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The Path of Joy

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Celebrating Vesak Day
at BL on May 13, 2014

If my sickness is of benefit to living beings, let me be sick.
If my death would benefit them, may I die.
But if my recovery would help, may I be cured.
*Bless me to accept whatever happens with **JOY** and use it as my **PATH**.*

Gyelsay Togmay Sangpo

Editorial Board

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Bhante Says

Contemplating Death and Impermanence

Once the Buddha was living in a *vihara* or monastery in a small town. There were two groups of monks there.

One group was led by an expert on disciplinary rules, the 227 precepts of a monk. The other group's leader was an expert on the teachings of the Buddha or the Dharma.

At that time, a misunderstanding arose between these two groups of monks.

The monk who taught the Dharma ignored certain minor monastic rules. In the Buddhist monastic code of conduct known as the *Vinaya*, there are certain rules which are minor but nevertheless still important. For example, there are rules on how to use the toilet, how to clean it and so on. A monk must also not leave any water in the container after cleaning the toilet. The person who comes next has to go and fetch water for himself.

These are minor rules so the preaching monk did not bother much about them. The other teacher, however, did pay great attention to such rules.

One day, the Dharma monk left some water in the container. The *Vinaya* teacher saw this and complained about it to his disciples. Soon criticisms against the Dharma teacher spread. This rift eventually grew into a big dispute.

The Buddha advised the two monks to resolve the matter amicably but to no avail. Disappointed, the Buddha left the *vihara* and went to the forest to meditate.

When the lay people heard about this, they were very unhappy and decided to stop supporting the *vihara*. Faced with this disaster, the monks had no choice but to resolve the dispute by themselves. They realised that they had allowed their foolishness to grow to the extent that the very survival of the *vihara* was threatened. In due course, they sent someone to invite the Buddha back.

Upon his return, the Buddha took the opportunity to give a sermon on the importance of living in harmony.

People who quarrel even on small matters are generally not mindful that one day they have to die and that these things don't matter so much in the long term. If they are mindful that they will die some day, they will stop bickering and attempt to live in harmony with others.

When people contemplate death, they realise that life is short and that they have to maximise the use of their available time and so they stop quarrelling. Their appreciation of impermanence thereby improves.

In this impermanent world, what is probably more important than anything else is to live in peace and harmony. There are people who lead quarrelsome lives and bear grudges. But often when these people are gravely sick, say, when they are on their deathbed, they ask their friends to invite the persons with whom they have quarrelled to come and see them before they die. When these people arrive, the sick person asks for their forgiveness.

And so, in order to have peace of mind at the last moment of their lives, even these quarrelsome people want to make peace with their enemies.

Thus it is important to note that even something as tragic or frightening as death has positive aspects. The Buddha mentioned certain of these positive aspects of death in his sermons.

When we look at the Buddha's teachings from this vantage point, we realise that, despite all the talk about suffering, it is not a negative teaching. On the contrary, it is highly positive. When we relinquish anger and hatred and stop bearing grudges, this can only bring good results.

In our contemporary society, we tend to pay more attention to materialistic progress so we think that it is not important or necessary to talk, or even think, about death. But, in reality, this is not true. As the great Thai meditation master, Ajahn Chah said -

'When one does not understand death, life can be very confusing.'

Indeed, in modern society, there may be a need or practical reason to think or talk about death even more than in the olden days.

Today, as a result of the advancement of science and technology, we can know certain things beforehand. For example, some parents want to know whether their unborn babies will be male or female. In some countries, their motivation may be to get rid of female babies for whatever reasons but most people nowadays are happy to have children of either sex and they simply want to know the sex of their babies out of curiosity.

With respect to death, it is the same.

We may not know the exact day when we will die. But with the current state of technology, when we are seriously ill, sometimes the doctor can tell how long more, say, how many months or years more, we can expect to live.

So when we are in this situation, when we are told that our days are numbered, how are we going to respond? Are we going to be miserable? That would be very unfortunate, totally contrary to what the Buddha taught.

Buddhism teaches us that life is very uncertain. No matter how strong and healthy we are at any moment, there is no guarantee that we can remain the same for a long time, even the next day or the next moment. So it is a good thing, while we are still healthy and of sound mind, to contemplate on the vulnerability of our lives.

In the *Abhinhapaccavekkhitabba Sutta*, the Buddha taught us to reflect on five things as a daily practice. The Buddha said -

"There are these five facts that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained. Which five?

'I am subject to ageing, have not gone beyond ageing.' This is the first fact that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained.

'I am subject to illness, have not gone beyond illness.' ...

'I am subject to death, have not gone beyond death.' ...

'I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me.' ...

'I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir.' ...

These are the five facts that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained."

Let me discuss some of these reflections one by one.

'I am subject to illness.'

I can give myself as an example. Now I am more than 70 years old but, as I always tend to think, I am still not so old!

I had no health problems at all until I passed 70 years of age. I never went to hospital to get medicine or get admitted. Actually, I was a bit proud of that also. All that changed after I passed 70 years of age.

If we perform this contemplation daily, when we do have health problems, which will inevitably come, our mind will not be shaken and we won't feel that the world is coming to an end. Instead, we will be able to accept that falling sick is a necessary part of life just as a motor car will sooner or later have engine problems or a computer will not work properly or may even crash every now and then.

As someone once joked, when teenagers wake up in the morning, the first thing they do is to look in the mirror to see whether there is any pimple that needs to be removed. When the old wake up in the morning, if they don't feel any pain in any part of their bodies, it is a miracle!

'I am subject to death.'

It is good to be mindful that we are not going to live forever. As I have said, realising that life is short and unpredictable will help us to cherish the time that we have and make sure that we spend *'quality time'* with our loved ones.

The late Christopher Hitchens, the renowned journalist and champion of atheism, died of cancer a few years ago. People often say that atheists are afraid of death for obvious reasons. But, although he was an atheist, he accepted his death with a remarkable degree of equanimity. Why? Because he realised that his death was a necessary part of not only his life but the wider scheme of things on this earth. For the young to grow, the old need to die and make room for future generations.

The Buddhist spiritual practice, of course, goes much further than this.

Rather than death being considered as simply being necessary, if our minds are highly trained, we can transform this otherwise

negative experience into a positive one. For example, the death process is often used by Buddhist masters such as His Holiness, the 16th Karmapa, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and Ajahn Chah as a tool for teaching their followers how to die in a peaceful and dignified way, in a manner that is skillful and beneficial to oneself and others. Indeed, it is taught, particularly in Tibetan Buddhism, that death is a great opportunity to realise enlightenment.

'I am subject to separation from all my loved ones.'

Those of us who live family lives have many close relatives. Then we also have our friends. Sometimes friends are even closer to us than our relatives. But, whether they are friends or relatives, we are subject to separation from every single one of them. As we live in a small and modern city state, it is very common for us to be separated from our family members and they from us from time to time.

The Buddha advised us that since separation is inevitable, why don't we contemplate on it? Then we will not be shocked when it happens. In this way, we can become mature people.

'I am subject to the results of karma.'

One of the most misunderstood concepts in Buddhism is karma.

In Buddhism karma is not fate or destiny. It is actually the exact opposite because the word '*karma*' actually means '*action*', something positive or dynamic rather than static or fixed.

Thus in the *Nibbedhika Sutta: Penetrative*, the Buddha told the monks –

"Intention, I tell you, is kamma. Intending, one does kamma by way of body, speech, and intellect."

The Buddha said that if we are destined or fated in life to be rich or poor, happy or miserable, then spiritual practice becomes meaningless. It is like the case of a university student who is guaranteed a first class honours degree no matter what he does or does not do. Why then bother to study?

And so, even if we have performed some unskillful actions which would in the normal course of things have resulted in some unfortunate consequences, until they occur, we can try to alleviate the seriousness of those consequences by performing some skillful actions such as by practising generosity or kindness to others especially the vulnerable and poor in our society. But I have to add that, of course, in terms of spiritual practice, it is always best to perform good actions without any ulterior motive.

Thus realising that we are responsible for our actions and that we have to experience the results of our actions in this life or future lives, it is beneficial for us to reflect on this fact on a daily basis. This will enable us to be more mindful of our actions and their consequences not only for us but also on other beings that may be adversely affected.

To summarise, I would like to quote from a couple of sutras that may help to give you a more vivid and clear picture of what I am trying to say here in the Buddha's own words.

The *Abhaya Sutta* is an interesting discourse which begins with someone going to the Buddha and making a brazen statement.

"I am of the view and opinion that there is no one who, subject to death, is not afraid or in terror of death."

This is not an uncommon view. It is understandable why somebody would say this even today. Why? Because death is indeed a frightening prospect.

In the *Pabbatopama Sutta: The Simile of the Mountains*, for example, the Buddha himself described in no uncertain terms how frightening death can be.

Like massive boulders,
mountains pressing against the sky,
moving in from all sides,
crushing the four directions,
so ageing and death
come rolling over living beings:
noble warriors, brahmans, merchants,
workers, outcastes, and scavengers.
They spare nothing.
They trample everything.

Nevertheless, in the *Abhaya Sutta* , the Buddha rejected this statement. There are indeed in this world, the Buddha stressed, people who are not afraid of death. Who are they?

These are people who have –

-'abandoned passion, desire, fondness, thirst, fever, and craving for sensuality';
-'abandoned passion, desire, fondness, thirst, fever, and craving for the body.'
-'done what is good, ... what is skillful, ... given protection to those in fear, and ... not done what is evil, savage, or cruel.'
-'no doubt or perplexity, who (have) arrived at certainty with regard to the True Dhamma.'

The practice of contemplating the five things I have mentioned above will certainly help us to lose our natural fear of death and lead our lives in a more meaningful way for the benefit of not only ourselves but others as well. We don't have to contemplate them all day and night but I am sure anyone can do this for a few minutes every day.

And please keep forever in your minds these memorable words of Ajahn Chah –

'If you trained properly, you wouldn't feel frightened when you fall sick, nor upset when someone dies. When you go into a hospital for treatment, determine in your mind that if you get better, that's fine, and that if you die, that's fine, too. I guarantee you that if the doctors told me I had cancer and was going to die in a few months, I'd remind the doctors, "Watch out because death is coming to get you, too. It's just a question of who goes first and who goes later." Doctors are not going to cure death or prevent death. Only the Buddha was such a doctor, so why not go ahead and use the Buddha's medicine?'

I wish you success in your spiritual practice.

Bhante B Dhammaratana
Religious Advisor
Buddhist Library

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Wat Rong Khun or the White Temple in Chiangrai, Thailand,
severely damaged in an earthquake on Monday, May 5, 2014.

Photo Credit : Cherdsak Yupao

Editorial

Neither Fish, Nor Fowl, Just Dependently Arising

'…with a stream of continuity, there is neither identity nor otherness.'

Prof. Y Karunadasa

Soon after the Buddha attained enlightenment, he pondered whether or not to teach the Dharma he had just discovered.

He decided against it.

Why did the Buddha, after having undergone so much hardship and deprivation, decide against teaching those he wanted to save, just when he had succeeded in his quest for enlightenment? It seems strange.

According to the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the Buddha thought to himself –

Enough now with teaching
What only with difficulty
I reached.
This Dhamma is not easily realized
by those overcome
with aversion and passion.

What is abstruse, subtle,
deep, hard to see,
going against the flow —
those delighting in passion,
cloaked in the mass of darkness,
won't see.

The Buddha thus considered two things - the nature of the Dharma and the nature of the people he wanted to save.

He described the *Dharma as 'not easily realized' and 'abstruse, subtle, deep, hard to see, going against the flow.'* Is the Dharma really that difficult?

A friend of mine once attended a talk given by a prominent Buddhist monk. After the talk, he said to me, *"Hey, you are a Buddhist. Tell me, why does the monk teach things we already know?"*

At first glance, what he said seemed reasonable enough. The precepts, for example – not to kill, steal, commit adultery, lie or consume intoxicants – they are not rocket science, are they?

Perhaps not. But what underlies the precepts, and all other Buddhist teachings, is something that is much more subtle and profound – dependent arising.

If my friend had read, for example, the *Samana-Mundika Sutta*, he might have come to a different conclusion.

In that sutra, a carpenter, having attended a discourse by another teacher went to the Buddha for confirmation. He had just learned that a person who *'does no evil action with his body, speaks no evil speech, resolves on no evil resolve, and maintains himself with no evil means of livelihood'* is *'consummate in what is skillful, foremost in what is skillful, an invincible contemplative attained to the highest attainments.'* Is this a valid teaching? He wanted to know. The Buddha responded as follows.

"If an individual is endowed with these four qualities, I do not describe him as consummate in what is skillful, foremost in what is skillful, an invincible contemplative attained to the highest attainments. Rather, he stands on the same level as a stupid baby boy lying on its back.

Now, an individual endowed with which ten qualities is one whom I describe as being

consummate in what is skillful, foremost in what is skillful, an invincible contemplative attained to the highest attainments? One endowed with the right view of one beyond training, the right resolve ... the right speech ... the right action ... the right livelihood ... the right effort ... the right mindfulness. .. the right concentration... the right knowledge ... the right release of one beyond training. An individual endowed with these ten qualities is one whom I describe as being consummate in what is skillful, foremost in what is skillful, an invincible contemplative attained to the highest attainments."

Thus, according to the Buddha, the first pre-requisite of *'an invincible contemplative' is 'right view'* - wisdom realising emptiness or, the other side of the same coin, dependent arising

What is dependent arising?

In his book, *Early Buddhist Teachings – The Middle Position in Theory and Practice*, Prof Y Karunadasa, an expert on Early Buddhism, states the general formulation of dependent arising.

'This being present, that comes to be: on this arising, that arises. This being absent, that does not come to be; on this ceasing, that cease.'

'This definition shows that whatever arises is arising in dependence on conditions, whatever ceases is ceasing because of the cessation of those conditions which made it arise.'

He reminds us of some important characteristics of dependent arising.

Firstly, while it is usually formulated with the singular noun, this is not necessarily the case in practice. Prof Karu:

'... (F)rom a plurality of conditions arise a plurality of conditioned factors ... nothing arises from nothing, nothing arises from a single condition, nothing arises as a single conditioned factor. It is always the case that from a multiplicity of conditions arises a multiplicity of conditioned factors.'

Secondly, dependent arising is not a compromise between two opposing views but a transcendence of them.

In the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the Buddha gives the proper context-

"This world, Kaccana, for the most part depends upon a duality — upon the notion of existence and the notion of nonexistence. But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of non-existence in regard to the world. And for one who sees the cessation of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no notion of existence in regard to the world.

... 'All exists': Kaccana', this is one extreme. 'All does not exist': this is the second extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dhamma by the middle.'

Prof Karu again:

'Dependent arising ,,, is presented as 'the middle doctrine' because it steers clear of the mutual conflict between spiritual eternalism and materialist annihilationism ... also called the view(s) of being and non-being, or ... existence and ... non-existence respectively.'

Thirdly, in Buddhism, what is relevant for spiritual practice with regard to the application of dependent arising is the world that we experience through our six senses – eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind - not the external world as such.

Questioned as to what constitutes 'the world', the Buddha replied –

'Wherever Samiddhi, there is the eye, the visible forms, the visual consciousness, and the things perceptible with the visual consciousness, there lies the world, there lies the concept of the world. Wherever, there is the ear... the nose ... the tongue ... the body ... the mind, there lies the world, there lies the concept of the world.'

> ***... (F)rom a plurality of conditions arise a plurality of conditioned factors ...*** **(Prof. Karu)**

Prof Karu:

'... the Buddha does not deny the objective reality of the world. What he denies is that which transcends the bounds of possible experience.

In other words, for early Buddhism, 'world' means 'individual existence' in relation to the external world. It is, in fact, only through the activity of our physical and mental sense-faculties that a world can be experienced and known at all. What is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched by the physical sense-faculties, and our various mental functions, both conscious and unconscious – this is the world in which we live. It is precisely this world, the world as given in experience, comprising both knowledge and the known in the widest sense, that Buddhism analyses into several basic factors, such as the five aggregates, the twelve sense-bases, and the eighteen elements of cognition. It is also precisely this world that Buddhism seeks to explain on the basis of its doctrine of dependent arising.'

The fact that the Dharma is premised on causes and conditions and their effects and not, say, faith in the Buddha or a holy book or language, has fundamental implications.

To begin with, a causeless first cause (God) or a caused but unchanging and permanent entity (soul) have no roles to play for obvious reasons.

And so for people who like to fit Buddhism neatly into a box, this presents a problem. Is it a religion, a philosophy, a way of life or a psychology? A false choice, for sure. Because in reality, Buddhism is all of them. And none of them, exclusively.

With this context in mind, we can better understand, say, the Buddha's famous pronouncement in the *Kalama Sutta*. Confused by the conflicting teachings of visiting religious teachers, a group of non-Buddhists approached the Buddha for guidance. You are no doubt very familiar with the advice that the Buddha gave them,

'So, as I said, Kalamas: 'Don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.' When you know for yourselves that, 'These qualities are unskillful; these qualities are blameworthy; these qualities are criticized by the wise; these qualities, when adopted and carried out, lead to harm and to suffering" — then you should abandon them.

'... When you know for yourselves that, 'These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted and carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness' — then you should enter and remain in them.'

Thus the Buddha encouraged his audience not to rely on externalities but to take the responsibility for themselves to 'know' which of the teachings on offer are worth following and which ones are not.

Then in the *Bahiya Sutta*, the Buddha gave a one-paragraph teaching to a persistent Bahiya who refused to accept 'no' for an answer.

"Then, Bāhiya, you should train yourself thus: In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized. That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bāhiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress."

This teaching was so profound and powerful that Bhaiya became enlightened upon hearing it because it was enough to enable his mind to realise dependent arising.

Over the centuries, numerous Buddhist traditions have sprouted and evolved resulting in some of them bearing greater resemblance

to other religions than to each other. But there is a golden thread that runs through, and unites, them all, a litmus test that certifies that they are Buddhist – dependent arising.

This is hardly surprising if we bear in mind that the Buddha himself regarded dependent arising as the essence of the Dharma. Thus in the *Mahahatthipadopama Sutta*, Ven. Sariputta reminded the monks, *"Now this has been said by the Blessed One: 'One who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination.' "*

Buddhist tantra, for example, may look a lot like Hindu tantra, and nothing like Zen or Theravada Buddhism, but the similarity ends there.

'Despite the similarities between Buddhist and Hindu Tantric practices, Tantric Buddhism has always retained its critical philosophical attitude. (T)here is no important philosophical difference between Tantric Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism ... And hence, there are two chief elements in Buddhist Tantric philosophy – 'mind' and 'emptiness'.

HH Sakya Trizin
Teachings on Tantra (Part 1)
– The Philosophy and Practice of Tantra

And Pure Land Buddhism may seem theistic. But not really.

'(c)onditional arising ,,, is a fundamental tenet of Buddhism ... All phenomena in this world and human life come about as the result of causes and conditions ... Thus in Shin Buddhism when we say, "I am saved by Amidha Buddha," this essentially means that, at the very moment that Amida Buddha attains buddhahood, we are saved and attain buddhahood, through conditional arising. Conversely, when we are saved, Amidha Buddha attains buddhahood."

Takamaro Shigaraki:
Heart of the Shin Buddhist Path

Yet, despite its pivotal role, the Dharma itself is dependent arising because the Dharma is nothing if not rational and consistent.

In the *Parable of the Raft*, for instance, the Buddha famously compared the Dharma to a raft, a tool to be used for its intended purpose but not to be clung to. In Prof Karu's words, the Dharma

'is for the purpose of crossing over and not to be grasped as a theory. As a means to an end, the Dhamma has only relative value, relative to the realization of the goal.'

And so, we can now see why the Buddha described the Dharma as *'abstruse'.* But how does it go *'against the flow'?*

Once, when I was teaching a class of beginners at BL, a student asked, *"Why is the Dharma so 'wishy-washy'? Why can't it be more straight forward?"*

On another occasion, I gave a tutorial to some law students at the NUS. At the end of our discussion, a student wanted to know the *'right answer'.*

I told him that his reasons were more important than the *'right answer'.* He was flabbergasted and dropped his head to the table with a loud thud.

It is human nature to demand straightforward, clear-cut answers. In contrast, dependent arising is complex, dynamic, and nuanced.

It is also human nature to seek refuge in confirmation bias and to reify, precisely what dependent arising is supposed to vaccinate us against.

To complete the story of the Buddha, as we all know, he ultimately agreed to teach the Dharma. The rest, as they say, is history.

Reading Prof Karu's book brought to me fond memories of the days when he used to lecture at BL. With this book, I now have a handy and reliable reference resource which explains this difficult topic (amongst others) methodically, authoritatively and in clear and

simple language, the clear hallmark of an expert.

Whatever Buddhist tradition we may choose to practise, this book will certainly provide the necessary solid foundation in Early Buddhism.

As usual, I wish you pleasant reading.

Chwee Beng
Editor

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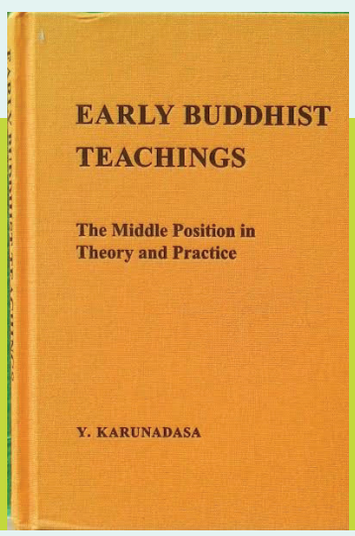


BL EVENT

BL EVENT: VESAK DAY 2014
Date: May 13, 2014
Venue: Buddhist Library
Photo Credits: Yew Beng & Yeow Foo

BL EVENT

BL EVENT: MOTHERS DAY 2014
Date: May 4, 2014
Venue: Hotel Royal@Queens
Photo Credit: Yeow Foo

BL EVENT

BL EVENT: TAI PEH OLD FOLKS HOME VISIT
Date: February 15, 2014
Venue: Tai Peh Old Folks Home
Photo Credit: Weng Fai







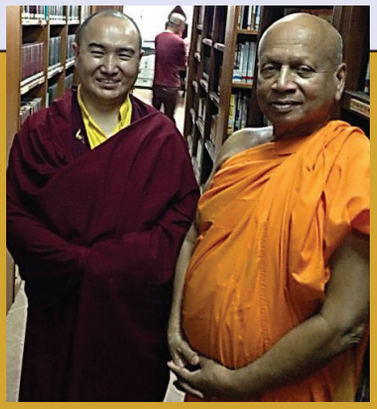




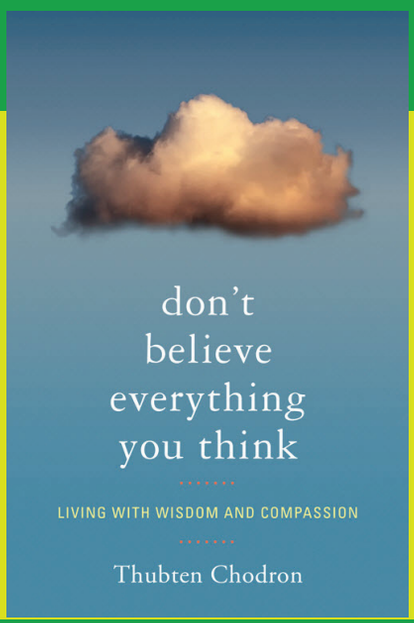



BL EVENT

BL EVENT: DHARMA TALK BY TULKU DAMCHOE RINPOCHE
Topic: *Eight Verses for Training the Mind* by Geshe Langri Tangpa
Date: June 7 & 8, 2014
Venue: BL Auditorium
Photo Credits: Claudia Hofmaier & Ng Wee Beng



BOOK REVIEW



Don't believe everything you think

- Living with Wisdom and Compassion

Author: Venerable Thubten Chodron

Reviewer: Saito 'Sandy' Shinobu

Do you think the person still remembers today what made you angry?

This simple question hit me like a thunderstorm when I shared my *'memorable'* experience with my spiritual mentor about some words spoken by a director of a company for whom I was working long ago. People may laugh about this tiny realisation, but this was a step forward for me ten years ago.

Ven. Thubten Chodron's book *'Don't believe everything you think'* introduces Tibetan monk and Bodhisattva Togmay Zangpo's *The Thirty-Seven Practices of Bodhisattvas* with her insights and experiences as well as her Dharma students' actual stories. There are thirty-seven verses which should enable us to remind ourselves to practise not on a daily basis, but rather moment-to-moment as we capture our *sati* (awareness).

For example, verse 20: *Working with Anger*

... Our anger has nothing to do with the other person's actions or motives. Why? One person will become enraged at a situation while another person is calm ... We create a description or story about the situation and the other person's intentions and actions, and then make ourselves mad ...

When people read this verse, they would probably reflect immediately *'How often can I control my mind correctly in this way especially when I face impulsive emotions?'*

My spiritual mentor has ever told me, *"Something outside cannot shake your mind. It is just data and the data is supposed to be neutral information. If you experience some*

feeling, happy or unhappy, this is something you subconsciously choose yourself. In fact, nobody can force you to feel one way or another."

I have kept these words in my mind for a long time. When I first read it, verse 20 suddenly woke me up and shook much sense into me because these words have a profound meaning and have the power to change.

Ven. Thubten Chodron not only explains the meaning of each verse but she also encourages her students to apply Dharma in their lives which may assist them to change or improve their lives. Those stories are also helpful to readers if they contemplate further because most of us are but ordinary people who have faced or are facing similar obstacles or pains. Otherwise, we might have to struggle quietly by ourselves.

There is one more important reason why this book should be great help to readers.

Since a long time ago, I have been struggling with the bad habit of being moved to tears easily. When watching a movie or even a sports competition, not to mention witnessing wedding or cultural ceremonies, I am easily deeply affected. I am often left speechless. My eyes become filled with tears without regard to place or occasion. I have been hoping to control this bad habit for a long time, but unfortunately to no avail.

Then one day I read verse 24 of Ven. Thubten Chodron's book.

Verse 24: *Suffering is like a dream*

....When you watch a movie, you get emotional about what happens to the characters. But when you remember that there are no real people in the screen, your mind calms down. Life occurrences are the same. They are just illusory appearances. There are no real things out there that have their own essence for one to hold onto, crave or grasp onto...

Ever since I read Ven. Thubten Chodron's explanation, my mind seems to be *'less liquid'.* This is difficult to describe but if I am asked to verbalise what I mean, I might use the term – *'detached mind'.*

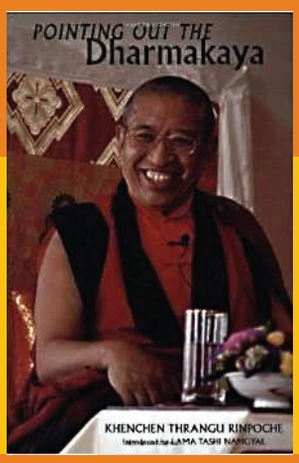
Ven. Thubten Chodron shows with much compassion how to become a better and happier person throughout this book. Not all verses will touch or affect everybody equally, of course.

Some people may even say that it is not an easy task to lead the life as full Dharma practitioners or Bodhisattvas because we are still living in this very mundane world. We are part of a material society. We need to sustain our household life, raise kids and take care of our elders. And in order for us to fulfill these tasks, we have to work to earn a living.

As society gets more and more matured, complex and developed, we have to work harder to earn a little more so that we can keep up with the Joneses. Wherever we are, as long as we are in this world, it is a little tough to escape this loop fully, which is not necessarily a bad thing. However, we should not ignore the Buddha's teachings and the Bodhisattva practices no matter how busy or hectic our lives may be. Everyone knows that there are certain levels of challenges which we face in our respective working environments such as a demanding work schedule, our superior's high expectations or tight time management. When we directly face these situations and feel tired or harassed, this book will provide us the remedy if we can understand, digest and take the opportunity to practise being Bodhisattvas even though we may be pushed to extremes in unreasonable circumstances.

How wonderful if more and more people can truly come to think like Ven. Thubten Chodron and feel whatever circumstances we come cross, whether positive or negative, in our Dharma, they are all precious Dhamma teachers to help us understand the Buddha's teachings.

BOOK REVIEW



Pointing Out the Dharmakaya - Teachings on the Ninth Karmapa's Text

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Reviewer: Geok Hua

An eminent teacher of the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism as well as a renowned meditation master and scholar, Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche has also served as tutor to His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa, OgyenTrinley Dorje and is the author of many valuable texts, including *Essentials of Mahamudra, Ocean of Definitive Meaning and Primodial Awareness.*

Although Rinpoche describes the teachings or instructions as simple and easy to follow which is true in his style of delivery, however, from his commentary, one can see that the text is extensive and in-depth with respect to its approach on insight meditation, the way of the Mahamudra. It is a detailed methodology guiding the practitioner to look into the nature of his own mind. This text is the shortest complete presentation of the Mahamudra practice. Since this book is a compilation of his teachings and commentary on a renowned Buddhist text by The 9th Karmpa, Wangchuk Dorje (1556-1603), Rinpoche keeps close to the core but at the same time injects a sense of freshness and relevance to our times.

Similar to other methods of mental cultivation, the mind has to be prepared before one begins the actual practice. In fact, the Mahamudra practice makes an even stronger demand on a serious student. The preliminary practice to develop a strong grounding requires a serious student to contemplate on foundational topics such as death and impermanence, the precious human rebirth, karma and its effects and so forth. This practice will help to reduce the attachment and aversion rooted in this sense of grasping to an *'I'*. It also helps the student to reflect on the changing nature of the world around us including the 'self' and the fact that the world of our experiences is largely karma-induced. If suffering is to be extinguished, then the mind which is its creator must be subdued. When this grasping has been loosened, the mind too will be softened, hence allowing the actual practice to begin. Thrangu Rinpoche emphasises the need to establish a solid foundation. Without this foundation, the practice will be like *'building a house on shifting sand'.*

It is quite clear that without gaining concentration, one will have difficulty in going further into insight or *vipashyana* meditation which, in the Tibetan tradition, is the technique of looking into one's own mind and experience. In order to maintain a stable *vipashyana* practice, a strong grounding in *shamatha* or tranquillity meditation is necessary. For those who have received the instructions to pointing out in vipashyana meditation, the subsequent practice in *shamatha* will enhance the stability and lucidity of the recognition of the nature of one's mind.

The main practice itself is divided into two aspects - that of *shamatha and vipashyana.*

Shamatha provides the stable grounding in concentration making the mind pliable for the effort needed to do the work of insight meditation which leads to final liberation.

Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche emphasises the absolute necessity of *shamatha* meditation both in the ultimate and conventional senses.

In the latter, an uncontrolled mind is incessantly led by a continuous stream of both positive and negative thoughts but mostly negative. The practitioner through *shamatha* meditation gradually gains freedom from the influence of these negative thoughts by expanding the spaciousness within one's experience.

In the *shamatha* meditation, physical bodily posture and the role of mindfulness and alertness; faculties which one already possesses, are explained in detail. The types of hindrances which arise during meditation and their function to distract the mind from the object of meditation together with their appropriate antidotes are discussed and one is given several alternatives to work with by applying, experiencing and finally selecting that which works best for oneself.

Thrangu Rinpoche's emphasis that a stable and continuous development of *shamatha* is necessary for the cultivation of *vipashyana* meditation is a timely reminder for those who rush headlong into vipashyana hoping to gain insights. All too often people disregard the need to cultivate a stable grounding in *shamatha* beforehand.

In the section on *vipashyana* meditation, Thrangu Rinpoche sets out the landscape for both approaches of sutra and secret mantra (tantra). Both were taught by the Buddha in order to benefit the different mental dispositions of his followers. All of our inner and outer experiences - mental states of mind, pleasure, pain, disturbing emotions and so forth - are taught to be the confused projections of our mind. Confusing the appearance of these phenomena to be truly existing is what binds us to samsaric existence. By using logic, reasoning and analysis of the innate fixation on *'I'*, the imputed self and *'mine'*, realisation attained during meditation becomes possible.

In this sutra approach, meditation refines the conceptual understanding of emptiness until a direct experience of emptiness is achieved by taking inferential reasoning as the path.

In the tantric (secret mantra or Vajrayana) approach in which the Buddha declared that Buddhahood can be attained in one lifetime and in one body, direct experience is taken as the path. In Vajrayana this refers to *'simply looking directly at one's own mind'* and through mindfulness, alertness and vigilance one will be able to directly experience both the emptiness of the nature of the mind as well as the emptiness of external appearances. The root of Mahamudra practice therefore is the cultivation and maintenance of mindfulness and alertness. These can be cultivated in both formal meditation sessions and in one's engagement in activities in daily life.

In this text a total of ten methods for the practice of *vipashyana* are given, combining the two aspects of looking (viewing) at the mind and a corresponding pointing out of the nature of the mind.

Having gained stability through experiencing the mind within stillness *(shamatha)*, the student is guided to first identify or recognise what is this *'mind at rest'.*

Here all personal bias and judgement are suspended in order to practise bare awareness or attention on what the mind is experiencing. The instruction is simply to directly experience one's mind without expectations and conceptual colouring of one's mental landscape by maintaining mindfulness and alertness. If something truly exists then one

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should be able to identify its form, shape, colour and characteristics. Here all personal bias and judgement are suspended in order to practise bare awareness and attention on what the mind is experiencing.

With bare attention one is guided using a series of questions and pointing out instructions to examine the different states of mind. This method enables the true nature of the mind to be experienced by providing the student with all the essential signposts along his journey of discovery and understanding of his own mind. It sets the student in the right direction leading him towards the direct realisation of the emptiness of the nature of the mind.

Having experienced the mind within stillness, one is then led to looking at the mind within movement or occurrence which refers to the arising of thoughts. Training to look at the mind in different mental states enables the practitioner to correctly recognise the reality of phenomena, understanding the nature of our own confused mind and the suffering created due to lack of understanding of true nature of reality. In this practice not only should one become aware of the arising, abiding and the cessation of thoughts but also to look for the substantiality of those thoughts. Are these thoughts independent, autonomous, arising and ceasing by themselves? How do they arise, where do they abide and is there a place where they go to?

Another technique involves looking at the mind within appearances both internal and external. The latter consists of the five sense objects whilst the former includes all the mental images generated by these five sense objects.

Here again one looks at the nature of these appearances. The point to observe is the nature of the mind while experiencing both internal and external appearances. In working with external appearances actual physical objects are observed whilst with internal appearances one works with the sensations and all the mental objects which arise in one's mind.

The author draws a clear distinction between merely *looking* at an object (mental or physical) which is simply looking at the object, free from thinking, speculation or any conceptual overlay; and *analysing* which is a process of inferential reasoning based on knowledge one has acquired. While intellectual understanding is good and necessary, Thrangu Rinpoche points out the possible mistake of adulterating one's experience with such acquired knowledge which may prevent further progress in the practice.

Although all these techniques of looking at the mind itself or the concept of *'I';* a self with a substantial existence, is the main concern. No attempt is made to refute the existence of such a self. Instead, the meditator is instructed to bring naked awareness, look directly at mind itself and, through direct experience, and gain knowledge of the empty nature of mind. This is an important point to note.

By prompting the meditator with a series of questions guiding him to check the authenticity of his own experience hence drawing him closer and closer to the realisation of the true nature of the mind and experience, giving the meditator the opportunity to learn in a manner almost similar to receiving direct instructions from a teacher. The key to an authentic experience is to be thorough and vigilant in investigating and analysing one's experience with honesty in order not to be derailed by one's ego.

Readers who do not have any meditation experience may find this text a little challenging.