of the body and mind which people today can more easily understand, and establishing at the outset there is no self in any of the three categories. Next, we shall take a closer look at no-self.

Indeed, the concepts of no-self and emptiness are difficult to comprehend because ordinary people have since beginningless time always believed that the self exists, moreover, that all sentient beings, the world outside, etc. exist. This notion is firmly entrenched in us and hard to change; only through repeated exposition of emptiness and practice of no-self can

emptiness be understood.

If properly explained, teachings on precious human birth, impermanence, etc. to generate renunciation can be expounded at any time to anyone. However, the concept and practice of emptiness is profound and cannot be comprehended by everyone. Not only that, some people upon hearing the teaching develop a mistaken view of Buddhism – a lot of people have the bad habit of refuting that which they do not apprehend. Hence, these people who cannot understand the doctrine of emptiness consider it to be a misconception.

The Buddha recognized this problem and specified that teachings on emptiness be given only to a selective audience. To receive the teachings, one must have the right disposition. There are rules on who can listen to the teachings and who cannot.

WHO IS QUALIFIED TO RECEIVE TEACHINGS ON EMPTINESS?

In *Introduction to the Middle Way*, it is said everyone is endowed with two kinds of root virtue or capacity: one is the wisdom of emptiness, the other the accumulation of merit – also known as the roots of wisdom and skillful means. One can receive the teachings on emptiness only when his or her wisdom capacity is mature.

What are the perceptible signs of mature wisdom root in a person? If upon hearing the teachings of emptiness, a person exudes great confidence with tears running down the face and the hair on the body standing up – these are signs of mature root of wisdom. A person of this capacity will quickly realize emptiness when he or she receives the teachings. So it is

necessary to give the teaching in this case.

What about a person who on hearing the teachings of emptiness and no-self has no reaction at all and appears dull, displaying neither confidence nor repugnance? On this point, the great master Tsongkhapa said in his commentary on *Introduction to the Middle Way* that without clairvoyant power, a teacher cannot ascertain a person's capacity nor know the extent to which the teachings on emptiness can be expounded. Nonetheless, a person who has genuine respect for a spiritual friend or guru and adheres strictly to the guru's every word is also qualified to receive the teachings on emptiness, even if the person does not exhibit the kind of reactions mentioned above.

Why is that? Although the wisdom capacity of this type of person is not yet mature, they have deep faith in their spiritual friend; they accept whatever the spiritual friend says and whatever is taught by the buddhas and bodhisattvas. In their minds, there cannot possibly be any mistake in the teachings of the guru and that of the buddhas and bodhisattvas; even if they do not understand emptiness at the moment, they can accept the concept. Hence, it is also fine to teach emptiness to this kind of person.

There is also a type of person of inferior capacity who does not respond to the teachings on emptiness and has no faith in the spiritual friend. Not only that, these people find the teachings to be repugnant and misconceived: "Clearly the mountains and rivers exist, my own existence cannot be denied either; how can we say these things are non-existent and empty?"

Seriously mistaken views arise as a result. Thus, one cannot in general expound emptiness to this kind of person.

Nonetheless, the sutras also say we should all listen to the teachings on emptiness whether we have faith in it or not. Why is that? Even if a person rejects the teachings and declines into hell, it is but one rebirth in hell. Having listened to the teachings on emptiness, the person has planted the seeds of emptiness which will ripen in the not too distant future. Hence, after leaving the hell realm, the person's journey in samsara will come to an end at some point just on account of this seed of virtue. Without hearing the teachings, there can be no end to the cycle of rebirth, no opportunity for liberation. Hence, Bodhisattva Manjusri believed this type of person should also listen to the teachings on emptiness.

EMPTINESS IS THE ESSENCE OF THE BUDDHAS' TEACHINGS

The Buddha once said that among his teachings on various topics, many do not reveal the complete meaning because they are directed at educating people of certain mental dispositions. However, there is one teaching which is definitive and invariable, a core concept repeated time and time again by the buddhas not only of the present but also the past and future – that of emptiness. Emptiness is ultimate truth. It is the essence of Buddhist doctrine, the underlying substance of the teachings of Buddha Sakyamuni as well as the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions and three times.

Why is emptiness the essence of Buddhadharma? Because all buddhas and bodhisattvas have but one goal in mind, that is, to help sentient beings attain liberation. How can this be achieved? We cannot resolve the question of birth, aging, illness, and death, or obtain liberation by way of clairvoyant powers, etc. There is only one root cause of cyclic existence

and only one method that can eliminate it. The root cause of cyclic existence is ignorance. All afflictions such as greed, anger, and delusion stem from ignorance or from self-attachment which arises from ignorance.

How do we overcome ignorance? Only wisdom can cut through ignorance, since wisdom and ignorance directly oppose or contradict one another. There is no such contradiction between ignorance and other methods like generosity, moral conduct, patience, and meditative absorption.

The wisdom herein refers not to worldly knowledge; it is the unsurpassed wisdom propagated by Buddha Sakyamuni, the realization of emptiness of self in person and in phenomena. The essence of the teachings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas of the ten directions and three times is none other than the wisdom that realizes emptiness.

HOW TO ESTABLISH EMPTINESS OF SELF

How do we realize emptiness? There are many different methods for realizing emptiness; these are all covered in *Basic Concepts of the Middle Way* and *Practicing No-Self* which I have discussed in the past. Because the actual practice of no-self shall be taught this time, the methods and view of selflessness must be restated before the practice.

Emptiness is a very profound concept which cannot be clearly understood in one teaching. When we first came upon the teachings on emptiness in the shastras such as *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, *Introduction to the Middle Way*, and *Treatise of Four Hundred Verses*, we would listen to them

multiple times. If we had skimmed over it, we would not have apprehended its true significance. I therefore think you will not be able to understand much either with just one teaching. The key to fully apprehending and realizing emptiness is repetitive hearing, contemplation, and practice.

Buddha Sakyamuni spoke here and there in the sutras of methods which employ logic to support the validity of his words. Later Nagarjuna carried the Buddha's logical reasoning further and established the fundamental doctrine of the Middle Way. Although the methods of reasoning in the Middle Way school are vast and precise, I shall only mention two of the five great reasonings that are most important and easiest to understand: one is "Neither One nor Many" – through the process of disassembling, the parts that make up the self, that is, the body and mental factors, are found to be empty; the other is "Dependent Arising" – based on the principle of dependent arising, all conditioned phenomena are relative phenomena and, as such, lack true existence.

1. Neither One nor Many

This topic was addressed earlier and is further explained here.

(1) Investigating Physical Matter

Emptiness of self in person is not difficult to understand. The three components of the self in person are the body, mind, and activities of the body and mind; apart from these, there can be no other self in person. Using the logical reasoning of the Middle Way, we can establish these three components are empty.

To start, let's investigate the body, not the mind. To establish the emptiness of self in person, we do not need to examine the body at the microscopic level; it is sufficient to just break the body down to a certain point.

Why is that? Because attachment to self in person is formed on the basis of the five aggregates at the gross level. When we know the gross body, mind, etc. do not exist, the foundation of attachment to self in person is damaged; once it is damaged, the attachment cannot survive on its own.

How do we investigate this? The conventional view is that our body and mind are distinct entities. Actually, the body, as well as the mind, is just a composite term.

For instance, the word "people" does not refer to a specific person but to all persons. Similarly, the word "body" is only a general term, since the body can be broken down into many different parts – skin, skeleton, muscles, etc. Each of the parts can be further broken down, for example, the skeleton into a skull, shinbone, calf bone, etc. This is not just the standpoint of anatomy, it is also common knowledge. As such, we can be certain the body is not something that cannot be taken apart, but like a car that can be totally disassembled.

All of us think a car is an assembly of car parts. When all the components are put together, a car is produced; however, if we take the components apart, down to the tiniest of screws, can we call these parts a car? No, we can only call it a huge pile of parts or a huge pile of metal, rubber, etc. At that point, we cannot say what a car is or recognize which part is the car. We cannot find traces of the car in any of the parts.

As mentioned, at that point, not only is there no car to be found, we can be very certain, aside from the parts, the so-called car has ceased to exist. Moreover, each assembly of the car is also made up of still smaller parts. A pile of parts that make up the assembly cannot be called an assembly either; it is no more than a large pile of metal, plastic, etc. It is not possible to say where the so-called assembly is; no one can tell in which screw or scrap of metal the assembly can be found. In other words, just the notion of an assembly is also groundless.

We can apply this line of analysis even to a tiny screw. The screw can also be broken down into metal chips; each chip can be further reduced to uncountable metal powder. When we continue to dissect things in this way, we'll end up with an elementary particle called quark in physics.

The scriptures mention a similar concept like quark from very early on and call it "dust." The so-called "dust" is a minute particle. Actually, quark and dust are the same thing.

Currently in physics, the quark is said to be the smallest unit and the fundamental constituent of matter. It has no form or color and does not occupy any space; it has none of the properties attributed to physical matter. We also know that its existence is supported by substantial research and evidence.

However, physicists have hit a bottleneck and are not able to move forward. Whether the final answer is a quark or energy, they still ascribe to the view that it is a truly existent thing. But from the Buddhist viewpoint, be it quarks or dust particles, all have been completely broken down; nothing remains in the end. Thus, the so-called car just disintegrates in front of us. Where does the car go? Whether a car or a house, everything that undergoes investigation eventually

disintegrates into emptiness before our eyes, a state which words cannot describe. This outcome is reached after extensive analysis based on the Buddha's logic.

Such a realization can be overwhelming: all along, I think the car exists; as it turns out, not only the car but all physical matter, even if perceptible to the eye, lack inherent nature. What we see on the outside is just an experience produced by our eyes; apart from this feeling, things do not truly exist and cannot be found at all. This is called emptiness.

The above is an analysis undertaken on physical matter; in investigating this area, quantum physics offers a very good method. This is not to imply the sutras do not have better methods of analysis. The scriptures contain very precise and clear methods for establishing emptiness; however, explaining the doctrine in the ancient terminology of Madhyamaka, Abhidharma, etc. employed over 2,500 years ago requires some effort. To a well-educated audience, the Dharma can be easily understood if terms like atoms, neutrons, and quarks are used.

Nevertheless, I believe most people do not know what a quark is, much less what lies beyond quarks. Actually, it is not important to know what a quark is; we just need to transcend it. Using Buddhist doctrine, we can get beyond it. In the teachings, something as minute as a quark also needs to be invalidated.

Some people may ask: how can a quark, which has no form or color and does not occupy space, be invalidated?

We form attachment even to minute and subtle things. If we have this kind of fixation, even if we have invalidated the "self" at the gross level and nullified the essence of matter,

we must still find a way to destroy it. In *Abhidharmakosa*, it is said the state of the heavenly beings in the form and formless realms is already a very subtle one; although it does not occupy space, this state is still classified as matter.

How can it be destroyed? With the same method employed above. If we continue to use this method of investigation, all things eventually become empty of self-existence.

At the stage of investigating matter that has no color and does not take up space, it may become difficult to continue with the investigation because there is no object for us to grasp. If so, we can use the Madhyamaka method of reasoning that refutes the arising of something already existent or non-existent.

By way of this reasoning, we will know all phenomena and matter are neither born nor annihilated. Since they are not born, they cannot exist. These analytical methods are both convincing and easy to use. With these methods, it is not a difficult matter to establish emptiness.

Ordinarily, we think all things exist; there is a self, an external world, a body, and mind. However, upon examination, we now discover that these things cannot be found at all.

Some scientists also have the same experience, but they conduct their analysis only from the standpoint of things being matter. As long as this is the case, their investigation is incomplete. One must know physics and Buddhist doctrine can never be the same; they only have certain conceptual similarity. In the end, only Buddhist logic can help us overcome attachment completely.

Some people will ask: if all things do not exist, why are we able to perceive them? This is because we perceive them incorrectly. Why is that? Our eye consciousness is also tainted by ignorance and is therefore subject to error.

This point can easily be established. For instance, apart from motion which is readily apparent in a fire, river current, etc., our eyes see all things as basically motionless. Actually, all matter is composed of very small particles. These particles are in a constant state of flux, arising and ceasing each instant, even if measured in only one millionth of a second. There is nothing that stands still in this world. As such, why do we not see it? This illustrates the problem we have with our eyes. They are obstructed by ignorance and thus cannot see the true face of matter. If they cannot perceive the truth at this level, the more profound nature of reality is even harder to discern.

There are countless other examples you can take time to think about. We will not mention these examples individually. Nonetheless, a great deal of evidence tells us our eyes cannot be counted on. We cannot place trust in our eye, ear, nose, and tongue; we cannot think things exist simply because we see them. This way of thinking has already been invalidated here. If this reasoning were valid, we would say our eyes tell us this object is still; hence it is not in motion, it is still. However, we now know this is not the case.

Even if our eyes can see, our ears can hear, there is nothing special about that since neither the eye nor the ear can apprehend the true nature of reality. Sound waves also change moment to moment. For instance, when we hear the two words “yan jing (eyes)” pronounced, we do not hear the arising and ceasing that take place within the sound, however

hard we may try. We hear a continuous sound “yan___jing___” but, in fact, what we hear is not one continuous sound, just instants of sound connected together.

Consider another example. If we light up a candle and make a circle in the dark with the candle, we will see a bright circle of fire. Actually, there is no circle to speak of. A circle does not exist at all. Because our eyes cannot capture each instant and step as the candle moves, we mistake all of these instants for one motion that is concurrent, continuous, and indivisible.

Similarly, when the two words “sheng yin (sound)” are pronounced, they too can be separated into many instants, each one thousandth of a second or one ten-thousandth of a second. These two words are not one continuous sound, but instants of sound that are pronounced in sequence. However, our ears are not able to make the distinction.

Also, a lot of people know that cosmic radiation, an electromagnetic radiation brought on by energy particles in the sky, is something very subtle which the eye cannot perceive. It penetrates our body all the time, including our heart and brain, yet we do not feel it at all. Although we do not feel it, it nonetheless exists. Hence, our sense of touch, that is, our tactile consciousness also cannot be relied on.

To sum up, even without Buddhist logic, the laws of physics have refuted what the eye, ear, nose, and tongue recognize or feel. Our experiences are all mistaken. If an object can be seen, this does not necessarily mean it exists; if an object cannot be seen, this does not necessarily mean it does not exist either.

The real truth is the Buddha’s method of reasoning.

Of course, our mental activity is dictated by the sixth consciousness which itself is also a mistake. Nevertheless, at the stage we are now, we can only rely on the sixth consciousness to guide us, to lead us to a certain stage whereat our speech, thought process, etc. lose their former effectiveness and functions and must be discarded, like a pair of worn-out shoes that has outlasted its usefulness.

What state is the mind in after mental fabrications are discarded? At that point, it’s just direct cognition. Whose cognition? It’s wisdom’s cognition, not that of the sixth consciousness. At that point, our sixth consciousness has already transformed into wisdom. Although not yet the wisdom of the buddhas, it is the wisdom of the bodhisattvas. This is just what we need. When wisdom appears, ignorance at the gross level is immediately eliminated; we instantly comprehend the true nature of life, phenomena, and the universe. This is what’s been pointed out in Ch’an Buddhism and Dzogchen as sudden enlightenment.

But before we attain this final result, we need to contemplate. We cannot cultivate wisdom without contemplation; to contemplate, we need to learn the doctrine of the Middle Way and emptiness of self. The Buddha expounded a way of reasoning that directly contradicts conventional thinking; if we follow the common view, we will stay in samsara forever. What we seek is the uncommon wisdom that frees us from samsara, that is, realization of emptiness.

The above discussion pertains to investigating the body.

(2) Investigating the Mind

There is a certain degree of difficulty in any investigation of the mind, since it is an entity, unlike the body, that cannot be seen or touched. The body is the first of the aggregates explained in the sutras because it represents external and substantial matter; consciousness, on the other hand, is placed at the end because it pertains to mental phenomena which are the most difficult to examine.

For most of us, the best way to investigate the mind is to analyze it in relation to time. In the case of physical matter, we are not limited to the use of time to establish emptiness. For instance, to conclude a house is empty of self-existence, we can analyze and break it down by direction, i.e., east, south, west, north, up, down, and so forth. However, we cannot use this method with the mind.

How is time used in the investigation? By examining the mind in three stages – the present, past, and future.

The past is already gone and will never come back. Einstein believed if the speed of light is surpassed, time can be reversed, the past can reappear, but this is not possible. For instance, our childhood no longer exists; whether it is with the speed of light or greater, we cannot be transported back to our past. How can something that does not exist appear again? It is not possible. The future refers to an event that is about to happen; from the present standpoint, it has not happened yet and hence cannot exist anywhere within the one billion world systems. In other words, if there is anything that can possibly exist, it is the present.

However, the past, present, and future are only a relative concept. There is no absolute past, present, or future.

As an example, if we consider the daytime to be the present, then the time before that is the past, the time that has yet to come is the future; the present consists of 12 hours. If we consider this month to be the present, then the month before is the past, the following month is the future; this present is a full month. If we say this year is the present, then the previous year is the past, the next year is the future; this present spans 365 days

That being the case, how long is the present? Some people think the present is just this instant.

Notwithstanding, if we divide time even more minutely and examine the present moment, we will discover things are not what we think. As with the outcome in analyzing matter, when time is broken down into its smallest unit and we try to divide it further, we will find nothing left. Why is that? Because time is finite, not limitless; divided over and over again, eventually there is nothing that remains. On this point, philosophers differ: some think time can be divided indefinitely; others believe time can no longer be divided after a certain point. But these are all misconceptions. Time can only get shorter and shorter, not longer, when it is broken down; as such, we can be certain nothing is left to be divided at the end. Moreover, who is to say time cannot be broken down after a certain point? Who sets the rules on this? The truth is not subject to limitation or manipulation, nor established through subjective evaluation.

On the concept of time, physicists also maintain different positions; however, from the Buddhist perspective, time is not physical matter. For instance, when we plant a flower seed and watch it sprout, grow, blossom, and finally wither, we

can set a time table for its progression. Apart from the seed ripening into a flower, this so-called time does not exist on its own.

Even though we believe a watch represents the passing of time, this is only our imputation or designation. Actually, it is just mechanical motion which is not connected in any way with time.

Time is essentially a concept of nominal existence, not true existence. Since time is nominally existent, we cannot find the real present.

The analysis above tells us neither the body nor mind has true existence. As such, their activities are even less likely to exist.

We should also think this way during practice. By way of meditation, let the mind rest first, since all realizations and positive feelings are attained when the mind is in a state of equanimity. We cannot experience realization of any depth if we are preoccupied with thoughts. Although renunciation and bodhicitta can be maintained and cultivated by contemplation, realization of emptiness can only be experienced when the mind is calm.

Here, being calm is only in the relative sense, that is, to focus only on the examination of whether there is body, mind, self, etc. When the examination is much more thorough, one can clearly realize: everything I see and hear is only an illusion, with no basis at all.

In one of the commentaries on the Middle Way, there is a good example: a certain kind of yellow flower grows on

the surface of lakes; from afar, the flowers are a resplendent golden hue, but up close, one sees that the flowers are not rooted in the ground but floating on the lake. The root of the flower reaches a certain length and disappears. No one can find the roots.

What does this example tell us? Prior to undergoing examination, the body, mind, world, universe, etc., these things all exist; but if we examine every solid object individually and look for its origin, we will find that at some point it disappears into empty space, like the flower in the example.

What does this disappearance signify? We should not think — like when a switch is turned on, light appears, and when a switch is turned off, light disappears — that brightness denotes existence, and darkness denotes disappearance. Such is not the case. Rather, we see light, but the light and the particles that make up the light at the very same moment do not actually exist. This effect is the inseparable union of appearance and emptiness. If we interpret disappearance to be the nonexistence of light when it is turned off, that would be nihilism. This method of investigation establishes emptiness of true existence by adopting the reasoning “neither one nor many” as the primary argument, and the reasoning “refuting the arising of something already existent or non-existent” as supplement.

2. Dependent Arising

Another method of investigation is dependent arising. All things that are relative do not have inherent existence and do not truly exist. This principle is very easy to understand with the following example.

Prior to or at the time of Buddha Sakyamuni, there were many magicians in ancient India who performed amazing feats of all kinds. Certain matter could also produce an illusion, for instance, the skin of a snake could be removed and rolled up into a light fuse; once lit, the people around would see that everything in the house where there was light had turned into a snake. This was an optical illusion that relied on the power of a certain matter to manifest. Another kind of magic derived from the power of the mantras; by chanting the mantras, the magicians could change a stone, a piece of wood, etc. into an animal and even a human being. Although these physical objects were not actually transformed into a human being or animal, an optical illusion was produced because of the substantial power of the mantras.

Why do I bring up these examples? So everyone can understand all things that are relative and impermanent lack inherent or true existence.

If gathered here today we chanted the mantras and thereby changed a flower into an apple, everyone would agree this is just an illusion, that there is no apple to speak of. No logic would be needed to make this point. However, please consider why we think this way. It is because we saw a flower when we first entered the room, not an apple – it was originally a flower and only became an apple when we chanted the mantras – so we do not believe it is an apple. This I believe would be the extent of everyone's reasoning.

Let me then ask whether this flower was originally a flower? Certainly not. The flower originated as a seed; it did not originate as a flower! The person who planted the seed in the ground had to regularly water and fertilize the seed, loosen

the soil, etc.; as a result of this effort, the seed became a flower, emerging as a root, stem, bulb, and so forth. When a seed becomes a flower, we acknowledge it is a flower; but when a flower becomes an apple, we do not consider it an apple. Why is that? You may say it's because we chanted the mantras that the flower became an apple; but, in the same way, it was the effort placed in growing the flower that the seed became a flower.

Why is chanting the mantras considered magic, whereas placing effort in growing the flower is not?

Perhaps some people will reply: we have never seen or heard a flower can be transformed into an apple; even children know, as well as many people who have seen it first-hand, that only the fruit of an apple tree is an apple.

But who is to say an apple can only come from an apple tree, and not from a flower? You will answer this is what our eyes tell us. Yet we have already shown our eyes cannot be counted on, that our sense perception is mistaken and cannot qualify as evidence!

Actually, these are all our attachment since we have a habit of thinking an apple comes from an apple tree, and that an instant transformation from a flower to an apple cannot be anything but magic. We are accustomed to thinking this way, but there is no real basis for it. We see that the flower is there for a relatively longer time, that there is a process by which a flower grows from a seed, so we believe it exists; the apple on the other hand appears in an instant, so we do not think it is real. Apart from the length of time in which they exist, is there any other difference between the two? No!

For this reason, the Buddha said all relative phenomena which depend on other things to come into being are empty in and of themselves.

The term “relative” means not absolute, not permanent. It refers to something that can be changed or transformed, and arises in dependence on causes and conditions. When causes and conditions come together, something is produced, which we say is relative. Simply speaking, all things that come into being due to causes and conditions are called relative phenomena; all relative phenomena do not have self-nature.

What does it mean to have no self-nature? For example, everyone believes the apple that comes from a flower lacks self-nature. Why does it lack self-nature?

The Buddha responded in this way, “It is you yourselves who say the apple lacks self-nature.”

When did we ever say that?

“At the very moment you determined the apple is not real.”

Actually, in our minds, we have already accepted this viewpoint; we just don’t know it.

Sakyamuni Buddha was consistent in that he never used his own logic to refute anything; instead, he used the confusion in our own reasoning to invalidate our own viewpoint; he allowed us to discover our own mistake by seeing the contradictions in our argument. The Buddha did not make assertions of any kind.

This is not simply a question of overturning or refuting a point, since the theory of emptiness as taught in the Middle

Way is extremely profound. We should keep in mind that many of our arguments cannot withstand analysis.

Rangzom Pandita, the great Ningmapa master, once told a very interesting story: a long time ago, there was a group of workers who made weaving their livelihood. One day, to build a loom, one of the workers had to go up the mountain to cut down trees. Inside the forest, he discovered that the trees were all very healthy – tall and straight. He thought it would be a shame to cut down the trees just for a loom. As a result, he abandoned his original plan and searched everywhere in the forest for suitable material to use. Unable to find any and exhausted after a long time, he lay down under a big tree and fell asleep.

At this time, the tree spirit was very pleased to learn what the worker had in mind. The spirit thus came to his side and asked, “It is most unusual that you cherish and want to protect the forest! To reward you, I can grant you a wish. Is there anything you want or wish for?” The worker pondered for a while but could not think of anything. He then told the tree spirit, “I would like to go back and consult with my partners before giving you a reply.” The tree spirit quickly agreed.

After the workers debated this question back and forth, they finally came up with a wish: we are all weavers; it would be great if we could weave from both sides of the body, the front and back! Go back and just ask for this siddhi (accomplishment)! The worker went back into the forest and asked the tree spirit to grant him this wish. Upon hearing it, the tree spirit executed the wish. In an instant, the worker was transformed into a person with a face and hands in front, and a face and hands in back.

When he returned to the village, the terrified villagers shouted, "A ghost is here! A ghost is here!" In the end, the poor worker was stoned to death by the "brave" villagers.

After he died, the villagers slowly got up the courage to approach his dead body. Everyone was shocked to discover that his body was the same in front as in back. There was basically no difference at all. Reasonably speaking, only the face and hands in front should be real; the face and hands in the back ought to be an illusion; there should have been a difference. But after his death, people could not tell the two sides apart.

What does this story tell us? Unlike what people think, the illusion produced from magic can be the same as the real thing. We used to believe an apple which is produced from a flower is not real and cannot be eaten. Actually, it is possible to eat this kind of apple; things created by magic can be just as real. We no longer have reason to think the way we used to.

If there is no reason to think so, why have we held on to the belief? It is our habit. This habit is formed by what our eye or ear perceives, since we have either witnessed or have heard this kind of phenomenon: a flower seed can grow into a flower after it is cultivated.

Now the truth is out that all misconceptions stem from the mistaken perception of the eye or ear. From beginningless time, we have placed great faith in our sense perceptions, which have trapped us in samsara. What we need to do now is to overturn all points of view that are based on these perceptions and reject any additional information they provide. In so doing, we can stay clear of samara and follow the path of liberation.

When we are conscious of our mistake, it is definitely a start towards realization of emptiness. Like a stream of light that appears at dawn, even though it cannot compare with the sunlight during the day, it is nonetheless not too far from it.

Everyone must take time to contemplate since we develop attachment to all different kinds of thought in our everyday life. For instance, we do not regard the images of people we see on a TV screen to be real. If we are asked why they are not real, we will generally say these images appear only after we plug in the TV and turn on the switch, and after the TV receives the signals from an antenna transmitted via electromagnetic waves. Thus the image is not the person.

On what basis do we say the image transmitted by electromagnetic waves is not a real person? After all, a person also comes into being from other things. We all know a person is an embryo before birth; it is a fertilized egg before the embryo; it is a sperm and egg before the fertilized egg. What is it before the sperm and egg? No one knows. If we acknowledge a person is real, even if it is transformed from other things, why do we feel differently about the image on the TV screen? There is no basis for it, merely our habit at work. These habits are a product of ignorance. Due to ignorance, we discriminate between what is real and not real.

The concepts in the Middle Way are explained in great depth, the two mentioned above are comparatively easy to understand. There are also many concepts which are complex; just learning the special Dharma terms in each requires great effort and time. Hence, they will not be discussed this time. If interested, one can read up on other commentaries on the Middle Way.

CONCLUSION

You should all take time to think about these two methods of reasoning, sometimes by investigating yourself, sometimes by investigating the outside world. I believe, through this kind of examination, we can diminish our attachment, even control and repudiate it. To what extent attachment can be repudiated depends on our practice.

Although we now understand the concepts, our afflictions, self-attachment, etc. will still remain. If we persevere in our practice, our wisdom will grow and we will eventually be able to eradicate our afflictions and self-attachment; without practice, we will not be able to progress beyond an intellectual understanding of the concepts. We cannot blame the Dharma, only ourselves. Absent the practice, how can one progress? No result can be had without making an effort.

Although the object is different in the case of no-self in person and no-self in phenomena, i.e., one is an examination of the world inside, the other an examination of the world outside, the two are in essence the same. There is no difference at all in the method of investigation and the result.

Nirvana Is True Peace

In the Samyuktagama Sutra, it is said:

When desire is exhausted, anger is exhausted, delusion is exhausted, and all afflictions are exhausted – this is called nirvana.

What is nirvana? Liberation is nirvana. From the standpoint of Mahayana Buddhism, the three bodies of an enlightened being – dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, nirmanakaya – and the five wisdoms are called nirvana.

What does true peace mean? After liberation, there is genuine freedom from the three types of suffering mentioned before; the seeds of the three types of suffering and their designations also cease to be. This pure and everlasting happiness is true peace. It is not the happiness ordinary people refer to; rather, happiness is just freedom from suffering that arises from contaminated actions. Because it is pure, it is deemed “true peace.”

We shall not elaborate further on nirvana here.

PRACTICING

THE FOUR
DHARMA SEALS

The Importance of Practice

To every practitioner, actual methods are extremely important. One must truly practice in order to achieve liberation. By reciting the name of the Buddha one-pointedly, we can go to Western Pure Land; by practicing renunciation, bodhicitta, and emptiness, we can gradually eradicate our afflictions and attain liberation in the end.

We should all recite the Buddha's name on a regular basis, but to be fully prepared, we should also undertake a concurrent practice. That is to say, we should choose one of the Middle Way practices in either Vajrayana or exoteric Buddhism to ensure all grounds are covered. If we can realize emptiness, that certainly is best; if not, we can still go to Western Pure Land if we are sincere in chanting the Buddha's name. The two should be practiced together, this is also His Holiness Jigme Phunstok Rinpoche's advice. At the same time, listening and contemplating the Dharma are both helpful to the practice and to chanting the Buddha's name, so these activities are complementary. An integrated practice like this is definitely beyond error.

Without practice or mind training, we cannot be sure of attaining liberation. For instance, over the several decades in our lifetime, we do not in general have to worry about our

livelihood; as long as we are willing to work, it is more or less guaranteed. However, death, this uninvited guest, comes when we least expect it. At the critical moment, we are not at all prepared to confront death or transform it into the path. Invariably, we are helpless when death arrives, so the question of birth, aging, illness, and death is a more important one than existence. If we cannot address this problem properly, it is more frightening than the struggle to stay alive; if we can come to terms with the problem in the correct way, it will be more meaningful than solving our livelihood. Therefore, practice is extremely important.

Before the practice, we must first have the corresponding view. Without right understanding, how do we practice? If we are not even clear about the direction, there is no point in talking about the practice. A lot of people will say “we want practice, not listening and contemplation.” Although practice is imperative in the end, so too are listening and contemplation up front. We can practice only after we have given sufficient time to listening and contemplation, that is, after these activities have reached a certain level.

What does “reaching a certain level” mean? By this we mean it is impractical to receive teachings on all of the 84,000 Dharma methods; however, at the very least, we should understand the method we are practicing, why it is practiced this way, and what the final outcome is. To achieve this understanding, we must first spend an appropriate amount of time to listen and reflect on the Dharma.

Regrettably, ordinary people have inverted values. Everyone thinks the ultimate goal in life is to make money and live well; the question of life and death, on the other hand, can be brushed off. In reality, even though our livelihood is an

important matter, practice is even more important.

Mind training is essential to everyone, including me. Like all of you, I still have afflictions and continue to wander in samsara. Since we have obtained precious human birth in this lifetime, we should cherish the opportunity to practice; if we forgo this chance, I fear that we are giving up on an opportunity that comes just once in many kalpas.

Of course, I cannot say we will not get another opportunity. But just when this opportunity will arrive is difficult to say — perhaps one lifetime, perhaps one hundred lifetimes, possibly even one or ten thousand lifetimes, which is a very distant matter. Not only that, can we be clear-headed enough by then to seize the opportunity? We may, as in this lifetime, idle away our time in ignorance, waste our precious birth, and once again miss a great chance. That would be the same as having no opportunity at all.

There are some people now that are really pitiful. Shortsighted and simpleminded, they are contented with their current lot, think they have everything they deserve, and do not feel it is necessary to practice.

This is a deluded way of thinking since such a person cannot look beyond the present. Although they have everything they want now — good health, a successful career, and a happy family, who can guarantee these things will last? No one can give this assurance, not in this life, let alone the next. Thus, even with power and wealth, we need to practice.

Conversely, some people from low-income families will question how they can find time to practice and study the teachings when their livelihood is still an issue that has to be

resolved. For them, it's wait and see!

This viewpoint is also incorrect. If we lack for food, we can borrow money or even beg to get something to eat; whatever the situation, there is always a way. However, on a major issue such as birth, aging, illness, and death, we cannot borrow money or beg for help; without prior practice, there is nothing that can be done. Thus, even the poor have to practice.

To summarize, whether we choose to practice or not, it is essential to all of us regardless of our background.

Our focus hereon is the practice, not burning incense, prostrating to the buddhas, or reciting the sutras. If we read *Diamond Sutra* in the morning and *Kṣitigarbhasūtra* in the evening, this constitutes recitation, not practice. Although reciting the sutras can contribute to the accumulation of merit and help the practice, it is not true practice.

What constitutes a true practice? It is contemplation on precious human birth, impermanence of life, and the other preliminaries. This discussion on the practice of the Four Dharma Seals is based on the teaching of Mipham Rinpoche, but overall, it is training in renunciation and bodhicitta, and gaining realization of emptiness of self through practices in Madhyamaka and Dzogchen.

We must try our utmost to cultivate these three qualities of mind. If at the end of our lives, we do not have renunciation and bodhicitta, nor realization of emptiness, and moreover cannot obtain a favorable rebirth in the three higher realms, the consequence of falling into the unfavorable realms is unthinkable.

We know that the animal realm is the preferred rebirth among the three lower realms; however, a key point is that animals are extremely ignorant and incapable of any kind of practice. Not only that, they cannot distinguish between good and evil, are just as afflicted by desire, anger, and delusion, and repeatedly commit unwholesome actions. Thus, taking rebirth as an animal will create even more bad karma, the result of which is one may never again return as a human being.

Due to the great importance of practice, we must be diligent. In this lifetime, we must at least develop genuine renunciation and bodhicitta. With renunciation and bodhicitta as a basis, we can quickly realize emptiness; even without realization, genuine bodhicitta will lead to a better future life, give us greater certainty in the practice, and bring us closer to liberation. Although we are now blessed as human beings, how much time do we have left in this life? No one knows, perhaps a few years, ten-plus years, or several decades; when our blessings accumulated from past years are exhausted, our situation will change for the worse. This is not the Creator's doing, nor does it happen without reason, it is the natural law of cause and effect. In the face of this natural law, there is little one can do; however, with effort, one can alter the direction it takes.

It is like cultivating land; under ordinary circumstances, when a seed is planted, it grows into a crop. But whether it can grow into a crop or a certain kind of crop depends on other conditions. A seed will not grow into a crop if the conditions are either incomplete or unfavorable. Although a cause produces an effect in general, there may not be a result if conditions change radically during the development process.

What we hope to do now is to change the rules governing samsara. To do that, we need to undertake practice – specifically the practices that lead to renunciation, bodhicitta, and realization of emptiness.

After training in these three practices, we can say: although I have committed a lot of bad karma in this life, I have trained in these sacred practices and have not wasted this precious birth, so my life is meaningful. Conversely, if we have not trained in these practices and have only attained worldly fame, wealth, and so forth, this kind of life would be meaningless. At the moment of death, all worldly things are useless. In life, they are not indispensable; after death, they cannot accompany us. The only thing of value that we can bring with us is our practice. Only our realization from practice is dependable; it will never lie to us.

We cannot say because I have to work and build a career, I cannot practice. Although Sakyamuni Buddha did not require all practitioners to take monastic vows, we must make time for practice at the same time we work for a living. How to reach a balance between work and practice depends on our individual situation.

If not having time is an excuse for not practicing today, and similarly tomorrow, we will never have time to practice. In general, lay people have difficulty forgoing their activities in everyday life and their family. If they delay their plans for practice until late in their seventies or eighties, they may not have the physical or mental capacity to practice even if the aspiration is present. Thus, we cannot keep putting it off; we should do it now.

Why is practice not a priority for most people? It is

because they lack the opportunity to listen and reflect on the Dharma. Listening and contemplation are very important for this reason. Although we can go to Western Pure Land if we recite the Buddha's name with devotion and one-pointedness, where does the devotion come from? Devotion does not descend from the sky nor rise from the earth; it comes by way of listening and contemplation. Only after listening and contemplation will we begin to think: I must achieve a state of complete mindfulness when I chant the Buddha's name. Only then will we have the motivation and confidence to chant the Buddha's name with devotion. Without listening and contemplation, there is no basis for motivation and confidence.

As a lay person, we must first have a clear understanding of the method we are practicing. If we have additional energy and interest, and the opportunity, we can also take up other methods; if we do not have the time or energy, it is not a problem. For instance, in practicing renunciation, we only need to understand the contents that pertain to renunciation; we may or may not have to understand other methods.

A Tibetan Buddhist master once gave an analogy: if a person has ventured to the top of the mountain and returns to the village below to exclaim, "Come quickly, all of you! The view at the top is spectacular!" the villagers will believe him. If he has never been to the top of the mountain and exhorts, "Go! The view at the top is spectacular!" the villagers may not believe him.

Here I would like to clarify a point. What I am propagating is not a viewpoint I just improvised, but the words of Sakyamuni Buddha. These teachings were transmitted directly from Sakyamuni Buddha down to my guru, who in

turn passed them on to me. I am only transmitting to you the contents of the teachings I have heard. Whether you practice or not is up to you.

The importance of practice has already been discussed. In the following section, the actual practice shall be introduced.

The practice of the Four Dharma Seals is: first, emptiness; second, impermanence; third, samsara is suffering; fourth, no-self. This is the order in which they will be explained.

Preparing for the Preliminaries

CHOOSING THE ENVIRONMENT

When our practice reaches a certain level, the external environment will not have much of an effect on us; at that point, there is no difference where we practice. However, to a beginner, the environment is very important.

Firstly, if the surroundings are too noisy, it will be difficult to practice. The sutras say the biggest impediment to meditative concentration is noise.

In general, this is a problem in the cities, but some homes can be very quiet if they have sound-proof installations, and the windows and doors are shut tight.

Secondly, in places where many practitioners in the past have aggregated, blessings are plentiful; this kind of place is particularly conducive to practice.

Whatever the circumstances, the environment is a very important factor. At the least, one should look for a quiet place to practice.

DEALING WITH CHORES

Before meditation, we should first get ready, that is, shut the door, go to the bathroom, turn off the cell phone, etc. We should deal with these chores ahead of time so as not to disrupt the actual meditation practice. Thereafter, go to a shrine room if there is one, and prepare a cushion. This cushion is called a meditation cushion; it should be higher in back than in front to allow the body to sit comfortably. As you sit on the meditation cushion, make the following vow: during this sitting, I will remain in meditation no matter what.

MAINTAINING THE THREE ESSENTIALS

There are strict requirements the practitioner must meet during meditation. Among them are the three essentials: the first is body; the second is speech; the third is mind.

1. *Essential Points of the Body*

What are the requirements for the body? During meditation, we must adhere to the sevenfold meditation posture of Vairochana; we cannot lie on a bed or assume any other type of posture. The seven points are:

1. The legs in a crossed-legged position, like the posture assumed by the buddhas and bodhisattvas in the thangkas. We can cross one leg or both during sitting meditation. Usually, one leg is crossed; if this is difficult or painful at the start, any position which is comfortable can also be adopted. However, to meet the first requirement in the Vairochana posture, both legs should be crossed.

2. The body straight.
3. The hands in the gesture of meditation (dhyana mudra) – palms facing up, the right hand placed on top of the left, thumbs touching each other, hands resting four fingers below the navel.
4. The upper arms away from the body.
5. The head bent slightly forward.
6. The eyes slightly closed with the gaze directed toward the tip of the nose.
7. The tip of the tongue touching the palate.

These seven points are called the Vairochana posture. Every part of our body should be relaxed, not tense. We cannot maintain calmness if we are tense. Whether we are training in the preliminaries or the main practice, we should always assume this posture. If we lie on a bed or sit incorrectly on a sofa, it will be difficult to stay calm during practice. Why is that? The mind's tranquility is connected with time and the body's posture. Thus it is said in Vajrayana: when the body is straight, the channels (for circulation of the subtle winds) are straight; when the channels are straight, the mind is straight, that is, free of mental elaboration.

2. *Essential Points of Speech*

Ordinarily, what we say is called speech, but here we are not looking to say anything but to expel the impure chi (life-energy) in our body. To remain calm during meditation, we must breathe correctly since the mind and breath are intimately linked. Moderating the breath is therefore the

essential point of speech.

How is this accomplished? In moderating the breath, we should visualize the impure chi in our body has been expelled; this will purify the body and allow the mind to rest. How do we expel the chi? It is expelled from the nostrils: first from the left nostril, next from the right nostril, then from both nostrils at the same time. The chi can be expelled three times in succession from the left nostril, right nostril, and both nostrils successively, for a total of nine times; or it can be expelled once from the left nostril, once from the right nostril, and once from both nostrils.

How can impure chi be purged from the nostrils? When training in the preliminaries, you are only told to expel the impure chi; when training in the main practice, there are concrete techniques pertaining to the use of wind (breath), channel and drops of the subtle body.

The actual technique for moderating the breath is as follows: firstly, to expel chi from the left nostril, make a vajra fist with the left hand. To form a vajra fist, press your thumb against the base of the fourth finger and place all four fingers on the thumb. Then, with the fist, press down on the artery in the left upper thigh next to the groin. Similarly, with the right hand, press your thumb against the base of the fourth finger; except for the forefinger, place all three fingers on the thumb; make a circle with the forefinger pointing up; then press the forefinger against the right nostril and expel chi from the left nostril. When doing so, visualize the following: let all the negative karma we have created since beginningless time change into a black gaseous substance, and let it be expelled from the left nostril.

Switching hands now, make a vajra fist with the right hand and press down on the artery in the right upper thigh next to the groin; make a circle with the left forefinger pointing up; then press the forefinger against the left nostril, and expel chi from the right nostril. Exhale fully and, like before, visualize the following: let all the negative karma we have created since beginningless time change into a black gaseous substance, and let it be expelled from the right nostril, either three times or once.

Following this, make a vajra fist with the left and right hand at the same time; press down together on the artery in the left and right upper thigh next to the groin; and expel chi from both nostrils, either three times or once. As for the frequency that is chosen, we should be consistent by following the same pattern throughout. This is the essential point of speech.

Why do we train in this technique? This is a method of purification. Just as the dishes have to be washed before we eat, the mind has to be trained in this way before it can abide in tranquility. Special techniques are needed to tame the mind; without these special techniques, the mind cannot be tamed. To control the mind, we must have a way, otherwise the more we try to control it, the less likely we are to succeed; just like the more you try to put something out of your mind, the harder it is to forget. As with all things in general, if we have methods, we can deal with problems easily; if we do not have methods, we will not succeed even with effort. This is also the case with practice.

Where did these special methods come from? From the buddhas and bodhisattvas and the great masters who gained supreme realization on the bodhisattva path. By way of these

methods, they attained spontaneity of mind, and therefore transmitted their experience to us. We cannot go wrong if we follow their advice. Although we cannot see the connection between these motions and the mind, training in these methods will be helpful to us.

After completing the essential points of the body and speech, we need to practice each of the four preliminaries once, i.e., precious human birth, impermanence, etc.

Why should we train in the four preliminaries? If we are diligent in practicing each of the preliminaries once, we will develop greater interest and desire in the practice.

3. *Essential Points of the Mind*

After completing the four preliminaries, visualize a lotus seat an elbow length in front and also above our head; Sakyamuni Buddha is seated on the lotus; the Mahayana bodhisattvas and Theravada sangha revolve around in the four directions; the Buddha and all the bodhisattvas and sangha are facing us.

Then, in front of Sakyamuni Buddha, offer the seven-branch prayer of *The Aspiration of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra* ①. Visualize as you recite the verses, which is the proper way to conduct all practices that contain recitation. This is to remind us to reflect on the meaning of the verses. If we recite the verses without connecting with their meaning, it is not very helpful to our practice, just a virtuous deed.

Following this, generate strong faith in the Buddha and bodhisattvas, and supplicate to them with genuine devotion: please grant me blessings to complete the practice of the Four

Dharma Seals in this sitting.

Next is the cultivation of bodhicitta, a topic we have discussed many times before. If you have been training in bodhicitta, what stage are you at? Have you already developed bodhicitta or are you still in the process? I cannot claim to have bodhicitta but I am doing the practice. Have you started? If you have started but do not see results yet, you need not worry since you can be sure of results at some point. On the other hand, if you don't practice, you will never see any results!

Let us consider for a moment where we are exactly in our practice. After an investigation like this, some people may delight in discovering they have perfect bodhicitta; some may regret they have not started to practice bodhicitta; some may know with certainty they are in the process of cultivating bodhicitta. Regardless, we should all work towards this goal. Those of you who are not practicing should start right away; those who, like me, have not yet aroused bodhicitta should exert greater effort; those who already have bodhicitta can start the practice of emptiness.

In the next section, the actual practice shall be introduced.

[Notes] _____

① **The Aspiration of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra – Seven-branch Prayer**

1. Pay homage to all Buddhas; 2. Make extensive offerings; 3. Repent all evil deeds; 4. Rejoice in other people's merits; 5. Request teachings from the Buddhas; 6. Implore the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to remain in the world for a long time; 7. Dedicate every merit one has accumulated to all sentient beings.

THE MAIN PRACTICE

OF

Realizing Emptiness

Impermanence

Suffering

No-Self

The Practice of Realizing Emptiness

In *Abhidharmakosa*, all composite phenomena are summed up as the five aggregates – form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness. The so-called “aggregate” means the coming together of a lot of things.

The aggregate of form denotes not only phenomena perceived by the eye, but also sounds heard by the ear and all kinds of appearances like weight, light, darkness, etc. In other words, the aggregate of form is an overall name for all of the things above.

To facilitate the understanding of these concepts, we shall utilize language that is familiar to everyone. The aggregate of form in Buddhism refers principally to the body and external objects; the aggregates of feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness refer primarily to the mind, and the activities of the body, matter, and mind. The aggregate of form shall first be explained.

FORM IS EMPTINESS

1. Practicing No-Self in Person

Ordinarily, if we harbor hatred toward a person, we cannot control our anger when we see the person; or when we are desirous of a person, we cannot control our desire when we think of the person. In so far as we have different degrees of attachment even to ourselves, we can consider these three entities – an enemy, a beloved, and oneself – as objects of investigation.

After making preparations, visualize the object of investigation in front of you, then proceed to analyze, with the enemy as an example:

The first step is to sever the right eye of the enemy from his or her body and put it somewhere. Of course, this is just a visualization since we cannot possibly gouge out the right eye of a person. Next, visualize removing the left eye from the body and putting it in a certain place, then the ear, nose, tongue, skin, bone, muscle, hair, blood, and different organs; remove whatever can be removed and place it in front of yourself.

Then contemplate: normally I have absolutely no control over the deep hatred I feel for this person. But what among these things is the object of my hatred? Is it the eye, ear, nose, muscle, bone, or blood?

The result of this kind of investigation is that the enemy cannot be found. If the person doesn't even exist, why would we hold feelings of anger toward his muscle, bone, and so forth? These component parts, the muscle, bone, etc., have

never hurt me, not in this life nor will they in the next. Why should I bear grudge if they have never bothered me?

Although this concept is very simple, it is nonetheless extremely useful; this is how we practiced in the past. If these steps are followed, we will truly realize the so-called anger is completely rooted in our ignorance, that it is pretty absurd.

However, if we practice only once or twice and then discard the method, we will return to the original state of anger even if our experience was significant during practice. Thus, we must train over and over again in this method; only with repeated training can the practice grow in power.

Sometimes, we can also use oneself as the object of investigation: we have always believed in the existence of the self, but what exactly is this self? If it exists, how does it exist? If it doesn't exist, how does it not exist? I should be certain about this.

The method of investigation is the same. First remove the right eye, then the left eye , like the sky burial in the charnel grounds mentioned in the scriptures, until all parts are dissected. Many of you have witnessed a sky burial and ought to know its process and result. For those who have seen this kind of burial, the impression is an intensely deep one and must still be very fresh in their minds!

When our whole body is dissected and the parts are piled up, let us take a look: I have always believed in the existence of a "self," but where is this "self"? Am I this muscle? Am I this pile of skin, or strand of hair? Am I this type of fluid – blood, lymph, etc.? No, there is no "self" besides these body parts.

Since all the component parts that make up my body are piled here, nothing is missing, not even a strand of hair, why do I not find the “self”? If there is a “self,” I should be able to find it! Why can’t it be found?

This is a very good method of investigation; it produces a feeling during the process of realizing emptiness that is entirely new. Some people will break into tears at this time. Some people will find their own stupidity to be laughable: I have all along believed in the existence of a “self”; to sustain this “self,” I have committed a lot of wrongdoings and wasted my entire life; it is truly absurd! Thinking so, they cannot help but laugh. Although different, these reactions come from deep within; it is not because the scriptures say people will react this way that they do so intentionally. For whom would they need to put on an act? No one can tell if we are crying or laughing when we sit alone in meditation. When we enter a certain state of mind in the course of meditation, these reactions are spontaneous.

Why do these reactions happen? As an example, when we hit a child, the child will cry due to the pain inflicted on him or her; when people are happy or sad, they too will cry. But the tears this time come from being overwhelmed by the truth.

Whether it is tears or laughter is unimportant. What is essential is to experience this state of mind.

This state of mind is only the result gained from one of the analytical methods of the Middle Way; it is not yet the realization of Dzogchen. Nonetheless, the realization of the Middle Way and the realization of Dzogchen are very close.

The outcome of following the required steps in the

contemplation is just this experience; otherwise, we have not attained anything from the contemplation. In other words, the entire purpose of the contemplation in front is to produce this final experience. When we clearly experience no-self, we are at the stage of starting the practice. How do we practice? By maintaining this state of mind as long as possible without distraction — ten seconds, twenty seconds, a minute, two minutes, the longer the better. Such is the practice of no-self.

This is extremely important, since the vast literature in the Middle Way and the teachings of all the spiritual masters can be summed up in just this experience. Although the methods of expression vary and descriptions are given in all different languages, the essence of all the practices is also just this experience.

At the beginning, this state of mind will not last very long. After a while, the experience will gradually dissipate; other discursive thoughts will appear. When these thoughts arise, go back to your investigation again without delay. By examining others or oneself, we can eventually regain this feeling and realization: I truly do not exist; it is not the self I find but the absence of self.

As mentioned previously, it is a misapprehension to think our problems will be solved simply by not finding the self. What we must do is to find that feeling of no-self.

This kind of practice is helpful not only in moderating our afflictions temporarily, but also in paving a solid foundation for practicing Dzogchen after the preliminaries are completed.

It is like the strings on the bow in ancient times. Although they are very tight at the start, they become increasingly loose

with use. Similarly, although our feeling is very strong at the start of the practice, the feeling diminishes in time and eventually gives way to all kinds of thoughts. Thus, when the thoughts arise, we must stay vigilant and immediately return to our investigation.

The most important thing in the practice is to first abide in this state of mind, then watch our mind from the side.

Perhaps some people will ask: if so, do we then have two minds? A mind that observes, and a mind that is being observed.

That is not the case, but our mind indeed has this capability. To allow the mind to rest, we must observe it at all times, to ensure it is not disturbed and that it remains in this state. If we are not mindful, we may not even know if it has wandered off. We may find, after a half hour or one hour of meditation, that the effort was futile since our mind was preoccupied the whole time. That would be a shame! So watching the mind from the side is necessary.

Why do we “watch the mind from the side” and not directly? If we watch the mind directly, the mind will be startled and disturbed, unable to rest quietly. If we proceed to watch the mind directly as soon as it enters a state of no-self, we will destroy that state since the thought of watching the mind is itself a kind of distraction. When that happens, the original state of tranquility disappears. As for watching the mind from the side, the mind can remain at rest and, at the same time, bring into full play its ability to supervise; as soon as distraction sets in, it will know and pull it back in place.

Whether our practice is good or not depends essentially on

mindfulness. Without mindfulness, the mind will go wild and we won't even know it. Not only that, we will follow the mind in the direction it takes us, destroying in the end all the time and effort put into the practice.

Abiding in the state described above is called practice.

This is similar to the way the Chinese prepare food. First, fresh vegetables, condiments, etc. are prepared; next, there is the complex procedure of plucking the vegetable leaves, washing, cutting, and sautéing the vegetables; then, succulent dishes of all colors and shapes are made. The whole process is undertaken just for the few seconds we put food in our mouth and savor it. Apart from these few seconds of enjoyment, there is no other outcome. Likewise, the contemplation of dissecting the left eye, the right eye, and so forth is undertaken just for the momentary feeling of no-self. Where does this feeling come from? From the preceding contemplation. We do not necessarily need the prior investigation, only the feeling at the end; however, without the contemplation, we will not attain that experience. This feeling will not appear on its own, only after repeated contemplation.

At the outset, our practice should not be very long; moreover, it cannot be forced. We should not feel compelled to practice when we are not up to it, otherwise rejection sets in. Some practitioners put pressure on themselves to practice and eventually become very resentful when they see their own place of meditation. This is not helpful to the practice. Therefore, if we are unwilling to continue with the contemplation, we should stop; if we are tired, we should allow the body to relax completely and dismiss all thoughts of good and bad, past and future, etc. Leaving the mind to

rest in this way is also a kind of practice. When we train in relaxation, there is no element of realization or wisdom of any kind; however, this state of mind contributes to realization, so it also constitutes practice.

After training in this way for seven or eight months, or roughly a year, the mind will calm down. At that point, the mind will be free of mental elaboration even if it tries to engage in thought; the mind will be free of confusion even if it is disturbed. Practitioners who have reached this stage in their practice are content to stay at home all day without going anywhere. Those of us who at our present stage have difficulty practicing even an hour or two will be entirely different by then. However, to get there, effort must be exerted over a period of time.

This is the actual practice of no-self. Whether it is examining oneself or objects of desire and hatred, we will come to a deep realization that the self and others are all alike: all are inherently empty and do not exist.

2. Practicing No-Self in Phenomena

In the previous section, we broke the body down into its components — eye, ear, nose, tongue, muscle, bone, etc. The next step is to take this still further. If we continue with the dissection, we will eventually arrive at emptiness.

As an example, we can first break the joint of a finger into many small pieces. The principle behind this process of dissection is the same as in physics.

If we dissect again, the pieces become smaller and smaller until they have no substance of their own — nothing to retain,

nothing that can be retained even if we so wish. In other words, the joint of the finger loses its apparent existence after it is dissected thoroughly; in the end, it is reduced to nothing and is truly empty.

At that time, the feeling from practicing no-self in person, as mentioned above, reappears — one clearly recognizes all phenomena lack inherent existence. This feeling is certain to arise if one is skilled at contemplation.

It is not because Sakyamuni Buddha said things have no existence that they do not exist, or because of some other reason that they do not exist. Rather, upon investigation, it becomes clear not only do we not find anything, but we truly perceive things are non-existent — it is a kind of empty or spatial feeling.

How is feeling defined? In this context, the essential part that must always be emphasized is “emptiness” or “realization.” In other words, it is the cognition or awareness of emptiness, a profound sense that all phenomena are empty. Here, “emptiness” denotes objects; “realization” denotes the wisdom that apprehends emptiness.

If the feeling of “emptiness” or “realization” is not there, it no longer matters how good we are in contemplation or how peaceful our mind is. It would not be very useful even if we can maintain a state of no thought for seven or eight days. At best, we can take rebirth in the formless realm.

When we conceptually understand emptiness, this is called the view. But when we discover emptiness over the course of our own contemplation and practice, that is, not by listening or studying the texts — even if this feeling of emptiness is the

same as that described in the texts — this is called “realization.” When “realization” dawns, it can be said at least we have attained the Middle Way realization of emptiness.

When the feeling of emptiness is very strong, let the mind rest in this state. Then, as mentioned before, continue to abide in the state while watching the mind from the side, and maintain this state to the extent possible. When the feeling diminishes, start over again; this is the practice of no-self in phenomena.

By practicing no-self in phenomena, we will come to the realization: not only do I not exist, but the joint of my finger also does not exist.

TEST OF REALIZATION OF EMPTINESS

We do not need to ask anyone whether we have realized emptiness or not; it is very easy to tell just by conducting our own investigation. If our mind is only tranquil, relaxed, and comfortable, this merely implies we are calm and clear-headed. If we do not have a sense of emptiness, we have not attained the Middle Way realization of emptiness. Because in deep sleep we are also very calm, but it is not useful to us; the celestial beings in the form and formless realms, and some non-Buddhists also achieve great equanimity during meditative absorption, but it is hardly useful in eradicating mental afflictions. Hence, the tranquility of the mind is not a measure of realization.

What is the test? It is that element of realization in the midst of calmness. That is to say, calmness of mind lies within realization of emptiness. The mind stays calm not

unknowingly but in a state of emptiness. The so-called “state of emptiness” means a direct experience of emptiness. At that point in time, the mind rests in tranquility as well as in the realization of emptiness. Realization of emptiness denotes insight into the true nature of reality (vipassana) or wisdom; calm abiding is pacification of the mind and the thoughts (samatha).

Although we can contemplate these two aspects separately, they are actually the same since the mind and the experience of emptiness are now united as one that cannot be separated. The tranquil mind is the experience of emptiness; the experience of emptiness is also the tranquil mind. This is the “union of calm abiding and insight.”

As in the prior example of preparing food, after exerting great effort in listening and contemplation, it is ultimately necessary to get to this stage. Although only a brief encounter at the moment, with sustained practice, we can gradually extend this experience to full realization of emptiness. This is not only a practice of the Middle Way; if you know how, it is also like a Vajrayana practice because realization, whether attained through the methodology of the Middle Way or Vajrayana, is not so different.

OTHER ESSENTIALS

We can set up our own schedule for practice, whether a half hour or an hour; as mentioned before, we should keep the practice short at the beginning and split it up into many sessions. For instance, if four sittings are scheduled in a day, each sitting can be divided into several short sessions. When

we get better at the practice, we can combine these sessions into one.

Another point we have also made before is that it is best to conclude the practice session when our meditation is proceeding well. This is the case whether we are training in emptiness or impermanence.

Why is that? Should we not try to abide as much as possible in a relatively good state? If we stop when the meditation is going well, it will actually have a positive effect on the next session. We will retain an enthusiasm for the practice, have expectations of possibly repeating the experience, and look forward to starting the practice again.

If we conclude the practice session when the mind is confused, it will not help our subsequent practice.

Finally, we have to dedicate our merit and undergo a process of investigation after coming out of meditative absorption. This shall be explained at the end.

The process above can be used with all phenomena. That is to say, everything can be examined in this way. If we develop a sense of emptiness about all things, the wisdom within us that apprehends emptiness will grow.

At the beginning, everything should be investigated; of course, this doesn't mean we examine a white flower, then go on to examine a red flower. It means we consolidate all things in the same category, and conduct an investigation at the overall level.

In examining mankind, we only need to conduct a separate

investigation of someone we are especially attached to; as for external matter, we can group things together to the extent possible and establish the emptiness of phenomena by category. As an example, we can consider all different classifications of water as one and the same: I used to think water exists; after this investigation, it is now clear to me not one drop of water can be obtained, whether in a river, a lake, or even in an ocean.

At the beginning of our practice, this feeling is the only state we can attain, there is none other. Buddhist terminology can often be confusing. Our imagination starts to roam when we talk about a state of mind, but there is actually nothing mysterious about it.

By way of these methods, we will gradually realize emptiness. Although the concept is simple, and the process uncomplicated, we can attain the expected outcome just the same.

FEELING IS EMPTINESS

The so-called "aggregate of feeling" is an overall label for feelings. There are essentially three kinds: pleasant, unpleasant, and a neutral feeling which is neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

How are these feelings produced? When the eye perceives matter that is pleasant or unpleasant, this thought is transmitted to the sixth consciousness; our consciousness follows the eye and forms an attachment; desire and anger arise as a result. Anger here implies a lack of acceptance; we do not necessarily get angry at everything that is unpleasant,

but when we refuse to accept, try to avert, or bear thoughts of resentment, this is also called anger.

In general, we don't think of our feelings as the "self." From our previous analysis, it is clear feelings cannot possibly be the "self" — there is no conceptual basis for asserting they are the "self." Having established this understanding, we proceed here to the actual practice.

Prepare for meditation by maintaining the essential points of posture, visualization, exhaling impure breath, etc. Then allow the mind to calm down and begin contemplation.

First, examine the aggregate of feeling to ascertain if it is a distinct and truly existent entity. Through contemplation, we quickly see that the aggregate of feeling includes at least three different kinds of feeling, that is, pleasant, unpleasant and neutral; this way we begin to understand it is not a real entity.

1. Investigating the Pleasant Feeling

Taking this a step further, the pleasant feeling can be divided again into various kinds: when the eye perceives a fresh flower or something like a thangka, a pleasant feeling is produced which comes from the eye; when the ear hears a lovely melody, a pleasant feeling is produced which comes from the ear , thus there are many different kinds of pleasant feeling. This being the case, we can conclude the aggregate of feeling is not a distinct entity; the pleasant feeling within the aggregate is also not a truly existent, complete entity.

With the same method, we can analyze the unpleasant feeling and the neutral feeling, the result of which must be the

same. Hence, feeling can be divided into innumerable kinds.

Furthermore, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant feeling, each thought thereof can still be divided into countless instants.

What is an instant? In the scriptures, it is said to first place sixty very thin flower petals in a pile; if an archer then shoots the petals with an arrow that has a sharp, fine needle inserted on the arrowhead, the needle tip will pass through the sixty petals in a flash. Relying just on our eye, we will think the needle tip pierces all sixty petals at the same time; actually the needle tip passes through the petals in an orderly way, that is, gradually a step at a time. When it passes through one petal, it is called an instant.

Of course, this is just a rough definition of a basic unit of time, not the smallest unit; within this time concept, there are countless units of time that are even smaller. However, if we continue with the analysis, these different instants in time will be confusing to everyone, since no one will know what the shortest unit of time is or how an instant in time is defined. For example, a penny, a dime, and a dollar are money of different denominations; they do not have the same value and cannot be counted together. Similarly, different time concepts cannot be mixed together; thus Sakyamuni Buddha put forth the concept of an instant with the example of the time it takes a needle tip to pass through sixty flower petals.

However, these concepts are not refined enough. Take this book as an example, why does it have a thickness? Because many sheets of paper are stacked together. In the same way, even though a flower petal and a sheet of paper are very thin, their thickness is also comprised of countless dust particles or

quarks. This thickness is formed by minute particles arranged in order from front to back. When the needle tip pierces the thin sheet of paper, our eyes cannot see the needle tip pass through these particles in that order. This shows that our eyes are unable to see the true nature of matter at all.

Assuming the thickness of a sheet of paper or a flower petal is formed by one thousand or ten thousand particles (of course, this is just an example, the actual figure must be greater), then the time it takes for the needle tip to pass through a flower petal can also be divided into one thousand or ten thousand parts; but these one thousand or ten thousand parts can continue to be divided until time disappears without a trace, and nothing remains at the end.

We have said before if something is infinite, we cannot establish if it gets bigger or smaller when divided; but all worldly matter, including the thickness of a sheet of paper, is finite. As such, matter will only get smaller and smaller when it is divided and eventually become empty.

By the same token, the feeling of happiness, the feeling of suffering, and so forth can also be broken down in this way until it disappears altogether into empty space.

Everything boils down to this in the Buddha's logic. Apart from the Buddha, no one in the world has penetrated the true nature of phenomena so completely.

As mentioned before, people today believe that quantum physics has already reduced matter to a microscopic level whereby nothing material is left except energy, but they remain attached to energy as an existent entity. Buddhism, on the other hand, has invalidated this so-called energy and

looked beyond it. Ultimately, everything is empty. In the formation of all phenomena, the first step is emptiness, the next is energy; the macroscopic world which our five sense organs perceive is actually the last.

This emptiness is true emptiness, as in the frequently recited verse "form is emptiness." Although physicists also talk about vacuum, it is not "emptiness" in the true sense, but space that contains energy. Only the emptiness that the Buddha taught is true emptiness since nothing exists within it, not mental or physical phenomena, nor their activities.

From a macroscopic standpoint, when we see a beautiful flower, a feeling arises; but when we trace the feeling to its source, we will find that it is mere appearance, nothing of substance. Similarly, if we chase after every one of our thoughts – pleasant, sorrowful, terrifying, we will end up at the same starting point where all disappear into emptiness.

You may remember the analogy I cited before about an Indian Madhyamaka master, which I think it is quite appropriate: a certain kind of yellow flower grows in a lake; from afar, it looks like a resplendent sea of flowers, but up close, one sees that the flowers are not rooted in the ground but grow in the water. Likewise, without examination, all physical and mental phenomena appear to be very solid and orderly; however, they all disintegrate into empty space when subject to investigation. The phenomena perceived by our eye, ear, nose, and tongue are all illusions; they are neither real nor reliable. This is not just the Buddhist point of view, but it is also acknowledged by scientists today.

For instance, when we look up and see the sun every morning, it is not the image of the sun at the moment, but

that of the sun eight minutes ago; a number of stars that are some ten, hundred, even thousand light-years away exploded a very long time ago and no longer exist, yet we can still see them here on earth through a telescope. Why is that? And what is it that we see? Although these stars have already been destroyed, the light emitted from the explosion takes a very long time — tens, hundreds, even thousands of years — to get here. What we now see happened in the very distant past; from the present standpoint, it is only an illusion.

These concepts were also explained earlier, but we still have to employ them in our investigation now. A pleasant feeling, or an unpleasant feeling, appears to be very real before it is examined; however, if we examine the feeling seriously, we will find there is nothing we can grasp at all and that it eventually dissipates in empty space. When this contemplation is as powerful as the perceived feeling, do not continue to investigate or give rise to other thoughts, but abide in the realization. To abide is to retain this feeling of emptiness for a minute, two minutes, or ten minutes, the longer the better.

Apart from maintaining this state of mind, there is no other kind of abiding, nor any abider, abiding place, or state of abidance to be discriminated.

From a macro perspective, a person who is sitting on a bed to meditate ought to be able to distinguish between the abider, the abiding place, the state of abidance, and so forth. Where is the abiding place? On the bed. Who is abiding? The mind. What is the state in which the mind is abiding? A state of emptiness. Actually, however, there is no person or place in the so-called abiding. The mind and the state of emptiness are

not two different things but one and the same.

Without this experience of emptiness, there is no abiding to speak of.

Since our practice is not yet well-developed, this experience of emptiness is only short-lived. When this condition disappears, discursive thoughts will resurface; when this happens, we should return to the investigation and start over again.

2. Investigating the Unpleasant Feeling

After investigating the pleasant feeling, we now examine the unpleasant feeling.

When we are sick or defamed by others, a feeling of suffering arises. This unpleasant feeling can also be broken down using the method described before: first break the feeling down into many instants — the time it takes for a needle pin to pass through a flower petal.

When time is divided again and again, we can be sure what remains in the end is emptiness. This feeling of emptiness is ultimately what we want to attain.

Of course, having just started, we may not be able to enter this state of mind right away or have a good practice each time. If we do not experience anything in a day or two, it is normal; however, if we do not feel anything after a long period of investigation, it is a problem we should find an answer to. If our contemplation method and surroundings are correct, perhaps it is because we have just started the investigation and have yet to temper our mind or because we have strong karmic

obstructions.

To counter these difficulties, we should first do the Vajrasattva practice to purify our karma, then contemplate the above; if we do not practice Vajrasattva but go directly into contemplating the emptiness of feeling, that can also be helpful in reducing our bad karma. However, it is best to first do the practice, then contemplate. This way, the result accords with reason and the Dharma, and we can certainly tell the difference with our practice.

Although the scriptures contain a lot of practices on emptiness, in the end, whether it is investigating the feeling of happiness, the world outside, or ourselves, what we want is a moment of realization — a very strong sense that all of these things are non-existent, empty, and illusory. The more powerful this feeling is, the better. At that time, we must not “disturb” this feeling or state of mind but maintain it to the extent possible.

As mentioned earlier, in maintaining this state of mind, we must place our entire focus on it, then watch the mind from the side to see if it has left this feeling and become distracted again. This is the practice of emptiness. There is no other practice apart from this.

3. Investigating the Neutral Feeling

After investigating both the pleasant and unpleasant feelings, we continue to examine the neutral feeling.

The so-called “neutral feeling” pertains to how one feels under normal circumstances when the body is healthy and the mind is calm and at peace; it is neither pleasant nor

unpleasant. The method of investigation is the same as above; after the feeling is broken down, a profound experience of emptiness is attained. This state of mind should be maintained to the extent possible, the longer the better.

According to Buddhist texts as well as to practitioners who are accomplished, the key to a good practice is whether the mind is supervised from the side. Because we have yet attained mental freedom, our mind easily loses control if it is not supervised; it cannot stay focused, it gets lost in thought, and it arbitrarily jumps out of this state and becomes preoccupied with other things. We can prevent these circumstances by supervising the mind; as soon as it appears to be wandering, we can immediately bring it back to the state of emptiness.

As the feeling of emptiness gradually dissipates, and other discursive thoughts resurface, it is time to stop this practice and move on to the next.

PERCEPTION IS EMPTINESS

Feeling, perception, and volition are all mental activities. The mind is always active, moving incessantly – indulging in flights of fancy, unrestrained like a heavenly steed soaring across the skies, thinking of this way and that.

The so-called “aggregate of perception” refers not only to the activity of the sixth consciousness but also to the thoughts produced by the other five types of consciousness. For instance, when our eyes perceive a flower, each color on the flower – white, red, green, etc. – constitutes a different perception.

It is easy to investigate the aggregate of perception. For example, when we see a red flower, we can break down the thought of the red flower like before; at the end of the exercise, the thought of the flower disintegrates. Likewise, when we hear a sound that is harsh to the ear, the experience of the sound can be broken down in the same way. Similarly, the experience that arises from the contact of the nose with a pungent odor, the tongue with a sour, sweet, bitter, or spicy taste, and the body with a soft or coarse object can also be reduced gradually to emptiness.

Please note that when listening to a sound, it is not the ear that is listening. The ear is but a tool; that which actually experiences the sound is the ear consciousness. When we come in contact with sounds that are high or low-pitched, heavy or light, each experience constitutes a perception of the ear consciousness. Additionally, a grating sound, a pungent smell, different kinds of taste, and a soft or coarse touch in itself are not perception; it is the experience that arises when we are in contact with them that is perception.

The perception of the sixth consciousness refers to our contemplation, thoughts, and views. Within each hour, our mind is like a river from which all kinds of thought flow – good, bad, neither good nor bad thoughts appear endlessly, all of which can be broken down to emptiness.

If we can truly master these concepts of investigation, we will gain a very strong sense that all phenomena lack self-existence. We will certainly experience this later on in our practice, as the great masters and siddhas in the past also followed this path; the essential points they recorded of their own experience are just these. Because we are using the same

method to practice and following the same path, we will undoubtedly attain the same experience, sooner or later.

When a profound experience of the emptiness of phenomena arises, stay focused and abide in this state like before.

Why do I say “profound experience”? If the emptiness of all phenomena can be established just by studying the books and applying the successive steps of reduction, it is only an intellectual understanding; we cannot call this true experience. Our work ahead is to get past the words and “actualize the experience.” If our experience is obscure, it is useless to us; it must be a very clear, indubitable experience of emptiness, thus the emphasis on “profound experience.”

This is how “perception is emptiness” is established.

VOLITION IS EMPTINESS

The so-called “aggregate of volition” includes the internal motions of the body, such as swinging the arm, walking, and so forth; external phenomena such as time, space, direction, speed, and sequence of things; and all kinds of mental states or thoughts which are stages in the activities of consciousness, even though these mental states and consciousness are inseparable, all part of one thing, just as the motions of the hand and the hand itself are inseparable. There are no activities associated with consciousness that are outside of consciousness; similarly, there are no motions associated with the body that are apart from the body. However, there is a difference; consciousness is a totality and thoughts are aspects of consciousness. For instance, consciousness is likened to

a flower, while thoughts are like the petal, the pistil or the corolla of the flower.

The method for breaking down the aggregate of volition is the same as that mentioned earlier and shall not be repeated.

CONSCIOUSNESS IS EMPTINESS

The so-called “aggregate of consciousness” refers to our consciousness^①, that which constantly does the thinking. This aggregate is the most important, since a lot of people believe although the body is not self, consciousness ought to be the self; they therefore form an attachment to it.

From a macro perspective or prior to investigation, consciousness exists; it can cognize and distinguish various things. But like a rainbow which appears from afar to be truly existent, its essence can never be found if one chases after it. Similarly, if we try to look into what consciousness is, the so-called consciousness cannot be found either.

How do we establish consciousness is non-existent? Firstly, consciousness is a composite term that can be separated into many kinds and called by different names – good mental states, bad mental states, eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, etc.; among these, eye consciousness can be divided further into different colors like red, white, green, and so forth. Each kind of consciousness can also be broken down by time and into successively smaller time units until consciousness disappears altogether; there is no real entity to be found.

This is to establish emptiness via logical reasoning of the

Middle Way.

Another method, also unexcelled, is to allow consciousness to examine itself. This is because consciousness is not something that can be perceived by the eyes, or measured with an instrument; only consciousness can be relied upon to understand itself.

This method closely approximates that in Vajrayana and is extremely useful. However, the prerequisite for using this method is firstly to practice the five preliminaries and to have a certain level of realization of emptiness. It is otherwise ineffective, even if it is explained now.

PRACTICING EMPTINESS AND ERADICATING SELF-ATTACHMENT

Consciousness is an enigma that a lot of people have never thought of examining. As previously mentioned, the Western philosopher Descartes said “I think, therefore I am”; this form of speech is inflammatory in nature. People basically believe in the existence of a “self”; incited by this kind of misconception or incorrect reasoning, they become even more convinced of their viewpoint. They are not inclined to reflect on the subject again, and accordingly descend into ignorance from which there is no escape.

We are all followers of Buddhism, particularly of Mahayana Buddhism. The essential point of Mahayana Buddhism, or the Greater Vehicle, is compassion and wisdom. The “wisdom” herein denotes realization of emptiness, not worldly wisdom. That being the case, have you ever tried to examine or understand consciousness? If so, what was the result of your

examination? Most people will probably say no. It is not a real concern if you haven't, but starting now we must endeavor to understand what consciousness is.

All of us believe in past and future lives, and readily acknowledge the basis upon which the "self" exists is not the body. If someone were to ask just what is it that transmigrates from one life to another, we would say it is our consciousness that is perpetuating in samsara and that consciousness is "self." Under the circumstance, consciousness naturally becomes the basis of the existence of "self." If we can establish consciousness does not exist, then the so-called "human being" or "self" also does not exist. That is why the examination of consciousness is extremely important; it allows us to cut through the root of samsara completely.

By examining consciousness, we can instantly realize no-self and purify unlimited bad karma, even if other repentance practices are not undertaken. This is because realization of emptiness is the best method for purifying karma.

We should not think all is well just because our livelihood is taken care of. There are still a lot of meaningful activities that await us; these things are neither mysterious nor complicated, and are easy to understand. If we do not take up these activities, we will never be liberated.

Sakyamuni Buddha intended for us to fully realize emptiness and attain liberation, and thus taught us to examine form, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness in that order. Since our attachment to the body is stronger, we start by examining the physical aspect, then the mental aspect. If we can establish the emptiness of consciousness, the fundamental problem is resolved. Therefore, we should place

special effort in this area.

THE MIDDLE WAY METHODS OF INVESTIGATION

The methods of investigation include those in exoteric and Vajrayana Buddhism. The Vajrayana methods shall not be discussed at this time; the Middle Way methods of investigation in exoteric Buddhism are the two sub-schools — Svatantrika and Prasangika.

1. *Svatantrika*

The Svatantrika method of investigation is the one just explained — by way of contemplation, analysis, and dissection, consciousness ultimately "disappears."

This so-called "disappearance" does not mean it cannot be found but that it is clearly perceived to lack intrinsic existence; it is nominal existence rather than true existence. Earlier, I made a special point of emphasizing that not finding anything and directly perceiving emptiness are as far apart as sky and sea.

When a profound feeling that all things are empty arises, try to maintain that experience for as long as possible.

To a beginner, gaining realization through this method is easy and feasible.

2. *Prasangika*

The Prasangika method of investigation sets aside contemplation, does not affirm the existence or non-existence of the mind, nor establish the emptiness of the eye, ear, nose,

tongue, etc. It simply allows the mind to relax and dwell in an extremely tranquil state, and to observe itself.

All kinds of contemplation and analysis are superfluous at this time; if we analyze the mind, it will only disturb this state of tranquility. Allowing the mind to observe itself is basically the same as watching the mind from the side, which I discussed earlier.

There are many ways to observe the mind. We shall not explain the Dzogchen way. If we employ the method in the Middle Way, it becomes readily apparent – our mind and the sky outside are one and the same.

Of course, the sky we refer to here is not the polluted sky in some of the metropolitan areas but the clear blue sky often found in Tibet.

The Dzogchen practitioners also do likewise. When the sun rises in the morning, they go up the mountain and watch the sky in the west. When the body and mind are completely relaxed, the inner mind and the sky outside merge and become indistinguishable. Just like the ocean set off by the blue sky, the ocean and sky dissolve into one another and appear as one in color, deep and expansive; it is no longer possible to tell the sky and ocean apart, as all things in and out are connected.

What does it mean to be “connected”? Does the mind also turn blue in color? No, it is “connected” or unobstructed like a cloudless sky; since the stars and other celestial bodies are obscured by the intensity of the sun’s rays, what appears is a clear blue sky, free of any other color or configuration; our mind is also completely translucent. At this very moment, the mind and the world outside are in unison with emptiness.

The method discussed here is similar. When the mind is quiet, we will discover the empty space in front and our own mind are the exact same thing.

Here, being the “same thing” is from the standpoint of emptiness. The so-called “emptiness” is only a name. Actually, no one can really identify what empty space or the sky is, except to say it is the absence of any substance. The sky appears blue because the earth reflects the sunlight; the color does not exist in and of itself. In the same way, our mind does not have intrinsic nature either; the so-called “mind” is merely our imputation.

The moment we enter such a state, we know with certainty it is emptiness and have a very clear feeling of emptiness, even though there is no thought of being empty or not in our mind.

As mentioned before, some people who experience this emptiness will either cry or laugh, which is very normal. Of course, this is completely different from the reaction of people who cry or laugh in certain non-Buddhist practices.

When emptiness is truly experienced, all of one’s afflictions and fixations are gone. But because our practice is not up to standard yet, we may only experience emptiness for an instant before our mind returns to its usual way. However, with repeated practice, we will be able to lengthen the time we dwell in this state and ultimately eradicate our afflictions completely.

Since our focus is on the actual practice now, we need not say too much lest people become confused and miss the essentials.

In fact, not much needs to be said in the practice of emptiness, nor can realization of emptiness really be described. For example, Ch'an Buddhism does not advocate the use of words. The Ch'an masters do not like to say much, since they feel there is nothing to be said or can be conveyed through words. One cannot say things are empty, or things are not empty. Neither assertion is correct, the reason being these are ideas of ordinary people, whereas the state of emptiness goes beyond the limits of expression and what ordinary people can conceptualize.

Although emptiness cannot be described with words, it is not a senseless state like in deep sleep or when one is unconscious. At that moment, we have a profound kind of feeling – that of seeing everything clearly as empty, just as we now clearly see the wall in front is white without having to think “this wall ought to be white.” This sense of seeing is not through the eyes but the mind, and comes from deep within.

The Prasangika method is thus explained above.

These are all actual methods of practice; apart from these, I have not come across, nor have the masters explained, other methods of the Middle Way. Although this is the approach taken in the Middle Way, it is considered a part of the practice in Vajrayana as well as that of many other advanced practices. To describe this in our everyday language, we can only go so far. For any higher state of realization, one must experience it directly. As long as you are inclined towards the Middle Way view and can accept this method of practice, I will explain it; there is nothing to hold back. Of course, it is a different matter for other Vajrayana methods. Although exoteric and Vajrayana Buddhism differ in practice and process, the final state of

realization is essentially the same.

If you are able to gain realization through the Middle Way practice, Dzogchen is probably just an elbow away. His Holiness Jigme Phunstok Rinpoche often referred to what one of his teachers once said: if you truly realize emptiness via the Middle Way, you are already very close to Dzogchen. I believe we will attain realization in Dzogchen in the not too distant future.

What is disappointing is that too often we do not consider these practices important; thinking there are even better methods, we forgo the basics. Actually, if we can really cultivate renunciation and bodhicitta, then practice emptiness and attain realization of the Middle Way, what else is more advanced? Apart from further refining or clarifying this state of emptiness, there is nothing more. If we carelessly discard the fundamental practices of renunciation and bodhicitta, Dzogchen will not be useful to us however illustrious its name.

These are all very important points to keep in mind. In the future, we will not have to ask anyone to ascertain our own realization, just examine ourselves. Have we ever felt such emptiness before? If so, this is the first stage of realization.

As a reminder, we should not say someone has attained realization if the person only has a slight understanding of emptiness. Why is that? In acknowledging the person's realization, he or she may become arrogant: I am so special! I have already attained realization! This not only impedes the person's progress but also causes him to regress.

One should know this kind of experience is hardly special. As it is likened to seeing a picture of the moon from afar – it

is neither the picture of the moon up close nor the moon itself, we have not apprehended the true nature of reality, and are still quite far from eradicating our afflictions and attaining liberation. Hence, under ordinary circumstances, we should not take the early stage of realization too seriously.

There is a story that illustrates this point: a Vajrayana lama exceptionally skilled in making tormas^② had a disciple who studied with him for a long time. The disciple always felt the tormas he made were exactly the same as the master's and could never discern how they were different; yet every time he presented the torma he made to the master, the latter would find fault with it and have him remake it.

One day, he took the torma the master made and dabbed water on it to give it a freshly made look; he then brought it to the master, upon which the master still said it was unsatisfactory. Unable to accept this response, the disciple said, "It is you who made this torma!"

Only then did the master say to him, "Actually, you passed the qualification a long time ago; however, to make sure you progress and refine your skills, I refused to acknowledge your achievement each time." The disciple finally came to understand the master's real intent!

Likewise, we cannot be satisfied with the early stage of realization, rather we should work harder and do everything possible to perfect our present state of realization.

Realization or the lack of is totally an experience of our own; except for those with clairvoyant powers, no one else can make this determination. Apart from the criterion mentioned above, you will not be able to find a better standard for

directly affirming the state of realization, even if you employ all the exoteric Middle Way concepts in the Tripitaka. In other words, the so-called realization is none other than the state of mind previously mentioned.

Another measure is whether after experiencing this feeling, you have a stronger sense of renunciation and bodhicitta and have less greed, anger, and delusion. If the answer is yes, that is a clear sign of realization.

The next step is to elevate our level of realization; there is nothing more, as this is already a very good attainment. If we are able to attain this level of realization during meditation, what happens after meditation? After the meditation, we will feel everything is an illusion, like a dream; sometimes we will even feel our hand can pass through a wall. Because we know all is an illusion, passing through the wall is just a matter of course.

On my recent trip to Wutai Mountain, I encountered a young Tibetan, an accomplished practitioner who had this experience.

He meditated in front of me and hoped I could confirm his realization in Dzogchen. Basically, the state of Dzogchen is indescribable. The disciples in the past would go to their master and sit in meditation; by way of this method, the master could tell what level they had reached and whether that state was Dzogchen.

The young man was familiar with this tradition and thought I might also be able to give him this confirmation. Regrettably, not knowing what Dzogchen is, I could not, let alone do so through meditation. The only thing I could do was to have

him describe his feeling, and check it against what is taught in the books.

Since the state of mind during meditation cannot be explained in words, I asked him how he felt after coming out of meditation.

He said, "Sometimes I feel the table in front and all material things are illusory; sometimes I feel I can pass my hand through the table These feelings are all very powerful." Subsequently, I told him his experience should qualify as the first stage in realization, since these feelings conform entirely to the standard of realization given in the scriptures. Thus, I think in all likelihood he attained realization.

Do you have this kind of feeling? Don't be preoccupied with imagining things like: "Yesterday I dreamed of the Great Compassion Bodhisattva," "Sakyamuni Buddha smiled at me," "I saw Amitabha Buddha," "So-and-so's picture is enveloped in light," etc. These are all very senseless.

A few days ago, a Buddhist master organized an event to release yaks. A lay person from Shanghai came to see me after the event and said to me excitedly, "Our event yesterday was truly sacred! At the time, a butterfly flew by and stayed on for a very long time! This is certainly a most auspicious sign!"

At the time, I thought it was quite laughable. Butterflies are commonplace in our area during this time of the year; they were everywhere on the days of the event. One should not make a big issue out of a butterfly that flies over!

A lot of lay people are inclined to think this way. I hope it does not happen again.

It is not easy to see Amitabha or other Buddhas. Do not get in the habit of saying things that are mysterious. Even if it is true, we should not spread the word around; we only need to focus on emptiness, compassion, and renunciation, nothing else. If we have these qualities, just cultivate and nurture these aspects of wisdom; there is no need to run around and look for help everywhere. If we do not have these qualities, then practice diligently; there is even less reason to run around.

What does "not running around" mean? It is not to say you cannot look for a master and rely on a spiritual friend. Indeed, we must rely on a spiritual friend and listen to the Dharma, then practice. If we practice, we will experience these feelings which are the first step in the realization of emptiness.

Let us review the many standards of realization I have mentioned.

The first, and the most important, is our feeling during meditation; the second is whether there is an uncontrived and spontaneous feeling after meditation that the external world is illusory and non-existent; the third is whether one has more renunciation and bodhicitta, and less afflictions. These criteria must be met to qualify for realization of emptiness.

However, this is only the most basic state of realization. As an example, assume there are more than five hundred thousand steps from here to Lhasa. We have taken but one step, the road ahead is still very long! We must not feel arrogant or self-contented under any circumstance. Nonetheless, in all things, getting started is difficult; the first step in realization is also not easy. As long as we have this basic state of realization, our direction is clear; with perseverance, we will be able to proceed to the second and

third step, and eventually reach our goal.

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE PRACTICE OF EMPTINESS AND NO-SELF

The practice of emptiness is the practice of no-self in phenomena; that is, perceiving all phenomena — all material things and mental events — as emptiness, and abiding in this state. The practice of no-self refers specifically to perceiving no-self in person; it is a part of the overall practice of emptiness.

Although the practice of emptiness mentioned here is one that belongs to the Middle Way, I think it is already quite advanced. All practices, whatever their level of difficulty, need to be experienced directly, since words can only go so far in describing the experience.

Examination is just the process, not the most important, but without this process, there can be no realization of emptiness. It is considered a significant achievement if one can truly attain realization in the practices of emptiness and no-self.

The Middle Way practice and other Vajrayana practices differ only in method and process; there is virtually no difference in the ultimate realization and experience. Hence, the realization attained through the Middle Way is a highly realized state of mind. When we engage in some of the Vajrayana practices at a later point, we will discover the result is the same; there is nothing new, except for the method. We must therefore cherish this practice.

We said earlier that these teachings are appropriate only

for the serious practitioner. Why is that? Because I want to introduce concrete methods. The teachings on emptiness are not meant for everyone; to receive teachings on the actual methods, particularly for the practice of emptiness, one must at least be sincere and serious about practice. The final goal of expounding and receiving the teachings is to practice. Most importantly, it is to attain personal experience — that is the purpose of all the teachings. Aside from these practices, if we are only espousing the basic concepts of Buddhism, anyone can listen, even people who have not taken refuge in the Three Jewels.

We have all read a lot of books — Vajrayana texts, books that introduce the actual practices, also other Buddhist literature. However, on the realization of emptiness, there is nothing more in the books than what has been said already. No other words are used to describe this state of mind since it goes well beyond the limits of expression.

The practice discussed here is the basis of all practices. When we have accumulated merit in completing the preliminary practices, and when all other conditions ripen, we will definitely attain realization during the process of this practice. If we do not have experience, feeling, and realization of any kind after undertaking this practice, we will not succeed in any other practice. Because this is the most substantive, the most fundamental, and the most important of all the practices.

[Notes] _____

- ① Consciousness: the term refers not only to the sixth consciousness but to all six types of consciousness.
- ② Torma: refers to all different configurations of foodstuff made from tsampa and butter; one of five types of offering, it is a relatively popular offering in Tibetan Buddhism.

The Practice of Impermanence

The practice of impermanence is of two kinds: one is impermanence at the microscopic level; the other is impermanence at the macroscopic level. In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, the discussion on impermanence is entirely at the macroscopic level; in general, not much is said about impermanence at the microscopic level. However, both types shall be discussed here.

Firstly, what is macroscopic? What is microscopic? That which we can see, hear, and touch in everyday life is macroscopic. That which we cannot see, hear, smell, and taste but know in theory that it exists is microscopic. Either way, they are impermanent.

Why do we want to practice impermanence? As previously explained, it is because we have attachment to things staying unchanged and this fixation leads to all kinds of affliction. We also practice from both the macroscopic and microscopic perspective in order to completely understand the impermanent nature of phenomena and to eradicate our attachment to permanence.

IMPERMANENCE AT THE MICROSCOPIC LEVEL

How does one practice? First, we prepare for meditation as before: take refuge, engender bodhicitta, expel impure chi, supplicate to Sakyamuni Buddha, and so forth. Then, using the logical reasoning discussed previously, we establish that all composite phenomena arise and cease, and are impermanent. This is the case not only at the macroscopic level but also at the microscopic level, wherein all things change from instant to instant.

As mentioned earlier, the Buddha said an instant denotes the time it takes a needle tip to pass through a very thin flower petal, but this instant can be divided into still smaller parts. If an instant can be separated into hundred thousands of time segments, we can imagine how short any one time segment is. Yet, even in this fraction of an instant, everything is in a state of flux. The Buddhist term for this is arising and ceasing, the modern term is motion.

From a macro standpoint, we can take this book in our right hand and put it in our left hand; however, from a micro standpoint, when the book is placed in the left hand, it is no longer the same book. The book in the right hand has already disappeared from the right hand and does not exist anymore. What about the book in the left hand? The causes and conditions that lead to the production of this book are as follows: when the book in the right hand disappears, a new book is produced in the second place; when the book in the second place disappears, a new book is produced in the third place; when the book in the third place disappears, a new book is produced in the fourth place; by the time the book reaches the left hand after arising and ceasing successively like this,

the original book in the right hand has long since disappeared. The process by which the book goes from the right hand to the left hand is called motion. Relatively speaking, motion is a macro concept; the Buddhist interpretation differs from the macro viewpoint since the original book no longer exists. If the book has already disappeared, wherein is the motion? The book in my hand is an example of the law of cause and effect at work; when causes and conditions come together, a new book like this is produced. Our eyes cannot perceive this process or the causes and conditions; they can only tell the book has been moved from one hand to the other.

As another illustration, if we take a candle or anything that is lit and make a circle with it in the dark, even though we see a circle of light, we know it is not a circle. It is just a point that glows, not a continuous circle of light. Why do we see this circle of light? Because the light is moving very fast. If it is moving slowly, we will see it move a step at a time.

The movie film is a good example. When the speed at which films are rolled out slows down, we no longer see a continuous image on the screen but individual pictures going either forward or backward. But when the speed at which they are rolled out is raised to more than twenty-four films per second, we see one continuous image on the screen instead of individual pictures moving back and forth. Our eyes cannot tell where one picture ends and the next begins.

Likewise, in a microcosm, this book has never moved because it arises and ceases simultaneously each moment. However, the conventional view is entirely different. From our perspective, the same book exists all the time. Since this is a misconception we have always held, it is difficult for us

to understand the kind of change that takes place moment to moment. When impermanence is apprehended at this very subtle level, a contradiction arises between our experience at the macroscopic level and true reality.

Similarly, when we examine ourselves, we think: I am the same person today as I was yesterday. But this too is a macroscopic concept; from a microscopic standpoint, it is a glaring mistake since all phenomena arise and cease every instant. Relatively speaking, the microscopic view is more accurate than the macroscopic view; however, at a still deeper level, neither view is correct.

It is essential to reflect on this during the practice. After contemplation, it will become clear even though we can see the change that occurs very briefly in a lightning, a river current, or a blaze, we cannot perceive the arising and ceasing that takes place in still objects such as a wall, book, etc. At this time, we are not using our eyes but our wisdom to reflect. When we have a profound realization that all composite phenomena arise and cease in one thousandth of a second or one ten-thousandth of a second, stay focused in this state. Let the mind and the feeling of impermanence become one and the same; that is, let the sense of impermanence become a part of the mind or the nature of mind. At that point, there is nothing more to contemplate but to stop and abide in this state for as long as possible. As previously mentioned, it is then important to watch the mind from the side, not directly.

What does it mean to watch the mind directly? For instance, if there is a thought to examine whether the mind is calm or thinking of other things, it is watching the mind directly. We should not entertain this kind of examination

when abiding in the concentrated state, because once the thought of examination arises, it disrupts this state. Hence we need to watch the mind from the side.

Actually, “watching the mind directly or from the side” is an expression I introduced to clarify this method of practice. It is not a specific Buddhist term. To watch the mind from the side means not having a specific thought: Is my mind scattered? Is it thinking of other things?

Some people may question this approach: Do we not have just one mind? How can a mind be a subject and object of examination at the same time? Is it possible we have two minds? No, we do not have two minds, but our mind has the capability of abiding in a state of calm and concurrently watching itself from the side. These two aspects are very important.

When we watch the mind in this way, we can immediately discover other thoughts that surface. Without this supervision, a distracting thought will crop up but we won't even notice it; this thought will then grow into more and more thoughts until, five or ten minutes later, they run out of control.

With supervision, we can drop the thought as soon as it comes up; after dropping the thought, we can continue if possible to abide in the original state of calmness. If that state has already disappeared, we should not persist in resting the mind but instead resume contemplation.

Sometimes we can examine our own mind stream, and sometimes the world outside; all composite phenomena are objects for practicing impermanence. When we examine these objects one by one and sense impermanence with each

object, then rest in that state of mind. This is the practice of impermanence at the microscopic level.

As for other concepts pertaining to impermanence, a lot can be found in the commentaries on Buddhist logic, such as *Commentary on Valid Cognition*, or in Maitreya Bodhisattva's *Ornament of the Great Vehicle Sutras*; however, these are difficult to apprehend without a certain background in Buddhist studies. The discussions we have given on impermanence, whether they relate in substance to logic or not, are easier to understand.

With this method of investigation, we can do without concepts for the moment. Ultimately, our goal is to attain a feeling that all phenomena are impermanent. Having this feeling is most essential.

IMPERMANENCE AT THE MACROSCOPIC LEVEL

The practice of impermanence at the macroscopic level is simply that expounded in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* on the impermanence of life, death, etc. Sometimes we examine the world outside, sometimes sentient beings; sometimes we examine the spiritual masters, and sometimes the changes in the four seasons. All kinds of phenomena can be employed in our contemplation on impermanence.

Logic is not necessary in this practice. Ordinarily, we can all see the changes that go on, but we only react to the change, such as fear, when it is totally unexpected; but without practice, this feeling dissipates soon after. When changes take place with such frequency in our lives, we become numb and insensitive to them. For this reason, we must practice. By

placing importance on these methods of investigation, we will easily apprehend all composite phenomena are impermanent and unreliable. The natural world outside, all material things, our own life, possessions, and reputation are all unreliable.

A book appears in this form now, but how it looked in the past and whether it will look the same in the future is uncertain, since it is not a permanent entity. Likewise, we are alive today, but we may not be around tomorrow or the day after. The further out we go, the less guarantee there is. It is the same with our possessions, reputation, and so forth. With practice and contemplation, we will discover all things are unreliable, impermanent, and meaningless; this is the basis of renunciation. Of course, it is not yet true renunciation.

Some people become very pessimistic when they hear these teachings on impermanence: I used to be very proud of my status and possessions, but all that is meaningless now. Even my own life cannot be guaranteed. What is the point of this life?

Is this outcome good or bad? It is good because an understanding of impermanence allows us to forgo our attachment to worldly things. When we encounter death in the family, bankruptcy, or other tragedies, we will not be overwhelmed by suffering but realize such is the nature of all things and that we are now a witness to it. If our practice of impermanence is successful, we will then turn our attention to matters of liberation.

In *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, the discussion on precious human birth, impermanence, etc. is followed immediately by an elaboration on the merit and the benefits of liberation. Why is it necessary to talk about the benefits of liberation? When

we do not understand the benefits of liberation, we lose hope because we think there is no purpose in life if everything is impermanent; when we understand the benefits and know liberation represents eternal happiness, rather than being pessimistic, we feel optimistic and happy. Because we finally see the reason for living and will then direct all our effort at attaining liberation. At that point, true renunciation can be cultivated. The ultimate goal of practicing impermanence is none other than realizing this outcome.

This practice can be undertaken on your own time, and for as long or short as you like. At the end of each session, do not forget to dedicate the merit of the practice.

The Practice of Suffering

The practice of seeing contaminated phenomena as unsatisfactory is the same as that taught in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*. In general, it is divided into two stages. First, contemplate the three types of suffering in samsara – suffering of suffering, suffering of change, and all pervasive suffering; then examine the suffering in each of the six realms – the suffering in hell, the suffering in the hungry ghost realm, the suffering in the animal realm, etc. Reflecting in this way, we will come to a profound realization that the six realms of samsara are filled with suffering and that no place is spared.

At that point, our mind itself becomes the experience of all things as suffering. Abide in this state of mind for as long as possible. If the feeling can be maintained for five minutes, this five-minute duration is called the practice of seeing contaminated phenomena as unsatisfactory.

If our mind starts to wander, we should try to dispel the discursive thoughts. If after letting go of the thoughts, we can still return to the state of mind prior to distraction, we do not need to resume the investigation; if the feeling of suffering disappears altogether, we will have to start the investigation over again.

Although the practice of impermanence and suffering is an ordinary and very basic practice, it is a prerequisite to succeeding in all other practices.

People who do not understand Buddhism think it is pessimistic and passive, since the doctrine teaches all is suffering, samsara is suffering, life is filled with suffering, etc. Actually, Buddhist followers are not pessimistic at all; instead, ordinary people are the most pessimistic.

A lot of people are optimistic and hopeful when they are young, especially when their career or business is successful. However, once difficulties arise, they quickly fall into despair and become very pessimistic, to the point of taking their own lives. That is true pessimism. Many people today have an extremely passive and negative outlook on life, thinking they have only a few decades remaining in their lives, following which they will turn to stone, dirt, etc. Buddhism does not see it this way.

The precepts Sakyamuni Buddha put in place were very conservative, but allowances were also made: If a monastic is not burdened by attachments and can easily, without much effort, come into ownership of five hundred homes, the Buddha would allow the monastic to keep the homes. This rule applied only to the sangha. Even less would then be expected of lay people. Let us imagine the implication of such an idea – how many people today have five hundred homes?

Sakyamuni Buddha also indicated: If a monastic does not have greed and can easily, without much effort, come into ownership of a lavish piece of clothing worth 100,000 *Kārshāpaṇas* (the ancient Indian coin, about 8.8 grams of silver in weight, roughly 30 RMB in current value), the Buddha

would also allow the monastic to wear the apparel. Can you imagine what kind of clothing it is?

In other words, a Buddhist practitioner need not necessarily eat poorly and dress poorly, or think he or she must refrain from using the good things in life. This would also be a form of attachment. The main point is not to develop greed for these things.

The whole purpose of bringing this up is to say Buddhism is not pessimistic. Although the Buddha exhorted his followers to be content with few desires, it does not mean one must live a life of austerity. Most importantly, one should seek meaning in life through liberation, not through the pursuit of worldly pleasures.

With this understanding, we will not be overcome by setbacks at work, in our career or business, since these are just means of livelihood and not its essence. The true significance of our existence is in attaining liberation, purifying the mind, overcoming selfishness, and elevating our lives.

All aspects of our lives will then be filled with the wisdom of the Dharma. In the midst of happiness, know that even though we are in possession of worldly goods today, we may not possess them tomorrow; thus arrogance will not arise. In the midst of misfortune, know also that even though we are suffering now, this is but a means of existence; we will be able to bear it. Because our hearts are filled with energy, power, and courage.

To be sure, since we are still ordinary people, it is hard to accept setbacks, in the first day or two, the first hour or two; this is only because we are not yet accomplished in our

practice. Upon reflection, it will become clear although we have lost status and wealth, we have not lost the prospect of liberation and can still continue to practice on the path to liberation. In so doing, we will be relieved. Although this notion is common knowledge, not the practice itself, it must nevertheless be reaffirmed.

The Practice of No-Self

Although the practice of no-self and the practice of emptiness are treated separately here, the practice of no-self is actually a part of the practice of emptiness.

The main point in the practice of no-self is to overturn self-attachment, since self-attachment is the source of all our afflictions – desire, anger, delusion, etc. However, this need not be emphasized here, because one will not form an attachment to the self if the prior three practices are undertaken successfully.

There is no need to repeatedly contemplate the point about no-self in this practice. When the three practices are completed, simply reflect on whether the self exists or not. At that time, it will become quite clear: if dust particles do not exist and are empty, how can I exist? It is not possible. Once we have this profound realization of no-self, let the mind rest in this state. When the mind gets distracted, start the practice over again.

These four practices of emptiness, impermanence, suffering, and no-self should be undertaken as a set, repeated over and

over again. It is essential to dedicate the merit of the practice after coming out of meditation.

NON-ATTACHMENT: THE RIGHT KIND

After meditation sessions, we should apply these concepts and experiences to our everyday life. At all times, it is important to remember everything in life is illusory, impermanent, and non-substantial; this way we will ultimately come to a profound realization there is nothing to be attached to. Such is the right kind of non-attachment.

NON-ATTACHMENT: THE WRONG KIND

What is the wrong kind of non-attachment? If we do not practice this contemplation or experience a feeling of emptiness, just casually proclaim to let go of things at random or arbitrarily, that is the wrong kind of non-attachment.

The Ch'an monk Moheyan stirred up a well-known dispute in Tibet during his time. This is not to say Ch'an Buddhism is wrong; Ch'an is a very good practice. Moreover, we cannot be sure if Moheyan attained enlightenment or not, but what he said is incorrect.

In his instruction to many beginners, he said: "It is not necessary to contemplate this way; the mind should be empty of all thoughts, whether good or bad. If you cultivate good thoughts, you will take rebirth in the higher realms; if you harbor evil thoughts, you will take rebirth in the lower realms; if you are completely free of thought, it is liberation." In this explanation, one cannot find any of the following elements:

the logical reasoning of the Middle Way, the practice of subtle energy and channel in Vajrayana, or the pith instructions of Dzogchen. To let go under these circumstances is merely letting go; nothing more is attained. Accordingly, this approach gave rise to an intense debate in Tibet.

A practitioner should stay detached when circumstances so require, and remain attached if attachment is called for. When cultivating bodhicitta, attachment is essential. Sakyamuni Buddha said that at that point our self-attachment should be bigger than Mount Meru — I want to attain Buddhahood, I want to free all sentient beings from suffering, I want to undertake actions that are beneficial to others, etc. This kind of self-attachment is indispensable at the beginning; with practice, one gradually dispels the wrong kind of self-attachment, creates the conditions for realizing emptiness and compassion, and ultimately eradicates all forms of attachment. Thus, the delineation between attachment and non-attachment must be very clear.

At times this investigation can be challenging. When we do not want to continue with the investigation, let the mind rest. Do not engage in contemplation of any kind; do not reflect on precious human birth, samsara is suffering, and so forth; stay completely relaxed. This is actually the method the monk Moheyan advocated; we can rest the mind in the same way.

If our practice of the preliminaries is good and we have strong faith in the Three Jewels, Vajrayana, and Dzogchen, we may experience realization at this moment. It is a very special moment because the mind, fully relaxed after an exhausting period of contemplation, is capable of sudden awareness of the voidness of its own nature.

Our final goal is to produce a very strong and precise feeling of emptiness or impermanence each time we meditate. When not meditating, our temporary objective is to be able to experience emptiness and impermanence naturally without having to think specifically about these concepts in everyday life.

Mipham Rinpoche said this is the practice of exoteric Buddhism which anyone can undertake. The emphasis in the method is on practice, not on exposition; although not much is said on the concepts, realization is indeed possible. If we do not practice, we will never experience anything even if the concepts are explained in great detail. Like a parrot repeating the words of others, it is meaningless.

If this method is practiced well, the essence of all of the 84,000 methods of practice is also realized. Hence, this is a critical practice that must be undertaken. Apart from the practice of no-self and emptiness, the other two practices are already included in the outer preliminaries; this practice can also be combined with the five inner preliminaries. Practitioners of the five preliminaries who are interested in training in no-self and emptiness can do so simultaneously on their own time; however, it is best to complete the inner and outer preliminaries first. When we have taken this practice to a certain level, we can move on to Dzogchen.

There is no specific practice for nirvana other than the practice of no-self and emptiness. Nirvana is the final outcome – the state of Buddhahood.

The Final Review

The process of coming out of meditative concentration can also be called “getting up from a sitting.” After completing our practice at a sitting, we should not get up immediately but rather look back and reflect on the practice.

There are two kinds of outcome: in one case, the practice goes well with few thoughts to distract us; it is easy at this time to become arrogant and think if we continue to practice this way, we will attain realization. We must then subdue this pride by telling ourselves: “Although this practice was good, it does not mean I am special. I must still do well next time.” This is how arrogance can be ameliorated.

In the other case, the practice does not go well and is actually filled with a lot of negative emotions – greed, anger, delusion , even more so than when we are not meditating. It is easy at this time to be despondent and think if we meditate like this, there is no hope for liberation. We must then encourage ourselves: “Even if I failed at this sitting, there will be another. Although I encountered a lot of discursive thoughts as well as afflictions in this sitting, it is very normal since I am just a beginner; these distractions are to be expected. However, by persevering and making effort one step at a time, I will succeed for sure; there is no reason to lose hope.”

Then vow to succeed in the next sitting. When practicing, do not fall into the two extremes – of being arrogant and feeling disappointed too early.

Subsequently, we once again examine if the vow made before entering meditation has been carried out. Prior to getting up from the sitting, it is very important to conduct this review and adjust our mindset. This process of coming out of and entering meditation is the same each time.